

Kashf-e Hejab

On 17th of Dey, 1314 (January 7, 1935) by order of Reza Shah Pahlavi, all Iranian women were to shed their hejab. The day was known as the day of *kashf-e hejab*, the “revealing” of the veil.

A few years ago I recorded some conversations with a friend of my father’s, Mr. Marashi, who recounted some of the historic events he had witnessed in his life. The day of *kashf-e hejab* was one. At an assembly for a number of Tehran high schools, Reza Shah made an appearance flanked by his de-veiled wife and daughters. “We stood in orderly lines listening to the Shah,” said Mr. Marashi. “Boys on one side and girls on the other...” Reza Shah gave a rousing speech, reminding the young people of their responsibility for building the future of the country. “We were a little awed by the presence of the Shah and his family, but we weren’t listening to what he was saying,” Mr. Marashi remembered. “We were much more interested in the pretty girls standing a few feet away from us.”

Those girls would be our mothers. On that historic day they stood in lady-like dignity with their single or double braids falling down the back of their school uniforms. They did their best to ignore the boys.

After *kashf-e hejab* policemen were under orders to snatch any kind of covering off women’s heads in the streets. Many men forbade their womenfolk to leave their houses and many women refused to do so of their own accord. It was a brutish, top-down royal decree, typical of Reza Shah. I am perfectly capable of seeing the undemocratic nature of this decree and

I do understand the class implications of it. But, in my heart of hearts, was I ever bothered by it?

No. Even my grandmothers were not bothered by it.

In my family there was only one *ammeh-khanom*, sister of my paternal grandfather, who refused to go out without her chador after kashf-e hejab. The scene of another ammeh-khanom's encounter with the police *agent* who ordered her to take off her scarf was laughingly enacted in my family for years. "And - here - is - to - the - health - of - his - Pahlavi - Majesty..." she had enunciated, slowly peeling the hejab off her head. She was well pleased with a performance that had evoked chuckles in the onlookers.

My mother and aunts and all the braid-heads in Mr. Marashi's memory took kashf-e hejab as a matter of course. They had never worn the hejab as children and by their adolescence it was already banned. But women were not the only ones whose appearance was changing. Men were also switching to western clothes and shaved faces—after all, the boys at that 17th of Dey ceremony were not exactly attired in traditional Iranian garb either. The appearance-overhaul of the country had been well under way by that time. Mud and cobble-stoned streets were paved. Automobiles drove on them. Electricity transformed days and nights. Life was changing fast and looking different.

Still, in Mr. Marashi's recollection, there was novelty in the sight of hundreds of unveiled school girls, attempting a dignified appearance between giggle attacks. Though many boys were accustomed to seeing their sisters, cousins, and friends without veils, the bounty had never been quite as vast as it spread before their eyes on that momentous day. Many of those ogling boys ended up marrying the officially de-veiled young ladies in their neighboring rows. As it turned out, those uniformed girls throwing side-glances at their male counterparts made regular wives and mothers and generally lived without debauchery. And many of them accomplished a great deal more for their country. The Islamic Republic knows this very well.

The kashf-e hejab decree was certainly dramatic. It was a most visible manifestation of profound and far-reaching social change. As the word “kashf” implies, it was indeed a kind of revelation: It *revealed* the presence of women in Iranian society. By endorsing that presence it expanded the role of women and increased their significance. But kashf-e hejab was not the moment that set the clock ticking on the emancipation of Iranian women. The “liberation” of women was part of a wider movement for democratization that had gained momentum in the nineteenth century. The notions of freedom and equality were the cornerstones of the Iranian battle for sovereignty (remember colonialism?) and democracy. Scores of writers and activists were engaged in “awakening” the nation, as they called it, to the modern world. Printing presses were spitting out ink-smeared original and translated publications at full capacity. Young Iranians went to Europe to study. Modern science was thrilling and technological advance irresistible. After the victory of the Constitutional Revolution in 1905, especially, there was no turning back.

But democracy, “high” culture, science, and technology were not the only appeal of the modern world. Thanks to the latest technology, western popular culture burst upon Iranian society and was embraced with relish. The glimpse into western society provided by translations of novels was in time projected onto cinema screens. Even the most obscure characters in novels or silent movies were closely observed for attire, behavior, mores, and what have you. From high to popular culture, from Montesquieu to Greta Garbo, the lure of the west left its imprint. By the 1930s the heads of some of the most driven Iranians had already been filled with what had made the west powerful and rich. And it would be silly to deny that catching up with the accomplished and glamorous west was a consuming ambition for a significant number of Iranians. By the time the 17th of Dey came along, for far too many people to be ideologized away by the Islamic Republic, the lifting of a piece of cloth off women’s heads was just that.

But now here we are, 73 years later, and many of the

grand-daughters of the braid-heads of 1935 have never been in public with uncovered heads. Starting in 1979, layers were added step by step to required women's clothing: headscarves, long pants, thick socks, chador, *rupoush*, *manteau*, *maqna'eh*, and so forth. If Reza Shah's royal decree was enforced by veils being snatched off women's heads and ripped on the spot, the religious decree after the revolution has been enforced by flogging, jail, throwing acid in the face, and other gross barbarisms. I don't know what the ultimate penalty is for refusing to abide by the Islamic dress code. I don't know if anyone has ever received the ultimate penalty—it is easy enough to throw a piece of cloth over someone's head and save her life.

What a catastrophe. What nonsense.

“Do you have to wear *that thing* when you go to Iran?”

For close to thirty years I have been asked that question. It is a highly annoying one. Is it equally fascinating whether Indian women, or men for that matter, wear saris or kurtas back home? Why this concern over how I cover myself? We all cover our bodies somehow, depending on where we are. What people who ask this question don't realize is that most of us cringe at this concern over the clothing of Iranian women. It directs an unwelcome kind of gaze towards us. Walking down the street in my nondescript attire, the last thing I want is to attract attention to how my body is clad—here, there, or anywhere. (And I won't even mention the patronizing overtones of the question.)

But we have the Islamic Republic to thank for this unwelcome gaze, as much as the limits of western experience and imagination. If Reza Shah *de-veiled* Iranian women, the Islamic Republic subjected them all over to the *unveiling* of which old Victorian obscenity, for one, was so fond. We are now subjected to everybody and their brother—and sister—commenting on how and how much we cover our bodies. The phenomenon begs for endless body-politic analyses. Dissertations beg to be written and careers to be made. But apart from annoyance there is nothing in it for the average Iranian woman walking to the grocery store, inside or outside Iran.

There certainly has been a change during Ahmadinejad's presidency. That nasty note of vigilance has been reintroduced into the enforcement of hejab. The young woman sitting next to me on the plane before landing in Tehran advised me to change the long shirt I got away with last time I visited in 2005. There were certainly less outrageous outfits on the streets and more patrolling of young people's hangouts. I had read personal accounts of all this and seen pictures and YouTube clips of harassment of women before my trip. Even a number of men's barber shops had been shut down. I was not quite so cavalier about my attire this year.

And yet, I had an irrational and nagging feeling that something is close to coming to an end in Iran. There is hardly any evidence to support this, but I have a feeling that another *kashf-e hejab* is imminent.