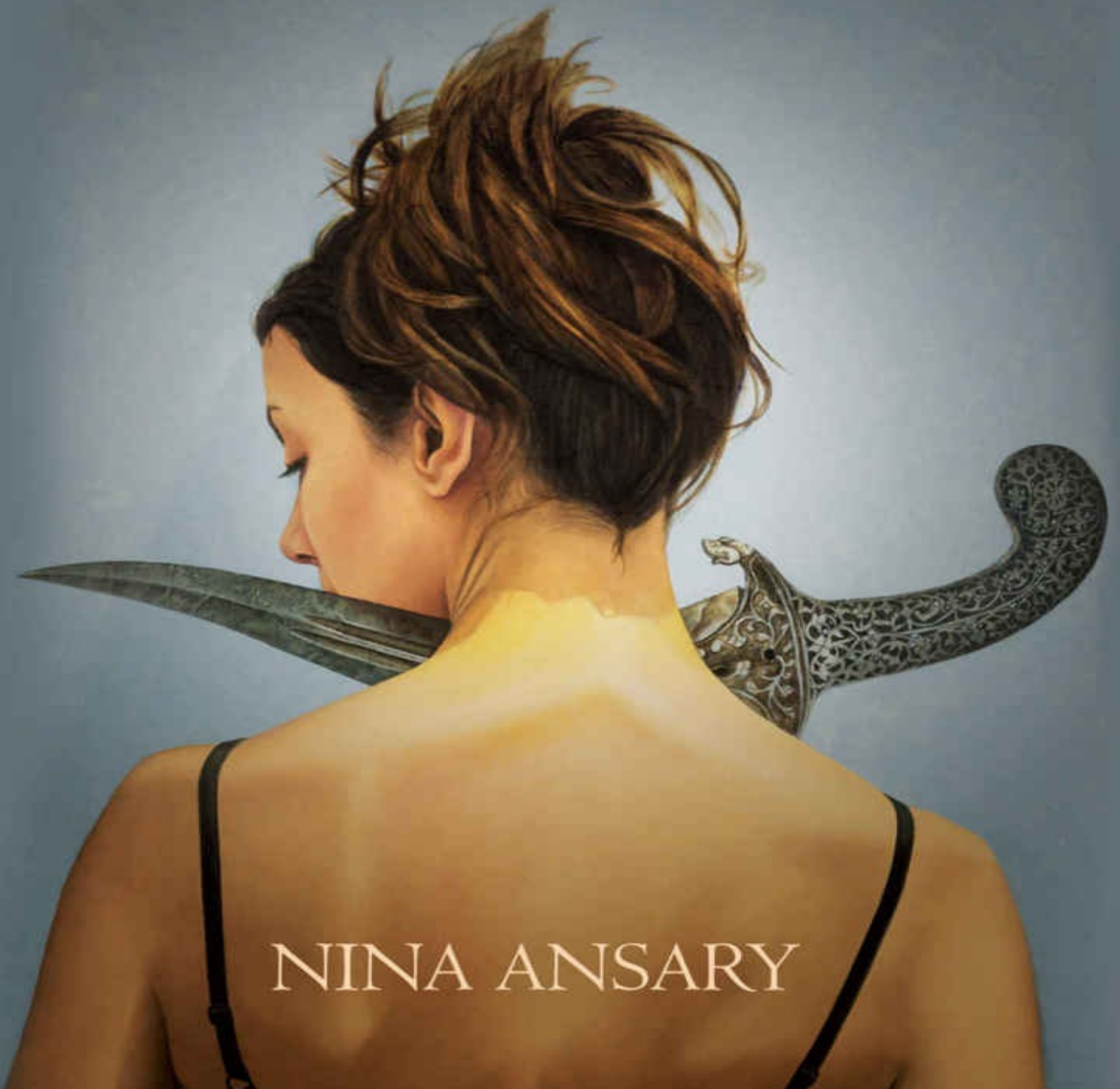


# *Jewels of Allah*

THE UNTOLD STORY OF WOMEN IN IRAN



NINA ANSARY



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# *Praise for Jewels of Allah*

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“A well-documented and persuasively written examination of the change in Iranian women’s status under the country’s secular and religious governments...maintains an engaging tone that makes it easy for casual readers to follow the arguments.”

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“Knowing our history is knowing ourselves. Nina Ansary expertly reveals largely untold stories of the multifaceted women of Iran and their perseverance to overcome considerable obstacles.”

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“I am a big fan of women speaking out, telling their stories, using their voices—and author Nina Ansary has used hers in an astonishing, important way. Her *Jewels of Allah* is brave, authentic and riveting. What a compelling example of why women NEED to tell their stories. Read this.”

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“Nina Ansary, with clear and precise language, laser-like focus and deep knowledge, lifts the veil of news media neglect and ignorance hiding the experiences of women and girls in Iran. *Women’s eNews* is delighted she regularly shares her insights and inside knowledge with its readers.”

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– **MAHSA ALIMARDANI, INTERNET RESEARCHER AND IRAN EDITOR, *GLOBAL VOICES.COM***

“This is a remarkable book. Nina Ansary explodes some of the myths and prejudices held about Iranian women across the centuries. This volume is an invaluable addition to the existing literature on the subject and a must read for all those who are interested in understanding Islam and feminisms and in the celebration of differences and diversities within the feminist movements.”

– **BARONESS AFSHAR OF HESLINGTON, PROFESSOR, ACADEMY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF YORK**

“*Jewels of Allah: The Untold Story of Women in Iran* is an important journey through time amplifying the powerful voices behind the Iranian women’s movement. Author Nina Ansary highlights the courageous women and their progressive steps forward throughout history. The book is an eye opener, from a misunderstood story to how women’s empowerment really advanced. It’s an enlightening and fearless journey that’s important for women around the world to learn.”

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“An elegant and enlightening experience—*Jewels of Allah* contains critical talking points, facts, and research that will empower its readers to more effectively understand the winds of change that are contributing to the empowerment movement of Iranian women.”

– **YASAMIN BEITOLLAHI, DIGITAL MEDIA PROFESSIONAL & HUFFINGTON POST CONTRIBUTOR**

“You can wrap them up in cloths not of their choosing but their powerful spirit still shines through. The Iranian women have always found a way to express themselves, make their presence felt and impact the society. This all comes through Dr. Ansary’s book which expertly highlights the challenges and the opportunities facing Iranian women during the secular Pahlavi dynasty and during the various presidencies of the current theocracy.”

– **DR. FIROUZ NADERI, DIRECTOR FOR SOLAR SYSTEM EXPLORATION AT NASA’S JPL**

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*Jewels  
of Allah*

THE UNTOLD STORY  
OF WOMEN IN IRAN



**Nina Ansary, Ph.D.**



Revela Press  
Los Angeles, California

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Los Angeles, California U.S.A.

This book is dedicated to my family, friends,  
those who worked on and supported this book  
(you know who you are), and every individual  
who has been oppressed by discriminatory ideology.

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100% of all proceeds from the sale of the book will  
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disadvantaged young women in Iran for over ten years.  
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*The day we lose our ability to show compassion and tolerance is the day we have effectively lost our humanity.*

—Nina Ansary

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# Introduction

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## AUDACIOUS GRANDMOTHERS

I grew up in Iran with two very different grandmothers. As a young girl, I took at face value the fact that one of my grandmothers was a devout woman who never left her home without wearing a headscarf, and the other was a Western-educated progressive-minded woman who didn't think twice about swimming topless in the family pool. Yet both women were forces to be reckoned with and by no means subservient.

My maternal great-grandfather believed in the value of education and sent all of his daughters to foreign-language schools, refusing to marry them off before their twentieth birthday at a time when sixteen was thought to be almost too old for a girl on the marriage market. My maternal grandmother was not only fluent in English, but also a very independent, feisty lady who used to walk miles every morning on her own in an era when women were expected to be wary of wandering out alone. She was an inspiration to her daughters, nieces, and granddaughters.

What was amazing about my paternal grandmother was that she had three sons and one daughter, yet she valued an education for all her children. Despite being a devout woman, she was not only not averse to sending her daughter to school in Iran's newly westernized climate, but in fact later came to the United States with her daughter so that my aunt could attend university. Unlike my grandmother, my aunt is not a religious woman, nor has she ever worn a headscarf. She is very fortunate to have been raised by a strong-willed, devout woman who was not opposed to having her daughter attend college in the United States. Granted, my grandmother accompanied my aunt to the United States, but this was during an era in Iran when a young woman going abroad to get an education was definitely not standard practice. So this audacious grandmother was also an inspiration to me.

It was during my scholarly journey into the Iranian women's movement that I began to reflect on how my grandmothers personified very different lifestyles and beliefs. In the course of my academic research, I came to realize why women from disparate backgrounds in Iran have more in common than is widely assumed. With my audacious grandmothers in mind—as well as generations of Persian women who have longed for equality—my commitment to a woman's right to determine her own destiny was intensified. It was also these factors that strengthened my belief that attire does not and should not define any woman if it is by choice and not mandatory.

I left Iran with my family when I was twelve years old and have been living in the United States ever since. I am humbled and grateful to reconnect with the history of the women in my country of origin. It is my hope that I will contribute in some small way to their ongoing struggle for empowerment. In fact, their struggle has become my own passionate cause.

Why did I choose to entitle this book *Jewels of Allah*? This book is based on my doctoral thesis on the women's movement in Iran, written in 2013 for Columbia University. I have rewritten the manuscript solely as an homage to all Iranian women who for centuries have struggled and continue to struggle against a discriminatory gender ideology imposed and justified by hardline conservative factions as the will of "Allah" (God in the Muslim world). The title is meant to convey that women who have been ordained as inferior, are in fact the jewels of the Creator.

In researching the feminist movement in the West, I came across a quote by American suffragist

and women's rights activist Alice Stokes Paul (1885-1977). She believed in the importance of women joining together collectively in order to advance the cause of women's equality. In 1923, she described the women's movement in this way:

I always feel that the movement is sort of a mosaic—each one of us puts in a little stone, and then you get a great mosaic at the end.<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by the mosaic image, I recognized that it also reflected what is occurring in Iran. Like my two grandmothers, Iranian women have different perspectives and attitudes, yet they are united in the desire to be free to follow their own path. Every woman is a unique gemstone, and I have faith that together they will change the course of history in their homeland.



# Chapter One

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## VEIL OF HALF-TRUTHS

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*It is difficult to find many bright spots in the lives of Persian women.... Their liberty of movement, of action, and of speech is curtailed.... In the prevailing social condition ... they could not do anything unless [they were] helped by men.... But some of the women maintain, and I agree with them, that their wisest plan is to go ahead and show what they can do. The day will come when the men will ask for their help.<sup>1</sup>*

Clara Colliver Rice, American missionary, 1923

*Here is the inconvenient truth: a flourishing, unwavering feminist movement is an unanticipated consequence of the Islamic Revolution.*

Nina Ansary

*So much of this was unknown to me....*

Reader's comment on Nina Ansary's Facebook page

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The historical narrative of the “woman question” in Iran is an intricate labyrinth. It is not a story that can be accurately recounted by portraying women as “oppressed” or “liberated” during a particular historical period. The audacious history of women in Iran is a maze, with unexpected twists and turns, gains and losses, triumphs and defeats.

When assessing Iranian women's history, the inconvenient truths that arise are striking: The Islamic Revolution that was explicitly antagonistic to the modernizing initiatives of the Pahlavi monarchy gave rise to a flourishing of powerful female voices. At the same time, the spirit of the progressive Pahlavi era influenced popular-class women (religious conservative women of the middle class who constitute the majority of women in Iran), despite the eradication of numerous “liberating” laws and institutions.

The women of Iran have been struggling for centuries to achieve equality; however, there have been periods throughout history when they were relatively free to determine their own lives. In this opening chapter, my intention is to enumerate the key misconceptions or half-truths concerning Persian women—from ancient history to the present—and to briefly explain why these statements fail to represent their authentic narrative.

Let me begin by submitting what I believe to be the *popular* narrative about women's lives in Iran over the last forty years. It goes something like this:



During the Pahlavi Monarchy, women were on an upward trajectory. In a nation on the cusp of modernity, women actively participated. They were given the right to vote and were free to be in public without veils; they wore miniskirts on university campuses. Then came the Islamic Revolution in 1979, with Ayatollah Khomeini at the helm. The burgeoning freedoms for women were extinguished. The veil was required and institutions were segregated by gender. The Islamic Republic had thus achieved its goal of resurrecting the image of the traditional Muslim woman.

The problem with popular narratives of historical events is that despite their seemingly convincing half-truths, the real story is usually much more complicated, nuanced, and less tidy. The dramatic and surprising story of the women's movement in Iran certainly is.

As a historian born in Iran, I was surprised to come upon certain essential facts about women's history in my native country that starkly contradicted my previous assumptions. For example, when I first began to conduct my research on the history of the women's movement in Iran, I was struck by this fact: a majority of traditional, religious women, and even some educated women who had benefitted from changes under the Shah, supported Ayatollah Khomeini and were a contributing factor in the 1979 collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy. I found this piece of information not only counterintuitive but also deeply puzzling and difficult to reconcile, given the fact that the Pahlavi regime was solely responsible for emancipating the Iranian woman.

Everything in my background had led me to adhere to the commonly understood view of women in Iran: they were emancipated under Reza-Shah Pahlavi and his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi; their rights were revoked with the dawn of the Islamic Revolution. But my years of research and study have resulted in the discovery of a number of unanticipated truths that will be explored throughout this book.

The following are popular misconceptions about women in Iran that fail to accurately portray the real, often audacious, story.

### ***Misconception 1: Before the Pahlavi monarchy, Persian women were always suppressed by the religious and political establishment.***

In the story accepted by many, Persian women are depicted as unceasingly under the power of male authority. Because this narrative leaves out the dramatic roles played by female leaders, as well as the fact that women were perceived to be equal to men centuries ago in ancient Persia, many assume that prior to the Pahlavi monarchy, women were confined solely to the domestic sphere. If they figured into public life at all, they were merely in the shadows.

Granted, ancient history is not a subject that everyone has studied in depth. College curricula at even the most prestigious institutions probably don't require courses in Etruscan civilization, the Zhou Dynasty, Vedic India, or ancient Persia unless one is majoring in a particular branch of history. If one is not a history major or a history buff, he or she may never discover how various early civilizations held beliefs and adhered to practices that would be deemed progressive even by twenty-first-century standards.

This can certainly be said of the Zoroastrian culture of ancient Persia. Zoroastrian ideology reflected the equality of men and women to the extent that women often occupied the same professions as men and received equal payment for their work. Female leaders ruled in a number of Persian cities and states in the sixth century BC, and female commanders controlled the armies. The

authority and independence of women were part of the accepted social system.

Similarly, the nomadic cultural traditions of the Turko-Mongol tribes in medieval Persia endowed women with rights and privileges that extended beyond the confines of the home. Thus, in some ways, these thirteenth- and fourteenth-century women had more freedom than women who lived hundreds of years later.

Acknowledging these and other early instances of female empowerment in Persia widens the cultural perspective of women's status in society and serves as inspiration for the current ongoing struggle in Iran. These feminist role models will be explored in [Chapter Two](#).

### **Misconception 2: Iranian women didn't advocate for their freedom until recently.**

There may be a common tendency to believe that meaningful progress occurs only in the present tense, that efforts to improve society are stronger now than in our grandparents' or great-grandparents' era. Again, our sense of historical precedent is not always as sharp as it could be.

Securing women's rights is not a cause born recently; it has been ongoing for hundreds of years. Persian trailblazers include Qurrat al-'Ayn, also known as Tahirah (1817–1852), an activist, intellectual, poet, and advocate of women's equality in Iran, referred to as the “the first suffrage martyr”; and Bibi Khanum Astarabadi (1858–1921), who produced “The Vices of Men” (*Ma-ayeb Rejal*) in 1895, considered to be the first declaration of women's rights in the history of modern Iran.

How many are aware of the professional, political, academic, and artistic contributions made by Iranian women in the early nineteenth century? Is it commonly known that during the era of the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911), a nascent women's movement was emerging in Iran that included women's secret societies? Amidst an austere environment in which the reigning presence of Islam continued to dictate the seclusion and subservience of the female population, a handful of progressive-minded women began to courageously challenge the principles of a patriarchal order, founding schools for girls as well as women's periodicals advocating greater female participation in society.

Acknowledging the historical roots of the women's movement in Iran, highlighted in [Chapter Two](#), serves to strengthen and inspire those currently challenged by oppressive policies.

### **Misconception 3: During the Pahlavi era, all women were liberated.**

The Pahlavi era undoubtedly ushered in progressive change in Iranian society, including policies that brought about modern dress, education for girls, women's increased participation in society, more freedom of the press (including women's magazines), and the enfranchisement of women.

However, the rapid transition toward a westernized way of life was largely unfamiliar to many women, as was a more secular culture after centuries of religious customs. Most of the Pahlavi-era changes affecting women were not embraced or accepted by the majority of females from traditional backgrounds. Their families were vehemently opposed to the new standards, finding them offensive and in conflict with cultural mores. Thus, wives, sisters, and daughters were prohibited from partaking of the new freedoms.

It is the contention of some analysts and historians that the cultural shift during this time was too precipitous and excessively focused on westernizing the society rather than giving more consideration to the cultural context into which the Pahlavi policies were incorporated. In other words, the

changes were considered by some to represent a cultural violation.

The Pahlavi years brought welcome liberation for a small sector of female society, but many others were unable to adapt to such a sudden and dramatic cultural transition. [Chapter Three](#) will explore the underlying conflict that ensued as a result of such noble, visionary, yet drastic changes.

#### **Misconception 4: *During the Khomeini era, women were totally oppressed.***

The partial truth is that women *were* limited or restrained by patriarchal laws and standards. They were forced to wear the veil, prevented from attending elementary and secondary schools with male students because coeducational facilities were converted into same-sex institutions, and subjected to many additional exclusionary policies. The whole truth, however, includes this critical fact: many of the seemingly discriminatory policies, such as the imposition of the veil and eradication of coeducational schools were initially a welcome alternative for the majority of traditional families. Why? Because wearing the veil was what their families had been accustomed to for centuries, and same-sex education meant that girls could comfortably attend classes and thus gain an education. Previously, during the Pahlavi era, most traditional families would not allow their daughters to be in the same classroom with the opposite sex or to leave home without the proper head covering.

[Chapter Four](#) will delve into Khomeini's surprising "blunders" involving policies pertaining to the veil, same-sex schools, and educational materials. The inconvenient truth is that owing to rules that many Western women and men may consider archaic and sexist, girls in Iran became educated and liberated.

#### **Misconception 5: *There is a lack of common ground between secular and religious women in Iran.***

Throughout the world there seems to be a widening divide between religious and nonreligious perspectives, each resorting to labels such as *fanatic* and *infidel*—or worse. There is also a more encouraging phenomenon: progressive religious groups are bridging the gap between religious and nonreligious thinkers by forming coalitions to combat injustice, poverty, and violence against women. Women in Iran are building such bridges due to their common belief in women's rights. While some may not use the word *feminist*, they agree that women deserve equal rights and freedom from oppressive yet sanctioned practices.

Some Westerners may assume that Iranian women who were forced to conform to Islamic practices after the revolution and those who essentially approved of those practices would have absolutely nothing in common. In fact, the truth belies that assumption. While it is indeed counterintuitive, the fact is that religious and secular women in Iran are working together to advocate for women's rights.

The traditional female population in Iran is now highly educated, worldlier and open-minded, more eager for equal opportunities, and more outspoken about being held back by discriminatory practices. While some would label it heresy, many traditional Muslim women are posing a radically earned question: Could a reinterpretation of passages in the Koran that are used to justify the inferior position of women be a means to women's emancipation?

The unanticipated alliance between religious and secular women, and the challenge of "Islamic feminism," will be explored in [Chapter Five](#).

## **Misconception 6: *There is not much of a women's movement in modern-day Iran.***

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In Western countries, one can Google “women’s movement in Iran” and a number of credible articles, websites, organizations, and references appear. One is then able to read about recent developments relevant to the struggle faced by women in Iran, written by journalists, academics, and feminist advocates. But are these materials available to women in Middle Eastern countries or in Iran itself? And even in the West, how extensive is the coverage by mainstream media of women’s advocacy and achievements in Iran?

The reason that some might think there is not much of a women’s movement in Iran is that there may be insufficient coverage of women’s activism there. The fact is, however, that the women’s movement in Iran is thriving. During the repressive administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, which eliminated many reformist organizations and resulted in drastic setbacks for activists, women’s resolve remained intact. It was in 2006 that countless female activists staged the One Million Signatures Campaign, a grassroots movement aimed at ending legalized discrimination against women in Iran. The feminist magazine *Zanan (Women, 1992–2008)*, flourished in the years prior to Ahmadinejad’s tenure (2005-2013), was shut down during his administration, and reinstated in May of 2014.

Countless artists, journalists, academics, filmmakers, bloggers, students, and professionals—women from all walks of life in Iran—are engaging in the struggle for women’s rights. They are up against formidable challenges, but they persist in their efforts.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven pay tribute to the many remarkable women who are at the forefront of a movement to make women’s equality in Iran a reality.

Today, in a country where the Islamic regime continues to debilitate women in almost every aspect of society, Iranian women are forging ahead as part of a vibrant, inclusive movement.

## **LIFTING THE VEIL OF MISUNDERSTANDING**

If this book shatters many of the stereotypical assumptions and the often misunderstood story of women in Iran, it will have succeeded. The objective is to reveal how a full-blown feminist movement developed and grew in the patriarchal climate of post-revolutionary Iran. What were the concealed components that made such a movement possible? What are its historical roots? And who are the women—throughout history and in Iran today—making the resurgence of women’s advocacy a reality?

The story of women in Iran is audacious because throughout history they have struggled against entrenched patriarchal regimes and never relented. They are not relenting now. Against formidable odds and despite prohibitions and arrests, their movement is unexpectedly thriving. Women from across the social, religious, and cultural spectrum are joining together. With resilience and tenacity, they persist.



# Chapter Two

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## CLIPPED WINGS

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*You can kill me as soon as you like, but you cannot stop the emancipation of women.*

Qurrat al-'Ayn, aka Tahirah (1817–1852), first suffrage martyr in Iran

*I will never forgive anyone who visits my grave veiled.*

Sadiqeh Dowlatabadi (1882–1961), early pioneer of women's rights in Iran

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The insistent cry for women's freedom has been heard for centuries in Iran. Twenty-five centuries ago in ancient Persia, women were in some ways more liberated than they are in modern Iran. That is because there is often an ebb and flow to popular movements such as women's liberation: enlightened progress appears inevitable until political, religious, or social forces turn back the tide with just enough fervor.

Three steps forward, four steps back? While that may seem to be the case for women striving for equality in Iran and elsewhere, when the powers that be push against women's objectives, it is possible to employ the knowledge of the past to invigorate the forward stride toward progress.

Knowing that women decades ago—even centuries ago—struggled for what women are still fighting for today can't help but be invigorating and inspiring. Who would want Tahirah's fervent efforts on behalf of women's empowerment to have been in vain?

This chapter will explore women's labyrinthine history from ancient Persia through the early twentieth century. Women's equality soared in ancient Persia, was severely diminished with the Arab invasion in the seventh century, and revived only sporadically via the Turko-Mongol cultures of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. More recent voices of heroic women like Tahirah and Sadiqeh Dowlatabadi validate the truth that even with clipped wings, those who passionately seek freedom never abandon the will to fly.

### MODERN WOMEN IN ANCIENT PERSIA

The First Persian Empire, also known as the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BC), was founded in the sixth century BC by Cyrus the Great. During that time, the Zoroastrian faith was the predominant ideology and reflected a clear belief in the equality of men and women. This belief was evident in the divine “primal creation” of six immortal beings:

Of the six Immortal Beings created by God, three are feminine and three are masculine. The sky, metal, wind, and fire are male, and are never otherwise;

The water, earth, plants, and fish are female, and never otherwise ...

The remaining creatures consist of male and female.<sup>1</sup>

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Simply put, male and female are seen as being equally represented in Earth's creation.

One of the world's oldest religions, Zoroastrianism (also called *Mazdaism*) was the ancient pre-Islamic religion of Persia. Founded by the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra), Zoroastrianism contains both monotheistic and dualistic features. Zoroaster's teachings emphasized an egalitarian creed, not only where men and women were concerned, but also with regard to rich and poor, young and old. Human beings were seen as God's helpers here on Earth. The fundamental basis of the religion focused more on moral ethics and good deeds, and less on ritual worship. Its sacred text, the *Avesta* (*Book of the Law*) was compiled over centuries and was completed during the Sassanid Dynasty (Achaemenid 226–641).

According to Kaveh Farrokhi of the University of British Columbia, women during this era were afforded similar rights and privileges to those of their male counterparts:

The rights of women in Achaemenid Persia were remarkably “modern” by today's standards: Women worked in many “male” professions (e.g., carpentry, masonry, treasury clerks, artisans, winery working), enjoyed payment equity with men, attained high-level management positions supervising male and female teams, owned and controlled property, were eligible for “maternity leave,” and received equitable treatment relative to men in inheritance.<sup>2</sup>

Maternity leave and equal pay for equal work would seem to belong on a twenty-first-century agenda, but perhaps the Zoroastrians were indeed progressive.

Although very little is known about specific women of this era,<sup>3</sup> it is important to acknowledge that centuries ago in ancient and medieval Persia, women were viewed as equal to men. Women were military and political leaders. For example, in 559 BC, Pantea Arteshbod was a high-ranking commander in the Persian military, as was Apranik centuries later in 632 AD. And Queen Pourandokht and Azarmidokht ruled, albeit briefly, over the vast Persian Empire.<sup>4</sup>



**Irdabama (488 BC)**

Empress Pourandokht (also known as Buran) was the first woman to become Queen of the Persian Empire (629–631). Daughter of Khosrow Parviz II, king of the Sassanian Empire (590–628), Pourandokht, who preached egalitarianism, wrote in a letter to her troops: “A monarch, regardless of being queen or king must defend his or her land and treat the people with justice.” Her sister Azarmidokht Sassanid, was the second Empress of Persia (630–631). She ruled over the empire after her cousin, Shapur-i Shahrvaraz, was deposed, as he was not recognized in an official capacity by some factions.<sup>5</sup>



**Pantea Arteshbod (559 BC)**



**Azarmidokht Sassanid (631 AD)**

Pantea Arteshbod (559 BC) was one of the greatest Persian commanders during the reign of Cyrus the Great (559–529 BC). The wife of General Aryasb (Achaemenid's Arteshbod), she played an important role in maintaining law and order in Babylonia after the conquest of the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 547 BC by Cyrus the Great.



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