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Opening Extract from...

Jewels of Allah

The Untold Story of Women in Iran

Written by Nina Ansary

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Chapter One

VEIL OF HALF-TRUTHS

It is difficult to find many bright spots in the lives of Persian women... Their liberty of movement, of action, and of speech is curtailed... In the prevailing social condition ... they could not do anything unless [they were] helped by men... But some of the women maintain, and I agree with them, that their wisest plan is to go ahead and show what they can do. The day will come when the men will ask for their help.

Clara Colliver Rice, American missionary, 1923

Here is the inconvenient truth: a flourishing, unwavering feminist movement is an unanticipated consequence of the Islamic Revolution.

Nina Ansary

So much of this was unknown to me...

Reader's comment on Nina Ansary's Facebook page

The historical narrative of the “woman question” in Iran is an intricate labyrinth. It is not a story that can be accurately recounted by portraying women as either “oppressed” or “liberated” during

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a particular historical period. The audacious history of women in Iran is a maze, with unexpected twists and turns, gains and losses, triumphs and defeats.

When assessing Iranian women's history, the inconvenient truths that arise are striking: The Islamic Revolution that was explicitly antagonistic to the modernizing initiatives of the Pahlavi monarchy gave rise to a flourishing of powerful female voices. At the same time, the spirit of the progressive Pahlavi era influenced popular class women (religious conservative women of the middle class who constitute the majority of women in Iran), despite the eradication of numerous "liberating" laws and institutions.

The women of Iran have been struggling for centuries to achieve equality; however, there have been periods throughout history when they were relatively free to determine their own lives. In this opening chapter, my intention is to enumerate the key misconceptions or half-truths concerning Persian women—from ancient history to the present—and to briefly explain why these statements fail to represent their authentic narrative.

Let me begin by submitting what I believe to be the *popular* narrative about women's lives in Iran over the last forty years. It goes something like this:

During the Pahlavi Monarchy, women were on an upward trajectory. In a nation on the cusp of modernity, women actively participated. They were given the right to vote and free to be in public without veils; they wore miniskirts on university campuses. Then came the Islamic Revolution in 1979. With Ayatollah Khomeini at the helm, the burgeoning freedoms for women were extinguished. The veil was required and institutions were segregated by gender. The Islamic Republic had thus achieved its goal of resurrecting the image of the quintessential Muslim woman.

The problem with popular narratives of historical events is that despite their seemingly convincing half-truths, the real story is usually much more complicated, nuanced, and less tidy. The dramatic and surprising story of the women's movement in Iran certainly is.

As a historian born in Iran, I was surprised to come upon certain essential facts about women's history in my native country that starkly contradicted my previous assumptions. For example, when I first began to conduct my research on the history of the women's movement in Iran, I was struck by this fact: a majority of traditional, religious women, and even some educated women who had benefited from changes under the Shah, supported Ayatollah Khomeini and were a contributing factor in the 1979 collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy. I found this piece of information not only counterintuitive but also deeply puzzling and difficult to reconcile, given the fact that the Pahlavi regime was solely responsible for emancipating the Iranian woman.

Everything in my background had led me to adhere to the commonly understood view of women in Iran: they were emancipated under Reza-Shah Pahlavi and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi; then their rights were revoked with the dawn of the Islamic Revolution. But my years of research and study have resulted in the discovery of a number of unanticipated truths that will be explored throughout this book.

The following are popular misconceptions about women in Iran that fail to accurately portray the real, often audacious, story.

Misconception I: *Before the Pahlavi monarchy, Persian women were always suppressed by the religious and political establishment.*

In the story accepted by many, Persian women are depicted as unceasingly under the power of male authority. Because this narrative

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leaves out the dramatic roles played by female leaders, as well as the fact that women were perceived to be equal to men centuries ago in ancient Persia, many assume that prior to the Pahlavi monarchy women were confined solely to the domestic sphere. If they figured into public life at all, they were merely in the shadows.

Granted, ancient history is not a subject that everyone has studied in depth. College curricula at even the most prestigious institutions probably don't require courses in Etruscan civilization, the Zhou Dynasty, Vedic India, or ancient Persia unless one is majoring in a particular branch of history. If one is not a history major or a history buff, he or she may never discover how various early civilizations held beliefs and adhered to practices that would be deemed progressive even by twenty-first-century standards.

This can certainly be said of the Zoroastrian culture of ancient Persia. Zoroastrian ideology reflected the equality of men and women to the extent that women often occupied the same professions as men and received equal payment for their work. Female leaders ruled in a number of Persian cities and states in the sixth century BC, and female commanders controlled the armies. The authority and independence of women were part of the accepted social system.

Similarly, the nomadic cultural traditions of the Turko-Mongol tribes in medieval Persia endowed women with rights and privileges that extended beyond the confines of the home. Thus, in some ways these thirteenth- and fourteenth-century women had more freedom than women who lived hundreds of years later.

Acknowledging these and other early instances of female empowerment in Persia widens the cultural perspective of women's status in society and serves as inspiration for the current ongoing struggle in Iran. These feminist role models will be explored in Chapter Two.

Misconception 2: *Iranian women didn't advocate for their freedom until recently.*

There may be a common tendency to believe that meaningful progress occurs only in the present tense, that efforts to improve society are stronger now than in our grandparents' or great-grandparents' era. Again, our sense of historical precedent is not always as sharp as it could be.

Securing women's rights is not a cause born recently; it has been ongoing for hundreds of years. Persian trailblazers include Qurrat al-'Ayn, also known as Tahirah (1817–1852), an activist, intellectual, poet, and advocate of women's equality in Iran, referred to as the “the first suffrage martyr”; and Bibi Khanum Astarabadi (1858–1921), who produced “The Vices of Men,” (*Ma'ayeb al Rejal*) in 1895, considered to be the first declaration of women's rights in the history of modern Iran.

How many are aware of the professional, political, academic, and artistic contributions made by Iranian women in the early nineteenth century? Is it commonly known that during the era of the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911), a nascent women's movement was emerging in Iran that included women's secret societies? Amidst an austere environment in which the reigning presence of Islam continued to dictate the seclusion and subservience of the female population, a handful of progressive-minded women began to courageously challenge the principles of a patriarchal order, founding schools for girls as well as women's periodicals advocating greater female participation in society.

Acknowledging the historical roots of the women's movement in Iran, highlighted in Chapter Two, serves to strengthen and inspire those currently challenged by oppressive policies.

Misconception 3: *During the Pahlavi era, all women were liberated.*

The Pahlavi era undoubtedly ushered in progressive change in Iranian society, including policies that brought about modern dress, education for girls, women's increased participation in society, more freedom of the press (including women's magazines), and the enfranchisement of women.

However, the rapid transition toward a westernized way of life was largely unfamiliar to many women, as was a more secular culture after centuries of religious customs. Most of the Pahlavi era changes affecting women were not embraced or accepted by the majority of females from traditional backgrounds. Their families were vehemently opposed to the new standards, finding them offensive and in conflict with cultural mores. Thus, wives, sisters, and daughters were prohibited from partaking of the new freedoms.

It is the contention of some analysts and historians that the cultural shift during this time was too precipitous and excessively focused on westernizing the society rather than giving more consideration to the cultural context into which the Pahlavi policies were incorporated. In other words, these changes were considered by some to represent a cultural violation.

The Pahlavi years brought welcome liberation for a small sector of female society, but many others were unable to adapt to such a sudden and dramatic cultural transition. Chapter Three will explore the underlying conflict that ensued as a result of such noble, visionary, yet drastic changes.

Misconception 4: *During the Khomeini era, women were totally oppressed.*

The partial truth is that women *were* limited or restrained by patriarchal laws and standards. They were forced to wear the veil, prevented

from attending elementary and secondary schools with male students because coeducational facilities were converted into same-sex institutions, and subject to many additional exclusionary policies. The whole truth, however, includes this critical fact: many of the seemingly discriminatory policies, such as the imposition of the veil and eradication of coed schools were initially a welcome alternative for the majority of traditional families. Why? Because wearing the veil was what their families had been accustomed to for centuries, and same-sex education meant that girls could comfortably attend classes and thus gain an education. Previously, during the Pahlavi era, most traditional families would not allow their daughters to be in the same classroom with the opposite sex or to leave home without the proper head covering.

Chapter Four will delve into Khomeini's surprising "blunders" involving policies pertaining to the veil, same-sex schools, and educational materials. The inconvenient truth is that, owing to rules that many Western women and men may consider archaic and sexist, girls in Iran became educated and liberated.

Misconception 5: *There is a lack of common ground between secular and religious women in Iran.*

Throughout the world there seems to be a widening divide between religious and nonreligious perspectives, each resorting to labels such as *fanatic*, *infidel*—or worse. There is also a more encouraging phenomenon: progressive religious groups are bridging the gap between religious and nonreligious thinkers by forming coalitions to combat injustice, poverty, and violence against women. Women in Iran are building such bridges due to their common belief in women's rights. While some may not use the word *feminist*, they agree that women

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deserve equal rights and freedom from oppressive yet sanctioned practices.

Some Westerners may assume that Iranian women who were forced to conform to Islamic practices after the revolution and those who essentially approved of those practices would have absolutely nothing in common. In fact, the truth belies that assumption. While it is indeed counterintuitive, the fact is that religious and secular women in Iran are working together to advocate for women's rights.

The traditional female population in Iran is now highly educated, worldier and open-minded, more eager for equal opportunities, and more outspoken about being held back by discriminatory practices. While some would label it heresy, many traditional Muslim women are posing a radically earnest question: Could a reinterpretation of passages in the Koran that are used to justify the inferior position of women be a means to women's emancipation?

The unanticipated alliance between religious and secular women, and the challenge of "Islamic feminism," will be explored in Chapter Five.

Misconception 6: *There is not much of a women's movement in modern-day Iran.*

In Western countries, you can Google "women's movement in Iran" and a number of credible articles, websites, organizations, and references appear. One is then able to read about recent developments relevant to the struggle faced by women in Iran, written by journalists, academics, and feminist advocates. But are these materials available to women in Middle Eastern countries, or in Iran itself? And even in the West, how extensive is the coverage by mainstream media of women's advocacy and achievements in Iran?

The reason that some might think there is not much of a women's movement in Iran is that there may be insufficient coverage of women's activism there. The fact is, however, that the women's movement in Iran is thriving. During the repressive administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which eliminated many reformist organizations and resulted in drastic setbacks for activists, women's resolve remained intact. It was in 2006 that countless female activists staged the One Million Signatures Campaign, a grassroots movement aimed at ending legalized discrimination against women in Iran. The feminist magazine *Zanan (Women)* flourished in the years prior to Ahmadinejad's tenure (1992–2008), was shut down during his administration, and reinstated in May of 2014.

Countless artists, journalists, academics, filmmakers, bloggers, students, and professionals—women from all walks of life in Iran—are engaging in the struggle for women's rights. They are up against formidable challenges, but they persist in their efforts.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven pay tribute to the many remarkable women who are at the forefront of a movement to make women's equality in Iran a reality.

Today, in a country where the Islamic regime continues to debilitate women in almost every aspect of society, Iranian women are forging ahead as part of a vibrant, inclusive movement.

LIFTING THE VEIL OF MISUNDERSTANDING

If this book shatters many of the stereotypical assumptions and the often misunderstood story of women in Iran it will have succeeded. The objective is to reveal how a full-blown feminist movement developed and grew in the patriarchal climate of post-revolutionary Iran. What were the concealed components that made such a movement possible? What are its historical roots? And who are the

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women—throughout history and in Iran today—making the resurgence of women’s advocacy a reality?

The story of women in Iran is audacious because throughout history they have struggled against entrenched patriarchal regimes and never relented. They are not relenting now. Against formidable odds and despite prohibitions and arrests, their movement is unexpectedly thriving. Women from across the social, religious, and cultural spectrum are joining together. With resilience and tenacity, they persist.