Inside the iran of the daughter of persia

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The risk of autobiography is the risk of telling the truth; it may not be flattering and it may be painful. Such is Sattareh Farman Farmaian's Daughter of Persia. This is not the story of a well-known figure or even a " behind the scenes" person privy to the seats of power. It is the compelling saga of a woman whose life history coincided with the most difficult era Iran has faced. Her story is all the more interesting as her position and profession provides an insight and understanding of Iran and Iranian culture.

Satti" as she was known to her family was one of dozens of children born into the harem of Abdol Hossein, on of the princes of the Qajar family, a military leader and regional governor. She was a lively tomboy: " Persian daughters are supposed to be meek and self-effacing, and I was an obstinate, contradictory square peg in her (mother's) smooth round notions of what a real girl should be" (p. 8). Early on she rebelled against the notion of the traditional Iranian role for women.

Although her father stressed educa-tion for all of his children, her brothers and step-brothers were sent off to Europe for an education and she was not. She told her mother that she " want(ed) to study abroad, too, like them. I want more education" (p. 89). When approached with this revelation, her father is dismissive. "'It would be a waste of money,' he said. ' She is a woman. A woman will be nothing'" (p. 90). This was a pivotal inspiration to young Satti: "(s)omeday, I vowed, I'll show them all—women are not nothing! " (p. 1). At this early age she was showing the indefatigable strength and depth of commitment which, in adulthood, would change the lives of many and keep her alive during the Khomeini reign of terror. She remained in Iran through the tumultuous period before and during World War

II. As a teenager she continued the independent spirit she had displayed as a youth, re-fusing to meet with her father and an arranged suitor. A servant is laughingly admon-ished to " give up. You know that Satti always does what she wants" (p. 109).

She wit-nessed and was a part of the paranoia that gripped her family and the nation after the for-eign-supported installation of Reza Khan. Ironically, it was her father who was one of the first commanders to promote " the huge, illiterate sergeant" and thus let him carry a heavy machine gun. (p. 41-42) Although " officially" neutral at the onset of World War II, the regime had a great respect and admiration for the Fascist Italian Mussolini and Nazi Ger-many's Hitler. The Allies invaded Iraq on August 25, 1941, setting the stage for the abdi-cation of Reza Khan and the rise of his son Mohammed Reza Shah.

Satti arrived in the United States in 1944. During her studies she has another piv-otal, career-guiding moment: Americans would eat part of an apple or a steak, then toss the rest into the gar-bage. My new friends would buy and inexpensive blouse or a pair of shoes, wear them for a month, then throw them away rather than wash or repair them. When I asked why they threw things away instead of giving them to the poor, they re-plied they didn't know any poor to give them to. (p. 163) She learns of the relatively new field of social work, and is accepted to USC for graduate (M.

S. W.) work. She realized her mission; she " had found the weapon I needed to fight Iran's human miseries" (p. 167). Marriage, childbirth, and career opportunities would keep her away from her beloved home. She finally

settled back to Tehran and in 1959 “ opened a private two-year professional school to train young Iranians to be social workers” (p. 205). It would continue to be her focus until forced to leave Iran. There are several parallels to her life and the social, cultural, and political events swirling around her.

First and foremost, the traditional role of women, in Iran and else-where was being challenged. Even in conservative Iran the Shah abolished the custom of women shielding their faces while in public. More and more women were entering the workforce, and it was becoming less unusual for Iranian and other Moslem women pursue college and professional education. A broader social awareness was dawning, and the devastation of third-world poverty could no longer be hidden. Flush with increased oil revenues due to a 1954 agreement The Shah was working towards technical and econom-ic growth to establish a “ modern” Iran.

The government “ was talking, though doing no more than that, about improving the conditions of ordinary people’s lives” (p. 208). Like western culture soon to sweep across Tehran, her western social services approach would also have a profound, albeit less flashy impact. As the rule of Mohammed Reza Shah heralded the beginning of a more stable and prosperous nation, it also brought back, with a vengeance, the secret police apparatus to internally enforce the Shah’s position via elimination of any opposition.

The Shah’s version, SAVAK, was able to maintain a secure paranoia within the populace. It would be a pervading influence on daily life, and would ultimately have an unexpected effect of Satti. Nonetheless, she fearlessly

charged into this heady environment. She was not reck-less; she earnestly believed nothing she was doing would upset the Shah. In fact she was well received by the government; she " could not take social work to Iran without turning to the regime for help" (p. 208). Surprisingly, it was a near-perfect setup: I was jubilant.

As the director of an independent professional school, I could run my institution as I liked, while by board would give me the influence I needed to get things done without depending on politics, the imperial court, or a government bureaucracy in which jealousy and timidity always smothered new ideas at birth. At last, after all these years, I had what I needed to begin! (p. 210) She is successful, probably beyond others' dreams but not hers. She took on squal-id orphanages and asylums, earthquakes and family planning. She did not train and grad-uate office-bound dilettantes; she led by example and field work as the priority.

Her atti-tude, unchanged since childhood, is perfectly suited for the situation and no doubt a gi-ant factor in her success. When she has an audience with the Shah " he would have to ac-cept me for what I was. I could not flatter him, but I could will myself to think only of my goal, and allow nothing to interfere with that" (244). She did not hesitate to correct him on the deplorable conditions of the orphanages and she left with the Shah's stipend and support. On first glance it would appear she was in a " safe zone" during the Shah's rule.

After all, she was " doing the dirty work" of caring for the poor and forgotten. It was " woman's work" or the " work of the Saints", laboring without end in

the field with stu-dents and running a growing school. She was not a “ wave-maker” or “ agitator” nor did she espouse any particular political cause or voice anti-government rhetoric. But the sub-stance of leadership in social welfare and reform is beyond any title or description. And it is contagious. In that aspect, she was, like many social activists of the fifties and sixties, inherently subversive to the status quo.

It went well beyond and much deeper than a tran-sient publicized campaign designed to showcase the needy and therefore embarrass gov-ernment officials. That was not her style. Instead there is this methodology of caring and inspiring and once within her influence, the social inequities spoke for themselves. Satti heard the early and ugly murmurs of things to come in the late sixties. By then Iran had virtually transformed itself due to oil revenue. The improvements were eve-rywhere and had “ trickled down” quite well. Land distribution, healthcare and educa-tional opportunities appeared that had been unheard of.

A bright future appeared on the horizon; it was “ a kind of Golden Age in which we were rushing toward the future at breakneck speed” (p. 262). With this unprecedented progress came an infatuation and embrace of western—particularly American—culture. She was, like many of her age, and older, “ distressed by our wholesale embrace of Western products, Western culture, West-ern lifestyles” (263). Iran was not the only country at the time feeling the pervasive and not entirely welcome influence of western and American culture.

However, the unex-pected Iranian response was unique. Discussing the " western-stricken" situation, she asks a friend's opinion and he us-es a teacup and saucer to illustrate his answer. He wants the cup placed in such a manner it will topple to the ground with the saucer. "'But it will fall! ' I exclaimed. ' Do you mean you want to destroy everything you don't like? ' ' Yes,' he said with satisfaction. ' That is my solution'" (264). In the context of the anti-war, anti-American movement of the time, such a statement is not unusual and maybe even typical of " radical rhetoric".

In today's context of an anti-western " jihad" it serves as a historical marker and a very sincere omen. The seventies witnessed the eventual demise of the Shah of Iran and the return of an obscure exiled mullah, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. His fervent message and fever-ish followers are still a very vibrant part of an embarrassed American psyche. That he and such a " backward" country could " hold America hostage" for years in the face of Ameri-can power and determination was unbelievable. Much of what happened in Iran was also unbelievable. Satti became a target of the enraged " proletariat".

Although eventually dis-missed by Khomeini's leadership as street rabble, these opportunistic thugs literally cap-tured Satti and turned her over to Khomeini's regime for trial and " execution". Only dur-ing questioning does it become insanely hideous. Her " crimes" including improving the lot of Iranians—apparently raising their ex-pectation—as well as traveling to Israel twenty years earlier at the Shah's command as well as advocating birth control. It wasn't just the absurdity of the crimes as we see them; it was the earnest, zealous attitude of her captures that so chilled her.

With good reason; the Iranians were seeing one regime toppled, ready for another. Her sorrow is for her country, likely being felt by many modern counterparts who found it necessary to leave Iraq. Fundamental social reforms are at risk by totalitarian despots as well as religious fa-natics. Those unlucky enough to be involved in either type of “ government” tend to look at the “ big picture” of national and international situations and relationships. Satti was occupied by the “ little picture”, the small impact of one person working to improve the life of one person. In Daughter of Persia, we see that actually is the big picture.