

Issues/Discussion Forum

Life without the Hijab: A Woman's Journey to Freedom?

- Zeenat Khan

I met my dear friend Maryam in the spring of 1980. We studied at the same US University in Rhode Island. She was a couple of years older than me as she was doing her Masters in Sociology and Community Development. The very first conversation I had with her was on a Friday afternoon as all the foreign students were hanging out in Tufts Hall which had a café (a popular on campus den for all the international students). A common friend introduced me to Maryam. Over a piece of chocolate-filled croissant and coffee, I had an interesting conversation with her. After exchanging pleasantries I asked her other than graduate studies if she had some other reasons for coming to the USA from Iran. I knew that since the Iranian Revolution only a few months back, affluent Iranian families were shipping off their children in the relative safety of the United States as they considered Ayatollah Khomeini simply will take Iran back to the middle ages. After so many years, I still distinctly remember her honest answer: "After the revolution, you can say that I was fleeing the hijab."

She talked about growing up in beautiful Esfahan known for its intricate art and architecture around the world. She spoke in detail about their summer home in Shiraz with a splendid garden where the sweet smelling scent of roses, violets and jasmine had filled the night air.

In June 1979, the secular pro-American monarchy headed by Reza Pahlavi that the CIA had helped to set up came crashing down. Iranians from every background clashed with the armed forces in Tehran. Reza Pahlavi, the Shah fled to Egypt. The Revolution promised three things: "Social justice, freedom and democracy, and independence from great power tutelage." Hard-liner Islamic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from exile and assumed power as Iran's Supreme Leader.

Right away, Maryam's parents had sent their three children to America to study as her father was close to Reza Shah Pahlavi's government. The influential families were not ready for the seismic changes the Islamic rule was bringing back to Iran. At the time the Iranian society was inundated with major issues. But instead of sorting those out, the regime went after the women in correcting their way of life. Their main concern became how women were dressing and doing their hair. Reza Shah's father the old Reza Shah had ruled Iran for 16 years as Persia's prime minister. He had banned the veil in public in 1935, was extreme, and had ordered the police to use force in removing headscarves from women in case they defied his orders. His son Reza Shah Pahlavi followed his suit. During his reign women enjoyed even greater social freedom. His dynasty was focused in westernizing Iran and women were

allowed to wear miniskirts and make up. Reza Shah Pahlavi was called Iran's "ultimate feminist."

But when Ayatollah Khomeini took the helm, the Islamic State imposed a mandatory dress code that had to be followed by all women regardless of their religious faith. It didn't matter if they were Muslim, Christian or Jewish. Such rules were utterly incompatible about the way young and ambitious Iranian women like my friend saw themselves. There was no way they were going to be dressed in black *chadors* while going to the university. They wanted no part in a society where women were going to be oppressed. They had felt they needed freedom, not compliance with outdated rules and did not want to live a life under a repressive regime. Finding non-stop political cartoons of Reza Shah's crown merely being replaced by the turbans of the mullahs had pained the urbanites like my friend and her peers very much. They figured in no time Iran will regress back to the dark ages. Those who could afford fled to different Western countries to escape the atmosphere of fear created by Khomeini. But they never forgot their homeland.

Eventually when travel ban was lifted for the Iranian Americans, every two years, in November Maryam goes home to Tehran to visit her only sister. After the trip, in December, she sends me a belated birthday gift package filled with goodies (finest quality Persian saffron, different types of nuts, mini pastries, a locally made wool scarf, a wrap and little gifts like a pair of hand-sewn socks) that she gets for me while in Tehran. Last package filled with Iranian goodies that I got from her was in 2016. Since then she hasn't been home to Tehran because of the travel ban imposed by Donald Trump. It also had a lot to do with the upheaval that took place in late 2017 and early 2018 in Iran.

After her last visit, she had painted me a very grim picture of Tehran. That time she didn't complain much about the mandatory headscarf that she has to wear before stepping out of the airplane. To lighten the mood, I jokingly had told her that during her next visit home she might be in one of the 80 newly purchased planes that Boeing has just sold to Iran's national carrier, Iran Air. To rub it in, I said since she travels business class, they might even give her a complimentary headscarf in case she forgot to pack some. She didn't seem amused as the visit was still very fresh in her mind. She had told me that nowadays when she is there for a visit she doesn't mind walking in the streets wearing a coat down to her knees and a headscarf. Some of the stories on Iran's foreign policy, human rights and politics that impact the lives of Iranians did not paint a rosy picture. I was told that there is a growing discontent among people and she gave me a long list of how bad things are – air pollution, unemployment, corruption in the government, excessive price hike of all things, and devaluation of currency. A huge number of folks with money were buying things from the black market. People who protested against the regime were constantly being jailed. The government routinely sends the accused to the gallows. Iran has one of the world's highest numbers of executions every year.

When I had asked if the nuclear deal signed in 2015 improved peoples' perception of America, the answer was a clear NO. According to her, Iran has the worst kind of dictatorship in the modern era. That was four years ago. Things are not getting any better according to an Iranian website that I follow every now and then. It is mainly geared toward the Iranians living in the western hemisphere and is very critical of the regime, of course.

Maryam's story pretty much echoes with Iranian writer Azar Nafisi's Memoir "Reading Lolita in Tehran." In this 2008 book Nafisi recounts the daily struggle of women under an authoritarian regime. She made a ritual of reading western novels with some of her female students every Thursday evening in her Tehran home. Some of those women had belonged to conservative and religious families; other came from secular and progressive backgrounds. For a few hours in Nafisi's living room they took off their headdresses and had talked about their lives, dreams, future aspirations, and shared love of literature. They all knew that they were taking huge risks defying the face of tyranny. Those women had felt liberated for just a little while under Nafisi's guidance. Nafisi was fired from her teaching job at the University of Tehran in 1981 for refusing to wear a veil while teaching. Nafisi now is living in Maryland.

I have also read other stories such as "Infidel and the caged virgin", "My forbidden face", "Beneath the veil," and "Zoya's Story." They all are similar stories with different names and faces of a rigid society, and a very painful reminder of their circumstances.

"Framed in a Marxist-Islamist mindset, the revolution was made on behalf of the *mostazafin*—the downtrodden—who were left behind by the monarchy's uneven development model. In the following four decades, intense controversy has erupted over the Islamic Republic's socio-economic performance. While some claim that under the Islamist regime remarkable progress has been made, others depict an entire country mired in misery. More nuance and contextualization is needed. Iran has indeed experienced progress over the last 40 years. Whether these successes have been a result of post-revolutionary policies, societal pressures, or the foundations laid by the shah remains hotly debated."

Over the years, the Iranians in the West (mostly those who came from privileged backgrounds) have yearned for an Iran that came out of the pages of the Arabian Nights, a collection of Middle Eastern and Indian stories. They wanted Iran to go back to the glory days of the past. A lot of them still have difficulties accepting the change in the pre-revolutionary Iran. They had worried non-stop about the government having access to nuclear technology to enrich uranium to make an atomic bomb. They had raised their voices against human rights violation, journalists jailed for writing the truth and women being robbed of their most basic rights like wearing lipstick in public or attending a men's volleyball game. The expatriates hate the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In 2015, when the nuclear deal was signed, the Iranians living in other countries had believed it can advance the cause of peace and stability. Since the signing of the historic

nuclear deal between Iran and P5+1 group (USA, China, France, Russia, United Kingdom plus Germany), things on paper looked well for the Iranians. But after talking to my friend, it was obvious that things are not always black and white. The Iran situation had turned into a grey area. Afterwards, when the US and the EU had started to slowly lift the sanctions, Iran had made new business deals with other nations and Boeing signed on a \$16.6 billion dollars deals (the first such deal since 1979).

From all indications Iranians continue to suffer under the Islamic rule. The hardliners wanted the western sanction to stay in place. Their greatest fear was that if in power, the moderates may turn Iran into a secular state by compromising the core values that they had tried to uphold so hard since the Iranian Revolution. Leading the moderates is President Hassan Rouhani, who initially had ended the country's isolation with the signing of the Iran nuclear deal.

But all that was for nothing. Donald Trump ditched the Iran deal in 2018 to shred the Obama legacy into pieces. "A constructive deal could have easily been struck at the time," Trump said of the 2015 negotiations. "But it wasn't."

With his ongoing anti-Muslim and anti-Iranian rhetoric Donald J Trump has made one thing clear: In America, Muslims are going to be invisible. He has said one ugly thing after another since he took office and we all know those stories. He has morphed all Muslim Americans into one category. Muslim Americans have yet to find out how to fight with an anti-Muslim bigot who is the president. By ignoring an entire religious group, Trump somehow intended to preserve the idea of a pluralistic society. With the rise of hate crimes across America since Trump's triumph, as Muslims, we decided that we are not going to continue to live in fear in the coming months and years. We have the same rights and protections like everyone else. On a side note: From December 2016 onwards I was slightly apprehensive of wearing my birthday gift from Maryam in public, a beautiful Pashmina shawl with an inscription written in bold Persian. I was told it simply means: "Life is good." When I wear it on occasions, for a split second, I think, will the ignorant Muslim haters mistake Persian letters for Arabic and think that I am carrying some sort of anti-American message? This usually reminds me of the 2016 September incident when a Muslim woman's clothing was set on fire while she was walking down New York City's Fifth Avenue in traditional outfit. Then I put it out of mind as we cannot live a life of constant, irrational fear.

After January 20, 2017, Trump with his travel ban and brand new sets of fresh sanctions had made my friend Maryam change her views of America where she found refuge so many years ago from the persecution in Iran. During phone calls, and in her candid emails, I get the feeling that now she thinks America has become a very precarious place. It is as dangerous as Iran.

It might be overly naive to think that Iran's so-called "moderates" are becoming weak to Trump's ongoing "pressure policy." "Indeed, there are significant domestic factors.

First, 10 months before Trump decided to withdraw the U.S. from the nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA), Rouhani's choice of second-term cabinet members turned out to be quite conservative, contrary to his supporters' expectations. For instance, Rouhani failed to fulfill promises to choose a woman for at least one ministry, disappointing crucial constituents," reported Iranian.com.

On a different note: I have never really asked Maryam what religious faith she belongs to. I think she knows that I am a practicing Muslim. But for no particular reason her religious beliefs and rituals never were part of our conversation. I know she celebrates Christmas holiday time. Every year, around Christmas time, I get a holiday card from her. But her cards are not designed like Christian themed Christmas cards. The cards do not include Mary and Jesus, Angels or Nativity scenes. She took her husband's last name after she got married. His surname is a Muslim name which belongs to someone from a Shia sect. Perhaps it is better not to know few things even if that person is your best friend. Friendship and religion are often separate. Some people prefer to keep their religious belief private. One's life doesn't have to be an open book.

What worries me is that it seems Maryam still hasn't found her footing, and is continuously trying to evolve on the path of a spiritual journey. In 2020 it also appears that she truly is searching for her individual freedom and a place to belong. A month ago, she was in South Carolina looking to relocate as she finds Michigan to be too cold in the winter. She wrote: "I am in South Carolina right now, and we are going back to Florida tomorrow. We came here to see if we can settle here but it's not enough time that we could spend to look around. It's a very hard decision to see where you want to live, everything in this country is so big and huge, and it gets overwhelming; especially where you don't know anyone. I think age makes it much harder to go out of your way and discover the unknown. I am still on step one, and feel paralyzed in terms of deciding where to move next. Today, people were texting me that it's so cold in Michigan, and I am lucky that I don't have to be in that weather but my place in Michigan up north is even colder. Soon in a couple weeks it will be warmer and I will be back." South Carolina was swampy with too many mosquitoes and Florida seemed too hot and humid, as she had concluded. Thus she will keep on searching until her mind is at peace in seeking liberation that she so desperately needed way back in 1979. After four decades in America, Maryam so far hasn't found freedom in the land of the free and the home of the brave.

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