TAJ AL-SALTANEN

CROWNING ANGUISH

Memoirs of a Persian Princess
From the Harem to Modernity, 1884–1914

Introduction with New Preface by Abbas Amanat
Translated by Anna Vanzan & Amin Neshati
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THE CHANGING WORLD OF
TAJ AL-SALTANEH

The infant girl born in 1884 to the ruler of Iran, Naser al-Din Shah Qajar, and a minor princess from the same ruling family named Turan al-Saltaneh had an ancestry noble enough to deserve a lofty name. The name chosen for her, however, was only a royal title: Taj al-Saltaneh, “crown of the monarchy,” one of many generic titles coined in the title-conscious court of the late Qajar period and bestowed upon royalty and commoners alike. The “crown of the monarchy,” however, turned out to be a remarkable woman in her own right, with a personality and drive that enabled her to outlive her counterparts in a waning royal house. Even though our knowledge of Taj al-Saltaneh is largely limited to what she cared to share with us, there are enough sincere thoughts and sentiments in her unfinished and untitled memoirs to qualify her not only as a representative of the emerging secular intelligentsia in the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911), but also as an ardent feminist who reflected many of the predicaments of her culture and society in a changing age.

Belonging to a tiny, secularized upper class in a society dominated by traditional Perso-Islamic values, Taj led a rebellious lifestyle that brought her much notoriety. Still, she fares favorably in comparison with other feminists of her generation, perhaps not so much for her actions as for expressing views well advanced of her own time. Nearly ninety years later, Taj’s memoirs are relevant. The realities of late-twentieth-century Iran and the restrictions which Persian women have been subjected to, or have opted
for, attest to the persistence or revival of old religious values and institutions. The plight of today’s Muslim women remains strikingly and sadly comparable to that of Taj a century ago. Yet, curiously, contemporary reaction to the female predicaments imposed by society is still unclear. It remains to be seen whether the sincerity of Taj’s secular convictions will be matched or surpassed by women of our time.

Taj’s memoirs are unusually self-revealing. Her language and mode of expression are iconoclastic, for she not only voices the flaws of her social class but those of her family and herself. Even compared to the liberated upper-class Western feminists of her time, Taj appears less inhibited. A sensitive observer, she narrates the story of her life with the lucidity of an intimate conversation, a style mastered by the matriarchs of the old families. Inspired by the spirit of European romanticism, her individuality comes through effortlessly. Among the memorialists of her time, Taj stands out for having crossed the formidable barriers of self-censorship. In Persian prose, as in any other formalist tradition, the authors of memoirs were, and still are, expected to hold back the harshest and most personally revealing realities for the sake of social stature, honor, and political expediency. Having acquired something of the candid language of the womenfolk, the cultivated as well as the common, Taj echoes in her narrative a refreshing divorce from literary formalism. In spite of its many shortcomings, her account is charged with nuances and flashes of a real life, which makes it comparable to the memoirs of her nonconformist uncle, Abbas Mirza III, to the secret diaries of her father’s astute confidant, E’temad al-Saltaneh, and to the memoirs of the shah’s enlightened minister, Amin al-Dowleh. She was the only royal woman known to us who has left an account of her life. When compared to the memoirs of her elder brother, Zell al-Soltan, written less than a decade after her own, or the historical reminiscences of Naser al-Din Shah’s grandson, Dust Ali Khan Mo‘ayyer al-Mamalek, compiled some four decades later, Taj’s candid tone becomes all the more conspicuous. The self-righteous complacency of one and the defensive nostalgia of the other stand in marked contrast to her frankness.

Written in 1914, at the disheartening close of the Constitutional Revolution (and the outbreak of the Great War), Taj’s memoirs cover a thirty-year span in the life of a generation that was acutely aware of a changing world. It is as though she had chosen this culminating moment to recall her “personal history”—a tale filled with “wonder and anguish,” as
she put it—in order to record a cultural leap which she, symbolic of her
time, made from the indulgent world of her father’s harem to the puzzling,
yet emotionally and intellectually challenging, world of a profane lifestyle.
The driving force behind this hazardous journey to modernity was Taj’s
desire to embrace independence. French literature, revolutionary rhetoric,
and journalism reshaped Taj’s sentiments and sensibilities as distinctly as
modern fashion and make-up, entertainment, music, furniture, luxury
goods, and architecture reshaped her lifestyle.

In narrating her journey from the confinement of her harem mentality
into what she defines as “liberated life,” Taj is remarkably aware of not only
her own intellectual and emotional rebirth but also the public and private
lives of others around her. She takes it upon herself to demonstrate the ills
of a society of privilege and intrigue: a crippled yet indulgent monarchy in
its last gasp, a decaying aristocracy, abused and insecure womenfolk, a
cynical officialdom, and a destitute populace so little noticed that it only
flickers through Taj’s account.

Hardly typical of the Persian woman of her time, Taj anticipated in her
writings and conduct something of the emancipation movement of the Reza
Shah era (1925–1941). Her memoirs are unique in consciously recording a
life which she could afford to lead because she was a member of the royal
house, albeit a declining one. The notable absence of Islam and its
representatives in her account also points to the waning power of religion in
the post-Constitutional craving for modernity; this decline was also vital in
allowing Taj to break away from a conventional path.

The picture she paints is primarily of her own life cycle and the course
she negotiated through diverse spheres: from the blissful days of the royal
castle to an arranged childhood wedlock and a troubled married life, and
further to a world of socializing and sensuality—the self-chosen liberties of
a Persian madame de salon. Sentimental, occasionally vain and self-
congratulatory, and carried away by her own liaisons, Taj nevertheless
displays moral strength in the face of many agonies: an unloving and harsh
mother, a benevolent but progressively childlike father, an adolescent
bisexual husband, a ruinous abortion, separation, financial difficulties, the
stigma of a libertine lifestyle, and the anathema of removing her facial veil.

IN THE HAREM
Even though the secret diaries and recollections of the old confidants engendered much hearsay about the royal harem (*andarun*: literally, “interior”), Taj’s account is the only one so far by an insider. The European accounts of the Qajar royal harem, though informative, often tended to glamorize life in the women’s quarters, lending it a certain Orientalist mystique akin to the stories of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Considering the voluptuous opulence and sensuality that surrounded the Qajar court, particularly under Fath Ali Shah (r. 1797–1834), it is not difficult to see why stereotypes persisted.

As a member of the shah’s harem from her very birth, Taj was considered part of the collective “royal honor,” the sanctum sanctorum of the Persian court, and was jealously guarded by an army of eunuchs, castrated black or white slaves in charge of the royal harem. The harem could be desecrated symbolically even by an alien’s glance. There were a few unmindful residents of the capital, among them the servants of the American minister plenipotentiary in Tehran, S. G. W. Benjamin, who dared to view the cavalcade of royal women passing through the narrow streets. They were quickly and rudely made to pay the price—a savage beating from the eunuchs and guards—for not turning their backs as a sign of respect for the royal virtue. It is plausible that before her marriage at the age of thirteen Taj had never met any adult male outside the confines of the harem.

The Golestan palace in central Tehran, the principal residence of the shah and his family, was surrounded by the high walls of the Royal Citadel (Arg-e Saltanati). Like Beijing’s Forbidden City, Delhi’s Red Fort, the Ottoman Topkapi, Cairo’s Citadel, or even Vienna’s Borge, the Arg was a self-contained complex of some magnitude. Built in the eighteenth century and extensively rebuilt in the Qajar era, the Arg was situated in the center of old Tehran. The business district, the bazaar, with its labyrinth of shops, trading houses, workshops and caravanserais lay to the south, where there were also the reconstructed market square (Sabza Maydan) and the royal theater (Takiyeh-ye Dowlat), built in an innovative style for the annual performance of the Shi’ite passion play, the ta‘ziyeh. To the east stretched the fashionable Naseri Avenue, with its Western-style shops carrying European goods. Looking northward one would see the Drill Square (Maydan-e Mashq), the barracks, and the royal tulip garden (Lalezar), which in the 1890s had just been developed by the shah into a new
shopping and residential section. To the west was the old Sangelaj, one of Tehran’s five wards (mahallehs). By the 1890s Tehran’s population had increased to a little less than 200,000—about two percent of the entire population of the country. With several residential quarters for the shah and his growing household—including a new bed chamber built in the 1880s in the style of French villas, with tasteful Persian modifications—the Golestan also housed the magnificent Hall of Mirrors and other reception halls; the innovative Shams al-‘Emareh (sun building), which was the tallest man-made structure in the capital; a small museum holding, among other things, the legendary Persian royal treasures; and other more mundane facilities, including a primary school for the royal children where Taj received her early instruction.

Naser al-Din Shah’s harem could not hope to match in size that of his great-grandfather, Fath Ali Shah. The earlier monarch, facing an oversupply of wives and concubines, had instituted a division of labor in the harem that allowed him to indulge himself with as many as eighteen wives, who tended to his bedtime needs in rotating shifts. Yet Naser al-Din’s harem was large enough to bring him more pain than pleasure. If the estimate of seven hundred for the harem and its dependents is accurate—this would include a total of about eighty wives during his half-century reign—it is not hard to see the reasons for the shah’s perpetual life in the saddle. He wandered unperturbed like a Flying Dutchman day after day and year after year among his eleven other palaces and summer villas and numerous resorts, gardens, and hunting grounds around the capital.
The Shams al-‘Emareh ("sun building") pavilion on the eastern flank of the Golestan Palace complex, the best example of the architectural amalgamations of
The walls of isolation that surrounded the harem were not as impenetrable as the stern eunuchs may have wished. Not only did the royal women take pleasure in such benign activities as discreetly watching the townspeople from the tower of Shams al-‘Emareh, enjoying the fireworks, and witnessing from behind the screen a whole array of people at the royal audience during celebrations and holidays, but they also accompanied the shah on some of his domestic trips, hunting excursions, and visits to the houses of courtiers and notables. The royal palaces and villas were equipped to host several households at once, and one palace complex in eastern Tehran, appropriately named “the pleasure land” (Eshratabad), was designed by Naser al-Din to house his numerous favorites in its secluded villas. Moreover, the royal women were permitted to visit their relatives and other women of consequence in their houses—visits that could last several days. It was common for guests, often relatives, to reciprocate, together with all their servants and dependents.

Taj’s description of the royal “broth-making” (ashpazan), where all the ministers and officials of the state were obliged to join the shah in the annual ritual of preparing the ingredients for a royal broth to be cooked in open air in a royal garden, signified another of the court’s symbolic ceremonies. The preparation, one may surmise, was meant to remind the guests of their collective duty toward the monarchy as its servants, while the later partaking of the prepared food, like all other ritualistic meals, was intended to recall the shared benefits of the state for the elite. Though women only maintained a passive presence in the ceremony, they too were reaffirming the harem’s functions, and thus its commitment, in the preservation of the state.

Perhaps no channel of harem communication with the outside was more effective than the servants and attendants who visited to render a variety of services. Physicians, goldsmiths, clothiers, tailors, and merchants of luxury goods often served as confidants to the women. People of the lower ranks, too, found their way into the harem. Some of the most influential wives of
the shah were of low birth, often peasant girls from around the capital, picked up by the shah on his never-ending excursions. In the curiously egalitarian environment of Naser al-Din’s harem, the women had no qualms about receiving their poor cousins from the villages and doing their utmost to secure them pensions or posts. They often employed them as their own agents to the shah’s many servants-in-attendance and other court functionaries.
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