



ASHRAF, GHODSIEH

Ashraf, Ghodsieh or **Ghodsia** (Qodšiya Maryam Ašraf; b. Majidābād, northeast of Tehran, 22 November 1889; d. Tehran, 16 April 1976), one of the first Iranian women who pursued higher education and obtained university degrees in the West, a Baha'i philanthropist, and an initiator and organizer of numerous educational and health projects, mainly for women and children.

Ghodsieh Ashraf ([Figure 1](#)) was the first child of Mirzā Faḡl-Allāh, son of Mollā Ašraf of Kan or Kand (a village some 12 km northwest of old Tehran), and Šafiya-Monavvar Khānom, a descendant of a family from Isfahan. During the early years of her life Ghodsieh Ashraf studied Persian and Arabic with private teachers, but, because she displayed an uncommon ardor for learning, she was enrolled at the American School for Girls in Tehran, where she studied English for three years. Her free hours were devoted to teaching at various schools in Tehran, including Nāmus and Tarbiat-e Banāt. She soon realized, however, that her ideals of progress would not take wing in this milieu, and her parents, demonstrating exceptional open-mindedness for their epoch, decided to send her to the United States to pursue higher education (Ashraf, unpublished notes, the Ashraf family archives in Geneva, Switzerland; Khan and Khan, p. 193; *Star of the West*, vol. II, English section, no. 3, p. 6; English section, nos. 7 and 8, pp. 3-4 and 8; English section, no. 18, p. 12; Persian section, nos. 6 and 7, pp. 11-12).

On 16 April 1911, accompanied by two friends of the family, Ghodsieh Ashraf left Tehran and traveled to England via Anzali, Baku, Batumi, and Vienna. The voyage from Southampton to New York on the *Mauretania* was made in the



custody of Louis G. Gregory, a prominent African-American Baha'i lawyer. She landed in New York on 3 June 1911. Within less than a fortnight, she participated, on 16 and 17 June, in the first annual conference of the Persian-American Educational Society, an association for cultural exchange, in Washington, D.C. Her speech in English about the progress of Persian women stirred great emotion, as did her address at a reception at Rauscher's Hall, which she attended as the guest of honor (*Star of the West*, vol. II, English section, nos. 7 and 8, pp. 3-4, 5, 8-9, 15; Persian section, nos. 7 and 8, pp. 11-12; Hannen, pp. 6-14). Her presence in the United States produced substantial newspaper coverage (*Washington Post*, 4 June, 11 June, 15 June, 18 June, and 19 June 1911; *Washington Times*, 14 June, 15 June, 16 June, and 18 June 1911; *Washington Herald*, 17 June 1911; *Evening Star*, 3 June, 15 June, 16 June, and 17 June 1911; *Sunday Star*, 11 June and 18 June 1911; *Daily Kennebec Journal*, 17 June 1911) and she was interviewed and photographed. She was also invited to the White House on 19 June 1911, on the occasion of the 25th wedding anniversary of President William Howard Taft.

After brief stops in Baltimore and Pittsburgh, where the press again reflected her visit (*Evening Sun, Baltimore*, 27 June 1911; *Baltimore American*, 27 June 1911; *Pittsburgh Post*, 30 June 1911; *Pittsburgh Gazette Times*, 30 June 1911 and 1 July 1911), she arrived in Chicago and was admitted to Lewis Institute, and later to Irving School. On 1 May 1912, she was asked by 'Abd-al-Bahā' to represent the women of the East at the cornerstone-laying ceremony of the Baha'i temple in Wilmette, Illinois (MAŠREQ AL-ADKĀR) (Zarqāni, pp. 72 and 436; Arbāb, II, pp. 184-85). She met with 'Abd-al-Bahā' again in November 1912 in Washington, D.C., and in 1920 in Haifa (Ashraf, 1972).

Before pursuing a course of higher education, Ghodsieh Ashraf first had to obtain preliminary diplomas. These included the diplomas granted after the completion of the course of study prescribed for the Grammar Department at Chicago Public Schools and for Eastern High School in the District of Columbia. In the summer of 1914 she was admitted to Boston University's College of Liberal Arts, where she obtained a B.L. degree in June 1917. On 6 July 1917, she earned the First Aid Certificate from the American National Red Cross in Boston. During this period, Ghodsieh Ashraf also became interested in drama and participated in historical and allegorical American pageants and old English pageants, as well as in the Shakespeare tercentenary celebrations. She then pursued graduate studies at Teachers College, Columbia University, and received an M.A. degree on 5 June 1918. In addition, she obtained, on 3



October 1918, the Certificate of Approval from the National Headquarters of Girl Scouts, which authorized her to organize a troop of girl scouts in Flemington, New Jersey. During the 1918-1919 academic year she was employed by the Board of Education of the Borough of Flemington in Hunterdon, where she taught at the public school and became head of its science department.

Towards the end of 1919, Ghodsieh Ashraf left the United States and returned to Iran after stopovers in Italy, Egypt, and Palestine. She was now primarily focused on developing programs for the education and advancement of women, specifically programs designed to prepare women for involvement in realms from which they had hitherto been excluded. She was a founding member of the Committee for the Advancement of Women, also called Women's Society for Progress (*Lajneh-ye taraqqi-e nsvān*; Khan and Khan, p. 193), which set up literacy classes, opened libraries for women, encouraged women to present public talks, and organized conferences and discussion circles, aimed at the eradication of gender prejudices and the familiarization of women with a number of issues beyond their domestic preoccupations. These activities were regularly attended by audiences of several hundreds of women (Coy, section V, pp. 50-55).

At the age of 38, Ghodsieh Ashraf left Persia to become a student at the American University of Beirut. She obtained a degree from the School of Nursing on 25 June 1930, and a certificate in Midwifery for Graduate Nurses on 23 June 1931. Subsequently, she opened a medical office in Nablus, mainly dedicated to patients from the poorest social strata (letter dated 3 February 1932; document dated 22 February 1933; document dated 14 March 1933, all kept in the Ashraf family archives in Geneva, Switzerland). She was appointed official representative of the women of Persia at the Congress of the Women of the East in 1930 in Damascus, where she delivered a forceful speech which was widely echoed (*Eṭṭelā'āt*, 18 Ābān 1311 Š./9 November 1932 ; Salāmi and Najmābādi, pp. 31 and 240).

Upon returning to Iran, Ghodsieh Ashraf was employed by the [Anglo-Iranian Oil Company](#) in Abadan in 1944, and was appointed director of the Program for the Education and Welfare of Workers and their Families in 1946. Working 12-hour days in the searing Abadan heat, she succeeded in organizing a day school that enrolled up to 900 street children instructed by roughly 20 teachers. The school provided health controls (especially ophthalmic controls), and later evolved into a kindergarten and elementary school officially



recognized by the Ministry of Education (document dated 27 November 1947; *Yazdān*, 21 Tir 1326 Š./13 July 1947). In 1948 she instituted classes in the quarter of Faraḥābād in the city of Abadan for the wives and adolescent daughters of workers. It was for the purpose of running these classes that Ghodsieh Ashraf created one of the very first curricula of its kind for girls and women in Iran (*Aḵbār-e hafteh*, 30 Tir 1329 Š./21 July 1950). The subjects taught in these classes included reading, writing, arithmetic, handicrafts, childcare and child education, hygiene and nutrition, home economics, and social behavior and etiquette. Discussion meetings were periodically organized for the women-students accompanied by their husbands, and for the adolescent girls accompanied by their parents, respectively. The 300 female students were granted diplomas at the conclusion of their studies, and many took part in the annual competitions of the Abadan Arts and Crafts Festival (archives of the Program for the Education and Welfare of Workers and their Families).

Ghodsieh Ashraf was a member of the Council of Culture of Abadan (Šowrā-ye ‘āli-ye farhang-e Abadan; member since 24 Šahrivar 1324 Š./15 September 1945), co-founder and member of the board of directors of the Society of Arts and Letters of Abadan (Anjoman-e honari-e Abadan), and member of the board of supervision of the Institution for the Protection of Indigent Children (Bongāh-e ḥemāyat-e kudakān-e binavā ; by-laws dated 1 Ordibehešt 1326 Š./22 April 1947). She earned the respect of the community and accrued many accolades during this period. An oil tanker was launched in her honor, as was the custom, and on 23 February 1948 she was awarded the King’s Medal for Service in the Cause of Freedom, conferred by King George VI and presented to her by the British Ambassador. After retiring from the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in 1949, she took up residence in Haširābād, one of the poorest quarters of Abadan, and set up a private practice and a small clinic, where she treated patients regardless of their ability to pay (numerous letters from patients and their families, dated 1949-1956; written accounts by collaborators; *Keyhān*, 24 Esfand 1329 Š./15 March 1951).

By the end of 1956, a restless desire for adventure and for humanitarian service in accord with her religious principles, which advocated planetary solidarity and cooperation and the promulgation of these ideals, led Ghodsieh Ashraf to emigrate to South America. First in Brazil, and later in Colombia and Ecuador, she waded through the thick vegetation and toiled up steep hills, championing, with the aid of indigenous interpreters, the education and health care of women and youth in isolated rural areas. She returned to Iran



in 1963 and, after visiting the provinces of Kerman and Baluchistan, she settled down on a cotton field known as *Kuṣeh* in Torkman *Ṣaḥrā* in the plains of Gorgān, where she decided to attend to bettering the lives of some 50 émigré Baluch working families. She established a rudimentary clinic that dispensed first aid, vaccinations, medication for benign disorders and contagious diseases, and treatment of wounds and injuries. She founded a modest library, a kindergarten and an elementary school up to grade five for 50 children, mostly girls, and launched regular classes for the women. At school, as well as in the classes for adult women, daily periods were devoted to health care, social conduct, singing, painting, and debate. The medical material for the clinic and the educational material for the classes were transported by bus from Tehran, and most often she herself conducted the transportation (Solaymāni-Ardakāni, IX, pp. 414-18; unpublished letters in the Ashraf family archives in Geneva, Switzerland). The consuming urge to serve and to promote the Baha'i development programs induced Ghodsieh Ashraf to use her last traces of energy to travel, at the age of 85, to the remote village of *Tākor*, located in the Nur district of the province of *Māzandarān*, a Caspian province in the north of Iran, in order to assist its inhabitants. Her main objective was to participate in a project initiated by *Misāqiyyeh* Hospital for the creation of medical facilities in *Tākor*. She passed away at the age of 86, on 16 April 1976 in Tehran, after a brief illness, and was laid to rest at *Golestān-e Jāvid* ('Eternal Rose Garden'), the Baha'i cemetery in Tehran.

Throughout her life, Ghodsieh Ashraf repeatedly observed, not without pride, that her material belongings could be packed into one suitcase. Though she may not have been an easy taskmaster, she was served by an unflagging *joie de vivre* and cut a figure distinct from the traditional models of her times.

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