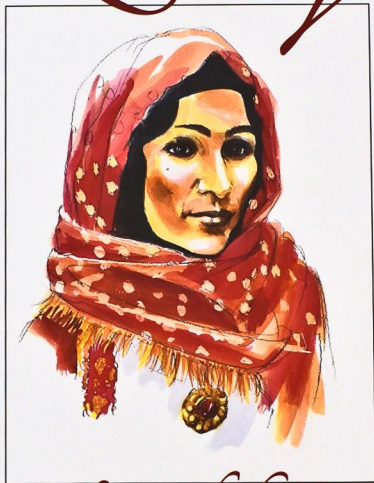


Azerbaijan



Women of the Past

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by Nur Dolay

Illustrations
Françoise Caillette-Deneubourg

Preface
by Jean-Louis Gouraud

Editions FAVRE SA
29, rue de Bourg - CH-1002 Lausanne
Tél.: 021 / 312 17 17 / fax: 021 / 320 50 59
e-mail: livres@editionsfavre.com

ISBN 978-2-8289-1544-5
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FAVRE

CHAPTER 2

19^e Century

Natavan, princess and artist

«**W**E WERE TAKEN TO THE HOME OF the District Commander, Mr. Pigulevskiy, who rushed to the door to welcome us and invite us to a second dinner on the same evening. He could not host us to the first one, which had started, because there were two Tatar princesses, mother and daughter and, according to the religious and social customs of Mohammedan women, they could not take off their veils in the presence of strangers. [...]

We were delighted by this respite provided by Mr. Pigulevskiy as it gave us time to wash but we had barely started dabbling in our large wash-basin that Mr. Pigulevskiy was back. The two Tatar princesses had decided to make an exception to the national and religious customs. They absolutely wanted to meet me.

Mr. Pigulevskiy's two carriages were waiting at

our door and he himself was waiting for us to be ready. [...] With the two Tatar princesses was the husband of the younger princess. We were greeted in a cordial manner and I would almost say that, considering the welcome we received, we were eagerly expected.

The two Tatar princesses were the wife and daughter of Mehdiqulu Khan, the last khan of Karabakh. The mother might have been forty years old and the daughter twenty. Both wore the national costume. The daughter was charming in this costume which was, however, more remarkable by its rich ornamentations than by its exquisiteness."

This is how Alexandre Dumas describes, in 'Journey to the Caucasus', his meeting in Baku with Princess Khurshid Banu, known as Natavan, in 1858. He is far from imagining then that the



Natavan and her children.

young lady he met was a future poetess who would make a mark in the history of literature in Azerbaijan. Natavan was then twenty-six. Apart from her mother and two children, she was accompanied by her husband, the Dagestani prince Kasay Khan Usmiyev. This elegant thirty-five-year-old man, speaking perfect French, and the couple's children captivated Dumas' attention: "A little girl of three or four, wearing the same costume as her mother, was looking at us with big black eyes, astonished, while a young boy of five or six had sought refuge between his grandmother's knees. By instinct and, perhaps just in case, his hand was on the handle of his khanjar. It was indeed a real khanjar, as pointed as a needle and both sides of the blade as sharp as a razor, the sort of thing that a French mother would never let her child touch but which is the first toy that a Tatar mother gives her offspring."

Tatar was a general term used at this period to refer to the Turkic peoples of the Russian Empire. In 1828, the Russian Empire had shared the Azerbaijani territory with Iran, taking the northern third and gaining full rights on the Caspian Sea, whereas the remaining two thirds in the South were annexed by its Persian rival.

At the time, Azerbaijan looked like a conglomerate of small principalities that appeared after the decline of the Safavid Empire. The khanate of Karabakh was one of the most important and Natavan's father was its last khan before khanates were abolished by tsarist administration. The fallen prince did not survive the grief

caused by the Russian occupation and the important subsequent changes. At his death, he bequeathed to his only child, princess Khurshid Banu then aged thirteen, the weighty responsibilities associated to her rank. She was affectionately called *Khan Gizy*, meaning 'daughter of the Khan', a sign of respect and a title which established her authority but also conferred obligations towards her people.

The princess was born in 1832 in Shusha, the fortified town of Karabakh founded by her grandfather. She received a very good education: her tutor, Govher Aga, a learned man who founded many charities, instilled in her the love of poetry and music and he helped her in the accomplishment of the public duties that she assumed in order to implement the social and urban development of her city.

After marrying the Dagestani prince Khasay Khan Usmiyev, Natavan moved with her husband to Tbilisi in Georgia. There, she mixed with a very cosmopolitan society made up of Russians, Georgians, Persians and Westerners. This opened new horizons. In particular, she learned new languages. She already spoke Persian and Arabic quite well. But she was not happy with this husband she had been forced to marry under the pressure of Count Vorontsov, the tsar's representative for the district.

When they returned from Tbilisi, she refused to accompany her husband to his homeland, Dagestan, and she simply said she wanted to divorce! That was something quite unthinkable at the time, especially for a mother who already

had two children. The Dagestani prince went back home alone and Natavan stayed in Shusha.

She remarried, choosing a commoner by the name of Seyid Huseyn. After all, with her avant-garde vision of equality, she made no difference between those who were noble and those who were not. But the people around her were shocked and highly critical of this unthinkable association. Even the young woman's son, named Mehdiqulu Khan after his grandfather, eventually distanced himself from his mother. He later took up writing poetry, like his mother, and chose the pen name *Vafa*, meaning 'loyal', a clear message.

Natavan had five children with her second husband but that in no way prevented her from travelling to other provinces to observe the situation in her country beyond the Karabakh territory. She was particularly struck by the adverse effects of Russian colonialism in the Caucasus and she did not hesitate to stand up against the policies of the tsarist administration. At the risk of her life, she defended the oppressed against the abuses of dishonest officials. She went as far as ripping off the epaulettes of one Doubrovsky, a local representative of the tsar who had beaten a peasant.

As a true patriot, she set herself the goal of awakening the national conscience of her people against the Russian administration's discriminations and she promoted social progress by developing access to education. At her instigation, the dignitaries of Shusha asked the tsar for his authorization to create a school and in 1885 the

Russian-Tatar school of Shusha was opened. Her philanthropy did not stop there: she liberally sponsored the Saint Nina School for Girls in the region of Shamakhi, granted scholarships to needy students and helped artists, poets, writers and scientists.

Her sponsorship benefited not only the populations of Karabakh but also all of the artists of the South Caucasus who sought her help and protection. Princess Khurshid Banu herself was a great poetess, a connoisseur of music, an artist drawing avant-garde sketches and the creator of very fine decorative embroidery. 'Natavan' was the pen name she chose after the death of her son Abbas, born of her second marriage. The loss of this child – who died of tuberculosis in 1885 at the age of fifteen – deeply affected her: she henceforth signed her work with this pen name which means 'powerless' or 'oppressed'.

Even if history will remember her under the name Natavan, her poetry was famous throughout Azerbaijan well before this tragic demise as the princess headed a movement of artistic flowering comparable to the European Renaissance. At her instigation, many literary circles appeared here and there throughout the country. Natavan was the soul of the most important one, *Majlis-i Uns* (meaning Society of Friends), a literary society that she created to bring together all of the artists of Karabakh. She engaged in lively correspondence with the other poets of her time and she helped create new groups in various cities. These meetings were not reserved for poets only: they were opportu-

nities to gather and exchange with other artists in the broadest sense of the word. They would discuss new ideas and the evolution of various styles. The works of great Azerbaijani poets were translated as they had often written in Persian at various times in history. There were contests and the laureates were rewarded by Natavan.

Some fifty poets throughout Azerbaijan were inspired by the literary style initiated by the poetess of Karabakh and they dedicated poems to her. Love was the core theme of her poetry, but it wasn't about platonic love and didn't use the chaste terms that were the standard at the time. In her works, one discovers courageous verses that speak of desire, verses that express the want of physical union with the loved one. She defied the rules of her time and faced the criticisms and disapproval of a society that did not look kindly on such freedom taken by a woman. What prevailed, even with her male counterparts, were minced words, hints and soft, tacit allusions.

But love was not the only subject she wrote on. She sometimes chose to evoke philosophical thoughts, metaphysical questions or she would challenge the well-established, unwritten social rules. She pointed out the contradictions between the laws of the times, of nature, society and reflected on the meaning of the huge gap between desires and reality:

"Might I not exist, O Creator, nor this universe,
Nor its jewels, this heart of sorrow and pain,
If there were not the rose and the rose garden
and their contemplation

And the thorn that injures the nightingale, but
only the strength of my love!"

One can but wonder if the famous Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa had read Natavan's poem before writing, some fifty years later: "Being me is beyond any measure./The abyss is my limit." And the same goes for the Turkish poet Cahit Sıtkı Tarancı who asked, some decades later: "Why, O God, this remaining thirst/By the fountain whose waters flow so strong?"

The beauty of Natavan's sketches were also remarkable. She was the one who introduced the notion of perspective in this region where artwork was dominated by the rules of miniatures. It is she also who showed real landscapes and concrete objects, very far from the drawings of the time, solely based on imagination. The surrounding mountains, rivers, bridges, the sea were all sources of inspiration for her artwork. Her most remarkable sketches illustrate a 270-page album ornate with landscapes of Shusha, its palaces, its flowers and birds. In this *Notebook of the Rose*, each poem is ornamented with a drawing. Or would that be the reverse?

Khurshid Banu Natavan is not the only poetess of her time to express feminist views. Several other women in Azerbaijan preceded her or were contemporaries, such as Fatma Khanum Kamine, but Natavan stands apart because of the wide range of her activities and interests. Horses are a good example! The most beautiful specimens of local breeds were raised on her stud farms, including the famous Karabakh,



Fatma Khanym Kemine;
a native of Shusha, she was a friend
of Princess Natavan (and a bit of a rival too).
She was noted for her keen and sensitive mind
and had her own literary circle. She spoke Persian and
Turkish and wrote close to five hundred poems.

Alyetmez or Tokmak. One of them, named Khan, was exhibited at the 1867 World Fair in Paris where it won a medal and aroused great admiration. Further successes followed, with other horses, in Moscow and Tbilisi exhibitions.

Great patron of many artists, Natavan Khurshid Banu was also a builder. The inhabitants of Shusha were indebted to her for the construction of an aqueduct, fountains, hammams and public parks. When their princess died in 1897, her body was carried on people's shoulders and they covered thirty kilometers on foot to her final resting place in the town of Agdam.

Almost a century and a half after Alexandre Dumas, another writer – this time a British journalist – met Natavan or more exactly a bronze bust representing her. It was modestly standing in the garden of the Red Cross in the center of Baku, waiting to be placed in a museum. Polad Bulbuloglu, Minister of Culture of independent Azerbaijan, had found the bust and two other statues in a Tbilisi backyard in the middle of metal scrap for sale. The three busts used to decorate the streets of Shusha before the city was captured by the Armenians. The new masters of Karabakh had used them for shooting practice.

Here is what Thomas de Waal wrote: "I saw the three bronze heads, forlorn and pocked with bullets, lying in the courtyard of the headquarters of the Red Cross in the center of Baku: the poet Natavan, an earnest girl in a head scarf reading a book, missing a thumb; the composer Hajibekov, a bullet-ridden gentleman in double-breasted suit and broken spectacles; and Bul Bul, a famous singer with a serious domed bronze forehead."