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Taj al-Saltaneh, an Emancipated Qajar Princess

Shireen Mahdavi

Taj al-Saltaneh, a daughter of Nasir-ad Din Shah Qajar (1848–96), was renowned for her stunning beauty, liberal ideas, tempestuous love affairs and unconventional way of life. She was a rebel both in spirit and deed. In any other society or time and place she would have fulfilled her restless nature, artistic temperament and thirst for knowledge either by becoming a creative writer, poet or artist herself or by holding a *salon* where such people could gather. But as it was, she lived in Qajar Society where women were behind the veil and confined to the *andarun*, leading a life of seclusion and idleness.¹

She was born in 1883 in the royal *harem* in Tehran. Her mother, Turan al-Saltaneh, was a paternal cousin of her father's.² He was Muhammad Mirza Mutazed al-Dowlah, a grandson of Abbas Mirza (son of Fath Ali Shah) by his twentieth son Mahdi Qoli Mirza.³ Turan al-Saltaneh's marriage to Nasir-ad-Din Shah was of the *Mut'ah* type.⁴ Taj al-Saltaneh's upbringing was conventional, according to the customs of the time. An unhappy marriage, arranged for her at an early age, led to divorce, a subsequent life of adventure and a final sad repentance. She has left behind a memoir which was recently published in Tehran.⁵ The memoirs span a period beginning with her childhood and ending when she was 29. They cover the last five years of Nasir-ad-Din Shah's reign during which period she reached the age of 13, and the early part of Mozaffar-ad-Din Shah's reign (1896–1906).

On a general level the memoirs are valuable as they contain a political and social commentary on the period and the surroundings and customs of the royal harem including an interesting comparison of the reign and court customs of her brother with those of her father. On a personal level these memoirs demonstrate the breadth and depth of her education and learning, ranging from classical history and philosophy to French literature and European politics. They are also a testament to her liberal political views: demanding natural rights, expressing support for the constitutionalists⁶ and believing in freedom for men and women. They also provide a unique example of the impact of Western values on traditional Persian ones and the spiritual dichotomy which they caused. The memoirs are all the more remarkable considering the position and situation of women in Qajar society and the restrictions imposed on them by Shiism. They were written at the behest of a young man whom she addresses as 'my teacher and cousin'.

According to royal custom she and her servants lived in a separate house from her mother. She was brought up by a *dayeh*, *dadeh* and *naneh*.⁷ Twice a day, permission having been obtained, she was taken to see her mother, and once a day in the afternoon to see her father. Her views on motherhood are surprisingly modern, considering that at that time even in Europe upper-class children were brought up by nannies and governesses. She considers breast-feeding to be an important bond between mother and child: 'Amongst the subjects which have always occupied me was the question of breast-feeding.

Why should not a mother feed her own child bringing him up in her own warm bosom of love and care? Why should she separate her own child from herself and give it to a stranger?’⁸

When she was eight years old a marriage was arranged for her and she became engaged to Amir Hussein Khan Shoja’-al Saltaneh who was also eight.⁹ Of this arranged marriage she says: ‘What greater misfortune could there be than for an individual in childhood and at the age of eight to be given a husband, and that one which her heart and soul has not chosen but her mother and elders have selected according to imaginary ideas and obsolete values. Hence my life of misery and wondering which has its origin in that evil day’.¹⁰

Apparently the family of the groom were pressing for an early marriage, but Nasir-ad-Din Shah would not give his permission. Concerning the motivation of her husband’s family, she says:

All of us whom people sought for themselves or their sons (we were not the point), the principal objective was themselves so that through having the daughter of the Shah in their houses they could practice all forms of oppression and tyranny on the lives, property and honour of the people without being accountable to anybody. Thus they attained authority which endorsed their actions. Woe to us who were weapons against the people.¹¹

After the death of her father she was married at the age of 13. She describes the wedding and the preparation for it in detail as she does her engagement. It is of interest to the story of her life that when on her wedding night she was taken to the house of the bridegroom she was so small that she could not step down from the carriage and had to be lifted out by her father-in-law.

The marriage was doomed from the start. They were both so young that they spent the first evening of their married life playing games and then quarrelling over who was the winner. It is difficult to imagine the nature of the sex life of two such young inexperienced people together. However, he soon started being unfaithful to her which led her to look elsewhere in a romantic platonic fashion. From later descriptions it appears that he was bisexual. Prejudiced as her descriptions may be, later evidence shows that he was undoubtedly a pleasure-seeking man of weak character and an untrained mind who squandered away a fortune and died of drink. In any case the marriage was an unhappy one and Taj al-Saltaneh went through deep periods of depression when she tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide. It was rebellion rather than death which came to her rescue. Her rebellion took the form of rejecting Persian customs and ideas through adopting European ones.

She started learning French and being tutored in the ideas of the naturalists.¹² Subsequently she started wearing European clothes and going bareheaded when women were veiled according to religious injunctions. In adopting ‘naturalistic’ philosophy she also abandoned traditional religious views and started questioning the political and social status quo. Her primary concern was the position of Persian women:

I am sad and depressed that members of my sex, the women of Iran, are not aware of their rights and are not fulfilling their duties as human

beings. In complete futility and void of purpose, they sit in the corners of their houses and spend all the hours of their life acquiring bad habits.¹³

The views of Taj al-Saltaneh on the position of women reflect her thoughts on social and political problems while expressing her reformist ideas:

If women in this country were free as in other countries, having attained their rights, they could enter the country's political arena and advance. It is certain that I would not see my means of elevation in becoming a minister and trampling upon the rights of the people, misappropriating the property of Muslims, and selling off my beloved country [*vatan*]. I would choose a correct road and a proper strategy for my elevation. Never would I buy houses, parks, furniture, carriages, and cars with the people's money, but would acquire them through hard work and service. Probably you laugh at my opinions and say that the men of the country could not find any other way for their promotion, how can you, an uninformed woman, find promotion through legal means? But, my teacher, are not opinions free? My principles would be neither reactionary [*irtija'î*] nor personal but specific [*naw'î*]. I would do my best for the expansion of trade within Iran. I would establish factories (not like the soap factories of Rabi'-of¹⁴), but factories which would meet the internal needs of the country, making it independent of foreign imports. I would work the God-given mines which exist in plenty in Iran. I would get the concession for the Bakhtiyari oil mines which have enormous annual profit, and would not give it to the English.¹⁵ I would create facilities for farming ... [blank in published text], would repair the Mazandaran road, and would create order and method for the growing of foodstuffs. I would grant uncultivated lands to the people and demand that they be cultivated as in California.¹⁶ I would excavate many *qanats* [subterranean water conduits prevalent in Iran], create artificial forests, bring the Karaj river water into the city and liberate the people from the filth and dirt of polluted [*janab*, possibly a missprint for *najab*, *najabat*, meaning pollution] waters. (By doing these things) both I myself would profit greatly without misappropriating money or selling the country and would have a comfortable life, while the people also would benefit from my service and endeavors.¹⁷

The influence of 'naturalist' philosophy can be seen in her assessment of the position of man in the world as follows:

Man was created free and independent. Why should man, who was created for freedom and a good life, be forced to live according to the wishes of others and be condemned to live according to another's commands? In the species of man there is no differentiation [*imtiyaz*, i.e. preference of one over another]. Human beings should live under one liberty and natural freedom.¹⁸

She was also attracted to socialism: 'Today there is no thought more liberated or broader than socialism'.¹⁹

Taj al-Saltaneh's perception in considering the human conscience to be the source of duty, morals and law is worthy of attention particularly as she places morals higher than legal commandments. 'We find the feeling for duty in our conscience. It is possible for law to establish a duty for us, but ...' morals dictate some higher obligation which the law does not recognize.²⁰

Curiously, it is her desire to go to Europe rather than her unhappy marriage which she cites as the cause for her divorce. She says: 'Madly I wanted to go to Europe. This desire gained such strength that it caused me to divorce my husband' (who presumably would not allow her to travel abroad). The version of the memoirs published is from an unfinished manuscript and ends with her divorce.

By all accounts Taj al-Saltaneh was the most beautiful woman of her time. She herself describes her beauty in many passages in the memoirs. For instance:

I was very clever and intelligent. God Almighty had blessed my face with all that is beautiful. My hair was brown, long with curly tresses; my complexion, pink and white – with big black eyes and long eyelashes, a sculptured nose, a very small mouth with snow-white teeth which in contrast gave a strange glow to my red lips. In the royal harem which was the center of assembly for hand-picked beautiful women there was not a face more beautiful or attractive than mine.²¹

All the young nobles, even men who had not seen her, were in love with her and aspired to her hand. After her divorce she was surrounded by a circle of lovelorn young men and her liberated life-style enabled her to entertain them and allow them to court her. She is reputed to have had many lovers, but it is difficult to separate fact from fiction. One of her admirers was Arif (1822–1932), the distinguished contemporary poet who gate-crashed her house under false pretenses just to be able to have a look at her, and has written a number of poems extolling her beauty and his love for her.²²

According to her living relatives and contemporaries she was an unhappy and unfulfilled woman who was caught in the dichotomy between traditional Persian values and modern Western ones. Towards the end of her memoirs she repents of her liberated Western ways, blaming them on courtiers and flatterers.²³ At the end of her life she was a sad, lonely figure who faced financial difficulties and was estranged from her children.

Taj al-Saltaneh was not representative of her time or class. Her final unhappy days may have been due to the fact that she rebelled against the traditional way of life prescribed for a Qajar princess. However, as far as posterity is concerned, the memoirs bear witness to the fact that it was possible to grow up within the confines of the royal harem and develop independent modes of thought. Much work needs to be done on the institution of the harem in Middle Eastern societies, and Taj al-Saltaneh's memoirs are a valuable source for such research.

NOTES

1. For the position of women under the Qajars see my article 'Women and Ideas in the Qajar period' in *Asian and African Studies*, 19 (1985), 187–97.
2. It has been difficult to establish which of the Qajar princes her maternal grandfather was. The editor of her memoirs, Mansureh Nizam Mafi, states that Khosrow Mirza, the seventh son of Abbas Mirza, was the grandfather of Taj al-Saltaneh. This seems unlikely as, according to the memoirs, Taj al-Saltaneh's grandfather had been the governor of Kirman and Urumieh during the reign of Mozaffar ad-Din Shah (1896–1906), neither of which Khosrow Mirza was. Also Taj al-Saltaneh mentions her grandfather as having been alive on the death of Nasir-ad-Din Shah in 1896, whereas Khosrow Mirza died in 1883.
3. The present information has been imparted to me by a nephew of Taj al-Saltaneh, Farhad Mirza Farhad, by her half-sister Qodrat al-Saltaneh and confirmed by other living contemporaries. In fact Muhammad Hasan Mirza was not governor of Kirman but deputy governor to Abdul Hamid Mirza Nasir al-Dowleh, the governor of Kirman in 1883. See Mehdi Bamdad, *Tarikh Rijal Iran* (Tehran: Kitabfurushi Zavar, 1971) Vol. 5, p. 228. Also Ahmad Ali Khan-i-vaziri Kirmani, *Tarikh Kirman*, ed. Muhammad Ibrahim Bastani Parizi (Tehran: Offset, 1973), p. 630.
4. *Mut'ah*: temporary marriage practised within the Shii branch of Islam.
5. Taj al-Saltaneh, *Khatirat*, ed. Mansureh Ettahadieh (Nizam Mafi), (Tehran: Nashr-e Tarikh-e Iran, 1982).
6. Persia did not have a constitution until 1906. Before that date a cross-section of people from different classes ranging from the aristocracy to religious leaders and intellectuals were agitating for a constitution and a constitutional assembly.
7. *Dayeh*: wet-nurse; *dadeh*: a negress nurse; *naneh*: nannie.
8. Taj al-Saltaneh, *Khatirat*, p. 10.
9. Amir Hussein Khan Shoja'-al Saltaneh was the son of Muhammad Baqir Khan Shoja'-al Saltaneh, Amir Nizam see George P. Churchill, *Biographical Notices, Persian Statesmen and Notables* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1906), pp. 7 and 84. Also Bamdad, *Tarikh Rijal*, Vol. III, p. 303.
10. Taj al-Saltaneh, *Khatirat*, p. 26.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
12. Naturalist Philosophers of the Enlightenment who held up nature as a model of conduct.
13. Taj al-Saltaneh, *Khatirat*, p. 12.
14. Rabi'-of: Taj al-Saltaneh must be referring to Rabi'-zadieh & Co., who were given the concession for a toilet soap factory in 1910. See Muhammad Ali Jamal-zadieh, *Ganj-i Shayigan* (Berlin, Chapkhanih Kaviyani, 1335/1916), p. 95. Jamal-zadieh says they made excellent soap; so it is not clear why Taj al-Saltaneh is critical of this factory – unless it is because the concession was given to an Iranian who, judging from his name, was a Russian subject.
15. Bakhtiyari oil mines: probably a reference to the famous D'Arcy Oil Concession of 1907, the fore-runner of the Iranian oil industry.
16. Taj al-Saltaneh may be referring here to the American Homestead Laws. These were a series of acts of the United States Congress, the first being the Homestead Act of 20 May 1862, through which settlers acquired public lands free of charge conditional upon cultivation and residence. On the other hand, the Acts encompassed the whole of the United States and not California in particular. Also it would seem unlikely that Taj al-Saltaneh would have detailed knowledge of the Acts of the United States Congress. However, items like this often appeared in Persian newspapers (the few that existed before the Constitutional Revolution), sometimes translated from Arabic (Egypt) or Turkish periodicals which found their way to Iran.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
22. Mirza Abu al-Qasim Arif Qazvini, *Divan*, ed. Abd al-Rahman Seif Azad, 6th ed. (Tehran: Intisharat Amir Kabir, 1957), p. 358. Also see Appendix.
23. Taj al-Saltaneh, *Khatirat*, p. 109.

APPENDIX

Oh thou diadem, crown on royal heads,¹
 By your bewitching eyes the world falters
 What do you know of the suffering of lovers?
 What do you know of their heart's pain?
 Oh God, look at us
 For God's sake look
 Reveal yourself to Arif
 With a single glance
 You can cure my two hundred pains
 My Saviour, my healer, my love
 You and only you are my cure
 I will not turn from your path
 I will not be exiled
 I will sacrifice myself to you

Two hundred hearts are the target of your sharp gaze
 But you have a stony heart in an ivory chest
 You plan rebellion intending to plunder
 I don't know, oh crown, what you have in mind
 There is bedlam in your street
 How will you know Arif from the others?
 In your cup wine flows constantly
 To look at anyone but you is a sacrilege
 You are divine. You are dazzling
 God is witness
 You are unique in the world
 You are both soul and spirit
 From head to foot you are life itself
 You are the God of lovers.²

1. Throughout the poem Arif plays on the word Taj which means crown. The whole of her title, Taj al-Saltaneh, means Crown of the Realm or Kingdom.
2. I am indebted to the distinguished American poet Mark Strand for this rendition into English.