

Iranian Woman as Reflected in Travel Books written in Qajar Period by European Travelers

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ABSTRACT: Foreign travelers to any country usually record their observations precisely and these recordings provide any nation with valuable resources based on which they could scrutinize the dominant culture and worldview prevailing in a specific period of time in the target land. The present paper aims to delineate foreign travelers' outlooks and viewpoints regarding Iranian women in Qajar period as reflected in their travel books. To this end, their observations regarding women's personality traits, clothing style, habits, beliefs, familial relationships and appearance are analyzed. It should not be forgotten that while many of these observations are recorded impartially and objectively, we could positively assume that these recordings are by no means devoid of prejudice and preconception. Readers will get acquainted with many startling and absorbing facts regarding women which could not be found in native sources.

INTRODUCTION

No doubt, foreign travelers found it extraordinarily difficult to shed light on women's status in Qajar period. This is due to the fact that women were often confined to their harems and no one except their husbands could access them. They rarely left their houses and did so often fully clad in veil and disguise. They were prohibited from any contact with male strangers. Derowil (1974, p.130) asserts that "it is indeed impossible for travelers to gather useful information on women in their short stay in a society where even naming women in public is considered unconventional."

Quite naturally, travelers turned to men for assistance in this regard or wrote their own preconceptions about women. Polak (1973) confesses that a great deal of his writings on women is acquired through his communications with a close friend of his who could access King's harem. Derowil (1974), however, recounts that during his three year stay in Iran he could establish close ties with Askar khan (the last Iranian ambassador in France) which caused him to access his harem easily.

According to him "Iranian women are the most beautiful women in the world and are head and shoulder superior to Georgian women" (p.149). He describes them as "tall, slim and gorgeous" who "rely on their natural beauty rather than artificial make-up... They have attractively white complexions and this is natural as they spend most of their time at home and are not exposed to sun light" (pp. 155-6).

He continues" hair is considered a vital part of woman's beauty and their dark black hair is thick and often touches the ground...they describe beauty as having big eyes and a small mouth. As the old Iranian saying goes women's mouth should be smaller than their eyes which is an unrealistic definition of beauty...that is why they use kohl to magnify the size of their eyes" (p.156). He asserts that "Iranian women have incredibly white teeth despite their habit of smoking hookah and have small hollow chins" (p. 159).

He describes Iranian women as round-faced and considers it as a defect. For Iranian men, however, this is considered a sign of beauty and that is why they liken beloved's face to the full moon. Further he says" Iranian women's face is usually pale and this may be as a result of their seclusion. Though they do their best to hide it by using special soap" (p. 173).

He distinguishes Iranian women with their greed for having jewelry. Derowil (1974) surprisingly recounts how Fathali Shah's wife was unable to stand up on her feet in a meeting with an ambassador's wife due to heavy weight of the jewelry she had worn. He also reprimands women's clothing style and considers wearing veil and girdle as ridiculous.

Felandin (1961) believed that seeing women's face in Iran is impossible as they wear thick veils and their faces are disguised behind a piece of white cloth which allows them just to see ahead of them and they never remove it in public in case strangers can

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see their eyes. He recounts how a woman cursed herself for letting him inadvertently see her eyes.

He informs us on how important is having joint eyebrows and a slim body. According to him, men preferred women with penetrating looks rather than kind passive looks and the fact justifies their tendency to use kohl more often. They use rouge to redden their cheeks and dye their hands and feet with Indian henna.

According to Juber ‘women symbolize public joy and sorrow. Upon receiving some exalting news they cheer loudly and vice versa they scream nerve-rackingly upon hearing terrible news... Widows are often seen shrieking in sorrow beside their husbands’ grave and it completely contradicts the claim that Eastern men treat their wives cruelly’ (289). According to Olivier (1980), ‘women play a crucial role in affecting their husbands while making important decision.’

Western travelers unanimously introduce Iranian women as die hard believers in superstitions. They spelling and chanting particularly when it comes to romantic issues. For instance to rejuvenate their spouse’s love to themselves or to attain the man they love and also to shun evil eye or to get pregnant. According to Derowil (1974), ‘the biggest female gatherings took place in public bathrooms where women sought advice for their familial problems. It was like a trial where daily feuds and disagreements could be mediated and solved. The trails were led by outstanding old women... Finally they discussed wedding ceremonies ahead of them and could mark single girls for their sons.. They superficially discussed each others’ merits but were quick to find faults with each other and backbite ’ (p 182-3).

They do not show any inclination to enjoy Westerners’ liberty and appear to be totally satisfied with the prevailing conditions. They have fully accepted men’s superiority and leadership and western liberty is reckoned as immoral and shameful. A man is allowed to have numerous wives and there was accordingly a tight rivalry among women to endear themselves to their husbands whether by seducing them or by obeying them. Surprisingly, a woman did not hesitate to dedicate her personal inherited properties to her husband to win his heart.

According to de Bode (1982), ‘We should not expect Iranian women to act as sensitively and emotionally as a western women and this is owing to the fact that manly way of conduct is considered sublime’ (190). Greatest women are praised not for their tenderness or sentimentality but for their bravery and strength. Hard conditions of living render women tough and strict. However, no other woman can parallel Iranian woman when it comes to sacrifice and selflessness for the sake of family and they are beyond doubt the best mothers. Yet ‘men are never filled with joy when their wives give birth to girls and women feel ashamed for letting their husbands down in such cases’ (173).

Derowil (1974) believes Iranian women in Qajar period were unexceptionally unaware and uneducated, their awareness not going beyond household chores. Modesty and chastity, according to Olivier (1980), are reckoned as decisive traits to judge a girl and husbands are extraordinarily fanatic and feverish in this regard. ‘They did not give it second thoughts to murder a wife accused of adultery’ (p. 257). Their brother-in-laws also support them. Cases of sexual affair happened rarely though, whether because of women’s strong loyalty or out of fear.

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