



HAREM II. IN THE QAJAR PERIOD

HAREM

ii. IN THE QAJAR PERIOD

Women played an important role in the life of the Qajar monarchs. Fath-‘Ali Shah and Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, in particular, kept a large harem.

Fath-‘Ali Shah’s harem. Though the number of his wives and concubines can not accurately be determined, it was probably over a thousand, with an inevitable huge offspring (for a partial biographical list of Fath-‘Ali Shah’s wives, daughters, and sons prepared by Navā’i, see Solṭān-Aḥmad Mirzā, pp. 336-64). Women had the most disparate origins (daughters of Qajar notables, of tribal chiefs, of members of the Afsharid and the Zand dynasties, etc.) and belonged to different religious groups (Jewish, Zoroastrian, Armenian, and Muslim). Every woman had white and black servants and eunuchs, whose number varied according to her status. Some wives had a house apart with personnel and stables of their own, whose expenses were supported by the crown (Solṭān-Aḥmad Mirzā, p. 24).

Though the harem consisted of several thousand people, its internal administration was precise and based on the women’s rank. At the top of the hierarchy was the shah’s mother, who was referred to as Mahd-e ‘Olyā (Sublime Cradle), and had, amongst other duties and prerogatives, the



responsibility of safeguarding the harem wealth, especially the jewels, which she administered with the help of female secretaries (*mirzās*; Solṭān-Aḥmad Mirzā, p. 30).

The distribution of assignments and roles was often a matter of squabbling and dissension among women who sought material benefits for themselves, higher ranks for members of their own families, or precedence for their own children. Tension in the harem was increased by the fact that, until Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's reign (1264-1313/1848-96), the Qajars did not have an effective rule of succession to the throne. As a consequence, the potential candidates' mothers would fight with all means within their power for their sons' eligibility.

Women carried out a wide range of activities; some ran the royal coffeehouse (*qahwa-kāna*, q.v.) inside the harem. Other women commanded the body of female sentinels who protected the king's nightly rest (Solṭān-Aḥmad Mirzā, pp. 43-44, 104-5); other ladies, called *ostāds* (masters), were responsible for the group of female dancers and musicians permanently employed in order to entertain the royal ladies. The performers and their servants were housed in a compound far from the rest of the harem. However, mobility was evidently possible since some entertainers even married Qajar officers (Solṭān-Aḥmad Mirzā, pp. 46-49).

Dance and music were the most popular pastimes in the harem, and also some of the shah's wives became famous for their ability in singing. Other ladies were particularly talented at reciting verses and telling stories, which the king enjoyed at bedtime (Solṭān-Aḥmad Mirzā, pp. 44, 50-51). Women also performed religious functions such as *rawza-k'vāni* (commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn at Karbalā); one of them would usually preach from the pulpit on the day of 'Āšurā (q.v., the 10th of Moḥarram) and directed the ritual of *sina-zadan* (beating of the chest). They had also their own theater, where passion plays (*ta'zia*) were performed, and one of the shah's wives was the custodian of all the paraphernalia used on those occasions (Solṭān-Aḥmad Mirzā, p. 46).

While women were responsible for all the activities in the harem quarters (*andarun*, q.v.), the links with the other parts of the palace (*biruni*) were kept by the eunuchs; for instance, ladies were usually in charge of the royal kitchens, but carrying and serving the food was the duty of eunuchs. Thus eunuchs, as well as tailors, physicians and both female and male relatives who



regularly visited royal women, constituted an important channel of communication between the harem and the outside world. The frequent social entertainments, engagement and wedding parties, as well as picnics in the summer estates, were other occasions when women and men had chances to meet (Solṭān-Aḥmad Mirzā, *passim*).

Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's harem. Nāṣer-al-Din Shah continued his ancestors' tradition of making alliances through marriages, and consequently he took into his harem a considerable number of notables' and princes' daughters. He also did not refrain from marrying girls of humble background, some of whom enjoyed the shah's favor more than the Qajar princesses did. Though Nāṣer-al-Din Shah could not boast a harem as large as that of Faṭḥ-'Ali Shah, in the course of his life he married some hundreds of wives (for a partial list of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's women and children see Mo'ayyer-al-Mamālek, pp. 16-17).

Women could not leave the harem precinct on their own; inside the harem they had daily entertainments such as music, dance, theatrical performances, and games. However, their struggles to gain precedence and influence, which were once carried on mostly behind the closed doors of the palace, now reached the outside, and the *andarun* was transformed into a center of political power struggle. The harem played a decisive role in some crucial moments of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's reign, beginning with his own accession to the throne in 1848, which was favored by a coalition led by the Queen Mother, Jahān Kānom Mahd-e 'Olyā (Amanat, pp. 96-98). The queen mother's intrigues were also crucial in the dismissal and subsequent assassination in 1857 of the Prime Minister Mirzā Taqī Khan Amir Kabir (q.v.; Amanat, pp. 134-36, and *passim*; Ādamiyat, pp. 666 ff.). Later, Anis-al-Dawla (q.v.), Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's favorite wife, brought about the dismissal of the Premier Mirzā Ḥosayn Khan Mošir-al-Dawla (1873). These evident political successes obtained by the leading ladies of the harem reinforced the power of this institution: consequently, both Persian policymakers and foreign diplomats sought support within the royal harem.

Though busy with frivolous pastimes and political machinations, Qajar ladies, or at least some of them, also kept an interest in literary and artistic achievements. In fact, in addition to the religious instructions they received from both male and female teachers, they were also taught calligraphy and poetry. The courtly epistolary art was also cultivated in the Qajar harems, and its high level is testified by the letters left by Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's mother (Amanat, chap. 4, *passim*) and by three of his daughters (Mahdavi, p. 198, n.



169). All these ladies were also accomplished poets and one of them, Tāj-al-Salṭana, wrote her own memoirs (*Kāṭerāt*). Some of the Qajar ladies also enjoyed being educated by foreign tutors, through whom new ideas and stimuli gained access to the harem.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997.

Ferydun Ādamiyat, *Amir Kabir wa Irān*, 4th ed., Tehran, 1354 Š./1975.

Fariborz Baḳtīāri-ašl, *Zanān-e nāmdār-e tāriḳ-e Irān (Mahd-e 'Olyā, mādar-e Nāšer-al-Din Šāh)*, Tehran, 1375 Š./1996.

Ḥamid Āzādi, *Pošt-e pardahā-ye ḥaram-sarā*, Urmia, 1364 Š./1985.

A. Mahdavi, “Les Archives Aminozzarb: source pour l’histoire économique et sociale de l’Iran, fin XIXe-debut XXe siècle,” *Le monde iranien et l’islam* 4, 1976-77, pp. 195-222.

Dust-‘Ali Khan Mo‘ayyer-al-Mamālek, *Yāddāsthā-i az zen-dagāni-e košūši-e Nāšer-al-Din Šāh*, Tehran, 1361 Š./1982.

Ḥosayn Rajabi, *Mašāhir-e zanān-e irāni wa pārsiguy az āgāz tā mašruṭa*, Tehran, 1374 Š./1995.

Soḷṭān-Aḥmad Mirzā ‘Āzod-al-Dawla, *Tāriḳ-e ‘āzodi*, ed. ‘Abd-al-Ḥosayn Navā’i, Tehran, 1376 Š./1997.

Tāj-al-Salṭana, *Kāṭerāt-e Tāj-al-Salṭana*, ed. Manšura Etteḥādiya and Sirus Sa’dvandiān, Tehran, 1361 Š./1982; tr. Anna Vanzan and Amin Neshati as *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of A Persian Princess from the harem to Modernity*, ed. Abbas Amanat, Washington, D.C., 1993.



Western Sources. The Qajar harems stimulated the fantasy of Western observers, whose accounts were often burdened with the stereotypes of the orientalist approach. However, the works of some of them contain useful information: Clara Colliver Rice, *Persian Women and Their Ways*, London, 1923; tr. Asad-Allāh Āzād as *Zanān-e irāni wa rāh o rasm-e zendagi-e ānān*, Mašhad, 1987.

Clara Serena, *Hommes et choses en Perse*, Paris, 1883; tr. Gōlām-Rezā Sami'i as *Mardom wa didanihā- ye Irān*, Tehran, 1984. Mary Leonora Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia*, London, 1856.