

UNVEILING THE GARDEN: UNPACKING THE PUBLIC AND THE PERSONAL  
ROLES OF IRANIAN WOMEN IN PAHLAVI ERA LITERATURE, 1921-1979

By

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Women's rights in Middle-Eastern countries have long been of great interest for Western countries. In the twentieth century, a number of different political changes happened in different middle-Eastern countries, such as Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, that grabbed the Western and Eastern academic communities' attention. One nation that went through a pattern of national change through its political leaders in this century was Iran. The twentieth century in Iran marks an important era in political, social, cultural, and literary aspects of Iranian life. The period was pregnant with many fundamental changes that affected many Iranian lives. The change of ruling systems from the Qajar to the Pahlavi dynasty prompted political reforms in Iranian society. In this period of political change, women were at the center of attention for the state's reforms. Iranian women experienced the roller-coaster of political, social, and cultural changes through the state's modernization project that targeted both their personal and public lives. Their state-assigned public role was to be a symbol of the successful westernized, modern nation of Iran, while inside the walls of their homes they were to be obedient mothers, wives, and daughters. The public role was ensured only through the state invading their personal rights – through unveiling – whereas the private role was dominated by the patriarchal society – traditionalism and religious beliefs. In 1936, the shah announced enforced unveiling under a project called the “Women's Awakening Project,” in order to modernize Iranian women. For Iranian women, the veil was a symbol that divided their private lives, at home, and public lives, outside their houses. The state imposed unveiling invaded Iranian women's private space, and consequently their personal rights.

The major objective of this thesis is to study how the ongoing changes in the Pahlavi era affected both political and personal lives of Iranian women through the lens of feminist theory and close reading of important Iranian texts from the era. During the Pahlavi era, in the male- dominated society of Iran, there was no space for a woman's voice to be heard. Politics and public life were men's territory. Only a few women from upper-class and upper-middle-class were elected as representative and senators. In order to voice their objection with the state and the patriarchal society, Iranian women chose the rebellious action of recording their stories in their writing. Many significant writers, such as Simin Daneshvar and Forough Farrokhzad wrote about Iranian women's problems in both private and public spheres.

Iranian women authors, like Daneshvar and Farrokhzad, through their writings, had documented the truths about deeper layers of women's issues in Iranian family and society because they saw truths about women's problems that others (male writers) could not see. For example, by exposing Zari's fears in her famous novel, *Suvashun*, Daneshvar proved to Jalal Al-e Ahmad and his audience the reason behind Hajar's fear of not being able to speak up for herself in "Lak-e Soorati" is that she was suppressed and dominated by patriarchal society and her husband. Daneshvar used the same mode of narration, limited third-person point of view, as Al-e Ahmad did in his short stories. However, she does this not to limit and misapprehend women, but to expand the readers' insight about Iranian women's issues in their personal and public life. Daneshvar devised her own unique and creative literary devices such as the image of the garden in order to describe and comment on women's struggles in the private sphere. While Daneshvar created authentic and reliable fictional female characters representative of Iranian women,

Farrokhzad broke the imposed silence on women by her autobiographical poetry to show that the most appealing characteristic of a woman is not her silence and passivity as it was depicted in male authors' stories, like "Aroosak-e Posht-e Pardeh" by Sadegh Hedayat. Through her sarcastic tone of depicting the insipid and empty life of a married woman in "Aroosak-e Kooki," Farrokhzad shows that there is another meaning to a woman's life other than living it like Hedayat's mannequin, silent and passive. Therefore, with their writings, Danehsvar and Farrokhzad challenged the stereotypical depiction of female characters in writings of male authors.

The first chapter of this study, presents a comprehensive summary of the historical framework with the focus of Iranian women's issues and rights. My intention of providing historical details during the Pahlavi era is to examine how political changes shaped Iranian women's public roles and to prepare the groundwork for the next two upcoming chapters that are mainly about women's role in Modern Persian Literature. Many scholars such as Janet Afary, Eliz Sanasarian and Badr ol-Moluk Bamdad have carried out a detailed exploration of social, political, and cultural reforms during the Pahlavi era in regards to Iranian women's rights and lives. In this chapter, with focus on the above-mentioned scholars' works, I will provide the reader with an general overview of the Pahlavi era. Sanasarian, in her book, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran*, explores different women's movements in the twentieth century in Iran. In her book, *From Darkness into Light*, Bamdad considers the status of women in Iran between the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) and the White Revolution (1963). Janet Afary, a leading historian in Iranian studies, dedicates her book, *Sexual Politics in Iran*, to an exploration of gender and sexuality in the twentieth century in Iran with focus on



different periodicals published in this period. Using primary sources about women's organizations and activists, major periodicals that were published by women during this period, research I conducted at the National Library of Iran, and close readings of the above-mentioned books, I present a detailed summary of the dynamics of Iranian women's rights during the Pahlavi era in the first chapter.

Chapters two and three are focused on studying fictional women's roles in both male and female authors' works. In these chapters, I use feminist theory in order to highlight gender inequality represented in Persian literature. During the Pahlavi period in Iran, *Literature Engagée* was a popular trend among modern Persian writers. Inspired by French writers, such as Sartre and Camus, the Iranian *engagée* writers, such as Sadeq Hedayat, Jalal Al-i Ahmad and Gholam Hossein Sa'edi, used literature to comment on social and political issues of their country. Male writers also used their writings as a vehicle for commenting on Iranian women's situation during this period. In chapter two, I explore how Iranian male authors, in particular Hedayat, Al-i Ahmad and Sa'edi, neglect a thorough focus on women's issues while commenting on the social and political problems. In the four short stories that I analyze in this chapter, I argue that these male writers fail to sympathize with women and their issues, because they do not go beyond the veil of social and political problems into a deeper interior of women's lives where women had to deal with the strict structure of the male-dominated society.

In the final chapter, chapter three, I shift the focus to modern female Iranian writers' works. With focus on a prominent prose writer, Simin Daneshvar and her novel, *Suvashun*, and a controversial poet, Forough Farrokhzad, I explore how they bring into the spotlight an issue that male writers neglect to talk about, which has been suppressed

in male-dominated modern Persian literature. This issue is that Iranian women's private lives and their sexual lives were controlled by a patriarchal society that would prefer that Iranian women keep their identities hidden. Daneshvar through a fictional character, Zari, and Forough through her autobiographical voice, in her poetry, bring Iranian women's issues from behind the metaphorical veil of private lives at home and into the public eye.

The epilogue is focused on women's rights activities towards the end of the Pahlavi era, with studying the international activities of the state-sponsored women's international organization, The WOI.

## II. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (1906-1979)

### The Constitutional Revolution

In Iran, the Constitutional Revolution period (1906-1911) marked a turning point for gender roles, particularly by changing Persian women's activities in society. After years of discontent with misgovernment and a widespread demand for a curb on royal autocracy, the ruler Mozaffar-ad-Din Shah Qajar (1896-1906) accepted a constitution where there would be a chance to hear people's voices in making government decisions.<sup>1</sup> The account of a woman's ideal role – as expected by Iranian patriarchal expectations – during this time is best described in a memoir called *The Strangling of Persia* by William Morgan Shuster. An American lawyer, financial expert, and publisher, William Morgan Shuster traveled to Iran after the Iranian government appealed to the U.S. government for help to organize its financial system. Shuster lived for two years in Iran, working on stabilizing the Iranian financial system. However, due to Russian opposition and the threat of Russian army intervention, Shuster left Tehran in early 1912. Coming back to the states, he published his memoir that recounts the history of his mission and Iranian life during his stay. His memoir includes his account of how he perceived Persian women and their activities.

Shuster recounts how Iranian women during this period got the chance to join the public arena, along with men, in order to fight against foreign intervention. He states, “Persian women since 1907 had become almost at a bound the most progressive, not to

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<sup>1</sup> Haleh Esfandiari, *Reconstructed lives: Women and Iran's Islamic Revolution*, (Baltimore ;: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 21.

say radical, in the world.”<sup>2</sup> As a close observer of the Iranian Nationalist movement, Shuster asserts that women were undeniably the most important part of this movement, for it was “the women [who] did much to keep the spirit of liberty alive. Having themselves suffered from a double form of oppression, political, and social, they were more eager to foment the great Nationalist movement for the adoption of constitutional forms of government.”<sup>3</sup> Shuster believed what Iranian women did during the Constitutional Revolution was remarkable, and he repeats it over and over in a section of his memoir titled “The Persian Women.” The revolution gave women the chance and courage to “[break] through some of the most sacred customs which for centuries past have bound their sex in the land of Iran.”<sup>4</sup> Shuster is correct in his assertions that women were active and crucial to this time since women actively organized different groups through which they defended the constitution and pushed for extended rights.<sup>5</sup> During this time, many urban middle- and upper-class women of Tehran and other major cities joined men in order to free Iran from any foreign intervention by supporting the new Iranian Parliament.

During this period, women came together in organizations, sometimes secretly, to fight for equality. They founded associations, schools, and hospitals for women. Before publishing periodicals, they started with handwritten underground leaflets (*Shab-nameh*),

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<sup>2</sup> W. Morgan Shuster, *The strangling of Persia; a story of the European diplomacy and oriental intrigue that resulted in the denationalization of twelve million Mohammedans, a personal narrative*, (New York,: The Century Co., 1912), 191.

<sup>3</sup> Shuster, *Strangling of Persian*, 192.

<sup>4</sup> Shuster, *Strangling of Persian*, 192.

<sup>5</sup> Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives*, 21.

all produced by women's secret societies.<sup>6</sup> According to Janet Afary, more than 200 periodicals began publication between 1906 and 1911.<sup>7</sup> The first periodicals about women's issues, also written by women, were *Danesh* (دانش, Knowledge) and *Shekoofeh* (شکوفه, Blossom) published in 1910. Besides the encouragement for the consumption of domestic goods and the fight for national independence, these periodicals also discussed different issues concerning women. These issues related to women included: "education and technical schools for girls, hygiene, critiques of superstitious beliefs, housework and childcare."<sup>8</sup> Women not only joined the political debates of the period with men, but also challenged the dominant conservative ideas regarding womanhood.

One of the objectives that feminists of the time had in common was the emphasis on girls' education. Activists like Sediqueh Dowlatabadi, one of the main Iranian feminist figures of the twentieth century, strongly believed that education was the first step in helping women become more aware of their rights. Dowlatabadi is also commonly known as the founding mother of feminism in Iran. In one of her articles, "Zaroorat-e Takmil-e Yadgiri-e Zaban-e Farsi," (ضرورت یادگیری زبان فارسی, "The Necessity of Completion of Persian Language Learning"), published in *Shekoofeh* magazine (1913), she compares the situation of education for Iranian women in different parts of Iran:

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<sup>6</sup> Haideh Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's Struggle in a Male-Defined Revolutionary Movement*, Women's studies at York series, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 32.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 126.

<sup>8</sup> Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, 32.

Thank God that in Tehran, it is somehow possible for Iranian girls to get educated. Although it is not complete, still it is better than having no education.

Alas, in other cities of Iran, girls don't have the opportunity to get the same partial education. For example, Isfahan, it is deprived of girl's education altogether. In this big city, except for one British and Jewish school, there is no other schools.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to insisting on women's education in periodicals, some women took serious steps towards founding girls-only schools. Indeed, it is worth mentioning here that before the foundation of girls-only schools by Iranian women, there were a few schools founded in Iran by American missionaries that did serve girls. In 1874, a group of American Christian missionaries opened a school for both boys and girls. However, from 1874 to 1906, only Christian and non-Iranian girls were admitted. The school did not accept any Muslim girls until after the Constitutional Revolution.<sup>10</sup> The other institution, The Ecole Franco-Persane, was founded by Yusof Khan Mo'addeb ol-Molk.<sup>11</sup> Yusof Khan was the son of a Frenchman and an Iranian Mother. He had two daughters, Emily and Qamar. When they reached the age to be educated, the father realized that finding private tutors for her daughters' education was going to cost him a fortune. Therefore, he decided to organize larger classes, inviting some prominent men of the time to send their daughters to these classes. Finally, the well-planned classes that started in a private house

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<sup>9</sup> Sediqeh Dowlatabadi, "Zaroorat-e Takmil-e Zaban-e Farsi," *Shekoofeh Magazine*, 1913. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>10</sup> Badr al-Mulūk Bāmdād and F. R. C. Bagley, *From Darkness into Light: Women's Emancipation in Iran*, (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2013), 50.

<sup>11</sup> Bāmdād, *From Darkness into Light*, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Bāmdād, *From Darkness into Light*, 42.

were extended and took the shape of a school in 1908.<sup>12</sup> However, in regard to Iranian women who founded schools without any institutional support, there are only a few names.

During this time, there were many Iranian women pioneers for girls' education, such as Tuba Azmudeh, (طوبی آزموده) Zandokht Shirazi (زندخت شیرازی), Safiyeh Yazdi (صفیه یزدی), and others whose names are seemingly lost to history, who despite the chaotic conditions of the country founded new girls-only schools. Tuba Azmudeh founded the Namus (ناموس) Elementary School (1907) in Tehran. In spite of the many threats that she received, she did not keep away from keeping her school running. Because of her dedication, the Namus school soon became an important nucleus of girls' education.<sup>13</sup> The girls who attended the school received similar threats. They had to tolerate defamatory songs that, in versified slang, accused the girls of unchastity.<sup>14</sup> Azmudeh worked hard in order to realize the women's movements' goals – education of Iranian women – well past the conclusion of the Constitutional Revolution.

Tuba Azmudeh was not alone in advocating education for Iranian women. Activists such as Bibi Khanum Astarabadi (بی بی خانوم استرآبادی), also founded a girls-only school called Maiden's School (دبستان دوشیزگان), in Tehran, in 1907 to promote education for women. In this school, young girls were welcome to attend with their mothers or grandmothers. Aside from her devotion to women's education, Bibi Khanum invited

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<sup>12</sup> Bāmdād, *From Darkness into Light*, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Bāmdād, *From Darkness into Light*, 42.

groups of women to her house once a week, in order to discuss “the advantages of constitutionalism and the disadvantage of autocracy.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite all the effort that women put in the Constitutional Revolution, the resulting Constitution did not grant them the right to vote. Before discussing the suffrage for Iranian women, it is worth noting that in 1911, when the first plea for Iranian women’s suffrage was discussed in the Majlis, neither British nor American women had won the battle to get the right to vote nationwide. British women did not attain the right to vote in 1918, while American women would only attain this right two years later in 1920.

Iranian Women were not allowed to go to the parliament (the Majlis) or even have representatives in parliament. However, there were men who helped them to fight for their rights. They found for themselves a champion in the Majlis who, for the first time, initiated a debate about women’s suffrage. Hadji Vakil el Rooy (وكيل الرعايا) was a deputy of Hamadan who astonished the Majlis by speaking up in defense of women’s rights. According to Mangol Bayat-Philipp the only document of this historical event is in the *London Times*.<sup>16</sup> The article starts first by setting Persia as an example for the supporters of women’s suffrage that, even amidst chaos, there was a champion of women’s rights in the Persian Majlis. The Majlis was discussing the election bill for the next year, and as always, it was declared that no woman shall vote. An opposer’s voice shook the Majlis with astonishment. Everyone listened to Vakil el Rooy declaring that women should

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<sup>15</sup> Afary, *Sexual politics in modern iran*, 132.

<sup>16</sup> Mangol Bayat Philipp, “Women and Revolution in Iran 1905-1911.” In *Women in the Muslim World*, edited by Lois Beck and Nikkie Keddie (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 300.



possess the right to vote. He said, “for what reason should women be deprived of votes; are they not human beings, and are they not entitled to have the same rights as we have?”<sup>17</sup> However, he faced strong objection from the Ulema (the parliament’s representatives from the Iranian clergy) who “denied to women neither souls or rights and declared that such doctrine would mean the downfall of Islam.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, in 1911, the first plea for women’s suffrage was denied by the Majlis. However, this didn’t put an end to women’s activities against patriarchy. As Haleh Esfandiari notes, “they wrote letters to magazines and to parliamentary deputies protesting their exclusion from the political process.”<sup>19</sup> In December 11<sup>th</sup>, 1911, the *London Times* published a response to a telegraph received from the Committee of Persian Women. Iranian women asked the women’s suffragist committee of London to help them resist the Russian intervention in Iran with a telegraph saying, “the ears of the men of Europe are deaf to our cries; could you women not come to our help?”<sup>20</sup>

Another major concern for Constitutional feminists was the low age of marriage for both girls and boys. Women’s activists started working on changing the laws about the official minimum marriage age, changing it from 9 to 12 in 1930s, and then later to 18 in 1975, under the Family Protection Law. This law came about likely due to the efforts of the pioneers of women’s rights, like Sediqeh Dowlatabadi, who wrote different articles criticizing the low marriage age. Sediqeh Dowlatabadi notably condemns the early marriage age for both genders in “Ezdevaj Dar 5 Salegi” ( ازدواج در پنج )

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<sup>17</sup> “Women’s Rights in Persia,” *Times* (London, England), August 28, 1911.

<sup>18</sup> Our Correspondent, “Women’s Rights in Persia,” *Times* (London, England), 1911/08/11 1911.

<sup>19</sup> Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives*, 22.

<sup>20</sup> “Appeal from the Women,” *Times* (London, England), December 7, 1911.

سالگی، “Marriage at 5”) (1920). The above-mentioned article starts with an excerpt from another Iranian newspaper, *Donyay-e Iran* (دنیای ایران, Iran’s World) talking about the general marriage age of five in India. Dowlatabadi first expresses her astonishment about how cruel this ritual is and how sad she feels about these Indian girls’ situation. She goes on blaming *Donyay-e Iran* of writing nothing about the enormity of this practice in India. She writes:

One of the greatest miseries that has surrounded our society is marriage at early age, that we have written about it over and over. Girls after reaching the age of puberty should finish their education with knowledge and intellect. And then, they should get a thorough education about every aspect of family life, then, with great understanding and heed (eyes open) they can get married. This, also, applies for boys. They should spend a period getting educated and then learning about the ups and downs of life. They should be experienced to know how to deal with important matters later in life. This is how our country can make progress and prosper.<sup>21</sup>

In 1919, Dowlatabadi started writing and publishing *Zaban-e Zanan* (زبان زنان, Women’s Tongue). According to Afsaneh Najmabadi, although this was not the first women’s journal, it was the most daring. For not only did it mention women in the title, but Sediqeh called it “Women’s Tongue,” which by tradition was to be discreet and not heard.<sup>22</sup> Dowlatabadi’s main focus in this magazine was to encourage women to get educated and know more about their rights. In one article, she invites women to do their

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<sup>21</sup> Sediqeh Dowlatabadi, “Ezdevaj dar 5 Salegi,” *Zaban-e Zanan Magazine*, 1920, 4.

<sup>22</sup> Lloyd V. J. Ridgeon, *Religion and politics in modern Iran : a reader*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), 73.

best to change their situation by themselves, since no statesman is thinking of women and their rights. In this piece, “Khaharan-e Man, Bidar Shavid,” (which roughly translates to “My Sisters, Wake Up!”), she starts with a comparison of boys’ and girls’ schools:

The only news that we hear the state or the ministry of education is talking about is all about boys’ education. Not that we are against boys’ education, no. We (women) support the increasing number of boys’ schools. What we say is that, why don’t they ever think about girls’ education? Shouldn’t girls get the chance to be educated?<sup>23</sup>

As mentioned above, the beginning years of the twentieth century in Iran witnessed a new wave of modern national consciousness. The Constitutional Revolution was a period of great change for gendered roles and expectations. Women who used to live in a strictly bound patriarchal system went out into the streets to fight for their rights – often organizing into larger groups to accomplish their goals. Despite the serious and often humiliating obstacles that they encountered, these women went on to publish magazines and found girls-only schools, orphanages, and clinics for women.

During the Constitutional Revolution and afterwards, the most important goal for many Iranians was the development of a greater sense of nationalism throughout Iran. They wanted their country to be free of any foreign intervention. Unfortunately, the results of World War I created chaos that undermined the nationalist goals of the Constitutional Revolution. Despite declaring neutrality when World War I began, Iran

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<sup>23</sup> Sediqeh Dowlatabadi, “Khaharan-e Man, Bidar Shavid,” *Zaban-e Zanan Magazine*, 1920, 9.

was pulled into the conflict when Russian and British troops occupied the region.<sup>24</sup> In 1916, the Russians took over the north, while the British dominated the south. On top of the foreign occupation, when World War I was over, Iran had to deal with critical issues such as, “food scarcity, high prices, the revived power of tribal chiefs and landlords, and the diminished power of the central government.”<sup>25</sup> After the Russian Bolshevik Revolution in late 1917, the new Soviet government ended all existing tsarist concessions in Iran. In 1919, the Majlis decided that it was time to say no to the foreign powers; the Majlis refused a British offer of military and financial aid. However, the Iranian government signed the Anglo-Iranian treaty, which was never ratified by the Majlis.

The treaty gave Britain more control over Iran’s military and financial resources. This treaty was designed to give Iran a stronger central government, but the government was to be largely controlled by the British government.<sup>26</sup> The British kept its control over Iran, because “[Iran] was useful for both [its] oil and [its geographical proximity to and] against Russia.”<sup>27</sup> The British diplomats supported an Iranian officer of the Persian Cossack Brigade, Reza Khan. On February 21st, 1921, Reza Khan began his coup Qajar dynasty of Iran. He marched his troops on Tehran (the capital), where he did not face much resistance. In a bloodless *coup d’état*, Reza Khan with 600 Cossacks overthrew the cabinet. The result of this coup was that, between 1921 and 1925, Reza Khan ruled as a

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<sup>24</sup> M. Reza Ghods, "Iranian nationalism and Reza Shah," *Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 1 (1991/01/01 1991): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263209108700845>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263209108700845>.

<sup>25</sup> Nikki R. Keddie, Yann Richard, and Nikki R. Roots of revolution Keddie, *Modern Iran : roots and results of revolution*, (New Haven, CT ; London: Yale University Press, 2003), 75.

<sup>26</sup> Ghods, "Iranian nationalism and Reza Shah," 37.

<sup>27</sup> Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, 76.

war minister, and later prime minister. During this time, he built an army that was loyal solely to him. Finally, in 1925, he deposed the weak Aḥmad Shah, the last Qajar Shah, and had himself crowned as Reza Shah Pahlavi, thus making him the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty.<sup>28</sup>

### **Iran Under Reza Shah Pahlavi**

Reza Shah resolved to restore Iran's glorious past. He believed that his crucial duty was to foster national unity and pride.<sup>29</sup> He decided that all foreign interventions, especially from Britain and Russia, must be cut off, so that "[Iran] could win full independence and respect of other nations Iran should be independent in international relations."<sup>30</sup> For national changes, he was mostly inspired by Turkey's modernization plans as practiced by Atatürk. He decreed that "Iran must be industrialized, and her social and economic institutions [be] reformed, along Western lines."<sup>31</sup> As part of his own modernization efforts, Reza Shah made several revolutionary changes. First, he terminated all foreign intervention. His focus following this was on building a stronger military, including the strengthening the Iranian Navy and Army. Reza Shah built significantly larger armed forces, which were provided with modern weapons. In addition, these service members were recognized for their extreme loyalty to him.

While Reza Shah brought about a number of other important improvements to Iran, one of the more noteworthy reforms he initiated was a partial integration of women

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<sup>28</sup> "Iran," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed October 10, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Newton Wilber, *Iran, Past and Present : From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*, vol. Ninth edition, Princeton Legacy Library, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), Book, 126.

<sup>30</sup> Wilber, *Iran, Past and Present : From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*, 126.

<sup>31</sup> Wilber, *Iran, Past and Present : From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*, 126.

into Iranian society and public life. His goal was not necessarily to better the lives of women, but to use women as a status marker for Iran's increasing modernization to other nations. Modernization was at the core of Reza Shah's strategies to reform Iran. He was determined to create a Westernized image of Iran and sell it to western countries. In this plan, there was no place for the veiled woman who would invoke the image of traditionalism. The image of veiled women had to be removed from the public eye, from Iranian streets. Wearing a veil or not wearing it was therefore not a question of personal preference, but more of an act of political consent or dissent.

Middle Eastern women's attire, especially Iranian women's clothing, has long been of a great interest and criticism to western people. In January 1889, *The London Telegraph* published an article, "Persian Women," talking about the veil and how it affects a woman's identity. The general outdoor clothing for Persian women, the chador (چادر) is "a sheet of cotton or silk 2 1/2 yards long by 2 yards wide; it is dyed deep blue with indigo"<sup>32</sup>. When wearing the veil, the Persian woman "places the center of the untrimmed edge of the chador over her forehead, and then draws over her head the long, while outer veil of fine linen 4 feet long and 3 feet wide."<sup>33</sup> The long veil can conceal a woman's identity and be a disguise, since most people can't even see the wearer's eyes: "there is an aperture in this veil an inch deep and 3 inches across [and] is covered by a patch of delicate embroidery, which enables her to see without being seen."<sup>34</sup> According to the author, this outfit is probably the most hideous outdoor costume in the world, indeed as comparable as to the frightful costume worn by the brothers of the

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<sup>32</sup> "Persian Women." *The Telegraph*, January 01, 1889. Accessed May 10, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> "Persian Women." *The Telegraph*

<sup>34</sup> "Persian Women." *The Telegraph*

Misericordia, in Italy.<sup>35</sup> This article was one of many reprimands that Persian women got from Westerns about the veil.

In 1936, Reza Shah decided to put an end to veiling, given that it was often considered a symbol of women's – and consequently Iranian society's – backwardness. After becoming the shah of Iran, Reza Shah started working on his unveiling plan implicitly so as to avoid controversy with the Iranian clergy. One of the steps taken towards modernization was bringing women into Iranian society and Iranian public life. In 1928, the government lessened restrictions that were related to women's public participation, thus allowing women – though often only those women with the financial means and class privilege – to go to cinemas, restaurants, and other public places. They were even allowed to talk to men in public and ride in the same carriage with them. These efforts were done to lay the groundwork for the state's more important project, the national modernization.

It is with the goal of national unification that he took the subtle steps toward unveiling women. For Reza Shah, this goal of national unification was a critical issue in presenting Iran as a modernized country. The first step he took towards his goal of unification was “ordering population to abandon its local costumes and turn to uniform way of dressing, that is, in the style of West.”<sup>36</sup> In order to reach the goal of uniformity of appearance, “the government imported large quantities of European made clothes and sold them cheaply.”<sup>37</sup> Although this style change was more evident and noticeable for

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<sup>35</sup> “Persian Women.” *The Telegraph*

<sup>36</sup> Parvin Paidar, *Women and the political process in twentieth-century Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 82.

<sup>37</sup> Paidar, *Women and the political process in twentieth-century Iran*, 82.

women, men's outfits and clothing were not exempt. The first clothing-related decree, Uniformed Dress Law, (قانون متحدالشکل شدن لباس) came in 1928 for men. According to this law, the cabinet decided to institute the "Pahlavi hat" (کلاه پهلوی), similar to the French kepi, as the official hat for Iranian men. People who did not obey the law faced punishment such as fines or imprisonment.<sup>38</sup> In a telegraph sent to one of the provinces of Iran, Khorasan, it was decreed that men without the Pahlavi hat entering offices should be warned to put their hats on. If they continue to disobey the enforced dress codes, the law dictated that such men should not receive any services or help from the office in question, so that these men realize that they must wear the hat.<sup>39</sup> This law made the change to where the state now decided what was appropriate for men to wear.

However, more important than the general public attire unification was the issue of unveiling. Some groups of Iranian women, particularly educated upper- and upper-middle class activists, such as Sediqeh Dowlatbadi, stopped wearing the veil in public in the late 1920s. In 1928, the police received an order to allow and support women who went unveiled in public. In June 1934, Reza Shah traveled to Turkey on a state visit. While there, he observed how Turkish women had been already unveiled. He vowed that upon his return to Iran he would apply what he learned from Turkey to make Iran seem as progressed in its ways as Turkey. In order to encourage women to unveil, Reza Shah decided to create a state-sponsored organization for the unveiling of women. In May

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<sup>38</sup> E. Chehabi Houchang, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah," research-article, *Iranian Studies*, no. 3/4 (1993): 212, <http://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjrs&AN=edsjrs.4310854&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

<sup>39</sup> National Library and Archives of Iran, Records of Foreign Ministry Files, 240/34404, 25 Tir 1314/17 July 1935.



1935, *Kanun Banovan* (كانون بانوان) (“The Ladies Center”), which was designed to unveil the upper- and upper-middle classes, was established under the leadership of the Shah’s daughter, Princess Shams Pahlavi.<sup>40</sup> This was a cultural and social organization that held different lectures and meetings about women’s issues. Bamdad highlights some of the other objectives of the center with the following list:

1. To provide adult women with mental and moral education, and with instruction in housekeeping and child rearing on a scientific basis, by means of lectures, publications, adult classes, etc.
2. To promote physical training through appropriate sports in accordance with principles of health preservation.
3. To create charitable institutions for the support of indigent mothers and children having no parent or guardian. To encourage simplicity of life-style and use of Iran-made goods.<sup>41</sup>

Although one of the main reasons behind the center’s establishment was to promote abandonment of the veil, one should not disregard the positive changes that it brought for Iranian women as a whole. One of the most important changes that Reza Shah, with cooperation of the Ladies Center, made for Iranian women was educational reform. When he took power, Iran’s educational system was underdeveloped and for the most part privately organized. According to Rudi Matthee, after the first two years of Reza Shah’s reign, “the number of schools rose from 612 to 1943, and thereafter to 4939

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<sup>40</sup> Bāmdād and Bagley, *From darkness into light : women's emancipation in Iran*, 94.

<sup>41</sup> Bāmdād and Bagley, *From darkness into light : women's emancipation in Iran*, 94.

in 1936, jumping to 8381 in 1937 to 1938.”<sup>42</sup> Women’s education was another part of this reform effort that needed attention for the country to be modernized. In an effort to improve women’s education, the government opened public schools, with a total number of fourteen or fifteen in 1923, and in 1926, the number increased to the total of 203.<sup>43</sup> These girls-only schools only provided the students with elementary and secondary education. After completing their studies at these state-run girls-only schools, many women had to go abroad to continue their studies. This was only possible for upper middle-class families.

The charity-oriented and state-sponsored women’s center forcefully replaced the independent feminist organizations, which is apparent with the state mandate that all feminist activity take place within *Kanun Banovan*. Therefore, women’s rights activists were effectively not allowed to have their own independent organizations anymore. According to Haideh Moghisi, the sole function of members of *Kanun Banovan* were to endorse the state’s mild reforms and praise the Shah as the father of the nation.<sup>44</sup> Given *Kanun Banovan*’s relationship with the state, there was intense pressure on members to promote unveiling. The women who joined the center were obligated to persuade their relatives, one-by-one, to cease wearing the black shroud (the chador). In the beginning of 1935-1936 school year, there was a decree from the minister of education that both female students and teachers must attend schools unveiled. Finally, on January 8th, 1936,

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<sup>42</sup> Matthee Rudi, "Transforming Dangerous Nomads to Useful Artisans, Technicians, Agriculturalists," in *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah 1921-1941*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (Routledge, 2016), 146.

<sup>43</sup> Rudi, "Transforming Dangerous Nomads to Useful Artisans, Technicians, Agriculturalists," 146.

<sup>44</sup> Moghissi, *Populism and feminism in Iran : women's struggle in a male-defined revolutionary movement*, 41.

(17 Day 1314), at the opening ceremonies of Tehran's brand-new teacher training college, Reza Shah attended with his female family members, the queen and his daughters, Ashraf and Shams, unveiled. It was in this ceremony that he announced the Women's Awakening Project (1936-1943). On this occasion, after the Queen distributed diplomas, Reza Shah made a speech in favor of women's rights. He said:

I am exceedingly pleased to observe that, as a result of knowledge and learning women have come alive to their condition, rights and privileges [...] We should not forget that up to this time one-half of the population of the country was not taken into account. No statistics of the female population were taken [...] I am not trying to point out contrasts between today and the old days but you ladies should consider this as a great day. You should avail yourselves of the opportunities which you now have to improve your country.<sup>45</sup>

Countries like Turkey applauded Reza Shah for his forceful decree of unveiling. Likewise, his speech was published in a Turkish newspaper. They titled the speech, "The Majesty gave an important speech in Tehran."<sup>46</sup> This title alone suggests the Turkish approval of Reza Shah's actions, as they honor him with "The Majesty" and say it was an "important speech." According to his speech, Iranian woman had another crucial responsibility other than being a mother: they should be more present in society and be more visible in public. This new crucial responsibility is made explicit with, "My sisters and daughters, now that you have entered the society [...] know that your duty is to work

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Donald Newton Wilbur, *Iran, Past and Present: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*, 173.

<sup>46</sup> National Archives and Library of Iran, "Şahinşah Tahrandâ Önemli bir söylev Verdi," 29<sup>th</sup> January 1936.

for your homeland [...] a nation that excludes women is a weak and contemptible nation.”<sup>47</sup> From that day on ۱۷ دی, (January 8<sup>th</sup>) was marked in the Pahlavi calendar as a grand day for Iranian women’s emancipation, and was celebrated all over the country. However, to consider Reza Shah as a true champion of women’s rights is to ignore his central motivations of modernization.

In order to know about Reza Shah’s personal ideas about women in general, it is useful to consider Mohammad Reza Shah’s point of view. In his memoir, Mohammad Reza Shah describes his father’s view about women:

Reza Shah never advocated a complete break with the past, for always he assumed that our girls could find their best fulfillment in marriage and in the nature [of nurturing] of superior children. But he was convinced that a girl could be a better wife and mother, as well as a better citizen, if she received an education and perhaps worked outside the home long enough to gain a sense of civic functions and responsibilities.<sup>48</sup>

Ashraf Pahlavi, Mohammad Reza’s twin sister, writes in her own memoir about her father’s decision of unveiling and the reason behind this critical decision. Ashraf connects unveiling with the desire for a restoration of Iran to its powerful and prosperous past. In fact, she finds that it was quite difficult for him to initiate unveiling. Despite this personal difficulty, his family did enter public life unveiled at his behest. Just like any other Iranian man in 1930s, Reza Shah did not like to talk about his wife or daughters in public, since they were a part of his very private life and household. His view of women

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<sup>47</sup> “Şahinşah Tahranda Önemli bir söylev Verdi”

<sup>48</sup> Shah of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Mission for my Country*, (London: Hutchinson, 1960), 28.

is clearly stated with, “you could sooner ask him how much money he earned or how much his house cost before you could ask personal questions about his wife or daughters.”<sup>49</sup> Ashraf Pahlavi recounts that her father made the “historical” decision to present his unveiled female family members at the Tehran Teacher Training College’s graduation ceremony. According to his daughter, “Reza Shah was a man of earlier generation.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, he was personally quite traditional in his beliefs. Ashraf later gives an example of this in how her father reacted to her wearing a sleeveless dress to a family lunch at home. Despite the public’s view of him as a progressive leader, his supposed progressivism did not prevent him from becoming infuriated with her and demanding that she change her dress. However, Ashraf believed that Reza Shah, driven to restore Iran to its glorious Persian past, put aside his traditionalism in the public sphere so as to bring significant progress to Iran. Therefore, against everybody’s will, Iranian women were unveiled solely because Reza Shah aimed to use their status as a marker for westernization and modernization.

Major scholars of Iranian women’s history such as Parvin Paidar and Eliz Sanasarian have criticized the Women’s Awakening project, because they believe that it was another rhetorically embellished opportunity for the Pahlavi state to build its power at the expense of true social progress by co-opting an independent women’s movement and confirming the patriarchal consensus.<sup>51</sup> In contrast, there were secular-minded women’s rights advocates – such as Badr ol-Moluk Bamdad – who celebrated this period

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<sup>49</sup> Ashraf Pahlavi, *Faces in Mirror: Memoirs from Exile*, (Prentice Hall Direct: 1980), 24.

<sup>50</sup> Ashraf Pahlavi, "Faces in a Mirror: Memoirs from Exile," (1980), 24.

<sup>51</sup> Camron Michael Amin, *The making of the modern Iranian woman : gender, state policy, and popular culture, 1865-1946*, (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida ; London : Eurospan, 2002).

as one in which women were emancipated and liberated from backwardness and tradition.<sup>52</sup> Unveiling was the first and crucial step in an Iranian woman's path toward progress and modernity, so long as the veil stayed a marker for the traditional woman. However, it remains true that the Women's Awakening Project reduced the question of women's progress and their rights to the sole question of the veil.

The Women's Awakening Project was met with opposition from both *ulama* (the religious leaders) and most women, who for centuries didn't know any attire other than the *chador*. Iranian writer and political activist Reza Barahani best describes the Women's Awakening project in *The Crowned Cannibals*:

In the mid-thirties Reza Shah tried to unveil the Iranian women by brute force, whenever a woman walked outside, his police would tear the veil from her face and figure. Women, not yet ready socially or psychologically for such an action and as a result of their economic, political and legal subservience to a masculine society, were forced to stay home.<sup>53</sup>

Barahani is not alone in establishing how unveiling was an invasion of woman's choice of dress and appearance in public spaces, an invasion understood as being done by men in power such as the police. Even the Women's Awakening Project – a group for women and women's rights – existed at the behest of Reza Shah. The pressure that the Women's Awakening Project had on women is best described in Mohammad Reza Shah's words. He states that he “strictly forbade any woman or girl to be seen veiled; if

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<sup>52</sup> Jasmin Rostam-Kolayi, "Expanding Agendas for The 'New' Iranian Woman," in *Making of Modern Iran Under Riza Shah State and Society under Riza Shah 1921-1941*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (Routledge, 2016), 146.

<sup>53</sup> Reza Barahani, *The crowned cannibals : writings on repression in Iran*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

she were, the nearest policeman would request her to remove her veil, and if she refused he would forcibly take it from her.”<sup>54</sup> Further, no veiled woman was to be served by shopkeepers, nor admitted to public baths, nor permitted to use public transport.<sup>55</sup> Veiled women were not allowed to ride in buses or carriages; they were not even allowed in cinemas or restaurants. Likewise, state workers were obligated to bring their unveiled wives to state events. If these workers and their spouses failed to meet this obligation, they promptly found themselves losing both their jobs and their state-provided housing.

Iranian police also had orders from the Iranian government to forcibly and publicly remove veils. In a telegraph the governor of Kermanshah complained about the police activities to the Department of internal affairs, “the police officers had used very inappropriate behavior in preventing women from wearing the veil in public that had caused so many complaints from people.”<sup>56</sup> In another telegraph sent to the Department of Finance, it was decreed that no one should help veiled women customers.<sup>57</sup> Through Woman’s Awakening Project and other state-led actions, veiled women were ultimately deprived of their agency.

Unveiling particularly had a negative impact on the lives of less privileged woman. The focus of the Awakening project was not solely on unveiling women, rather it targeted the general concept of “what modern Iranian women and men should look

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<sup>54</sup> Pahlavi, "Faces in a Mirror: Memoirs from Exile," 24; Pahlavi Ashraf, *Faces in Mirror: Memoirs From Exile*, (Prentice Hall Direct, 1980).

<sup>55</sup> Shireen Mahdavi, "Reza Shah Pahlavi and Women, A Re-Evaluation," in *Making of the Modern Iran Under Riza Shah: State and Society Under Riza Shah 1921-1941*, ed. Cronin (Routledge, 2016), 171.

<sup>56</sup> National Archives and Library of Iran, Prime Ministry Files, 14663/1312.

<sup>57</sup> National Archives and Library of Iran, Foreign Ministry Files, 20068, 14, Esfand, 1314, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1936.

like.”<sup>58</sup> For upper and upper-middle class women meeting the new expectations of dress was as simple as buying new clothing. Yet, buying European-made clothing for women that weren’t class-privileged was not so simple. The economic data shows that during 1936-1940, “the cost of living index as it related to clothing increased faster than the general index or the indices for food, rent, or fuel/water.”<sup>59</sup> The creation of a new westernized wardrobe led to a significant demand for European-made clothing, which in turn led to a surge in prices of what would be considered appropriate for modern Iranian women. The price surge on these clothes thus left financially disadvantaged women unable to buy a whole new wardrobe. Likewise, the clothing these women used to wear under their *chador* would often be worn. Thus, unveiling meant that they could neither afford Westernized clothing nor continue to wear the shabby clothing that a *chador* traditionally hides.

The increasing pressure on women was not confined to women’s public lives and attire. Unveiling also affected the private lives of Iranian men and women. Unveiling often created conflict between couples. Despite Reza Shah’s decree, some men were vehemently against their wives unveiling. However, if they were working for the state, they were not allowed to publicly object. In a letter sent to the head of the Financial Office in Mashhad, an employee was threatened with termination and eviction if he followed through with divorcing his wife.<sup>60</sup> The reason he gave for filing for divorce was

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<sup>58</sup> Amin, *The making of the modern Iranian woman : gender, state policy, and popular culture, 1865-1946*, 79.

<sup>59</sup> Amin, *The making of the modern Iranian woman : gender, state policy, and popular culture, 1865-1946*, 83.

<sup>60</sup> National Archives and Library of Iran, Foreign Ministry Files, 1168, 27, Dey, 1314, 18<sup>th</sup> January 1936.



that his wife was going unveiled. In addition to the threat of termination and eviction, he would also face blacklisting. This would mean even with privately-owned companies, he would be unable to secure future employment.

The state's justification for brutal actions for enforced unveiling was often tied to a desire to make women a part of mainstream Iranian society. Indeed, unveiling went hand-in-hand with opening Iran's educational facilities to women.<sup>61</sup> In 1936, the same year of unveiling, women were admitted to the University of Tehran, that was founded two years earlier, in 1934. Furthermore, new career opportunities were made available to women, including teaching and nursing. The Civil Code of 1931 made few changes in sharia's laws relating to women, but did establish minimum marriage ages of fifteen for women and eighteen for men.

With all the changes that were done to the marriage law, Iranian women were still struggling with polygamy. The Shah himself practiced polygamy with his three wives. Likewise, Raza Shah's period of rule is also often depicted as a period of brutality and political repression. In regard to women's issues, only pro-state feminists enjoyed freedom. Others had to live under a suffocating blanket of censorship enforced by a totalitarian regime. By the mid-1930s, all women's organizations – such as the Patriotic Women's League – were dismantled. According to Moghissi, “socialist women's organizations were suppressed and their leaders, Roshanak Nowdoost (روشنک نودوست), Jamileh Sedighi (جميله صديقي) and Shoukat Roosta (شوکت روستا) were arrested.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Houchang, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah," 204.

<sup>62</sup> Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran*, 40.

One of the social avenues that suffered strict censorship was the press. Since the Constitutional Revolution, women had used periodicals to advocate for their rights and for consciousness-raising. There were mostly two groups of periodicals: ones that praised Reza Shah and his reforms for the country, and ones that were critical of his actions. The latter type of periodical was consequently outright banned. An example of the first group was *Alam-e Nesvan* (*Women's World* ، *عالم نسوان*)(1920-1933), one of the early Iranian feminist magazines published by the American School graduates in Tehran, Iran. With Iranian and American writers, *Alam-e Nesvan* enthusiastically supported Reza Shah and were optimistic about his reforms.<sup>63</sup> The hope that these women had cultivated in Reza Shah's reforms is clear in the following piece:

Are we aware that whenever they want to, men can throw their wives out of the house? Are we aware that women's illiteracy, lack of knowledge, and superstitions are harmful to society, the country, and the family? [...] do we know that in villages far from the capital, people illegally marry off a ten-year-old girl to a sixty-year-old man? [...] today we have a government that listens to sensible arguments and protects women and children [...] we can raise our cries and have our complaints heard by the authorities who will of course help us.<sup>64</sup>

Along with *Alam-e Nesvan*, there were many other magazines, such as *Zaban-e Zanan* published in Isfahan, from 1919 to 1922 and *Jahan-e Zanan* (*جهان زنان*) (Women's World, Mashad 1921) published by women, since periodicals were considered the best way to make women's voices heard in the society. However, they were not destined to enjoy the

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<sup>63</sup> Rostam-Kolayi, "Expanding Agendas for The 'New' Iranian Woman," 165.

<sup>64</sup> Mastureh Afshar, "Are We Aware of Our Own Position in the Society?" *Alam-e Nesvan*, 5 Sept. 1932.

same freedom of publication. Rostam-Kolayi believes that the short life of these magazines reflects not only the material and financial difficulties of running a journal, but the level of state censorship of the periodical press.<sup>65</sup>

With World War II raging around the world and in the middle-east, Iran tried to stay neutral. On September 4, 1939, Iran formally declared neutrality in the European conflict. Iran was of great importance to Germany, Russia, and Britain; Donald Newton Wilbur indicates, “it was a protected route to Russia and the British navy was dependent upon the output of the oil fields of the country.”<sup>66</sup> Germany had built a channel of communication with both Iranian officials and the Iranian local elite.<sup>67</sup> This made it clear that there was an implicit leaning in Iran for Germany to win the war, which infuriated the Allied Forces. On August 26, 1941, Russian forces and British troops marched on Iran. Four days later, the Iranian government signed an agreement that placed it again under the control of British and Soviet forces. During this time, Reza Shah knew that the Allies were unwilling to make any further accommodations with him. On September 16, 1941, Reza Shah fled the capital city, Tehran. In Isfahan, he sent his letter of abdication.<sup>68</sup> His son, Mohammad Reza, was appointed the Shah of Iran.

### **Iran Under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi**

World War II had severe impacts on Iran and all Iranians’ lives. As Wilber notes, “Food was short and goods for every type very scarce, and inflation sent prices soaring.”<sup>69</sup> Like his father, for the first decade, Mohammad Reza Shah had to deal with

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<sup>65</sup> Rostam-Kolayi, "Expanding Agendas for The 'New' Iranian Woman," 166.

<sup>66</sup> Wilber, Donald Newton. *Iran, Past and Present*, 132.

<sup>67</sup> Wilber, Donald Newton. *Iran, Past and Present*, 132.

<sup>68</sup> Wilber, Donald Newton. *Iran, Past and Present*, 132.

<sup>69</sup> Wilber, Donald Newton. *Iran, Past and Present*, 135.

political and social turmoil. In 1942, thousands of men, women, and children, frustrated by poverty and famine, gathered in front of the Majlis crying, “you may kill us but we must have bread.”<sup>70</sup> On top of that, Iran had to deal with foreign occupation after the Allied invasions. This intervention was felt in different parts of people’s lives. For example, Qazvin, one of the larger central cities in Iran, residents complained, in 1943, about misconduct of American soldiers that were occupying the area. These reports included concerns of drunkenness, disorderly conduct and molestation of women.<sup>71</sup> Despite these reports, American armed forces remained in Iran both during and after the War.

With the removal of Reza Shah, the clerics again gained power. Women who were unhappy with enforced unveiling were able to wear their veils again, while willingly unveiled women were not immune to the social pressure and the menace of the religious mobs. These pressures led to compulsory veiling. Likewise, the press was used to increase these pressures on women. According to Kashani-Sabet, “men could exert some control over family life through the medium of print.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, the impact that the medium of print –free from Reza Shah’s tight control of the press – had on Iranian families shouldn’t be dismissed.

During this time (1944), writers like Ahmad Kasravi (1890-1946) advertised new ideas that affected people in general and women in particular. Known mainly as a

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<sup>70</sup> Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving citizens : women and the politics of motherhood in Iran*, (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 167.

<sup>71</sup> Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving citizens : women and the politics of motherhood in Iran*, 168.

<sup>72</sup> Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving citizens : women and the politics of motherhood in Iran*, 168.

historian, he gained broad knowledge through his work as a clergy-member to the Ministry of Justice, a teacher, and a linguist. Though still traditionally-minded, he set out to modernize the attitudes of the public through greater access to education. In order to realize meaningful social and cultural reforms through education, Kasravi used books and periodicals as the main medium to disseminate his ideas. Though he wrote in multiple different fields including history, religion, politics, education, language, literature and philosophy, Kasravi analyzes Iranian women's status and functions in Iranian society with *Khaharan va Dokhtaran-i Ma* (خواهران و دختران ما, translates to *Our Sisters and Daughters*) which was published in 1944.

The first section of *Khaharan va Dokhtaran-i Ma* is dedicated to unveiling. Kasravi believed that the problem was not the wearing of the veil itself, but the obstacle that wearing the veil creates for Iranian women. As he notes, “the discussion is that because of wearing the veil, women were excluded from the public, while because of the veil they were not participating in any organizations, and because of the veil they were all unaware of what was going on in the country.”<sup>73</sup> The symbolism of veiled woman is that of ignorance and superstition, for Kasravi. He emphasizes that since women are half of the population of Iran, they should be more present in public arenas with men doing their best to help the country prosper. However, he also asserts that women can only take on limited specific roles in the society, with, “they are not created to be soldiers, pilots or serve in the army.”<sup>74</sup> For women who would like to unveil, but find it difficult, he advises to stay away from what he finds to be undesirable practices:

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<sup>73</sup> Ahmad Kasravi, *Khaharan va Dokhtaran-i Ma*, (Tehran, 1944), 12.

<sup>74</sup> Kasravi, *Khaharan va Dokhtaran-i Ma*, 12.

The process of unveiling (of being free) cannot happen overnight. Women should come out into the streets without dressing up and wearing make-up. They should reserve make-up and showing off only for the confines of their house and their husbands. The woman who wears make-up going out wants to attract men's attention. They should not mingle openly with strange men and should not participate in any celebration or party without their husbands.<sup>75</sup>

His disdain of the habits of European women extends to the way he reads European culture. He concludes his chapter on unveiling with: "Europeans do not honor their women. No one should be deceived by what they [Europeans] publish in their newspapers. They devalue women, because they only use women as objects for men's pleasure and gratification."<sup>76</sup> Kasravi, in calling for the protection of women through encouraging them to be modest in dress and demeanor, ultimately is in line with contemporary thinking that while woman should be part of the public sphere, they should not enjoy or take liberties in this freedom.

In the following chapter, Kasravi shifts focus to women's rights. He believes that women falsely think they have a right to be representatives in Parliament, ministers, judges and office managers. For Kasravi, these women are mistaken. He writes, "the one and only right that women have today and is being disregarded is to find husbands and have children. This is their indisputable right."<sup>77</sup> He goes on to argue that the physical differences between men and women are proof that God created men and women for different types of work. Another important reason is that jobs that require women

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<sup>75</sup> Kasravi, *Khaharan va Dokhtaran-i Ma*, 11.

<sup>76</sup> Kasravi, *Khaharan va Dokhtaran-i Ma*, 15.

<sup>77</sup> Kasravi, *Khaharan va Dokhtaran-i Ma*, 20

working out of the house are not compatible with women's natural duties of raising children. This is to say, women and men are equal partners in life, but women cannot pursue goals that interfere with having a family. On the other hand, men should also stay away from the jobs that are only designed for women, because no man can supposedly succeed in housekeeping or raising children. In other words, Kasravi was quite traditional in his patriarchal worldview.

Kasravi's reflections on stereotypical gender roles were echoed in other intellectuals' opinions as well. The reason behind this widespread anti-feminist ideology was a fear of an eventual subversion of women's and men's role in the Iranian society. This fear is made clear by Kasravi with, "what might actually happen to the Iranian nation and family if men became homemakers and women served in the army."<sup>78</sup> However, women's rights activists were not silent about resisting patriarchal ideas. Activist like Fatimah Sayyah (فاطمه سیاح) (1902-48) strongly confronted the idea that women's participation in society and working outside the home would not be obstacles to their ability to reproduce or rear children. In an interview that was published in the feminist magazine *Alam-i Zanan*, Sayyah confronted opposing forces to Iranian women's emancipation. She notes, "They tell us that women's duties are motherhood and child care, duties that have nothing to do with rights and emancipation."<sup>79</sup> Sayyah's life in fact undermines Kasravi's assertions, as she was the first woman to become a professor at

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<sup>78</sup> Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran*, 17.

<sup>79</sup> Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran*, 17.

Tehran University, worked as a magazine editor, and was the first Iranian woman to represent Iran at the United Nations.

Reza Shah's policies to modernize Iran and Iranian women were continued by Mohammad Reza Shah. The plan to modernize Iran was renamed by Mohammad Reza Shah to the "Great Civilization," which was launched later as the White Revolution in 1963. He believed that on the path to modernize Iran, he needed help from European countries and the United States. As he notes, "in 1948, as soon as we had begun to recover from the chaos of the war, my government called in an experienced firm of Americans consulting engineers. [They] were asked to survey Iran's potentialities and to recommend ways of using our large oil revenues to speed our modernization."<sup>80</sup> In his memoir, Anthony Parsons, the British Diplomat, describes the Shah's "Great Civilization" as follows:

It was essentially materialistic, the realization of the Shah's vision of Iran as a fully developed, industrial state, the Japan of central Asia. But, it was more than that. In the Shah's mind, Iran was part of Western civilization, separated by an accident of geography from its natural partners and equals. The Iranians in his view were Aryan, not Semitic, and their innate talents and abilities had been suffocated by the blanket of the Arab invasion of 1,200 years previously and its spiritual concomitant, Islam. He saw it as his mission to lift this blanket and to restore Iran to its former grandeur among the Great Powers.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Pahlavi, Mohammed Reza. *Mission for My Country*. Hutchinson & Co. 1976, 138.

<sup>81</sup> Anthony Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall: Iran 1974-1979*, (London: Cape, 1984).



It was presented to Iranian people that the reason behind the “Great Civilization” project was to enhance people’s material standards of living, whereas, in reality, it was more of a psychological plan. As Anthony Parson says, “the Iranians were to be galvanized out of their slow, traditional Muslim way of life and projected into the Western Europe of the twenty-first century, all under his [Shah’s] personal, inspired leadership”<sup>82</sup>. There were many positive changes that resulted from the Shah’s modernization plan that should not be overlooked. According to Parsons, he noticed himself that,

the peasant villagers and tribesmen, who probably comprised over 50 per cent of the population of Iran, were on balance better off under the Pahlavis [...] there were now village schools throughout the country, small clinics, some piped water and electricity. Feeder roads had been built, connecting remote village with local towns. Above all, for the first time in centuries, strong central government had pacified the country: it was now possible to travel throughout Iran unescorted and unmolested.<sup>83</sup>

Women and their organizing played an important role in stabilizing Iran after Mohammed Raza Shah’s accession, even in regards to non-women’s issues. One of the important movements of the second Pahlavi dynasty was the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry. Since the discovery of oil in Iran, it was exploited by foreign powers due to the weakness of Iranian state to control it themselves. The plan to nationalize oil was a strong action against foreign intervention. The Women’s branch of the *Tudeh* Party supported the national government of Mohammad Mossadegh (1951-1953). During this

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<sup>82</sup> Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall: Iran 1974-1979*.

<sup>83</sup> Parsons, *The Pride and the Fall: Iran 1974-1979*.

short time, women were in the forefront of political activism. They were especially active in selling national government bonds and raising funds for the support of the democratic government.<sup>84</sup> However, Iranian men did not reciprocate in supporting women's rights.

The second attempt towards women's suffrage since 1911 came from the *Tudeh* Party in 1944, when its fraction in the Majles introduced a bill to extend the vote to women. This bill lived the same sad destiny of the first bill; it was denied and attacked by a deputy as anti-Islamic and anti-Quran.<sup>85</sup> Although disappointed, women still did their best to get the right to vote. The *Tudeh* Party of women supported Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh (1882-1967), an Iranian politician and the head of the democratically elected government. He became the prime minister in 1951.

In response to women's support, Mossadegh granted limited freedoms to women. In 1951, women were allowed to hold office and vote in trade unions. In December 1952, Mossadegh's government presented the new electoral law proposal to the Majlis, but it failed to include women's suffrage. Mossadegh decided to sacrifice women's suffrage, because he already had many clergymen (the religious leaders) opposing him and his reforms. He thus thought women could wait for their rights, making the nationalization of oil his topmost priority.

While the social and political conditions of the country were going through some improvements, another major development happened for women's organizations. The

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<sup>84</sup> Sima Bahar, "A Historical Background to the Women's Movement in Iran" In *Women of Iran, The Conflict with Fundamentalist Islam*, ed. By Farah Azari (London: Ithaca Press, 1983), 181.

<sup>85</sup> Nayereh Tohidi, "The Women's Rights Movement and Feminism in Post-Islamist Iran," <http://www.roozonline.com/english/opinion/opinion-article/article/women-and-representation-in-irans-democracy-movement.html>

50's was the decade of co-optation of different women's organizations. Sanasarian clearly distinguishes between different approaches of Mohammad Reza's handling of women's activity with, "while Reza Shah coerced activist women into the government, his son encouraged organizational co-optation whereby all women would come under a central institution."<sup>86</sup> In 1956, in order to ensure the control over women's organizational activities, the minister of labor planned a mass meeting with several women's organizations' presidents. In the meeting, they talked about new horizons for women's rights and social segregation between men and women. After the meeting, an umbrella organization, the Federation of Women's Organizations, was established in Tehran. Fourteen organizations joined the federation, but it did not last long. It was replaced by a new institution called *Shora-ye Ali-ye Jamiat Zanan Iran* (شورای عالی جمعیت زنان ایران) (the High Council of Iranian Women), whose honorary head was the Shah's twin sister, Ashraf Pahlavi. Eighteen organizations joined the council. Therefore, all of the women's organizations were controlled by the state through the Shah's sister. The Council had different branches in several major cities in Iran with the main goal of the Council being advertised as education and westernization. The Council continued its activities till 1963, the year that the White Revolution was instituted by Mohammad Reza Shah. Unfortunately, the Council was not successful in promoting women's rights. Sanasarian notes, "except for following the formalities of building a bureaucratic type of organization, the High Council did not do anything else."<sup>87</sup> Mohammad Reza Shah –

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<sup>86</sup> Eliz Sanasarian, *The Women's rights movement in Iran : mutiny, appeasement and repression from 1900 to Khomeini*, (New York: Praeger, 1982), 81.

<sup>87</sup> Sanasarian, *The Women's rights movement in Iran : mutiny, appeasement and repression from 1900 to Khomeini*, 81.

despite his slightly different approach – followed his father’s lead in using Iranian women’s status as a marker for modernity and progress, while also failing to fully liberate women.

### **The White Revolution**

Finally, in 1963, Iranian women were granted the right to vote. In January 1963, the Shah called for a referendum in support of the White Revolution that included 6 major reforms: land reform, the sale of government owned private factories, new election laws (including women’s suffrage), the nationalization of forests, a new national literacy corps, and a plan to give workers a share of industrial profits.<sup>88</sup> On February 27th, 1963, despite much opposition from religious leaders, Iranian women were given the right to vote and run for the office. In September 1963, after national elections were held in the country, six women, Mehrangiz Dawlatshahi, Farrokhrou Parsa, Nayyereh Ebtehaj Sami’i, Harjar Tarbiat, Shawkat Malik Jahanbani, and Nizhat Nafisi were elected to the Majlis as deputies. The senate consisted of 60 senators, with 30 elected by the parliament and 30 appointed by the Shah. For the first time in Iranian history, two women Mehrangiz Manuchehrian and Shams al-Muluk Musahib were appointed as senators by the Shah.

The appointment of female senators, however, was not a pure act of feminism. Although the media also presented the Shah as a champion for women’s rights, no one should forget his historical interview with the famous writer Oriana Fallaci. In this interview, in the presence of his wife, Farah Diba, the Shah was asked if he agreed with polygamy, since Islam allows him to take another wife. He answered:

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<sup>88</sup> Keddie, Richard, and Keddie, *Modern Iran : roots and results of revolution*, 145.

To be honest, one must admit there are cases where [...] When a wife is ill, for instance, or when she refuses to perform her wifely duties, thereby causing her husband unhappiness [...] Let's face it! One has to be a hypocrite or an innocent to believe a husband will tolerate that kind of thing.<sup>89</sup>

His statements show that he cares very little for women's individuality or personhood, instead viewing women as simply agents for "wifely duties." In this interview, when he was asked about women's influence in his life, the shah believed he was the main influence in women's progress by including them in the White Revolution reforms. However, he states that he does not believe in women's rights, or their influence in men's lives,

I don't underestimate [women], [...] they have derived more advantages than anyone else from my White Revolution. I have fought strenuously to obtain equal rights and responsibilities for them. I have even incorporated them in the Army, where they get six months' military training before being sent to the villages to fight the battle against illiteracy [...] But I wouldn't be sincere if I asserted I'd been influenced by a single one of them [...] In a man's life, women count only if they're beautiful and graceful and know how to stay feminine and [...] This Women's Lib business, for instance. What do these feminists want? What do you want? Equality, you say? Indeed! I don't want to seem rude, but [...] You may be equal in the eyes of the law, but not [...] in ability.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> "The Shah of Iran: An Interview with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi," *The New Republic*, 1973, accessed May, 30, 2018.

<sup>90</sup> "The Shah of Iran: An Interview with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi."

According to Afsaneh Najmabadi, “in 1930s, women’s status was seen as a symbol of modernity of the new nation and the new state [whereas] in 1970s, it became the symbol of modernity of the monarch and his progressive benevolence toward women.”<sup>91</sup> It is true that women’s rights activists in the 1960’s and 1970’s had greater access to higher education and better job opportunities, but they had fewer opportunities to publish independent views – especially those independent of the Shah or critical of the regime. Despite the improvements of this time, women’s activities were closely monitored either through the Shah or his sister, Ashraf.

In 1966, another umbrella organization took the place of the previous High Council. The Women’s Organization of Iran (WOI) was established under the leadership of Ashraf Pahlavi and continued its activities till the Islamic Revolution in February 1979. Few feminists like Mehrangiz Manuchehrian were able to resist the pressure to not to join the organization, she had established the International Organization of Iranian Women Lawyers long before WOI. In 1967, Mahnaz Afkhami was appointed as the general secretary of WOI. Some of the members were not necessarily feminists, they were teachers, nurses or government employees who could help with some specific programs. Women activists such as Mehrangiz Dawlatshahi held classes that were informative about both women’s personal and political rights. They knew that in order to encourage women to be more active in public, the state should provide some facilities (i.e. child-care centers). In 1967, WOI had established different Family Welfare Centers in different parts of Iran. These centers provided different services for women, such as

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<sup>91</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Hazards of modernity and morality: women, state and ideology in contemporary Iran," in *The modern Middle East: a reader*. Ed. A.Hourani, P.S.Khoury, & M.C.Wilson (London: Tauris, 1993), 63.

education, health care, legal counseling, and child-care.<sup>92</sup> Despite the positives of WOI, it was ultimately a state-sponsored program that was not consistently an ideal organization.<sup>93</sup>

The second important initiative regarding women in this period that should be singled out is a 1967 legislation entitled as the Family Protection Law. This law contained 23 articles that included limitations on men's ability to divorce limitations on the practice of polygamy, and a raising of the marriable ages for men and women. These changes made divorce court proceedings become more intensive – to include a requirement that a court had to issue a non-reconciliation certificate for the couple to continue with the divorce process under Article 8 and Article 11 placing increased restrictions on polygamous relationships. Article 8 was a turning point for Iranian women since the marriage laws of 1931 and 1937 had denied women equality in the divorce process. Though Article 11 was unable to demolish polygamy outright, it did require that polygamous marriages be approved by the court. The raising of the marriageable ages would later be raised again in 1975, when the parliament passed an amendment that raised the age of marriage to 18 for women and 20 for men. The progress that these laws afforded women would not last long, unfortunately.

The public discontent with Mohammad Reza Shah and his regime grew to uncontrollable levels in the 1970's. Many activists and critics of the Shah, like Reza Baraheni and Vida Hejebi Tabrizi, were jailed and tortured. People were dissatisfied with his mismanagement of the overwhelming oil wealth that resulted in a flagging economy.

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<sup>92</sup> Sanasarian, Eliz. *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran*, 87.

<sup>93</sup> More detailed information about the WOI will be provided in the Epilogue.

The most prominent voice that opposed the Shah was Ayatollah Khomeini. He was against the Shah and his policies since the 1940's. Many of the Iranian population who were suppressed under the Shah's policies, enthusiastically joined Khomeini's call for the revolution. Activist women who were anti-Shah and deprived of the right to form independent organizations, could now voice their dissatisfaction through protests, papers, and speeches. It was during this time that the veil became a prominent symbol of revolution and protest for Iranian women. It is important to note here that before the end of the provisional government, it was not certain that Iran would become the Islamic republic, under clergy rule. When talking about women, Khomeini emphasized men's and women's equal roles under Islam. Women who were suppressed under the shah chose to wear the veil again as an act of rebellion and revolution. Towards the final months of the Revolution, even a large number of the WOI members joined the anti-Shah forces. Finally, on the morning of 16 January 1979, Mohammad Reza Shah left Iran for exile in Egypt. This was the ending of the Pahlavi dynasty and the beginning of the Islamic Republic of Iran.



### III. MEN WRITING WOMEN

An important era in socio-political history began in Iran with the social upheaval that started since the Constitutional Revolution, culminating in the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty. In 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran, with highlighted events that are discussed in the first chapter, marks an important era not only for social, political, and economic changes, but also for producing a fascinating body of literature. For example, from the socio-political point of view, the year 1921 is worthy of notice both for the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty and the establishment of extreme measures to modernize and westernize Iranians. From a literary standpoint, this year marks an important introduction of new literary forms of writing in Persian Literature. In fiction, Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997) published the first modern Persian short story collection, *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* (یکی بود یکی نبود, *Once Upon a Time*). In poetry, poets like Nima Yushij (1897-1960), initiated new a form that was called *She'r-e No* (New Poetry). New Poetry broke the strict regularity of the rhyme and meter scheme of classical poetry. These important events in Persian Literature marked a new beginning of modern Persian Literature.

The literature written during the Pahlavi reign (1921-1979) reacts to the ongoing social and political conditions in the country. In many stories and poems, a major theme involves the detrimental effects of imposed modernization and westernization to Iranian traditional values. However, they also challenge the traditional forces like the Shi'ite rules of Islam as one of the main obstacles of improvement Iranian lives. In many short stories and novels written by male authors, the prevailing ideas about traditionalism and modernism are manifested as two contradictory female characters. In most of the stories written by men in this period, women are devoid of agency to make important decisions;

they are practically just puppets in the hands of either traditionalism or modernization. They are either obsessed with traditional ideas, such as finding a husband, or with the superficial elements of modernization. Therefore, the commentary that the male authors make on women's conditions is through creating weak female characters who are condemned by the author, reader, and society in general. In order to study the dominant roles of female characters, I discuss a few short stories written by major male authors such as Sadeq Hedayat, Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Gholamhossein Sa'edi. The highlighted roles designed for women in these stories are as passive victims of traditionalism and westernization. Female characters are only created to be vehicles for the author to criticize the shifts in socio-political Iranian life. Women do not question their situation; they submissively accept the roles assigned to them by the patriarchy. In the following stories and most of the stories written by male authors during the Pahlavi era, the writers represent a picture of Iranian woman that is desirable by the patriarchal society they are living in.

Twentieth century Persian literature captures different social, political, and cultural changes of the time. Almost all the writers of this period follow the conventions of *literature engagée*. For the *engagée* writers, the primary focus was both the writer's suffering and that of others. Therefore, writers drew from the real-life contexts and situations, to mankind, and to human problems of contemporary Iran. The traces of *literature engagée* in Iran can be traced back to the Constitutional Revolution. In those tumultuous years of revolution, writers could enjoy an atmosphere of relatively free speech. Some famous poets and writers, like Ali Akbar Dehkhoda, wrote pieces that were published in popular newspapers, such as *Sur-e Esrafil* (صور اسرافیل), The Trumpet of

Esrafil) (1907-1909). In this weekly journal, which supported the Constitutional Revolution, Ali Akbar Dehkhoda (1879-1956) published satirical articles called “Charand-o Parand” (چرند و پرند, Fiddle-Faddle) as a social and political commentary. These series became very popular among Iranians not only for their commentary nature, but also because “they were written in colloquial Persian with frequent use of popular proverbs and expressions.”<sup>94</sup> In this popular series of articles, Iranian women were presented as fools, trapped in their superstitious beliefs. Common scenarios in these works included: mothers going to see fortunetellers in order to cure their ill sons, women being sold to pay a man’s taxes, or the idea of “temporary wives” (i.e. women being used solely for men’s pleasure, and not as actual wives). Therefore, with his female characters, Dehkhoda comments on the character of Iranian women, with his works suggesting that they are passive, oppressed, naïve, and superstitious.

The trend of writing simply and using colloquial language continued after Dehkhoda in the works of Moahmmad Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997), often referred to as the father of the Iranian short story. Like Dehkhoda, Jamalzadeh commented on Iranian women’s situation between the lines of his short stories. By the time Jamalzadeh started writing fiction, Iran had already transitioned from the Qajar to the Pahlavi dynasty. In 1921, Jamalzadeh published his first short story collection, *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud*. It was published in Berlin and banned in Iran because of its criticism of the clergy and the socio-political conditions of his homeland. The indictment of the institution of Shi’ite Islam, a

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<sup>94</sup> M. R. Ghanoonparvar, *Prophets of doom : literature as a socio-political phenomenon in modern Iran*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1984), 4.

dominant theme in the books shared by many modern writers.<sup>95</sup> *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* consists of six short stories, written over seven years (1915 - 1921). The stories offer an interesting glimpse into Iranian life during the second decade of the 20th century. They are written in a narrative style abundant with cultural-specific metaphors and idiomatic expressions. In “Bil-e Dig Bil-e Choqondar”, (بیل دیگ بیل چغندر, “What is Sauce for the Goose”), gives readers the opportunity to see Iranians through the eyes of a westerner. However, what matters here is how he depicts Iranian women.

“Bil-e Dig bil-e Choqondar” is about the encounter of an Iranian, probably the author himself, who lives abroad with a westerner who has lived many years in Iran. The story happens in later Qajar times, and is a fascinating satire on the Iranian way of life, the ruling classes, and the tyranny of the Qajar dynasty. The narrator notes that he misses the Iranian baths (Hammam) and the massage that he used to get from a talented masseur. As a result, he finds a bath that has a masseur familiar with the Iranian Hammam style bath, but is shocked to learn that the masseur was an adviser in Iran, for different ministries. The masseur tells the narrator the story behind going to Iran and staying there for a few months, therefore, the masseur Jamalzadeh is able to convey to Iranian readers the western view of Iran.

The reader is then presented with some of the flaws of Iranian society and culture, through the eyes of the westerner. For example, one of the most important flaws – according to the westerner – in Iranians is their dishonesty, highlighted by the masseur in his story about how he was robbed by thieves. The masseur hands the narrator his journal

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<sup>95</sup> Ghanoonparvar, *Prophets of doom : literature as a socio-political phenomenon in modern Iran*, 7.

in which he wrote in detail about his stay. Upon reading the journal, the narrator realizes that it is written from uneducated European point of view, one that only judges Iran and Iranians based on Western norms. Specifically, this is apparent with his observations about women, which are aligned with other Western critics of the time who published articles about Persian women.

The masseur's judgment of Iranian society and women's situation is limited due to his ignorance of the social, political, and cultural realities of Iranian society. One of the very first depictions of Iranian woman presented by the masseur is that they are essentially anonymous. He says, "another thing that is very strange about Iran is that a substantial part of people, about half the population of the country, wrap themselves from head to foot in black sacks, not even leaving a space to breathe."<sup>96</sup> For the masseur, women are nowhere to be seen and have no identity except their "black sack," which is a signifier of their passive presence. In his diary, he also notes about women that "one strange thing about this country is that, apparently, there are absolutely no women in it. You see little girls, four or five years old, in the alleyways, but never any women."<sup>97</sup> Therefore, according to the European, women are not a part of the Iranian population; he describes Iran as a "city of men." The masseur, still curious about this absence of women, asks one of his Iranian friends, who has several kids, where his wife is. Asking about his wife infuriates the friend, noting that "his eyes bulged crazily from their sockets, and his mood changed completely."<sup>98</sup> The masseur realizes that in Iran, not only can he not see

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<sup>96</sup> Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, "Bil-e Dig Bil-e Choqondar," Translated by Heshmat Moayyed and Paul Sprachman as "What's Sauce for the Goose," (Washington, D.C.: Maga Publishers, 1991, 41.

<sup>97</sup> Jamalzadeh, Moayyed and Sprachman, "What's the Sauce for Goose," 40.

<sup>98</sup> <sup>98</sup> Jamalzadeh, Moayyed and Sprachman, "What's the Sauce for Goose," 41.

any Iranian woman, but also, he cannot even mention them. However, he finds the answer to his question in part with regards to his points about women being anonymous “black sacks.” These are the European man’s observation about Iranian women. It is an exaggerated western peek into the Iranian woman’s life, as he says statements like, “these people are never allowed to speak and have no right to enter a teahouse or any other place.”<sup>99</sup>

This is a recurrent western observation of Iran that happens over and over either in western travel journals or articles published in newspapers. For example, an American traveler, Paul Theroux, describes the male-dominated Iranian society as:

Women are seldom seen with men; there are few couples, no lovers, and at dusk Tehran becomes a city of males, prowling in groups or loitering. The bars are exclusively male; the men drink in expensive suits, continually searching a room with anxious eyes, as if in expectation of a woman.<sup>100</sup>

The question of Iranian women and their rights is more complex than it is described in Jamalzadeh’s story and others. He is touching upon different groups of people, such as women and clergy, in his satirical short story to ridicule the dark truth of Iranian life. It is true that before the Constitutional Revolution years’ women were confined rigidly to the private sphere of life and had no participation in public life. No mention of a man’s wife, mother, or daughter were possible. Years later, in 1977, in his book, *The Crowned Cannibals*, Reza Barahani approves the picture of women that is explained in “Bil-e Dig bil-e Choqondar”,

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<sup>99</sup> Jamalzadeh, Moayyed and Sprachman, “What’s the Sauce for Goose,” 41.

<sup>100</sup> Paul Theroux, *The Great Railway Bazaar: by Train Through Asia*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 62.

The majority of Iranian husbands do not mention the names of their wives in any gathering. They use the word *manzel*, which is the Arabic word in Persian for “house.” They say, for instance; “My house told me that you had come looking for me, but I wasn’t home.” Or sometimes they use male names, such as Hassan or Hossein, or even insignificant objects such as shoes and hats. My father used to call my mother *bashmagh*, the Turkish word for “shoes,” in the presence of other men.<sup>101</sup>

Therefore, in this short story, Jamalzadeh is trying to highlight the pathetic situation of Iranian women’s life to enlighten Iranians about this dire problem of social invisibility that half of the population face.

During the 1920’s and the 1930’s, Reza Shah exposed new issues, such as westernization and severe censorship. This was also exacerbated by increased foreign intervention from Britain and Czarist Russia. New concerns found their way to the writings of the authors of the 1930’s and the 1940’s. They were more focused on the political problems of modern Iran. Most of the stories shared some mutual concerns such as the violation of people’s human and civil rights and the protest of workers and students, all focusing on dictatorship of the Pahlavis. During this period, the most prominent writer is Sadeq Hedayat, the outstanding master of the modern Persian story, whose stories and short novel, *The Blind Owl* (1937), succeeded in reaching national and international fame.

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<sup>101</sup> Baraheni, Reza. *The Crowned Cannibals: Writings on Repression in Iran*. With an Introduction by E.L. Doctorow. New York: Vintage Books, 1977, 51.

Admired as the most significant modern Persian writer, Sadeq Hedayat was born in 1903 in Tehran and committed suicide in 1951 in Paris. However, in the short years of his literary career, he was quite active: he published a substantial number of short stories, two short novels, a novelette, two historical dramas, a puppet play, a travelogue, and a collection of satirical parodies and sketches.<sup>102</sup> When he was sent to France to study dentistry, he got acquainted with the works of de Maupassant and Chekhov. But it was Franz Kafka's works that attracted the young writer the most. Hedayat was deeply influenced by Kafka, and his literary style was similar to his. Hedayat's characters are chosen from ordinary people, who are dealing with dark themes such as isolation, hopelessness, loneliness, absurdism, depression, and death.

According to different Persian literary scholars, such as Ehsan Yar-Shater and Mohammad Ghanoonparvar, Hedayat's talent lies in depicting a society that is in transition. In most of his stories, Hedayat captures the mood of a society in transition and expresses the strong feelings of helplessness that people in his society, Iran, are going through. In his short story, "Aroosak-e Posht-e Pardeh" (عروسک پشت پرده, The Doll Behind the Curtain) (1934), Hedayat explicitly talks about this transition, depicting a human being going through the conflict of transition from a traditional society into a modern future.

The story is about an Iranian student who is studying abroad in Paris at La Havre. Mehrdad is a good student, "obedient, meek, quiet, he was always attentive in his

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<sup>102</sup> Hedâyat, Sâdeq, and Ehsan Yar-Shater. *Sadeq Hedayat: An Anthology* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1979), vii.



studies.”<sup>103</sup> The most noticeable characteristic about him is his shyness. One the day that Mehrdad leaves the school for summer break, the headmaster tells him that he is an amazing student, but “so much shyness isn’t becoming in a young man. One must assert oneself in life.”<sup>104</sup> Back home he was a “mama’s boy,” and “whenever somebody spoke of women, he would blush across the forehead down to his earlobes.”<sup>105</sup> Although Mehrdad thrives in school life, he has difficulty adjusting to Western life. This is clear with, “he had felt like a prisoner, lonely and lost [...] surrounded by fellow students whose thoughts were not compatible with his, a language that he did not fully understand, and customs and habits which were unfamiliar to him.”<sup>106</sup> Mehrdad is representative of Iranians in Iran, not only expatriates who are surrounded by imported norms of modernization. They find it difficult to adopt to new ways of clothing, ways of life, and the imported western culture. They are lost in the path of transition from traditional culture into a modern one.

Mehrdad comes from a traditional Iranian family, and is raised according to traditional beliefs. He had never talked with a woman outside his family. His parents had crammed his head with the maxims and words of wisdom of a thousand of years ago. Out of traditionalism and lest their son should slip, his parents had arranged for him to be engaged to his cousin, Derakhshandeh. Growing up in a traditional society and family, Mehrdad (at twenty-four) did not have within him the courage, experience, resources or

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<sup>103</sup> Hedayat, Sadeq, “The Doll Behind the Curtain.” Translated by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak. In *Sadeq Hedayat: An Anthology*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), 127.

<sup>104</sup> Hedayat and Hakkak, “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” 127.

<sup>105</sup> Hedayat and Hakkak, “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” 128.

<sup>106</sup> Hedayat and Hakkak, “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” 129.

boldness of a fourteen-year-old French teenager. The other victim is Derakhshandeh, who gets married to her cousin without anyone asking about her opinion. This is an arranged marriage based on what the parents decide. Hedayat criticizes traditionalism and blind decisions that are made based on its ethical standards, through these two characters.

One night Mehrdad decides to go to *Le Casino*. His friends had told him endless romantic stories about *Le Casino*. As he is walking, he comes to a large store window and sees a big mannequin of a blonde woman, noting that “its head was tilted to one side, accentuating its white neck, long eyelashes, large eyes and smiling lips.”<sup>107</sup> For Mehrdad it was not a mannequin; “it was a real woman, an angelic woman smiling at him.”<sup>108</sup> Aside from the dazzling beauty of the blond mannequin, Mehrdad is attracted to it due to another reason. He states, “this woman could not talk [...] He would have to do nothing to please her [...] she would never be quarrelsome or fall sick [...] She would always be contented, quiet, beautiful, always wearing that smile.”<sup>109</sup> But most importantly, he is attracted to her because she has no agency. This is apparent with, “she would never open her mouth, never express an opinion, and he wouldn’t have to be afraid of incompatibility”.<sup>110</sup> Mehrdad, among thousands of Iranians, is a victim of the dilemma of the Iranian intellectual and the nation as a whole. He is torn between two women, who symbolize traditional society (his betrothed) and modern society (the mannequin.) He rejects both women and in consequence both societies. The only reason he treats Derakhshandeh well is his mother’s insistence and his inability to stand up to his parents.

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<sup>107</sup> Hedayat and Hakkak, “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” 129.

<sup>108</sup> Hedayat and Hakkak, “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” 130.

<sup>109</sup> Hedayat and Hakkak, “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” 130.

<sup>110</sup> Hedayat and Hakkak, “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” 130.

However, it is impossible for him to imagine having a relationship with a western woman, as “he hated social gatherings – everything about it. besides he was too shy, too timid for all that.”<sup>111</sup> Western life is strange and intangible to him. He likewise “scanned the made-up faces of women. Was it these faces that entrapped so many men so passionately?”<sup>112</sup> He feels that he is alienated from both societies. Therefore, he finds refuge in a passive non-human mannequin. The Iranian intellectual may be modernizing away from traditional notions of love and marriage; however, he is not yet able to understand the modern female who is active, demanding, and desirous. This is a struggle shared by virtually all 20<sup>th</sup> century Iranian intellectuals.

The story is told from third-person limited point-of-view, with the narrator giving glimpses into Mehrdad’s thoughts and feelings – as is the case with Mehrdad’s thoughts towards the mannequin and Derakhshandeh. As it is third-person limited, Hedayat does not include Derakhshandeh’s thoughts in this story. Further, the limited dialogue involving women creates an overall sense of silence on women. The silence here can be a symbol of how Iranian women are hushed in both public and private spheres of their lives. This is explicit, as Mehrdad is in love with a mannequin whose attracting characteristic is her silence.

In “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” and later in his famous novel, *The Blind Owl*, Hedayat criticizes the clash between traditionalism and modernism. While he comments on traditionalism and superstitious ideas, he criticizes Reza Shah’s imposed Iranian modernism. Derakhshandeh is his vehicle for critiquing traditionalism; her parents

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<sup>111</sup> Hedayat and Hakkak, “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” 131.

<sup>112</sup> Hedayat and Hakkak, “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” 132.

arrange her marriage without asking her consent. They choose Mehrdad for her only because they were childhood playmates. Further, the reader does not know how she feels and thinks. Like Mehrdad, she also struggles with traditionalism and modernism, but she is kept silent about it. She is a passive character who is just waiting for her fiancé to come back from Paris, waiting for him all the years that he was studying abroad.

The only act that is assigned for the female character is imitation. When Derakhshandeh sees that Mehrdad is attracted to the [mannequin], she imitates it. It's noted that "she had her hair colored and styled after the [mannequin]'s [...] made herself a dress just like that of the [mannequin] and bought shoes of the same style [...] she would stand before the mirror trying to imitate the mannequin's pose".<sup>113</sup> Here, Hedayat suggests that most Iranian women blindly imitate the westernization norms imposed by the state, without even thinking about them. This is thus how he goes about critiquing modernization. However, it is important to note that, in this story, the person who imports the western fashion model to be imitated is the male character, Mehrdad. Derakhshandeh is left with no other choice than imitation. When she sees that the mannequin is loved dearly by her fiancé, she thinks that the way to win Mehrdad's love is to essentially change herself into a Western mannequin – to the point where in the end she is confused by Mehrdad for the actual mannequin, ironically leading to her ultimate demise; Mehrdad kills her after realizing that he wanted to have a real relationship with Derakhshandeh. Thus, the conflict between modernization and traditionalism is depicted by Hedayat as sad for men, but fatal for women. This idea resonates later in works of different authors,

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<sup>113</sup> Hedayat and Hakkak, "The Doll Behind the Curtain," 135. "Translation Modified"

such as Jalal Al-i Ahmad, who strongly criticizes the Pahlavi's Westernization project in his essay, *Gharbzadegi* (غربزدگی, Westoxification).

After the abdication of Reza Shah after World War II, Iranians experienced dreadful hardships. Most of the stories written or taking place during this time reflected hardships such as famine, extreme poverty, fatal disease, and foreign intervention. In the period of Mossadegh (1951-53), following World War II, the Iranian writers celebrated a short period of freedom of expression. Even after the CIA-assisted coup in 1953 against the Mossadegh Government, the *engagé* writers continued their writings. During the 1950's to the mid-1970's, despite increasing censorship from the state, the *engagée* writers such as Jalal Al-Ahmad, Sadegh Choobak and Beh Azin experimented with new themes, styles, and forms in their writing. During this time, some writers like Reza Baraheni got imprisoned due to their comments against the government.

Mohammad Reza Shah continued with his westernization plans even more rigorously. Focus is thus needed on reforms that pertained to Iranian women (see Chapter 1). According to Kamran Talattof, two groups of writers reacted to the state-imposed reforms. He says:

[the reforms] were opposed by the religious conservatives for their Westernized nature and for the way that they undermined clerics' traditional authority. To the left, the reforms appeared superficial and limited to small groups of urban women who in fact symbolized the shah's White Revolution and Westernization.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Kamran Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature*, 1st ed. ed., (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 95.

Among the second group, the most prominent opponent and famous Iranian writer was Jalal-i Al-i Ahmad (1923-1969) (جلال آل احمد). Al-i Ahmad was one of the most influential and important literary and intellectual figures of the 20th century. He was also one of the strongest critics of the westernization of Iran. Al-i Ahmad was born into a religious family that shaped an important part of his personal identity. However, the young Jalal decided to experience a world beyond the religion that he was taught in his family. He got to know about Marxism by joining the *Tudeh* Party (the primary communist party in Iran). While translating different books from French, he also learned about existentialism by Camus and Sartre.

Al-i Ahmad is best known for his novellas, short stories, and essays that he wrote as social criticism of Iran. *Garbzadegi* (1962) [translated into English as *Plagued by the West, Weststruckness and Westoxification*] is a rather long essay, was banned during the Pahlavi era. However, *Garbzadegi* was nonetheless widely circulated and read in Iran.<sup>115</sup> Jalal and a group of his followers such as Reza Baraheni, believed that Westernization brings “the corruption of Iranian gender roles.”<sup>116</sup> They saw Westernization as “a very thoughtless process of modernization.”<sup>117</sup> He opens his essay by making a simile between Westernization and a deadly illness, such as tuberculosis, with, “I speak of ‘occidentosis’ as of tuberculosis. But perhaps it more closely resembles an infestation of weevils [...] At any rate, I am speaking of a disease: an accident from without, spreading in an

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<sup>115</sup> M. R. Ghanoonparvar, *In a Persian Mirror: Images of the West and Westerners in Iranian Fiction*, 1st ed. ed., (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 72.

<sup>116</sup> Camron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865-1946*, (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida ; London : Eurospan, 2002), 82.

<sup>117</sup> Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865-1946*, 82.

environment rendered susceptible to it.”<sup>118</sup> Jalal believed that westernization was an illness – a form of cultural colonization – that turned Iran into a passive market for Western goods. It had made Iranians essentially mere imitators of western models (i.e. education, the arts, and culture). One of the consequences that westernization had brought was alienating people from their own national and traditional identities. As Jalal puts it, “we now resemble an alien people, with unfamiliar customs, a culture with no roots in our land and no chance of blossoming here. Thus, all we have is stillborn, in our politics, our culture, and our daily life.”<sup>119</sup>

After explaining thoroughly how westernization has affected different dimensions of Iranian life, he talks about the negative contradictions of westernization. One of these involves women’s emancipation. Jalal believes that westernization falsely suggests that Iranian women and men share equal rights. However, it does not change the traditional patriarchal view that Iranian society held towards women. Westernization had made women busy with trivial things, such as caring about new styles in fashion, thus making them consumers of western beauty products. Jalal states that women’s emancipation projects under the Pahlavi era were designed solely to deceive foreign countries that Iran had become a modernized – or westernized – country. He asks:

Do women and men now have equal rights in all matters? We have contented ourselves with tearing the veil from their faces and opening a number of schools to them. But then what? Nothing. We believe women cannot be judges, cannot serve as witnesses, and as for voting or serving in the Majlis, the whole idea is

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<sup>118</sup> Jalal Al Ahmad and R. Campbell, *Occidentosis: A Plague From the West*, (Berkeley [Calif.]: Mizan Press, 1984), 27.

<sup>119</sup> Ahmad and Campbell, *Occidentosis: A Plague From the West*, 64.

idiotic, since even men have no such right [...] Divorce, too, is the male prerogative [...] So we really have given women only the right to parade themselves in public.<sup>120</sup>

Here, Al-i Ahmad indicates the fact that the imposed unveiling has not granted women equality in their civil and legal rights. Iranian women are still deprived of taking roles outside the private sphere. According to Al-i Ahmad unveiling has busied Iranian woman with Western fashion and goods. He continues his criticism of Westernisation in regard to women, with:

We have forced them into ostentation and frivolity, every day to freshen up and try on a new style and wander around. What of work, duty, social responsibility, and character? There are very few women concerned with such things any more. Unless the work of men and women and their services to society are equally valued and paid, unless, alongside men, women assume responsibility for administering a sector of society (other than the home, a private function shared between men and women), unless material and spiritual equality is established between the sexes, we will have succeeded only in swelling an army of consumers of powder and lipstick – the products of the West's industries – another form of occidentosis. I am speaking here of the cities, of the nation's leadership, from which women are excluded.<sup>121</sup>

In regard to Iranian women's problem, Al-i Ahmad criticizes both westernization and traditionalism. He believed that the first makes women superficial and merely consumers

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<sup>120</sup> Ahmad and Campbell, *Occidentosis: A Plague From the West*, 70.

<sup>121</sup> Ahmad and Campbell, *Occidentosis: A Plague From the West*, 70.



of western products, while the latter keeps women caught up in a riddle of superstitious ideas, thus making them blind to their true personal and social rights.

Despite their relative progressiveness, Al-i Ahmad and Jalal both wrote very few works with female characters. The few female characters that Jalal creates are busy in superstitious ideas, such as witchcraft, or are in search of husbands, thus willing to remain slave of the man who marries her. For instance, in one of his short stories, “Lak-e Surati,” (لاک صورتی, Pink Nail Polish) he criticizes a woman who is caught up in the superficial glamour of westernization, while in “Zan-e Ziadi” (زن زیادى, The Unwanted Woman) the female character is struggling with self-hatred due to the traditional belief that if she is not married then she is a shame for her family.

“Lak-e Surati” was published in 1948/49 in a collection called *Seh'tar* (سه تار, Setar). It is a story of a happy but poor couple, Hajar and Enayatollah. Enayatollah used to be a peddler, but, now he has a small showcase: the greatest fortune in his life. At a corner of a busy street, he sells different things from his showcase. Coming back from a three-day pilgrimage, Enayatollah decides that he will stop at Tajrish, a busy street in Tehran, to sell some items. During this time, Hajar gets on a bus, but gets off at the Shahabad stop by mistake. However, she decides to window-shop while waiting. She sees different people selling stuff on the street, among whom a barefooted boy catches her attention with the nail polishes he has for sell. Looking at these nail polishes, Hajar wishes that Enayatollah would add nail polish to his wares, so that she can choose one every month and paint her nails. With his character’s obsession with western beauty products, Al-i Ahmad is clearly painting this woman as a consumer of western products.

Nail polish has another meaning for Hajar. It is stated, “whenever she passed a smart lady or was asked to help at a local wedding, she carefully looked at the ladies’ nail polish.”<sup>122</sup> Nail polish becomes a signifier for the upper-class and the supposed intelligence of the women who wear it. Hajar loves make-up as a whole but only has mascara, tweezers, and a box of rouge.<sup>123</sup> Despite the fact that she and Enayat are financially struggling, she buys the glossy pink nail polish. Later at home – one shared with two renters – Hajar tries to convince her husband to sell nail polish with a series of questions that start with, “by the way, Enayat – why don’t you have nail polish among your ware”?<sup>124</sup> These questions turn to argument, which eventually leads to Enayat physically beating her.

One of the people who rent a room from them – a well-read man named Rajabali – ends this fight and forces them into his room. Through Rajabali’s listening to their complaints, Al-i Ahmad criticizes both traditional religious ideas along with westernized superficial concerns. Enayat’s traditionalist complaints center on his religious procedure, such as prayer, that Hajar’s nail polish disrupts. He says, “this idiot woman prays, and does her ablutions with this unclean nail polish on her nails—and it’s not valid. With this—the water won’t wet her skin.”<sup>125</sup> In response, Rajabali refutes Enayat’s complaints, telling him that the nail is not a piece of skin to be wetted in ablutions – a dated and misinformed religious idea. He reasons, “every week you cut some of your nails and

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<sup>122</sup> Ahmad Jalal Al-e, A. Reza Navabpour, and Robert Wells, "Pink Nail Polish: A Story," *Iranian Studies* 15, no. 1/4 (1982): 83, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.txstate.edu/stable/4310382>.

<sup>123</sup> Jalal Al-e, Navabpour, and Wells, "Pink Nail Polish: A Story," 84.

<sup>124</sup> Jalal Al-e, Navabpour, and Wells, "Pink Nail Polish: A Story," 84.

<sup>125</sup> Jalal Al-e, Navabpour, and Wells, "Pink Nail Polish: A Story," 84.

throw them away. If it were a piece of skin and you cut it—you would have to atone for every bit of it.”<sup>126</sup>

He, then turns to Hajar to ask her opinion about the same religious matter. He asks, what she thinks and she answers, “how should I know, mister? I’m only a simple woman [originally *Zaeifeh* that means weak and insignificant], aren’t I? How should I know about these religious laws?”<sup>127</sup> Here, Al-i Ahmad emphasizes the fact that although Hajar is obsessed with new make-up items, she has no desire to know about the religious laws that she obeys every day or gets beaten over. Al-i Ahmad blames her for her ignorance (through Rajabil), as well as society’s ignorance.

What Al-i Ahmad fails to acknowledge, however, is the fact that in the male-dominated society of Iran, women are never asked about their opinions. This is particularly true with religion. It is men who decide what is right or wrong. Women are to obey the written rules by Mujtahids (Clergy men). Therefore, they just blindly obey the rules enforced by men. This is a shocking moment for Hajar, because for the first time ever, a man asks about her opinion about an important matter. It is the patriarchal society that has crammed women’s minds with traditional religious beliefs. Al-i Ahmad voices his opinion through Rajabali by responding to Hajar,

What do you mean—a simple woman? You shouldn’t let your husband say things like that, let alone say them yourself. It’s a pity that you women still know nothing. You can’t read the papers or else you would know what I mean. It’s your

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<sup>126</sup> Jalal Al-e, Navabpour, and Wells, "Pink Nail Polish: A Story," 84..

<sup>127</sup> Jalal Al-e, Navabpour, and Wells, "Pink Nail Polish: A Story," 84..

husband's fault, of course. But, don't you think I'm on your side. You are not blameless either.<sup>128</sup>

Al-i Ahmad uses his female character in this story, through specifically Rajabali's condemnations of Hajar, to comment on the state's westernization project and traditional ideas. Like "The Doll Behind the Curtain," the story is told from a limited third-person, point-of-view. Thus, the reader does not get to know about Hajar's thoughts and feelings. This mechanism makes Hajar a passive character, one who is solely designed to show how women can be ignorant and superficial. At twenty-five years old, she has been married to Enayat for seven years and is a member of a lower middle-class family, who has minimal education. Likewise, she is seemingly religious woman, wears a chador, that never questions anything that happens in her life. Even when her husband beats her to death, she is silent and submissive. She thus has no ability to fight the temptations of westernization. The obsession that Hajar has with western beauty goods is not only her problem, as almost every Iranian woman is dealing with western consumerism.

For Al-i Ahmad, westernization has not brought any kind of awareness or encouragement for education for Iranian women like Hajar. It has just made her eager to spend more money on nail polish or lipsticks. This portrays the contradiction that Al-e Ahmad talks about in *Garbzadegi*. One of the hazards of westernization in regard to women's emancipation is that it will make them mere consumers of western products, which is apparently in contrast with both traditional and religious ideas. Although he succeeds to criticize traditionalism and westernization by creating a character like Hajar,

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<sup>128</sup> Jalal Al-i, Navabpour, and Wells, "Pink Nail Polish: A Story," 84..

he fails to acknowledge significant reasons behind her unhappiness in Iranian society, which has more to do with the dominant patriarchal norms.

Jalal Al-i Ahmad goes on creating cliché female characters in order to criticize traditionalism. A tangible example of a fictional female character who is preoccupied with traditional views of women is Fatemeh in “Zan-e Ziadi” (The Unwanted Woman). This story is about a girl who believes that her unwanted presence at her father’s house is tortuous for her family members. This negative thought comes from a traditional belief that if a girl passes the marriage age, then she is a *Torshideh* (spinster) and no one would want to marry her. Therefore, she will be a reason of shame for other members of her family. It has been two days since returning to her father’s house after being left by her husband, as he had found out that she had lied to him. This is another cliché story or character trope that happens over and over in modern Persian literature, including “Abji Khanoom” by Sadeq Hedayat, wherein an unmarried girl commits suicide as a result of the pressure she faces from her family and Iranian society.

As with earlier discussed pieces, “Zan-e Ziadi” is yet another story told in a third-person limited point-of-view. Yet, Hedayat does give the reader more insight into her psyche than with Hajar in “Lake-i Surati”: her thoughts about her life practically comprise the entirety of the work. As she wanders the streets, she reflects on her life, blaming herself for the negative events of her life. She believes that her presence at her father’s house is an unbearable shame, noting: “How could this be endured that, after staying in father’s house for thirty-four years, within forty days I was taken back and tied

to his beard again.”<sup>129</sup> The secret that she kept from her husband was that she was wearing a wig. After finding out about it, the husband sent her back to her father’s house.

To avoid the shame of being sent back, she is willing to even work as a slave. She notes, “I was ready to wait a year and, during this time, do the house work for his mother and sister.”<sup>130</sup> This is another traditional view that was and is still common in Iranian culture; the saying that “a woman enters her husband’s house with white wedding dress and leaves it with white shroud” is prevalent throughout Iranian culture, which suggests that a woman must live with her husband despite all conflicts until his death.

The Iranian female author, Mahshid Amirshahi criticizes Al-e Ahmad of being misogynist, due to the fact that women in his stories are always described as helpless and without any agency over what happens to them. However, keeping in mind what he expresses in *Garbzadegi* about Iranian women’s situation, it is important to notice the fact that he wrote the stories in order to criticize the patriarchal social circumstances that made women helpless and force them to be passive. For instance, in “Zan-e Ziadi”, the girl is a helpless creature who thinks getting married and living like a servant would bring her less misery. This is the belief that had been planted in her mind by the traditionalism of her family and Iranian society. Al-i Ahmad condemns the underlying false traditional ideas about marriage that destroys a woman’s life. Yet, he again fails to point the finger to the patriarchal society that has left women with no choice other than marrying a man to get out of their fathers’ houses. In Al-i Ahmad’s stories, women are identified according

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<sup>129</sup> Jalal Al-e Ahmad, “Zan-e Ziadi,” translated by Leonard Bogle as “The Unwanted Woman,” In *Iranian Society, An Anthology of Writings by Jalal Al-e Ahmad*, edited by Michael C. Hillmann, (Kentucky: Mazda Publishers, 1982), 72.

<sup>130</sup> Al-e Ahmad and Bogle, “The Unwanted Woman,” 74.

to the relationships that they have with men; they are either daughters, mothers, or wives. There is no space or identity defined in Iranian society for a woman to have individuality. Further, it is the patriarchal society that has taught women that finding husbands, and keeping marriages at any costs is essential, because there is no definition for an unmarried or divorced woman. Iranian women, like Fatemeh, have had no chance in getting educated because, according to traditional and religious beliefs, education corrupts women.

In “Zan-e Ziadi,” Al-iAhmad repeats Fatemeh’s obsession with marriage. The dialogues that are dedicated to her are only involve this obsession and her self-hatred. However, Jalal again fails to point to the reason that Fatemeh is so desperate to staying as an unwanted woman in her husband’s house is that being a wife is the only identity that she can have in Iranian society, where women’s identities are defined in regards to men. The sad regret that Fatemeh voices in the story is a sad truth about most Iranian women in this period, best reflected with:

In all those thirty-four years that I was at my dad’s house, I only learned how to go to kitchen and public bath. Why didn’t I think of finding any niche for myself? Why didn’t I learn something, any kind of education? I could have gotten a job like our neighbor, Miss Batul, and saved some money each month in order to buy a sewing machine and earn some money from sewing [...] for thirty-four years, I was crying about my wig, about me being ugly, about not getting married.<sup>131</sup>

Traditionalism has taken away from them the chance to get educated and consequently be aware of their rights, while westernization have busied them with trivial,

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<sup>131</sup> Al-e Ahmad and Bogle, “The Unwanted Woman,” 77.

superficial western consumerist habits as distraction. In both stories, “Lak-e Soorati” and “Zan-e Ziadi,” Al-i Ahmad depicts two female character who live under unfavorable circumstances due to their own ignorance. The reason behind this ignorance is a society that has made women victims of either traditional beliefs or westernization. Women are excluded from participating in the society and taking action in changing their personal and political lives alongside with men.

Another role that Iranian women commonly take as fictional characters in male authors’ stories is as a prostitute. Prostitution is what women have to deal with in the works of major writers such as Sadeq Choubak (1916-1998), Gholam-Hossein Sa’edi (1935-1985) and Houshang Golshiri (1938-200). As Mashid Amirshani notes, “Choubak’s and Sa’edi’s women are smelly, filthy, beaten up creatures who are dressed in rags, if at all dressed, because both these authors are particularly fond of depicting women as prostitutes.”<sup>132</sup> Other occupations that these authors deem right for women are begging, washing dirty linen or dead corpses, or abandoning children born out of wedlock. While, it is true that they use their writing to criticize the social, cultural, and political situations of Iranian society, they use weak and condemned female characters, like Hedayat and Al-i Ahmad. For example, in Sa’edi’s “Dandil” (دندیل) there is no detailed description of the female character, in order to avoid giving the reader a distinct face or shape to remember. The description of physical characteristics is highlighted by the author because this helps the reader to know why men are sexually attracted to the new prostitute who has newly come to their city. In further analysis of the story, it

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<sup>132</sup> Mashid Amirshahi. Accessed August 05, 2018. "The Image of Woman in Contemporary Persian Prose," accessed 06/10, 2018, [www.amirshahi.org](http://www.amirshahi.org).



becomes obvious that the purpose of choosing the female character is commenting on westernization and foreign intervention that had threatened Iranian nationalism. The passive unknown girl who has no objection with her prostitution is a symbol of the invasion of Iranian nationalism by western values.

Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi was one of the most prominent novelists and playwrights of modern Iran. Like Al-i Ahmad, he strongly believed that a writer has a responsibility towards his society and his people. Due to his social criticisms in his works, he was imprisoned and tortured several times. Despite the strict censorship he dealt with, Sa'edi published more than 30 works, including novels, novellas, collections of short stories, plays, and monographs. For most of his stories, Sa'edi chose rural areas as his main setting. "Dandil" is the name of the red-light district of the small town of Maragheh in East Azerbaijan. The setting of the story creates a darker feeling. Dandil is a place full of poverty and human suffering filled with addicts and prostitutes. In "Dandil," the Madame of the most prominent brothel advertises for new customers for Tamarah – a fifteen-year old girl – who is accompanied by her gullible father – who believes that this is a service to help Tamarah find a husband. Sa'edi uses the description of the physical space of the Madame's house to distinguish its importance. This is clear in, "The other houses were all lower than Madame's [...] Madame's house remained standing above the others."<sup>133</sup>

The advertised rumor being spread about Tamarah is that the Madame "has got a fresh young whore."<sup>134</sup> The Madame, sick and requiring expensive treatments in Tehran, tries to find a wealthy customer, paying her "real cash," for the new prostitute. Therefore,

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<sup>133</sup> Gholam-Hossein Sa'edi, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, Translated by Robert Campell, Hasan Javadi and Julia Scott Meisami (New York: Random House, 1981), 3.

<sup>134</sup> Sa'edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 3.

the Madame wants to take advantage of Tamarah. Tamarah could fetch a hefty price from her first client, thus making the Madame a large amount of money.

The rumor being spread for the Madame is shared by the men of the town. These men think that by selling the girl to a rich customer, they can improve Dandil. However, it does not seem that poverty is their main concern, since they seem less concerned about it than about having money to buy drugs. This especially true for male characters like Panjak, Mamali and Zeinal. Thus, Sa'edi connects prostitution and drugs to western models of capitalism that are morally bankrupting towns throughout Iran just like Dandil.

The story opens with a scene at the teahouse where the male characters are talking about Madame's "fine piece."<sup>135</sup> Madame had invited Zeinal to see Tamarah and find a customer for her. Zeinal is amazed by Tamarah, as he tells Mamali and Panjak that, "she's a clean, fresh girl, and no one's even touched her yet [...] Never since Dandil has been Dandil has such an incredible piece of merchandise set foot here."<sup>136</sup> In this, all the adjectives that are used to describe Tamarah are adjectives used for objects (i.e. "fine piece" and "an incredible piece of merchandise"). This makes Tamarah an object of trade.

In order to ignite his friends' interest about Tamarah, Zainal goes on giving some physical details with, "she's about fifteen, but her body is really filled out like a twenty-one-year-old woman. She's got fair skin, big dark eyes, curly hair."<sup>137</sup> Her father does not realize the fact that this is a brothel in a morally-corrupted, impoverished town. Yet, the way that Zeinal markets Tamarah to Johns – as well-educated, well-mannered, and

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<sup>135</sup> Sa'edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 5.

<sup>136</sup> Sa'edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 5.

<sup>137</sup> Sa'edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 3.

proficient with English – points to the fact that Sa’edi is depicting the town of Dandil as a site of western degradation.

The people of Dandil are so inhumanely mesmerized by Tamarah’s physical appearance that they ignore the fact that she is just a child being coerced into prostitution. Sa’edi’s characters are all blind to this fact, because they all care about how to use her for their own personal advantage. When Zainal is enthusiastically telling Asdollah, the local policeman, about Tamarah, Asdollah is amazed to hear that she is fifteen-years old. He says, “What’s world coming to? How old are they when they start nowadays? Bibi says the girl is really something else.”<sup>138</sup> In his ignorant remark, though, he sees her as an active agent who willingly enters prostitution, while the truth is she is brought to the Madame’s house by her clueless father. Further, it is apparent that she does not know the reason behind her stay at the Madame’s house. When Zeinal and Mamali go to the Madame’s house to take her picture so that they can show it to an American customer, she is completely unaware of why. Tamarah even calls for the Madame, to join her in the picture, saying, “let Mama come too, so you can take a picture of both of us.”<sup>139</sup> She does not know that the picture is taken for the sake of advertisement. The poor innocent girl thinks that it is a kind of family picture.

With the two different scenes, wherein men go to the Madame’s house to see Tamarah, there is no dialogue designed for her. This is yet another story told from the third-person limited point-of-view. Thus, the reader has limited access to Tamarah’s

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<sup>138</sup> Sa’edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 12.

<sup>139</sup> Sa’edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 16.

feelings and thoughts. It is men that instead have the agency, with Sa'edi always using men as the vehicle for the plot's progression.

Through Asdollah, they find an American sergeant as a potential customer. They say, "he's an American; he's really different from the assholes around here. It's going to be expensive."<sup>140</sup> They have high hopes that with the American sergeant coming to their town and paying a good deal of money, everything is going to change for them, "So, with a man like that coming here, do you realize how much Dandil is going to improve?"<sup>141</sup> Here, Sa'edi is alluding to the false premise that Iranians think that the West is a utopia and through westernization they will achieve a perfect utopian life. They are presented as brainwashed and blind to the true picture of Western life. The people of Dandil think that Americans live in another world where "their buildings are all glass; their streets sparkle crystal. There are rows and rows of banks, all full of money. Everyone has a private car. Their prostitutes spend four or five hours a day just playing around in the beauty shops."<sup>142</sup> The false assumption, and thus expectation, that the people of Dandil, and Iranians generally, have about Americans and their lives is one of the main themes of western obsession in Sa'edi's story.

Finally, the night comes when the American sergeant arrives. He is described with, "he had a big head with little hair and beady eyes. He had a triple chin."<sup>143</sup> Tamarah is still not aware of what is going on. She is scared when she hears the flood of people roaring in the street at the sight of the American. The next morning the American leaves

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<sup>140</sup> Sa'edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 18.

<sup>141</sup> Sa'edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 18.

<sup>142</sup> Sa'edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 18.

<sup>143</sup> Sa'edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 24.

the Madame's house laughing loudly. He leaves the house without paying any money. Everybody is scared to go ask him to pay because, "you can't say anything to him. You can't go asking him for bread. He's not like you and me; he's American. If he gets pissed off, if he's not satisfied, he's going to turn Dandil inside out."<sup>144</sup> Sa'edi ends his story with, "the American had reached the back of Baba's coffeehouse. He pulled down the zipper of his pants and, whistling, started to urinate." This bitter scene highlights the destructive effect of westernization on Iranians and Iran.

Sa'edi uses this story as an allegory for the 1953 coup that brought a wave of anti-American sentiment to Iran. Dandil is a symbol of the western exploitation of underdeveloped Iranian society, while Tamarah is a symbol of ideal – i.e. passive – womanhood being corrupted by westernization. However, like previous authors, Sa'edi fails to look at the problem from different perspectives, particularly from the female character's point-of-view. Through creating a submissive and passive character, Sa'edi silences his character towards what happens to her. All the other women in the story are prostitutes. He fails to acknowledge that one of the main problems that Dandil, and Iran, is dealing with during this period is the infringement of women's rights. However, in his story, women's issues are overshadowed by the emphasis he puts on westoxification.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, Iran underwent significant change. Leftist writers like Hedayat, Al-i Ahmad, and Sa'edi created works that navigated the positive and negative changes occurring in Iran at the time. These writers also read women's issues as tying into their criticisms of both traditionalism or westoxification. However, they failed to accurately portray or include the perspective of women.

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<sup>144</sup> Sa'edi, Campell, Javadi, and Meisami, *Dandil: Stories from Iranian Life*, 28.

Likewise, they failed to acknowledge – and offer improvements – to patriarchal Iranian society. The first noticeable problem with these writers’ engagement with female characters is that they were limited to social critique of women. They fail to analyze a woman’s own thoughts and feelings about the situations she is living in – with the exception of “Zan-e Ziadi,” where Al-i Ahmad exposes Fatemeh’s thoughts for the sole purpose of critiquing traditionalism.

In “The Doll Behind the Curtain,” there is no action defined for the female character other than submissiveness and imitation. Derakhshandeh solely imitates a mannequin to win Mehrdad’s love. In “The Doll behind the Curtain,” “Pink Nail Polish,” and “The Unwanted Woman,” women have no social self or jobs to take. They are defined in relation to male relationships that they already have or can achieve.

Derakhshandeh does her best to win Mehrdad’s heart in order to become a wife. Hajar is a vapid housewife and Fatemeh wants to be basically a slave for her husband. In “Dandil,” Sa’edi opts to make his female characters prostitutes – something not rare for Sa’edi, as prostitution and begging are common in his works.

Women are not only always victims in these stories, but specifically silenced victims. It is true that the leftist writers wrote for the sake of changing the society for better. However, they were not sympathetic enough to their female characters and these characters’ problems. Hedayat, Al-i Ahmad and Sa’edi are too busy using stereotypical female characters, that they neglect writing well-rounded female characters. Instead, the superficial characters they create are either happy with their miserable situations or too weak to change. This is apparent when looking at the characters in these works. Hajar is a happy housewife, who does not have any objections to her husband beating her

relentlessly, while when Derakhshandeh realizes that Mehrdad does not want to marry her, instead of continuing with her own life she puts all her energy in becoming the kind of Western mannequin that Mehrdad adores. Hajar and Derakhshandeh choose self-surrender instead of resistance in the face of oppression. Fatemeh likewise feels deeply regretful about what happened to her, instead of feeling angry about it. Al-i Ahmad shows his patriarchal lens with Fatemeh's deep shame for how her life has panned out. Sa'edi likewise silences the emotions of his fifteen-year-old victim, despite the confusion she must experience. Not only do these writers not give glimpses of emotion and thought in these characters, but also, they silence them verbally. In "The Doll behind the Curtain" and "Dandil," the scarcity of female dialogue is unnerving for the reader who wants to know about the ideas of the oppressed characters. In "Pink Nail Polish" and "The Unwanted Woman" there is a good deal of female dialogue, but what they say is nonsensical and obsessive.

Although Hedayat, Al-i Ahmad, and Sa'edi are prominent writers of modern Persian literature, they are not effective at portraying women accurately. Motivated primarily by their intention to critique constructs like traditionalism, modernization, and westernization, they give little depth to women or women's issues. They instead rely on patriarchal norms to focus on the issues they are more readily concerned about. Ultimately, they ignore the nuances of life as an Iranian woman, thus failing to represent a thorough and accurate image of the silenced Iranian woman.

#### **IV. FEMALE WRITERS MAKING THE PERSONAL PUBLIC**

During the Pahlavi era (1921-1979) in Iran, Iranian women had more opportunity to participate in public life with men. For the first time in the country's history, they were able to enroll in Tehran University or pursue higher education elsewhere. However, these new opportunities for Iranian women were a major part of the state's renewal ideology: the modernization of Iranian citizens in attire, body, and mind. Along with all the improvements for women, such as the expansion of girls-only schools, new marriage and divorce laws that curbed men's total power, and women's suffrage, the Iranian state made sure that women would not trespass their traditional roles as wives and mothers. Iranian women were given rights that would be aligned with Reza Shah's modernization efforts. The Iranian state then shined the spotlight on aspects of women's lives that were favorable to the overall picture of Iran as a modernized and westernized country. The private sphere of women's lives were ignored, because the private sphere was not shared with the mass media. Through the state's modernization project, a woman was allowed to wear a miniskirt, but could not legally confront her polygamous husband. She could study at the universities, but would later need her husband's consent and approval to choose a profession. Religious practices still dominated women's private lives, such as the obsession with virginity and sexual purity that resulted in women's sexual oppression. The reality is that the public sphere obscured the reality of private life, where women were expected to be obedient and submissive wives to their husbands. Even as a wife, the Iranian woman and her activities – ranging from domestic, such as household, preparation of meals, and bringing up children, to crafts like carpet-weaving, and sewing – was devalued.



Iranian women were essentially silenced when it came to their private lives and familial struggles. In this period, the leftist writers used literature to comment on social, political, and, cultural issues in Iran. However, there are very few traces, if any, of the manifestations of women's struggles in regards to the private sphere. In modern Persian literature, the leftist male authors frequently wrote about women's struggles, but failed to sympathize with women. Writers like Jalal Al-i Ahmad, Gholamhossein Sa'edi, and Sadeq Hedayat looked at the Iranian woman and her struggles through the limited patriarchal point-of-view, thus blaming her for prostitution and domestic violence (in Ahmad's case, to the point of a female character being beaten to death). They showed that it is women who are to blame for the problems that they have – in both the household and in society. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Persian Modern Literature is saturated with weak, condemned, and submissive female fictional characters.

On the other hand, some women writers, such as Simin Daneshvar and Forough Farrokhzad broke the imposed silence of male-dominated Persian literature. They broke this silence by writing openly about the private struggles of Iranian women. Simin Dneshvar's *Suvashun*, her most popular work, details the struggles of a middle-class housewife, while Farrokhzad's poetry focuses on male-female relationships and female sexuality; both emphasize that women are individuals, with suppressed thoughts and feelings. These were new concepts to write about in Modern Persian Literature. Therefore, it was women writers like Daneshvar and Farrokhzad, who proved that the personal should be political in Iranian society.

The most authentic sources to examine the personal struggles of mid-twentieth century Iranian women would likely be the memoirs or autobiographies written during

the Pahlavi era. It would be Iranian Women's own writing that would give the reader some deep insights to the world within the family. However, it is a sad truth that there is no recorded memoir or autobiography written by women during this period. Apart from ordinary people, women writers also have not written any of their life stories, or no one successfully attempted to document their lives in a biography. Oddly, there is a lack of life-writing by men as well. For example, for Sadeq Hedayat, the prominent Modern Persian writer, there was no biography until forty years after his death, despite all the archival material and letters that he left behind. The absence of this literary genre is due to different factors. According to Farzaneh Milani, this may be due to Sufism and Islamic Mysticism, both of which demand intense forms of self-mediation.<sup>145</sup> It can also be indicative of a culture that defines a sharp split between private and public life. The Persian language is filled with proverbs that prohibit speakers from exposing the inner self – i.e. proverbs such as زبان سرخ سر سبز به باد میدهد (don't let your tongue cut your throat).<sup>146</sup> In women's case, it is likely because they felt the pressure from a male-dominated society, literature, and their male guardians (fathers, brothers and husbands) to not publicize their thoughts and feelings.

Despite the lack of life-writing by and for women, there are a few books and articles that documented women's experiences during the Pahlavi era. They are not written particularly for the purpose of recording women's personal experiences, but to instead record women's movements and their issues during this period. To provide

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<sup>145</sup> Farzaneh Milani, "Veiled Voices: Women's Autobiographies in Iran," In *Women's Autobiographies in Contemporary Iran*, ed. Afsaneh NajmAbadi (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>146</sup> In this proverb, Zaban-i Sorkh is directly translated as the red tongue that means that is not under control.

significant insights into Iranian women's personal struggles, discussion of Paul Vielle's "Iranian Women in the Family Alliance and Sexual Politics" and Haleh Esfandiari's *Reconstructed Lives* are both useful. Paul Vielle was a French sociologist who lived in Iran in the 1960's and the 1970's, during which he collaborated with the department of sociology at Tehran University (1960 – 1968). Of the articles, he produced as a result of his time in Tehran, he did write on his observations of Iranian women. In the study, he conducted for this specific article, he focused on peasant families and industrial workers. Of 150 individuals (100 peasants and 50 industrial workers), including both men and women, Vielle interviewed each participant separately. The results, and his overall argument, are vital to understanding the harsh realities middle- and lower-class women faced during this period.

The gender-based discrimination in Iranian families starts from child birth. Vielle observes that the differentiation between boys and girls appears consistently and habitually. He notes, "people want more boys than girls; they want a boy as the first child."<sup>147</sup> From birth, Iranian girls are considered to be made for obedience, while boys for pride and independence. According to the common belief in this study, one applicable to most of the Iranian population, girls are going to enlarge another family, or another lineage, while boys stay in a family and lineage, supporting his parents in their old age and assures the strength and perpetuation of the lineage.<sup>148</sup> When the family decides that the time has come for a girl's departure, another form of her devaluation happens: the

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<sup>147</sup> Paul Vielle, "Iranian Women in Family Alliance and Sexual Politics," in *Women in the Muslim World*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Lois Beck (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), 452.

<sup>148</sup> Vielle, "Iranian Women in Family Alliance and Sexual Politics," 453.

obsession of the family and society with her virginity. Vielle picks up on this: “the young girl must be a virgin on her wedding night; if she is not, she cannot be established in honorable conditions that her family will be covered with shame.”<sup>149</sup> Virginity, the girl’s hymen, becomes the major reason of the family’s honor or shame. This results in women’s sexuality being silenced from the very beginning years of their childhood. They have no control or over their sexuality, as experimentation is rigidly guarded by compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity. Thus, Iranian women are raised for the sole sake of being marriageable, with the one exception being the need for Iranian women to be able to bear children after marriage.

In twentieth-century Iran, women could not talk about their sexuality. According to Reza Baraheni, a famous Iranian writer, no woman has historically been allowed to speak out for such tendencies. Baraheni notes, “a lesbian is considered to be far worse than a prostitute. To attest to lesbian desires would be an unforgivable crime.”<sup>150</sup> After marriage, “there is no physical contact during the course of the sexual act other than of the genital organs.”<sup>151</sup> Therefore, it is not just that an Iranian woman cannot explore her own sexuality. Even after marriage Iranian women are expected to be submissive wives, only to fulfill their husband’s desires. As to how these women know about their husband’s desires is unclear, as “there is no communication between spouses on the subjects such as pleasure, not only during the sexual act but even outside it.”<sup>152</sup>

According to Vielle’s study of more than 100 individuals and their families, there is a

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<sup>149</sup> Vielle, “Iranian Women in Family Alliance and Sexual Politics,” 454.

<sup>150</sup> Baraheni, *The Crowned Cannibals*, 48.

<sup>151</sup> Vielle, “Iranian Women in Family Alliance and Sexual Politics,” 462.

<sup>152</sup> Vielle, “Iranian Women in Family Alliance and Sexual Politics,” 464.

clear dividing line between the worlds of Iranian men and women in the 1960's. An Iranian woman's world is all about reproduction, childbearing, and nursing; these activities are all viewed as uniquely feminine roles. Men are excluded from these roles, because such roles represent one of the lowest forms of labor. However, sexuality and sexual freedom were integral to a man's experience in the 1960's. Vielle writes, "only a man has the right to want to make love, only he is the potentiality of sensual pleasure, and only he is promised its enjoyment."<sup>153</sup> Paul Vielle's research exposes the ignored problems that Iranian women faced. Some of the conclusions that he draws from his research are that a woman is an inferior being, a sexual object with whom communication is not sought.<sup>154</sup> His conclusions make it apparent that Iranian women were not allowed to discuss the plight of their private sexual lives, at risk of reducing men's freedom to explore – forcefully, in many causes – their sexual interests and preferences.

While Vielle looks at the personal, Haleh Esfandiari's *Reconstructed Lives: Women & Iran's Islamic Revolution* compares Iranian women's public lives during the Pahlavi era and after the Islamic Revolution. Esfandiari interviewed more than thirty women for this work, but her findings are based on the experiences of privileged interviewees, with most coming from upper-middle class families or having been educated in European countries. The interviewee sample size that Esfandiari uses is thus not necessarily reflective of 1960's Iran, as ordinary women from middle-class or lower middle-class families would hardly get the chance to go to schools. However,

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<sup>153</sup> Vielle, "Iranian Women in Family Alliance and Sexual Politics," 463.

<sup>154</sup> Vielle, "Iranian Women in Family Alliance and Sexual Politics," 456.

Esfandiari's work is useful in that it does detail some personal experiences that were shared by most Iranian women of the time.

One of the mutual personal experiences that most of the women in this series of interviews share is that Iranian parents favor male children, and consequently the education of boys, rather than girls. Mari, an English-educated university professor, remembers how her brothers were the center of attention for her parents: "I grew up in a privileged family, surrounded by boys. At home, I felt that my brothers were my father's favorite, so I decided to beat them by excelling in my studies."<sup>155</sup> Another woman, Ramesh, from a completely different background experiences male supremacy differently while growing up. She notes, "I grew up in a traditional family [...] I lost my father when I was very young. My older brother was the man in the family. He was narrow-minded and fanatic. He worried constantly about me [...] I was bright and a good student and wanted to study, but there was so much pressure from my family that I finally got married at an early age."<sup>156</sup> In Ramesh's case, and as is the case for many other women like her, it is apparent that the role of the mother as a guardian for children is totally denied when there is a male child or grandfather to protect the family. In the absence of the father, it is the brother or the grandfather who decides the future of a young girl.

Another dominant attitude in Iranian families was (is) that if the girl reaches the marriage age – a rather young age – she should be married off, otherwise she would bring shame to the family. The word used for an unmarried woman past the marriage age (i.e. spinster) is *Torshideh*. As discussed in Chapter 2, Sadeq Hedayat has Abji Khanoom kill

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<sup>155</sup> Esfandiari, *Reconstructed lives : women and Iran's Islamic revolution*, 80.

<sup>156</sup> Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives*, 93.

herself in “Abji Khanoom,” rather be considered a *Torshideh*. Khanoom’s suicide reflects the reality that being a *Torshideh* was practically a nightmare to Iranian families. For Ramesh, the escape from family pressure results in a “disastrous” marriage that ends with a “messy and long” divorce: “to this day I blame my brother for my failed marriage, and my mother for not standing up to him.”<sup>157</sup>

The widespread ignorance that many Iranian women felt growing up, in some cases, resulted in them acting like a man, thus erasing their own sexuality. Gowhar, an Iranian-educated lawyer, says that she did not face any problems before the revolution, only because, “[she] behaved like a man... did not wear makeup, nor did [she] act coquettishly. [She] wanted people to look at her as they looked at a man and act toward [her] as they would toward a man.”<sup>158</sup> In a society that women experience discrimination while they grow up at home, it would leave them with damaging consequences to cope with when they enter the society as an adult.

One of the questions that Esfandiari asked her interviewees about was the Family Protection Law (1967), which curbed men’s rights on divorce and polygamy. Women were the beneficiaries of this law, because it gave them more rights within the family. Soudabeh, an Iranian-educated physician, thinks that the law was more beneficial for lower middle-class women, than it was for lower-class women. She points to the dominant attitude in Iranian households that “the lower-class women were brought up to obey their husbands no matter how they were treated.”<sup>159</sup> Examples of this attitude can be seen in many short stories during this period as well, particularly in the works of Jalal Al-

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<sup>157</sup> Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives*, 93.

<sup>158</sup> Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives*, 84.

<sup>159</sup> Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives*, 85.

i Ahmad, who writes about mostly lower-class people and their problems. Even if a husband's control over the family was restricted by the law, the androcentric practice of polygamy was prevalent. Lili, a secretary in a private office, admits that if her employer was not related to her husband, he would never let her go to work, although they needed the money. Women, even being qualified and educated to work, still needed their husband's permission to enter to the public life regardless of the law.

Many of the women included in interviews were women activists who were familiar with Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) activities in regards to women's rights. One of them is called Monir who gets to know more about women's issues when she starts working for a women's magazine. She was responsible for answering the "letters to the editor." Most of the problems that women were writing about were about their daily and personal life, as is clear with, "women wrote about the difficulty of open relationships with men and of sexual relationships and clandestine affairs that made them uncomfortable, virginity, wife abuse, and all the hardship and discrimination they were encountering in their daily lives."<sup>160</sup> Women were not allowed to talk about sexual relationships. Without any knowledge about sexual relationships, they were married off at a young age. Being a good wife meant being silent and submissive to the husband in every aspect of life, including sex. Sexual segregation was another exacerbation for women. Girls and boys had separate schools, and were not allowed to see each other while growing up. This was strictly observed in small towns. Monir recalls, "when I came to Tehran, I was exposed to boys at the university. I had never been in such close proximity to boys. We were thrown together. It was a different world to me. You might

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<sup>160</sup> Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives*, 95.



say I experienced culture shock.”<sup>161</sup> Girls like Monir, and boys grew up in a world unaware of what male-female relationships mean. If they are lucky, like Monir, they see each other at universities, otherwise they meet each other after getting married. Sexual segregation minimized male-female interactions by making the world of women concealed and privatized, thus cannot be shared with men or, in general, with the public.

The pressure that Iranian women felt in the family to not share their personal experiences due to different cultural, social, and psychological factors resulted in a lack of inclusion in modern Persian literature of women’s personal struggles. Patriarchy influences not only the smaller social quantities, like family, but also to larger scale quantities, like literature. In the flourishing century for modern Persian literature, the role of women writers was further overshadowed by an overwhelming number of male writers. From the 1930’s to the 1960’s, there were only 15 women writers publishing their work, in contrast to 270 male authors. This extreme ratio helps explain why it was men who had the most highlighted presence during this literary period. Having a literary career would be difficult, given the weight of their domestic responsibilities and the power male guardians had over their ability to freely write. Additionally, this was a period when women were busy fighting for their very basic rights. The few women who were writing in these years used pseudonyms, such as Irandokht, Mahsima and Shahrzad.

The 1960’s to the 1970’s were known as a thriving period of Modern Persian art and literature. In these years, there is a slight improvement with the ratio of male to female authors. According to Hasan Miabedini, there were 130 male writers, while more than 25 women were being published (a ratio of five to one). Despite this noticeable

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<sup>161</sup> Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives*, 95.

difference between the number of women writers before and after the 1960's, these women were pushing the boundaries of what Iranian society considered proper. Most of the stories written by women in this period focus on the challenges that women had in their private lives or within the family. Women writers summoned the courage to give voice to other Iranian women by embodying their struggles in the form of fictional characters. These fictional characters live under the cultural, religious and social pressures of Iranian society, on top of dealing with discrimination in their families. In addition, these characters navigate personal identity crises, which reflect the reality that an Iranian woman's identity was defined in regards to their male members of the family. It was in these years that Simin Daneshvar and Forough Farrokhzad challenged the patriarchal structures of control that negatively impacted women's personal lives, through their prose and poetry.

Simin Daneshvar (1921-2012) was an Iranian academic, translator, and fiction writer. Her first and famous novel, *Suvashun* (سوشون, *A Persian Requiem*), was published in 1966 and was a breakthrough for other female writers, since it was the first Persian novel published by an Iranian female writer. This gave hope to other writers that they could also make their voice heard in Persian literature. Although Daneshvar and Farrokhzad never wrote an autobiography that directly reconciled Iranian women's personal and public lives, they both have indirectly written about personal aspects of women's lives. In *Suvasun*, middle-class housewife Zari, the female protagonist, is seemingly the embodiment of Daneshvar herself, as well as most Iranian women. Daneshvar is able to use Zari in this manner, as the novel focuses on the daily life of an Iranian woman in a male-dominated family and society.

Set in post-World War II Shiraz, Iran, *Suvashun* is set during a time of foreign intervention. The setting is thus one marked by harsh consequences such as poverty, food shortage, and fatal disease like Typhus. Shiraz, a major city in Iran, is even occupied by the British Empire. Zari's husband, Yousef, is against the western forces and fights against the western occupation of his city, although everyone else in his family tries to persuade him not to do so. Yousef's character is reminiscent of Jalal Al-i Ahmad and shares his ideas as expressed in the famous essay, "Westoxification." Yousef's brother, Abdol-Ghassem Khan, is the opposite. He works for the British governor and hopes to get a good position as a deputy. However, the focus of *Suvashun* is not necessarily on Yousef and Abdol-Ghassem, but on Zari. Using third-person limited, Daneshvar focuses the reader on Zari's point-of-view, thus keeping the reader's attention on Zari's innermost thoughts and feelings. It is thus a novel that truly is about women, and not a novel that simply has a female protagonist, such as "Zan-e Ziadi," "Lak-e Soorati," and "Aroosak-e Posht-e Pardeh."

Daneshvar takes the reader beyond what is going on in Zari's public life to her very private life at home, in the family. Zari thinks she is happy; she does love Yousef, has maintained a long marriage of fourteen years, has a positive friendship with Yousef's widowed sister, and has kids that she cares for. However, the events of the novel quickly work to undermine her assertions of happiness. The root of this unhappiness is that she (and thus Iranian women as a whole) is left shielded from critical public matters like fighting off the British empire by Yousef and most Iranian men and is instead expected to occupy her time with mundane, domestic tasks.

Having access to the characters' thoughts helps the reader understand more about the character change that Zari goes through. Daneshvar relies on Zari's narration to tell the reader about the Iranian political and cultural unrest, so it is through the eyes of a woman that political struggle and imperialism are read. Daneshvar creates Zari as a reliable symbol of every Iranian woman, thus making her a paradigm of a middle-class woman's experience as these national conflicts occur inside and outside of her home. Zari's change in character is not drastic, as she stays static in her omniscient fears as a housewife till the very last chapter of the novel, when due to her husband's tragic death, she decides to fight her fears. Yet, through the course of the novel she does increasingly become more assertive and confident in herself.

Zari is introduced as an educated girl, who has studied at the English school. As she claims throughout the novel, she used to be a fearless student who would stand up for her principles in case of injustice. However, she is not the same courageous girl after she gets married and becomes a mother. Now, she cares more about her husband and her children than being a fearless woman. When she thinks about her own identity, she finds it in her husband and children to define her as a wife and a mother. After marriage, she has lost her own independent identity.

One of the important features of *Suvashun* is that it has its own unique prose. Daneshvar creates her own symbols, metaphors, and imagery. As Yasamen Jahed suggests, "she uses garden allegory, animal imagery and Iranian myths and fables [that] are intended for women readers."<sup>162</sup> In a conversation with Houshang Golshiri, a

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<sup>162</sup> Yasaman Jahed, "Daneshvar's *Suvashun*: Examining Gender under Patriarchy" (Master University of New Orleans, 2011), 8.

prominent Iranian writer, he interviewed Daneshavar and asked if she has followed Jalal Al-i Ahmad, her husbands', style of writing in her literary career. Daneshvar asserts that her prose, the prose for *Suvashun* particularly, is unique and is incomparable to any other works of fiction, "I want to be myself. I do not want to imitate anyone else. But I do believe that in order to find a logical pattern, one should look up to her pioneers. That's why I followed my pioneers. Other than that, *Suvashun* is absolutely not an imitation of any other prose. It is a prose unique to myself."<sup>163</sup> The garden is a symbol of a women's private and domestic life, while the world outside of a garden is the public and political space for men, a space filled with tension. Zari describes her home as a beautiful garden, saying:

This is my city, and I love every inch of it – its hills in the back, its veranda that runs all around the house, the streams on both sides of the patio, those two elm trees at the edge of the garden, its sour–orange grove in which you planted with your own hands, that 'seven-graft' tree to which you yourself added one graft every year, the distillery next door with its mounds of flowers and herbs every season, flowers and herbs whose very names makes me happy.<sup>164</sup>

When tension heightens either in the home or outside of the home, Zari takes refuge in the garden, taking care of flowers. The symbol of the garden as a utopian space isolated from what is happening in the city and, in general, in the country, serves as Zari's (and thus women's) private sphere where she (and she alone) has freedom of

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<sup>163</sup>Hoshang Golshiri, *Jedal-e Naghsh ba Naghash, Dar Asar-e Simin DANeshvar*. (Tehran: Niloofar, 1376/1997), 198.

گلشیری، هوشنگ. جدال نقش با نقاش در آثار سیمین دانشور. تهران: نیلوفر، ۱۳۷۶.

<sup>164</sup> Simin Daneshvar, *Suvashun*, Translated by Roxane Zand as *A Persian Requiem* (London: Peter Halban 2002), 41.

expression. Amidst what is going on in Iran and in the city, Zari tries her best to keep her family and home away from the conflict. She repeatedly implores Yousef not to get involved in political quarrels and conflicts. Rather early in the narrative she tells Yousef, “Let them do whatever they want, but please don’t let them bring this war into my home.”<sup>165</sup> However, Yousef is oblivious to her worries because he deems it his duty to fight against British intervention. Indeed, Yousef is oblivious to Zari’s personal and private life that she has created for herself because he is so caught up with the political world outside the house.

Through using the garden as a place of unconscious reflection, Daneshvar emphasizes the vulnerability of Iranian women’s private lives. The image of Zari’s garden starts to deteriorate as it gets invaded by external influences that Zari has no power over. When Yousef’s friends, Malek Rostam and Malek Sohrab, come to Yousef’s house in order to discuss their plans against the government, Zari feels anxious about what is about to happen. This is conveyed in Zari’s thoughts on the supposed transformation that her garden is going through:

It seemed to have lost its freshness; dust had settled on all the trees, their leaves and had burned and turned yellow. For a moment, she thought the trees were stunned and staring at her. Then she saw that the trees were trembling, shaking their heads, and soon after settled down. They were preparing to go to sleep, she thought. But the sparrows on the top branches are awake and are bickering at each other like old women in a public bath. <sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 13.

<sup>166</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 220.

Though Zari is unaware of how she is projecting her annoyance onto her garden – to the point of personifying the trees – it is clear that Zari is not happy about her confinement to the garden, which is coded as a private sphere. After the arrival of multiple men to Zari and Yousef’s home for a political meeting, Yousef politely asks her to check on a new guest. Zari realized that “she was being politely dismissed, even though she very much wanted to stay.”<sup>167</sup> She thus notices her exclusion from discussion and understands that her presence is not valued; Yousef only values her for her ability to prepare food, drinks, and hookah for men.

While she is preparing hookah for Yousef, she contemplates her own life: “regardless of her courage or cowardice, both her upbringing and her life-style made it impossible for her to participate in anything that would jeopardize life as she knew it.”<sup>168</sup> She thinks that her lack of courage and endurance caused her attachment to her husband house and garden. Again fear comes in the way of her logical thoughts about her situation. She concludes by thinking, “her only act of courage would be not to hinder others who wished to be brave, and allow them to accomplish things with their free minds and hands.”<sup>169</sup> She makes herself believe that she still has some agency in the household by sacrificing herself, thus failing to take actions that would move her from a passive role to a more active role.

In her conversation with Houshang Golshiri, Daneshvar asserts that one of the main reasons of writing *Suvashun* was that she wanted to show the mentality of Iranian women, “the Iranian women’s mentalities with all the dilemma, even a wealthy, educated

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<sup>167</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 175.

<sup>168</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 176.

<sup>169</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 176.

woman like Zari.”<sup>170</sup> Zari is a symbol of all other Iranian women in this period who do not feel real happiness in their lives, even with all the achievements in their lives, because they always struggle with challenging thoughts about their roles in life. In the words of the author herself, “Zari, although she is wealthy and educated, she loves her husband and her children but in reality, she is miserable.”<sup>171</sup> In *Suvashun*, Daneshvar draws a line between public and private life with Zari’s character, as Zari stands in for how Iranian women in general are confined to domesticity. A public life is only for men; they are free to be active in social and political affairs of the country, while women are only free to be active in their gardens.

Another symbol in the novel that is worthy of attention is the horse. The horse is important to Jahed, in regards to women’s experiences in that “Daneshvar adapts this imagery from the classical period using Zoroastrian symbols to continue her criticism of colonial invasion and gender restrictions.”<sup>172</sup> She uses horse imagery to convey how the patriarchy regulates women’s lives. The governor’s daughter wants the beautiful, white foal, Sahar, that belongs to her son, Khosrow. Khosrow loves Sahar and all his life depends on her. When the governor wants to take Sahar away, the horse imagery becomes a symbol for British colonialism and foreign intervention that invades Zari’s household. Yousef is away, and it is up to Zari to refuse this irrational request. When they come to their house with the request, Yousef’s Sister, Ameh Khanom, tells the worker, Gholam, “didn’t you tell them his father had gone [...] don’t you know that my sister-in

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<sup>170</sup> Golshiri, *Jedal-e Naghsh ba Naghash, Dar Asar-e Simin Dneshvar*, 199.

<sup>171</sup> Golshiri, *Jedal-e Naghsh ba Naghash, Dar Asar-e Simin Dneshvar*, 199.

<sup>172</sup> Jahed, "Daneshvar's *Suvashun*:Examining Gender under Patriarchy", 13.



law doesn't move without Yousef's permission?"<sup>173</sup> Ameh Khanom is thus pointing to how Zari appears quite passive through this statement, but for Zari it is a comment on her cowardice.

Throughout the novel, Zari curses her fears and cowardice several times. It is out of this supposed cowardice that she allows Sahar to be taken away. She curses herself inwardly for her own ineptitude: "spineless women like me deserve no better."<sup>174</sup> Zari knows that she should have stood up to the governor and his family. She berates herself with, "It's my fault, I've been too weak. But this time I'll stand up to them [...] I'll go to the governor myself, and tell them there is a limit to everything."<sup>175</sup> Although she summons up all her courage to fight her fears this time, she fails again. Not only she does not go to the governor, but also, she instructs Gholam to tell anyone coming from the governor that she is not at home, therefore nothing can be given away in her absence. Her solution fails, because the governor sends an armed police officer and gets the horse without any force. As the situation with Sahar establishes, Zari does not have any agency or control over what is going on in the household, since she has always lived under her husband's overshadowing presence. It is always Yousef who makes the decisions. That's why when Zari is left alone with making a serious decision about the horse, she feels helpless. However, this incident is the first time that makes Zari confront her fears. It makes her understand the bitter reality that she is not the same fearless student she was before Yousef.

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<sup>173</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 53.

<sup>174</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 30.

<sup>175</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 53.

Daneshvar uses the symbol of the horse for another more important purpose; to fulfill her criticism on gender roles. The Sahar incident creates trouble in the household. When Khosrow finds out that her mother has given Sahar away, he gets angry at her. This coincides with his father coming back home. Yousef is unaware of what was going on in the house while he was away and returns to find Khosrow missing; Khosrow had devised a plan with his cousin to go to the governor's house and take Sahar back. Zari tells Yousef about what happened to Sahar and what Khosrow is up to. Yousef gets wild with rage and slaps Zari. It is noted that "it was the first time he had ever done such a thing. Zari didn't know it would be the last time."<sup>176</sup> The agency that Zari thinks she has as a housewife crashes into pieces when Yousef blames her for everything with, "in my absence you're no better than a stuffed dummy."<sup>177</sup> Zari is scolded for her behavior not only from Yousef, but also from her son. He believes that because of her mother's cowardice he has lost his horse. Khosrow complains, "women are either worrying or lying. All they can do is to dig graves, or sit around and cry."<sup>178</sup> Yousef, however, sees another layer to his wife's fearfulness. Yousef blames westernization for his wife's cowardice. He tells Khosrow that:

It is not your mother's fault. It is the way things work in this town; the best school is the British school, the best hospital the missionary hospital [...] the teachers who've trained your mother have always tried to steer her away from reality, filling her instead with some etiquette and coquetry and embroidery.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 108.

<sup>177</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 108.

<sup>178</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 113.

<sup>179</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 118.

However, Zari does not want to be silenced by the reprimands she is bombarded with from the male members of her household. Unlike Yousef, Zari does not blame westernization or studying at the British school as the main reason behind her fears. Instead, she blames marriage and Yousef for her fears. She believes that she used to be a brave student. She tells Khosrow, ““yes, according to your father, I am a coward, I’m helpless, I’m soft. I’m always afraid something may happen to one of you [...] I couldn’t bear it. But when I was a young girl I too had a lot of courage.””<sup>180</sup> And then turning to Yousef, she accepts that the British school was not the best option, because they were teaching them whatever they care for. She says, ““our English headmistress constantly harassed us about manners and how to live. I knew in my heart there was more to it than they were willing to tell.””<sup>181</sup> With that being said, Zari still proves to Yousef that she was courageous, asking him, ““wasn’t it a mark of courage to walk off with you that day in the middle of a street riot [...] you a total stranger [...] which girl would have’ [but cut herself off, literally biting her lip.]””<sup>182</sup> Yousef accepts Zari’s point – he was impressed by her fearlessness – but still asks, ““why have you changed so much?””<sup>183</sup> Zari answers Yousef with what critics like Houshang Golshiri believe is the answer that Daneshvar would have given to Al-i Ahmad:

If I wanted to stand firm and put my foot down, I’d have to do it right here with you first, and then what kind of battle of wills would we have at home? Shall I tell

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<sup>180</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 119.

<sup>181</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 119.

<sup>182</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 119.

<sup>183</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 119.

you one more thing? You are the one who took my courage away from me [...]

I've obeyed you for so long that subservience has become a habit with me.<sup>184</sup>

Zari is the embodiment of most Iranian women who are silenced in their private lives because of their domineering husbands. In public life, like Daneshvar, their role is overshadowed by their husband's presence. Zari and Daneshvar have one thing in common – they have lived under their husband's shadow throughout their lives. Zari, for the first time in the novel, voices Daneshvar's and many other Iranian women's feelings by telling Yousef that he is the reason for her fears and submission.

From this point on in the novel, Zari starts questioning all her deeply held beliefs. The narrative focuses on her thoughts, which reminds us that her inner consciousness may not be as subservient as her outwardly expressed words or actions are. Zari ponders the real reason for her change, questioning marriage in her thoughts; while it has given her the most cherished roles (as a wife and mother), she ultimately thinks that marriage is wrong. This is apparent in her bold question, "why should a man be tied for a lifetime to a woman and half a dozen children [...] or conversely, for a woman to be so dependent emotionally and otherwise on one man and his children that she couldn't breathe freely for herself?"<sup>185</sup> Zari's mind is clouded with the carefree days of her girlhood, the memory of the day in Ramadan when she confronted the headmistress for breaking her friend's fast. The novel is filled with Zari's thoughts on women's cowardice and courage, but the mid-point marks the beginning of a change that is made explicit later.

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<sup>184</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 119.

<sup>185</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 121.

*Suvashun* may not be explicit in its feminist coding, but there are some implicit thematic hints in the novel related to women's rights during this time and women activists. As a religious vow, every alternate Thursday, Zari visits the asylum and the prison, to bring food to people. One woman who was committed to the asylum by her family, Miss Fotouhi, refuses the food Zari brings. She does, however, like reading newspapers. Zari thus collects Yousef's newspapers and brings them for Miss Fotuhi. Prior to being committed, Miss Fotouhi had been a good writer, writing articles in local papers about women's rights and the injustice of male domination. It is noted that "she also brought out a magazine which aimed to raise women's consciousness."<sup>186</sup> Through this minor character, the author alludes to the unveiling during Reza Shah's reign. Miss Fotouhi was the first woman to abandon the black veil (Black Shroud) even before the unveiling was officially announced, in favor of a more attractive blue veil. She was deeply disappointed that she had not been appreciated, noting: "A pity that our men were not ready to accept a woman like me. At first, they thought they could take advantage of, like a pot of honey you could dip your finger into. But when I smacked them on the fingers and sent them off packing, they humiliated me or ignored me."<sup>187</sup> She believes that the reason behind her madness is men. When she thinks about how they treated her, Miss Fotouhi starts to shout with tears in her eyes, "They drove me mad! I told them I wouldn't give in! When will other women – those silly little dolls – ever understand who I was and what I stood for!"<sup>188</sup> Other than unveiling her physical body, Miss Fotouhi attempts to unveil women's silence about themselves; she is writing her autobiography to

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<sup>186</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 98.

<sup>187</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 99.

<sup>188</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 99.

accomplish just this. Indeed, the absence of actual, recorded life-writing by Iranians is contrasting greatly by the fact that Danshvar includes a fictional character who is writing her own autobiography. That Miss Fotouhi is committed to an insane asylum by her family, reflects the likelihood that Iranian women did not produce memoirs or autobiographies out of fear that they too would be locked away, or worse. None of Miss Fotouhi's courageous manifestations are accepted in the patriarchal society of Iran, where women are forced to silence their voice about their personal lives. Miss Fotouhi could have had a "normal" life like Zari does, but due to her bravery she is destined to a tragic ending, death in an asylum.

Miss Fotouhi's character reminds the reader of the Iranian women's right activist Zandokht Shirazi. Zandokht was from also from Shiraz, the city where Danshvar places Zari and Miss Fotouhi. Zandokht published a women's newspaper in the years 1931-32, *Dokhtaran-i Iran*, including information about feminist activities happening in other parts of the world. In her articles, Zandokht criticized women's physical inferiority to men and encouraged women to stand and fight for their rights. Both her organization and newspaper was banned due to state censorship. She died young, at the age of 34 both because of physical and mental illness, due to the severe oppositions that had caused great depression for her.

The climax of the story happens towards the end of the novel. Zari is at home, waiting for Yousef to come back from the village. She sees Yousef's friend approach alone. She knows there is something wrong, and she is right; Yousef has been killed and they don't know who killed him. Zari sees her husband's body in the back of the car, covered in blood. She does not realize what happened until after a few hours later, when

she gains consciousness again. She thinks that due to excessive sadness she has gone mad, just like the patients that she visits at the asylum, but there is only one person who can assure Zari that she is still in her right mind, Dr. Abdullah Khan, the asylum's doctor. After being fetched by Khosrow, the kindly doctor assures Zari that it is perfectly natural to feel distressed and delirious. However, he believes that Zari suffers from a contagious illness, saying, "you have a malignant disease that cannot be cured by my hand. You must get rid of it before it becomes chronic. Sometimes it is hereditary."<sup>189</sup> This malignant disease is fear.

Dr. Abdullah Khan advises Zari that she should get rid of her fears as soon as she can. He cautions her, "a human life is a chronicle. It can be any kind of chronicle – a sweet one, a bitter one, and ugly one or a heroic one."<sup>190</sup> His words have a great effect on Zari, to the point that she felt as if she'd been freed from a cage. The doctor tells her that she has just fallen a victim to her fears, but he is sure that she is a "real" lady who is "strong and brave enough not to run away from the bitter reality."<sup>191</sup> After Dr. Abdollah Khan's visit, Zari takes refuge in her garden again, where "she leaned against the tree and wept quietly behind her hand."<sup>192</sup> After quietly grieving in her private sphere, the garden, she feels revived with hope and encouragement. She thinks "not one but a thousand stars were lit in her mind. She knew now that she feared no-one and nothing in the world."<sup>193</sup> From Yousef's death, she emerges confident and composed.

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<sup>189</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 259.

<sup>190</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 259

<sup>191</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 259.

<sup>192</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 260.

<sup>193</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 260.

Zari stands up to her fear with her decision about Yousef's funeral. Yousef's brother, Abdol-Ghassem Khan is planning to have a quiet funeral in order not to cause rioting. He is afraid for himself because he works for the government. He knows that if a crowd of people gather for the funeral, the government and the people will clash and blood will be shed. He asks Zari to talk to Yousef's friends, in order to persuade them to do a secret funeral. With the understanding that Abdol-Ghassem Khan has about Zari's personality, he knows that she would stay away from trouble. But to his amazement, Zari decides the opposite; she decides to even encourage Yousef's friends to have a courageous mourning with, "the least we can do is to mourn his death. Mourning hasn't been outlawed."<sup>194</sup> Although in great grief for Yousef, Zari feels freed from her omnipresent fears due to her marriage. Instead of Yousef, it is Zari now who should make decisions in her own life.

The change, although implicit, shows that Zari has stepped out from the restraints of private life into taking some active roles in political life. She tells her husband's friends, "today I came to the conclusion that one has to be brave in life for the sake of those who are living [...] but is a pity I realized it so late. To atone for that ignorance, let's mourn our courageous dead the way we should."<sup>195</sup> The results of this decision may have been bloody – soldiers suppress the large group of mourners with "batons or rifle-butts" – and resulted in Yousef's corpse being brought back to the house, but Zari holds firm in her commitment to her decision to publicly mourn Yousef. She tells the annoyed mourners who question her decision, "I don't regret it. As Yousef used to say, a town

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<sup>194</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 264.

<sup>195</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 265.



mustn't be completely empty of real [wo]men."<sup>196</sup> This irony shows that Zari is the only courageous one surrounded by all men who are unable to take any action without Yousef.

In *Suvashun*, Daneshvar breaks the dominant rules both in society and in modern Persian literature in many different ways. First of all, she exposes a woman's private life through her own thoughts and feelings to the public. She gives agency to Zari, by choosing her as the reliable narrator. Most importantly, she portrays a female character's transformation from a timid housewife to a more active woman in making critical decisions.

While Daneshvar chose Zari as a symbol for her own and Iranian women's thoughts and feelings in order to bring their personal and private struggles into public attention, Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad, (فروغ فرخزاد) voices her own controversial ideas about gender roles in private space more directly using an autobiographical voice in her poems. Her writings, particularly her poetry, are often discussed as personal sources of expression for Farrokhzad's life experiences and ideas. In her poetry, Farrokhzad "moves from private incidents to public concerns in a self-conscious attempt at the exploration of womanhood."<sup>197</sup> Born to a conservative, middle-class family in Tehran, she and her six siblings moved to the province of Mazandaran, in northern Iran, during her early childhood years where she attended a coeducational elementary school. She did not continue her education, because at the age of 16, she fell in love with a distant

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<sup>196</sup> Daneshvar and Zand, *Suvashun*, 274.

<sup>197</sup> P. Ghasemi and F. Pourgivi, "Captivity, confrontation, and self-empowerment: Identity in Forough Farrokhzad's poetry," Article, *Women's History Review* 19, no. 5 (11 / 01 / 2010): 30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2010.509161>, <http://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsehc&AN=edsehc.2-52.0-78449249350&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

relative of her mother. Despite her parental objections, she married Parviz Shapour ( پرویز ) (شاپور) (1924-2000), a satirist and caricaturist, and left Tehran for Ahwaz, a city in southwest of Iran. A year after, Forough gave birth to a boy named Kamyar ( کامیار ). At the age of 18, Forough published her first poetry collection, entitled as *Asir*, ( اسیر , *The Captive*) (1955).

The persona in the majority of her poems in this volume is “I”, the poet herself. She voices the frustration that the Iranian women felt after marriage by uncovering her own life and exposing the silenced life of personal to the public world. At one point, she writes, “I am thinking about it and yet, /I know that I cannot leave this prison.”<sup>198</sup> This exposing of the silenced life is clear in that even just the words that she uses for home, are cage and prison. In “The Captive,” the poet sees the house, the private space of a woman, as a cage, where she has to live like a prisoner. Though she would flee, her children keep her in her metaphorical cage. This apparent with:

From behind the bars, every bright morning,  
the look of a child smiles at me,  
When I begin singing a song of joy,  
his lips come towards me with a kiss.  
O sky, if one day, I decide to fly this silent prison,  
What shall I say to the weeping child’s eyes,  
‘forgive me, for I am a captive bird’

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<sup>198</sup> Forough Farrokhzad, *Majmueye Kamel-e Sheerha* (Germany: Alborz, 1381/2002), 21.  
فروغ فرخزاد، مجموعه کامل شعرها (آلمان، البرز، ۱۳۸۱).

The consciousness of being a mother forces her to stay in the confinement of the house. Indeed, Farrokhzad is highlighting the fact that Iranian women are tied down to an unhappy life of domesticity by their adoring children.

The maternal duty both for Farrokhzad in “The Captive” and Zari in *Suvashun* makes them accept the undesirable conditions at home. She is captive because she knows as a woman, as a mother, she does not have any legal rights over her son. If she decides to get divorced she will lose custody of her son. In fact, this happens to her. During her four years of marriage, she realized that she wanted something more than the domestic life, although she loved her husband and son dearly. Her brother, Fereydoon Farrokhzad recalls her telling him: “I am not born to prepare food, to sew socks, or to wash clothes. I must leave for poetry.”<sup>199</sup> In her poem, “Khaney-e Matrook,” (خانه ی متروک, The Abandoned House) she calls poetry her sweetheart, companion, and lover. In different poems, she acknowledges that the art of writing poetry was in conflict with traditional values for a woman.

In “Esysan”, (عصیان, Rebellion), she portrays home as a cage and the man as a jailor who has silenced the woman to tell her story. She pleads with him to be freed, with:

Do not lock my lips with silence,  
I have an untold story in my heart  
Do not lock my lips with silence,  
I must tell my secret,

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<sup>199</sup> Fereydoon Farrokhzad’s Speech at Poetry Night at Umeå Sweden” YouTube. 15 November 2011.

I must sing the resonance of my fiery song,  
to the ears of all people<sup>200</sup>

In this poem, it is clear that she is torn between the creative world of poetry and the mundane world of domesticity. She sees the man, the husband, as the reason behind her imprisonment. She echoes this with:

come, O man, the arrogant creature,  
come, open the doors of the cage, ...  
come, open the door, so that I fly,  
towards the bright sky of poetry,  
If you allow me to fly,  
I will become a flower in the flower-garden of poetry<sup>201</sup>

There is a recurring theme of alienation, isolation, and loneliness in most of her poems in this collection, and others to come. She does not find a friend to confide in, no one to share her “secret” with.

She also complains about men’s insincerity. In “Khasteh” (خسته, Tired), she speaks about a man who has devalued her love and gone for another woman. This reminds the reader of one of Iranian women’s problems, polygamy, during the 1950’s that Farrokhzad implicitly addresses in her poem. There is no legal limit to the number of wives that men can take in this period. After talking about the man’s dishonesty, Farrokhzad turns to her sisters, and advises them:

O woman who has a heart of purity

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<sup>200</sup> Farrokhzad, “Asir,” 44.

<sup>201</sup> Farrokhzad, “Asir,” 45.

Do not expect loyalty from men, do not  
He does not know the meaning of love  
Do not share your heart's secret with him<sup>202</sup>

In one of her last poems of *The Captive* collection that is entitled as “Halgheh” (حلقه, The Wedding Band), Farrokhzad pictures the dissatisfaction of a woman with her marriage by comparing her bright and shiny ring to a ring of slavery. She writes:

The girl asked, smilingly, What  
Is the secret of this golden ring?  
The secret of this ring that so tight  
Embraces my finger<sup>203</sup>

The use of a happy girl, (دخترک) in contrast to the depressed woman (زن افسرده) at the end of the poem, shows that Farrokhzad wants to emphasize the fact that most Iranian women, like herself, get married at a very young age. Therefore, they do not have a full understanding of the responsibilities that come after marriage and the difficulty they would bring. It is impossible for them to grasp the reality of the transition from their playful world to the serious life of a married woman. “Halgheh” is seemingly about Farrokhzad herself, who married her husband with love at the age of 16. However, she is fully unaware of what weighty responsibilities marriage is going to bring for her. She does not know the meaning behind wearing a wedding ring that she is excited about.

It is a man who answers the girl's question that the ring is the ring of “happiness” and it is the “ring of life.” With tightness of the ring around the girl's finger, Farrokhzad

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<sup>202</sup> Farrokhzad, “Khasteh,” 69.

<sup>203</sup> Farrokhzad, Halgheh, 93.

alludes to the suffocating patriarchal oppressions that become highlighted in Iranian women's lives after marriage. Even with man's assuring answer, and everybody's happiness around her, for the little girl, the meaning of the ring is still doubtful. Years go by and the girl, now a depressed woman looks at her golden ring again and wonders about its hidden meaning with:

A depressed woman looked at the golden ring  
saw in it gleaming pattern  
the days that she wasted in hopes of her husband's loyalty  
Days, all wasted, wasted<sup>204</sup>

Here, as she did in "Tired", Farrokhzad emphasized the man's infidelity that brings marriage to an unhappy ending.

Although Farrokhzad did not openly claim to be a feminist, there are multiple traces of commentary in her poetry on the issues that Iranian women faced in their personal lives. In Iran in the 1950's, distrust in married life was a major problem for women because they could not fully trust their husbands, since the law gave men the freedom of practicing polygamy and taking temporary wives. The Family Protection Law of 1967, with its requirement that men get the approval of their first wife before remarrying, managed to resolve this issue to some extent. Yet, the private, domestic sphere was still a site of male dominance and control. Indeed, Farrokhzad's woman finds the true answer of the golden ring after many years of marriage:

The woman grew upset and cried:  
O my, this ring that

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<sup>204</sup> Farrokhzad, "Halgheh" 94.

Still shines and sparkles

is the ring of slavery and servitude<sup>205</sup>

To her (and generally Iranian women's) dismay, the meaning of the ring is living like a slave under the patriarchal oppressions of domestic life.

Uncovering the personal life struggles that women dealt with in the private sphere is Farrokhzad's specific way of highlighting Iranian women's issues. After her first publication, all the negative eyes of the society turned towards her, because "some readers and critics seriously believed that such poems could corrupt Iranian society."<sup>206</sup> The male-dominated society was afraid of her poetry because they were revealing the problems of private life. According to Farzaneh Milani, "in a culture of walls and veils, masks and masquerades [...] Farrokhzad explored a language of openness and intimacy, thrilling in its directness."<sup>207</sup> Her commentary on Iranian women's issues was not limited to her first poetry collection. She continued to question institutions such as religion and marriage and criticized women's lack of sexual freedom in her later poems.

However, she got severely punished for her honest self-revelation in her poetry. After publishing "Gonah" (گناه) ("Sin"), in 1954, she fell into profound depression, due to excessive pressure from both the society and her family, even attempting suicide and receiving electroshock therapy. A short poem that was published by a young unknown woman in a magazine called *Rowshanfekr* (روشن فکر, *The Intellectual*) caused both social

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<sup>205</sup> Farrokhzad, "Halgheh" 94.

<sup>206</sup> Michael Craig Hillmann, *A Lonely Woman: Forugh Farrokhzad and Her Poetry*, (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers : Three Continents Press, 1987), 75.

<sup>207</sup> Farzaneh Milani, *Words, Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*, 1st ed. ed., (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press ; London : Eurospan [distributor], 2011), 143.

and literary scandal.<sup>208</sup> “Sin” was about a woman’s sensual awakening and her extramarital affair. For a society where self-effacement was a tradition, talking about the female body and female pleasure created a turmoil. Milani notes that even “a number of clerics signed a petition condemning the author of such a poem and the magazine that had had the insolence to publish it.” The pronoun used in the poem is again “I” that suggests that the “sinner” was Farrokhzad herself. The tone used in this poem was another shocking feature for her Iranian contemporaries. Farrokhzad does not murmur or whisper quietly about women’s forbidden desires; she gives the female persona agency to fully explore her own body, agency that Iranian society forbids in women. Indeed, she is the first writer to write about women’s pleasures and fantasies in Modern Persian literature.

It is through the vehicle of acknowledging her “sins” in sexually exploring her own body, that she undermines the notion that it is a sin for a woman to have agency in their sexuality. She writes:

I sinned  
It was a most lustful sin  
I sinned in arms sturdy as iron, hot like fire  
And vengeful<sup>209</sup>

Although she uses the word sin for the affair, she is not blaming the female persona in the poem for the lustful sin. The female persona, “I” has the full agency to start the affair.

She continues:

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<sup>208</sup> Milani, *Words, Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*, 136.

<sup>209</sup> Farrokhzad planned to publish “Sin” originally in her first poetry collection, but because of excessive social pressure, she was forced to remove it from her first collection. She published it later in her second poetry collection, *Divar, The Wall*.



I whispered the tale of love in his ears:

“I want you, O dear love of mine

I want you, O, life-giving embrace

I want you, O, crazed lover of mine.”<sup>210</sup>

The religious awakening that would evoke blame on woman is absent in this poem. It is a mark of Farrokhzad’s courage to talk openly about female pleasure outside of marriage, when the punishment for adulterous woman is stoning. The redundant endings for the adulterous woman in Persian literature are all detrimental for the female character – she dies conveniently; she attempts or commits suicide; she is punished by her creator; or punished by her (generally male) family members. However, the persona is not worried about all the blames and insult she is going to get. This lack of concern is clear in, “I sinned, it was a most lustful sin/ beside a tremulous and intoxicated body/ in that dark and silent retreat.”<sup>211</sup>

Although Farrokhzad, did not punish or blame her poetic persona for transgressing the rigid gender roles and sexual assumptions/expectations, Iranian society punished the poet harshly. The interpretation of using the “I” in the poem was that the writer and the poetic persona were the same. This infuriated the public because it was a scandal that a devoted wife and mother of a two-year-old son would commit such a sin. Iranian society punished her by throwing countless verbal stones at her; she was verbally

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<sup>210</sup> Farrokhzad, “Gonah,” 122.

<sup>211</sup> Farrokhzad, “Gonah,” 122.

assaulted in the public square. Her work was banned in some religious cities like Qom. Many readers called her a whore.<sup>212</sup>

Her family did not support her either, instead adhering to patriarchal values. Her husband and her father were already angry with the publication of “Sin.” Her marriage ended in divorce, she lost the custody of her son, Kamyar, and was deprived of the right of visiting him. She did not have anywhere to go, since her father disowned her. However, this did not shake her strong will to pursue her love of poetry in the face of all this rejection.

Farrokhzad continued her battle with the male-dominated society of Iran and literature with her poetry. She published three more collections of poetry, *The Wall* (1956), *Rebellion* (1958), and *Another Birth* (1964). She continued to use erotic female body images in her poetry. In “Abtani” (آبتنی, Bathe) from *Divar* (دیوار, The Wall) collection, she pictures a naked woman taking a bath in a natural spring. In “Aroosak-e Kooki, (عروسک کوکی, The Wind-up Doll) from *Tavalodi Digar* (تولدی دیگر, Another Birth), she criticizes marriage as women’s source of sadness. In this poem, she describes in detail, that the personal life of a married woman staying at home is weariness and boredom. She writes:

For hours and hours  
with the vacant stare of a corpse,  
one can gaze at cigarette smoke,  
at the shape of a tea cup,

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<sup>212</sup> Milani, *Words, Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*, 138.

at a faded flower in a carpet,  
at an imagined mark on a wall<sup>213</sup>

In this poem, and many others like “Halgheh,” she speaks to Iranian women whose private life is filled with immobility and silence. The only use and function that a woman has in this poem is to be an object of sex and a provider of unequitable sexual pleasure for a man. This is made explicit in:

One can exclaim,  
with a voice patently false and alien,  
“I love”  
In the powerful embrace of a man,  
one can be a beautiful, healthy female commodity  
with a body like a smooth leather table cloth  
with two large, firm breasts.  
In bed with a drunk, a mad man, a vagrant,  
one can contaminate the purity of love<sup>214</sup>

However, there should be more meaning to life than sitting at home waiting passively for a man. The woman in this poem is a doll in the hands of men, the patriarchal society. She is deprived of her agency as a human being by turning into a doll, living a meaningless life. Farrokhzad’s tone is sarcastic in this poem, for she uses the metaphor of a doll as a housewife. The irony and sarcasm that she uses in this poem is aimed at awakening Iranian women about taking control over their identity and individuality. She writes:

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<sup>213</sup> Farrokhzad, “Aroosak-e Kooki,” 307.

<sup>214</sup> Farrokhzad, “Aroosak-e Kooki,” 308.

Like a windup doll,  
one can see one's own world with two glass eyes.  
With a body stuffed with straw  
one can sleep for years  
in a felt-lined box  
on lace and tinsel<sup>215</sup>

The Iranian woman is the doll who is staring at the fantasized life with her glassy eyes, with no emotion. Her body is stuffed with straw, like a scarecrow or a mannequin that is used for the male gaze only, for she has no control over her own body. She is sleeping for years in a box that is like coffin, and thus passive like a dead body. The box is the immobile personal life that she is living, the marriage, and, in general, the male-dominated society. With her marked sarcastic tone, she invites her Iranian sisters to fight against self-degradation and self-objectification. She encourages them to seek a more profound meaning for their lives than being an idle housewife.

Apart from poetry, she wrote different screenplays and directed a documentary, *The House is Black*, about harsh living conditions in a leper colony in northwestern Iran. In 1966, she died in a car accident at the age of thirty-two. Her last poetry collection, *Iman Biyavarim Be Aghaz-e Fasl-e Sard* (ایمان بیاوریم به آغاز فصل سرد), *Let Us Believe in the Beginning of the Cold Season*, was published posthumously. Both with her poetry and her lifestyle, she fought to liberate Iranian women from conventional sex-stereotyped modes of thoughts and emotions that made her a slave to the patriarchal structures of

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<sup>215</sup> Farrokhzad, "Aroosak-e Kooki," 308.

Iranian life. She tried her best to define a new gender space for herself and Iranian women, a space she paid dearly for.

With few women taking writing as a career, it is evident that writing in contemporary Iran is thus a radical sort of action. Iranian female writers' works should be analyzed within the context that they were written, particularly during the 1960's and the 1970's, as this is the period that many women writers were introduced into the Modern Persian literature. Most women writers of this period faced excessive hardship, sufferings, and anxieties due to the suffocating pressure hurled on them from Iranian men and patriarchal society. For example, Simin Daneshvar, in comparison of her situation of writing with famous writers from other countries, said, "even the few writings we have produced are an accomplishment. Let Simone de Beauvoir come and live for a year the life I live and if she can still produce one line of writing I'll change my name."<sup>216</sup>

Although living under rigid rules of society, some women writers, like Simin Daneshvar, Mahshid Amirshahi, Forough Farrokhzad, Goli Taraghi, and Shahrnoosh Parsipoor, put an end to their imposed exile from both public and literary life. The silenced, condemned fictional female characters in male authors works found a new voice articulated in female authors' writings. With either using fictional characters like Daneshvar, or unveiling their own life stories like Farrokhzad, they proved to the public eye that there is another side of Iranian women's lives that is largely ignored – their personal lives.

With writing about the problems that women deal with in their private lives, the female writers encouraged Iranian women to be conscious about their rights in the private

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<sup>216</sup> Farzabeh Milani, "Pay-e Sohbat-e Simin Daneshvar" [An Audience with Simin Daneshvar], *Alefba*, no. 4, (Fall 1983), **quoted in** Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words, The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, 72.

sphere. They proved that other negative aspects in society impacted women than traditionalism or modernization; where male Iranian writers portrayed woman as mere victims, Daneshvar and Farrokhzad grants greater agency to their characters so as to make it clear that it is the patriarchal Iranian society that should be held responsible for the issues women face.

## V. EPILOGUE

Throughout the Pahlavi era, the Iranian woman was at the center the state's modernization and westernization projects. The images of women that were circulated were dominated by the figure of the unveiled woman, one dressed in western fashion, walking freely in the streets of Iran in a miniskirt. In the pictures presented by the official Pahlavi media that were intended for a Western audience, there is no space for the veiled woman or for her personal struggles beyond what is superficially marked as women's emancipation in public life. Even most modern male authors who were critical of the state's reform overlooked the issue of women's struggle for a nuanced critique of traditionalism and modernism. Some women writers, such as Simin Danshvar and Forough Farrokhzad, found it suffocating not to write about the struggles that they shared with their sisters in the private, feminine sphere. These women voiced their disappointment with the rigid rules of the patriarchal society of Iran through their writings, either with fictional characters or by bravely using an autobiographical voice. However, the state's activities to modernize Iranian women—in very specific, state-sanctioned ways-- proceeded even more rigorously.

Towards the end of the Pahlavi Dynasty, from 1966 to 1979, women's rights activities were almost exclusively orchestrated by the state-sponsored Women's Organization of Iran (WOI). As a relatively homogenous organization, the WOI failed to be a true representative of the diversity of Iranian women, including the poor, rural, and religiously conservative, not to mention the more radical individuals and groups working inside and outside of Iran that were not politically aligned with the Pahlavi regime. Some scholars like Haleh Esfandiari, formerly a member of WOI, argue that the Women's

Organization of Iran thrived in staying up to date with new changes in feminist movements as well as in considering the needs of traditional Iranian women. Haleh Esfandiari resists charges that the WOI was an elite women's group that primarily benefitted upper-class women, claiming that "the vast majority of the users and beneficiaries of the services offered by WOI branches and centers were traditional, working class women. The Family Protection Law and the Family Protection courts benefited all women."<sup>217</sup> On the other hand, scholars such as Nima Naghibi state that the picture illustrated in Esfandiari's words was the part of the desired image that the WOI tried to project in the late 1970s. However, Naghibi argues, the organization did not represent an indigenous feminism, "one that would speak to the traditional cultural and religious practices of Iranian women."<sup>218</sup> As she points out, it is a known fact that most members of WOI were royalists from privileged social and economic backgrounds who had been educated in Western countries. The homogeneity of this group reinforced social barriers between WOI's members and Iranian women in general that involved differences in economic and class status, education, geography, and even religious practices. When women associated with the WOI discussed reforms for women, they tended to overlook the particular needs of the urban poor or the peasant classes in rural Iran.<sup>219</sup>

Ashraf Pahlavi's leadership became more problematic for women activists in the late Pahlavi era. The control and sponsorship from the state meant that those women working with the WOI felt the constraint of the state's policies of national modernization.

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<sup>217</sup> Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives, Women and Iran's Islamic Revolution*, 33.

<sup>218</sup> Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Feminism*, 88.

<sup>219</sup> Zohreh T Sullivan, "Eluding the Feminist, Overthrowing the Modern? Transformations in Twentieth-century Iran." In *Global Feminism since 1945*, 235-64. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).



The emancipation of women in Iran involved only a selected group and class of women. WOI failed to support solidarity and sisterhood within and beyond the national borders. Activist women working in the organization were set in a position of power over the lives of poor, peasant, and lower-class women, who they portrayed as victims of the traditional patriarchal society. The upper-class, educated activists were charged with the responsibility of “emancipating” these women by subjecting their minds and bodies with a process of modernization.<sup>220</sup> In result, lower-class women were marginalized within the discourse of state-sponsored women’s rights by way of an internal segregation from the upper- and middle-class feminists and actively excluded from the public eye.

Women’s Organization of Iran designed activities for women based on their class differences, segregating women from different backgrounds. Lower-class and poor women were to learn sewing, cleaning their house, and cooking better for their husbands through classes provided by the WOI. Middle-class women were directed towards charity work because it prepared them to become involved in civic activities. Upper-class women were busy training for political seminars and participating in international conferences, since they were already modernized and presented the ideal, desired westernized image that the state desired women to project. Women working in provincial branches of the WOI had little connection to the organization’s central branch in Tehran, and few understood their work to be aligned with feminist activities. The level of awareness among the members was radically different. For example, women who were working in sewing classes or day-care centers in small towns were less concerned with women’s

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<sup>220</sup> Mana Kia, “Negotiating Women’s Rights: Activism, Class, and Modernization in Pahlavi Iran”, 241.

rights than members who were trained to work or represent the organization in international seminars and conferences. Only a few groups of women in the central branch had the ability to lobby for women's rights effectively.

In the early years of the 1970s, the WOI increasingly focused on its international activities. The organization sent different representatives to international conferences. The international interaction made Iranian representatives aware of different women's rights activities in other countries such as the United States. Mahnaz Afkhami, the secretary of the WOI, stated that in addition to meeting western feminists in person, she and her colleagues had created a list of reading of feminists' books such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*.<sup>221</sup> In 1973, the Shahbanou (Empress Farah Pahlavi) and Princess Ashraf extended an invitation to Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer, well-known second-wave feminists, and to Helvi Sipilä, the United Nations' Assistant Secretary General for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, to visit Iran. Their intention was to increase Iran's visibility on the world stage as a modern nation that endorsed women's equality and to bolster their chances of being selected to host the International Women's Conference in 1975.

Some of the women involved with the WOI were worried about how this visit might appear within Iran. As Mahnaz Afkhami, the former secretary of the WOI in this period explained, "some were worried that the publicity around the visit might further typecast [them] as Westoxicated, others were concerned about what the speakers would

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<sup>221</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, "Women's Human Rights in Iran, from global declaration to local implementation," In *Women and Girls Rising: Progress and Resistance Around the World*. Ellen Chesler, Terry McGovern. (New York: Routledge, 2016).

say and the ramifications of their opinion.”<sup>222</sup> Afkhami had first suggested inviting Kate Millet instead of Greer, but Millet said that she could not come.

On May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1974, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and Helvi Sipilä arrived in Tehran for a six-day stay in Iran. The date was chosen purposefully by the WOI, since Iran was vying to host the International Women’s Conference in 1975, for which it had donated \$1 million dollars. Through hosting the biggest international event for women in 70’s, the Iranian state wanted to project an international image of Iran and its state as one of the most important women’s rights champions among other nations joining the conference. This image would have of course reinforced the overall state-desired image of Iran as a modernized and westernized nation, but the hosting committee ultimately chose Mexico to be the host country.

The Western visitors to Iran had different levels of understanding of the complexities of Iranian women’s daily living situations, the nation’s dominant cultural contexts, and the limitations imposed on them from different powers including the state and the clergy. As Nima Naghibi argues in *Global Sisterhood*, Friedan’s idea of Iranian women’s oppression was based on the widespread view that women around the world shared a common oppression.<sup>223</sup> Friedan assumed Iranian women’s problems were the same as those of American women, such as those she discusses in *The Feminine Mystique*. While this is correct, it must also be noted that Friedan’s views about Iranian women were confirmed by the partial and false picture of Iranian women’s situation and struggles that she was presented by the WOI during her visit.

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<sup>222</sup> Afkhami, Mahnaz, “Women’s Human Rights in Iran, From global declaration to local implementation,” 7.

<sup>223</sup> Naghibi, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood*, 76.

The speech that Friedan gave at the University of Tehran and the article that she wrote after coming back to the United States, "Coming Out of the Veil," which was written primarily for an American audience, offer evidence for both of these points. Nima Naghibi relied on the article as the main source in order to study and criticize the failure of global sisterhood in the wake of the 1974 trip. However, additional information about Friedan's perception of Iranian women and their struggle can be found in her speech. Perhaps of greater importance than either of these in establishing how Friedan's visit was perceived in Iran by Iranian women were the questions that she got from the Iranian audience. In addition, we can learn more about the impact of the visit by critically considering the purposeful reasons that the WOI invited her to Iran in the first place.

Friedan was, at this time, a leading figure of the women's movement in United States and widely recognized internationally as well. The WOI purposefully chose to invite Friedan because they hoped that she could be able to reinforce the image of the shah, Iran and the WOI as modernized, westernized and progressed in the eyes of a Western reader. Friedan was also chosen for the WOI's purpose because they believed that she shared a vision of feminist priorities with the organization and its upper-middle class and upper-class members. Bell Hooks, amongst other feminists who have critique Friedan's focus on the issues most important to white, upper- and middle-class women, believes that Friedan was oblivious of lower-class women's problems. As Hooks points out, the problems that she discusses in her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, concentrate on the plight of a select group of women: usually college-educated, middle- and upper-class, married white women. Hooks believes that Friedan fails to include non-white, poor women due to her focus on the specific problems of the "leisure-class white

housewives.”<sup>224</sup> Like the state-sponsored Women’s Organization of Iran, Friedan understood women’s issues and rights from a limited perspective. The WOI thus found Friedan’s ideologies to be in line with its overall purposes.

In Betty Friedan’s 1974 speech “Women’s Liberation: The Past Ten Years” presented at Pahlavi University in Shiraz, she commented on Iranian women’s stages of building a feminist movement and divulges her dominant Western critique of Iranian women’s problems.<sup>225</sup> Friedan primarily talks about the Women’s Liberation Movement in the United States, and different stages of success for building the women’s movement. Between the lines of her speech, she also comments on Iranian women’s rights and their movements. At the beginning of her speech, Friedan states that she will inform the audience about the ten years of development of women’s movement in the United States. According to her analysis, the first condition and stage in the modern women’s movement is revolution in consciousness, “as long as we were confined in our consciousness by a feminine mystique, there was no way to see the problems, the barriers, that kept us from equality.”<sup>226</sup> She goes on explaining the problem of the feminine mystique and how it negatively had affected American women’s lives. After ten years, American women had gone through a revolution in their consciousness, realizing

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<sup>224</sup> Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 2nd ed. ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>225</sup> Betty Friedan, Papers of Betty Friedan, 1933-1985, MC 575; T-97; T-125, Vt-1; Phon-7, 970. Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study.

<sup>226</sup> Betty Friedan, Audiotapes. Friedan talk in Iran, 1974. Papers of Betty Friedan, 1933-1985, MC 575; T-97; T-125, Vt-1; Phon-7, 1993 at Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Harvard University.

that there was no problem with them, it was the society that was structured against them. Therefore, they rebelled against the male-dominated society asking for equal rights.

For Friedan, the veil is a symbol of the feminine mystique in Iran. The feminine mystique, which Friedan defines in her book as the problem that has no name, is the false notion of women's role in the society as a wife, mother and housewife, nothing other than that. It is the denial of a woman's individuality. The problem that has no name for American women is named by Friedan in her speech to the WOI as the veil. She compares the situation of Iranian women with American women, stating, "now, in my opinion, you are equivalent of that stage that has happened in a much more dramatic way in 1936."<sup>227</sup> Here, she refers to the enforced unveiling decreed in 1936 by Reza Shah, the "Women's Awakening Project." Friedan states that while American women were confined and suppressed mentally in their consciousness by patriarchy, Iranian women are physically confined by the veil. She applies her analysis of American women's problems to a larger, international context of Iranian women's problems and relies on her assumption of women's common oppression to evaluate Iranian women's issues. In so doing, she fails to see that there is a big gap between these two forms of oppression that is powerfully informed by their different cultural and historical contexts.

The veil in Iran had different layers of meaning. Taking her cues from the WOI, Friedan sees unveiling as the first stage in Iranian women's path to equal rights. However, seeing the veil as a form of shared oppression is a superficial analysis. The veil was a part of Iranian women's social, personal, religious and cultural identity that many understood as being forcefully taken away by a man, Reza Shah. Friedan exaggerates the

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<sup>227</sup> Friedan, Betty, Audiotapes. Friedan talk in Iran, 1974.

negative effect of the veil in Iranian women's lives and suggests that Iranian women who have not cast it aside are backwards: the fault for not being liberated women, she implies, is their own. "The veil, what is the veil? It denied your personhood. You were anonymous in human society. I mean, I know I am not an expert in conditions of the Persian family, but in society, on the street, you were anonymous. So, it was much more of a rigorous feminine mystique than just in the brain. I would think that women that still wear it have not moved out of it in their own minds."<sup>228</sup> For a western feminist like Betty Friedan, it is hard to see the veiled Iranian women as possessing any sort of agency since the veil has long been seen a symbol of marginalization and suppression of women in the dominant western discourse about Persian women.

Friedan fails to understand that the enforced unveiling in Iran was seen by many as another form of female oppression imposed by a patriarchal state. During her visit to Iran, she did not communicate with a wide range of ordinary women: her only source of information was the upper-class educated women of the WOI who did not represent Iranian women in general. She fails to realize that the decree that Reza Shah issued in 1936 that stripped women of the veil was perceived by many Iranian women as a violation of women's personal and private sphere, since the veil was marked as a dividing line between the personal and public life. Reza Shah, by tearing the veil off women's heads, violated Iranian women's personhood. Because the picture of the veiled woman was, in the perception of Westerners, a symbol for traditionalism and backwardness, the modern Iranian state headed by Reza Shah mobilized the symbol of veiled woman as the nation's main obstacle to modernization. The image of the unveiled European woman

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<sup>228</sup> Friedan, Betty, Audiotapes. Friedan talk in Iran, 1974.

became a model for the Iranian women to emulate and the nation to desire. The dominant belief in Western women's superiority—as a symbol of modernization—continued to influence the state and the Women's Organization throughout the twentieth century. The reinforcement of this belief resulted in the alienation of traditional veiled women from mainstream Iranian feminist discourse. The broader effacement of veiled women due to her choice of clothing helped the state and the WOI to present the desired modernized image. Friedan did not realize the complexity of the problem of unveiling for Iranian women, but joined in with the state-sponsored women's organization to celebrate unveiling as a modern act of women's emancipation and liberation.

The most interesting part in Friedan's speech are the questions that she received from the audience after her speech, which were preserved in her materials from her visit to Iran. One of the members of the audience, Ms. Kheradpir, wondered if “the ideology of the Women's Liberation Movement in the States would be applicable to the other countries including the most traditional ones (some countries in the South-East Asia and the Middle East?).”<sup>229</sup> Her question suggests that the Iranian audience realizes that the targeted changes and also the system under which the changes would be possible do not seem feasible for the Iranian society. Another audience member makes this point more explicitly in a question that is phrased more as an instructional comment to the Western visitor. She informs Friedan why the stages of success for American women's rights could not be applicable in Iranian society:

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<sup>229</sup> Betty Friedan, Iran trip, 1974: notes, speech by Princess Pahlavi, correspondence from Women's Organization of Iran. Papers of Betty Friedan, 1933-1985, MC 575; T-97; T-125, Vt-1; Phon-7, 972. Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Harvard University.



The problem of consciousness – here in Iran, unfortunately it has not arrived. Mainly perhaps because our women’s lib movement is not a middle class. Our women’s lib is thanks to the Empress and princess Ashraf. How can we make Iranian women even become conscious? Most of them, upper class women that should be the leaders are very happy going to the hair dresses and playing bridge. (we have servants for the waxing affairs!) the lower classes are too busy trying to feed their children. (And no middle class!!!)<sup>230</sup>

This question, or rather comment, on the WOI indicates that the organization is not an inclusive organization of all Iranian women. The change in general consciousness cannot happen since only a selective group of women are the targets of the WOI’s changes. In this anonymous comment, the audience member seems to believe that the focus of the WOI should shift from upper-class and upper-middle class to middle-class women—if there were an Iranian middle class. Her criticism of the WOI as an institution oriented toward elite women responds to a widespread sense that Iran is an extremely stratified society: in reinforcing this idea, she suggests that a middle-class model for feminism such as that described by Friedan in the United States cannot work in Iran. Based on Friedan’s model—with which she seems to be in sympathy—she fails to conceptualize a women’s rights movement that can represent all classes and groups of women in Iran.

Years after Friedan’s visit, Mahnaz Afkhami reflected on the varying level of understanding that each of the invited visitors had of the cultural context of Iranian

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<sup>230</sup> Betty Friedan, 1974: notes, speech by Princess Pahlavi, correspondence from Women's Organization of Iran. Papers of Betty Friedan, 1933-1985, MC 575; T-97; T-125, Vt-1; Phon-7, 972. Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Harvard University.

women's lives. For example, in one of the scheduled visits to one of the WOI centers in south Tehran's slum area, Friedan harshly criticized a woman learning hairdressing, "why are you studying hairdressing? That's such a traditionally female skill."<sup>231</sup> Friedan could not understand that for a poor Iranian woman from the slums it is a great form of consciousness awakening to leave the house and come to a class in order to be independent. Afkhami declares that she did not expect Friedan to realize "what such a woman must do to gain agreement from menfolk in her household to do so."<sup>232</sup> What Afkhami implied, but did not state directly, is that Friedan analyzed Iranian women's lives and the domineering situation through a western feminist lens.

The feminist visits to Iran made big news in the country, and was featured in the headlines of different newspapers. On May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1974, *Keyhan*, an Iranian newspaper aimed at an English-speaking, international audience, published a short article covering the visit. It offered a general criticism that many Iranian women had about the visit:

many could with reason have said that the concerns of militant European and American women have little to do with the condition of women in Iran; and that the visitors could at most hope to come to contact with an upper-class woman who was in any case far less in need of 'liberation' than those down on the economic and social ladder.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, "Women's Human Rights in Iran, from global declaration to local implementation," 8.

<sup>232</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, "Women's Human Rights in Iran, from global declaration to local implementation," 8.

<sup>233</sup> Iran trip, 1974: press clippings, printed material. Papers of Betty Friedan, 1933-1985, MC 575; T-97; T-125, Vt-1; Phon-7, 976. Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Harvard University.

This aptly summarized the failure of the global sisterhood in Friedan's visit to her Iranian sisters. Western feminism failed in building a global bond of sisterhood between Iranian and American women since it is focused on elite women. *Keyhan* states that coming together had helped women to see the shared problems such as abortion, birth control, divorce and equal work opportunities. These problems can be categorized under the concept of "common oppression" since most women living in patriarchal societies deal with these problems. The ultimate goal of sisterhood, however, involves understanding not only these shared concerns but also the specific needs of women's differences across culture, race, and class. Finally, *Keyhan* hopes that from these visits, Iranian women would come to the realization that they will have to work out their own road to equality in keeping with Iranian conditions. Therefore, Iranian women should not look up to their global sisters in helping them attain their rights.

Friedan's evaluation of her visit was different. In a letter that she wrote to Mahnaz Afkhami, she says that the days she spent in Iran were enormously interesting, intellectually stimulating and personally enjoyable, "I feel now I have many friends in your country and will be back soon again. I hope you count on me now, as I do you, as a personal friend as well as a valuable ally and sister."<sup>234</sup> Based on the letters that the WOI and Friedan exchanged, the WOI indeed believed in Friedan as a sister and valuable ally since they continued their sisterhood in the following years. They exchanged letters and

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<sup>234</sup> Iran trip, 1974: notes, speech by Princess Pahlavi, correspondence from Women's Organization of Iran. Papers of Betty Friedan, 1933-1985, MC 575; T-97; T-125, Vt-1; Phon-7, 972. Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Harvard University.

met again in New York City and at the Women's International Conference in Mexico City.

In dominant western discourse, the veil has been criticized as a material form of oppression of women by a traditional, patriarchal society. However, during the twentieth century, the veil had different meanings for Iranian women since they went through unveiling and reveiling.<sup>235</sup> Towards the end of the Pahlavi dynasty, in the mid- seventies, many Iranian feminists were unhappy with the state's restrictive goals for feminist action. Many members of the WOI joined the revolutionary forces.<sup>236</sup> While during the Pahlavi era, the veil was presented as a symbol of traditionalism and backwardness marking the women's passivity, towards the end of the Pahlavi era, some women veiled themselves as a form of rebellion against the state. Many female members of the revolutionary forces chose to wear the veil again in opposition to the state and its policies. However, women were not aware of the new policies that were to be passed under the new leader, Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution. Under the Islamic Revolution, Iranian women were forcibly veiled. Even the historic protest on International Women's Day on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1979, did not change Khomeini's view about forced veiling.

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<sup>235</sup> Hamideh Sadeghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling and Reveiling*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>236</sup> Afary, *Sexual politics in Modern Iran*, 245.

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