

Prisoners of Expectations: The Awakened Iranian Woman and Social Reality

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The “awakened” woman in the title of this paper refers to Reza Shah Pahlavi’s (r. 1925–41) vision of the Iranian woman as the symbol of a modernizing country that would take its place in the progressive (and prosperous) world (i.e., Europe). The Pahlavi government’s Women’s Awakening project dates to 1936–41.¹ In 1939, the government established a Society to Guide Public Opinion. Its publications and activities were intended to acquaint the public with the new official views of men’s and women’s role in society and provide opportunities for women to contribute to public life. Young graduates of the modern coeducational upper schools established by the government in the 1920s would become lawyers, teachers, doctors, and technocrats—in other words, the designated contributors to the “new” Iran.

¹Camron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy and Popular Culture, 1865-1946* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 8.

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Professional training became available to women when the University of Tehran opened to females a year after its opening to males in 1935. Practically, women's working outside the home was limited by patriarchal expectations of women's role and a small number of opportunities. Amin cites the number of women teachers in Iran as 3,967 in the first academic year following the Women's Awakening. He adds that very few "would have received much formal training by the state."²

The Persian government's program to modernize Persia and "awaken" the Persian woman figures prominently in this paper as context for the discussion of a first generation of modern women memoirists. But the context of the Persian government's plans for the Persian woman must also include a reading public with ideas of its own. Based on Amin's references to journals, magazines, and newspapers in the period 1865–1946, information about a growing reading public suggests that modernization with Europe as the model was not universally praised. To give one illustration, the journal *Women's World*, in its September 1932 issue, published an article saying that Iranians should not blindly follow Europeans and like a crow learning the ways of the partridge "give up our ancient customs."³ Europe as a model for Persia was not of prime concern in popular discussions about the role of the Persian woman. Female education and unveiling were the key topics in sections devoted to women's issues in the growing number of newspapers and magazines available to the reading public in the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. Discussions about the Persian woman as key to a rejuvenated Persia were not featured in women's magazines such as *Danesh/Education*, first published in 1910. In the March 1911 edition, *Danesh* promoted the ideal public woman as an active partner.⁴

In a context of intellectual ferment, women's role in society was a topic of intense concern. Amin reports on the quarrels that were going on in

²Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 158.

³Heshmat Hadasheyan, "Zan-e Irani Cheh Mitavanad Bokonad?," *Alam-e Nesvan (Women's World)*, no. 5 (1932): 198–201, quote on p. 200. Quoted in Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 169.

⁴Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 268n41.

the press.⁵ This insight into a mixed degree of acceptance of a public role for women following the unveiling law of 1936 is important for the argument of this paper as it provides background for the choices the memoirists made in their lives as well as their revelations in their memoirs. Although the memoirs tell us about the influence of female “role models,” the values promoted by patriarchy continued to be the primary authority for female behavior. It was only in 1941 that “equal rights feminism” entered public discourse.⁶

In the context of a new “civic presence” for women in a new national era introduced by Reza Shah (as well as earlier, by intellectuals using journals, magazines, and newspapers available to a reading public), the image of what Amin terms the “capable” Iranian woman took its place beside other images, to guide female citizens of Iran. *Progressive* and *active* became acceptable adjectives for females, as Amin suggests; but there was yet to be a concept of a woman who was “independent of male guardianship.”⁷ By 1941, the influence of the Women’s Awakening project faded. A male backlash against women working in offices made its appearance.⁸

Proceeding from the preceding background about the place of women in the period following the government’s program to awaken the Persian woman, let us consider the content of the memoirs by Persian women born in the first half of the twentieth century, as a means to enter into women’s reality. Each memoirist makes her own choice about what to reveal. Individual choices enable a composite picture of the first generation of women to let us access the reality of their lives.

What is the picture of women that emerges out of the complexity of government engineering, the hold of time-honored traditional expectations of women’s behavior, and women’s lived experiences? This paper will begin by considering the genre of memoir in its traditional setting. The discussion will then turn to the content of the memoirs.

⁵Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 220–22.

⁶Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 8.

⁷Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 8.

⁸Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 8.

According to Waxler, a memoir as it is generally understood outside the Persian setting is a personal perspective on life.⁹ The discussion of the memoir in Waxler's blog does not fit the reality of the memoir in the Persian environment. As I hope to make evident based on the discussion of the memoirs of four Persian women—Taj al-Saltana (b. 1883 in Iran, d. 1936 in Iran), Sattareh Farman Farmaian (b. 1921 in Iran, d. 2012 in the United States), Najmeh Najafi (b. 1930 in Iran), and Shusha Guppy (b. 1935 in Iran, d. 2008 in the United Kingdom)—the social reality of their context is crucial to their lives. Their memoirs share a historical experience, a particular juncture in the history of Iran that had no precedent in women's history. The ambitions of the authors are tied to the coincidental timing of their birth. Their memoirs have a similar structure, with space devoted to traditionally key components of their lives such as family, education, and community. But the memoirs discussed in this paper have a new component: the personal revelations of the memoirists. Their future is no longer exclusively tied to the traditional expectation of a life devoted to the home and nurturing of family. The expectation of the memoir outside the Persian environment, of revealing an individual experience, does not match exactly the definition of the genre of memoir/autobiography provided by Farzaneh Milani. Social change (initiated by the government in the 1920s–40s) altered the world of the authors. The memoirs in this paper are a phenomenon connected with a time in history. (As such, they have an added poignancy in a century of political upheavals and major social change.)

Milani writes about autobiography (she uses the terms *autobiography* and *memoir* interchangeably) as a genre of literature.¹⁰ Milani does not refer to the women who are highlighted in this paper. As noted, these four women were products of the new social and cultural environment to awaken women, which was not the context for Milani's comments about autobiography/memoir.

⁹Jerry Waxler, *Memoir Revolution*, memorywritersnetwork.com/blog/ (accessed 9 December 2021).

¹⁰Farzaneh Milani, "Disclosing the Self: Autobiography," chap. 9 in *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992).

Milani asserts that “women writers had to transgress feminine proprieties that shut them out of the public domain.”¹¹ She presents male autobiographers as similarly reticent to express personal information. But their hesitation is tied to their status in the community. Milani cites as an example of male hesitation an autobiography titled *An Account of My Life*. The author introduces his work by stating that “An account of my personal life offers nothing worth reading.”¹² Milani suggests that this male memoirist’s hesitation to discuss government and its administrative affairs reflects his post in the administration of the Qajar Dynasty (r. 1785–1925). Milani comments that the memoir can be an outlet for a male to write personally but is more often “historical or sociographical.”¹³ History is seen through the eyes of an author, rather than the author presenting himself. Milani cites male autobiographies that brought shame and anguish to their authors. This leads us to consider the context as a contributing factor in disclosure for female memoirists. If context has a bearing on the disclosure of male authors, that is doubly true for females, given a cultural environment that required female modesty (in both behavior and writing) bordering on silence.

The memoirs discussed in this paper offer a contrast to the hesitancy to reveal personal details described by Milani in “Disclosing the Self,” chapter 9 of her book *Veils and Words*. The most significant ingredient in this change is the government’s vision of a new Iranian woman articulated by the unveiling law of 1936, which not only permitted but actively encouraged women to leave their homes unveiled. The government’s creation of work positions in socially accepted venues allowed women to pursue education (and work) outside the home. Although females had had experience of education outside the home prior to government schools, those schools were private and did not offer a modern education. (The private school curricula were patterned on the values of each school.)

¹¹Milani, *Veils and Words*, 6.

¹²Abdollah Mostowfi, *Sharh-e Zendegani-ye Man (An Account of My Life)* (Tehran: Zavar, 1962). Quoted in Milani, *Veils and Words*, 207.

¹³Milani, *Veils and Words*, 207.

The memoirs discussed here indicate that with new opportunities, as well as family support, and despite family criticism, women made choices that would take them beyond the home setting to serve their community and country. Amin proposes that “The Women’s Awakening [. . .] was about containing and coopting women’s activism [. . .] and promoting women’s progress within a framework of male guardianship overseen by the state.”¹⁴ “Male guardianship [Amin prefers the term *male guardianship* to *patriarchy*¹⁵] underwent a crucial re-definition of male control in the public mind, in the first half of the twentieth century, which indicated new relationships for women outside the home; for example mentor, teacher and classmate joined father and husband. The policies and propaganda of the Women’s Awakening were the catalyst for this change.”¹⁶ With new opportunities, women moved out of their traditional setting to serve their community and country in different venues and roles. It would appear that in addition to expressing their own aspirations, they wished to provide inspiration for the next generation and show that women were capable of duties beyond the home.

We now turn to a discussion of the four women memorists mentioned earlier. The discussion of these women addresses this paper’s introductory comments.

Taj al-Saltana was born into the small, secularized upper class in a society dominated by traditional Perso–Islamic values.¹⁷ Her life is of interest as a self-portrait of a woman who grew up in a time that predated the government’s initiatives for women in the 1920s–40s. Additionally, she stepped over the boundaries of the memoir suggested by Milani. Taj (the editor of the memoir refers to Taj al-Saltana as *Taj*) lived a circumscribed life because of when she was born (1883) as well as her privileged position as the daughter of the ruler of Iran,

¹⁴Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 12.

¹⁵Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 12.

¹⁶Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 12.

¹⁷Abbas Amanat, “Introduction,” in Taj al-Saltana, *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess from the Harem to Modernity, 1884-1914*, 1st ed., ed. Abbas Amanat (Washington, DC: Mage, 1993), 11–102. Reference on p. 11.

Naser al-Din Shah (r. 1848–96). Taj’s memoir gives us a portrait of an intelligent, gifted, progressive female. She was a woman ahead of her time. She had a picture of improvements for both women and government, but the society of her time evidently did not value her views, as suggested by the fact that her memoir was not published until well after she died in 1936. Her father began her education when she was seven years old. He engaged a teacher, a private tutor, and a eunuch. Taj describes her teacher as passably educated. She expresses her regret at not being educated by a good, understanding teacher. She thus “remained deprived of progress in life.”¹⁸ “Today I see clearly that an illiterate human is baser than inanimate matter [. . .] making progress means drawing closer to truth and happiness.”¹⁹ Her proposals for improving Persia suggest that she read widely and was familiar with European culture.

Taj’s memoir is an example of a writing style that is contrary to the portrait of the memoir described by Milani. The introduction to this memoir categorizes it as self-revealing²⁰ and highly unusual, especially for the time in which it was written: “Inspired by the spirit of European romanticism, her individuality comes through effortlessly.”²¹ She stands out for her time for “having crossed the formidable barriers of self-censorship.”²² The editor, Abbas Amanat, a historian (Yale University), suggests on the first page of his introduction that the absence of religious values in her circle allowed for a degree of personal freedom from the patriarchal values accepted by the society of the time. Taj is a sophisticated commentator. Her knowledge of government affairs is impressive, given her context of limited access to the world outside the royal court and to government actions to awaken Persian women. She expresses what she would accomplish if she were able to be a member of the government and participate in politics. She would use the power conferred upon her by a government position to

¹⁸Taj al-Saltana, *Crowning Anguish*, 136.

¹⁹Taj al-Saltana, *Crowning Anguish*, 137.

²⁰Amanat, “Introduction,” 12.

²¹Amanat, “Introduction,” 12.

²²Amanat, “Introduction,” 12.

improve the lives of the people. She would not use her power to ignore their rights. She would not use stolen money to profit herself by buying a position or property and valuables. Rather, she would earn a place and be paid for her hard work and service.²³

Taj is particularly perceptive in her comments on women's traditional place in society, and how ignoring what they can offer reduces the quality of Persian life and Persia's ability to thrive. She proposes that advancement lies in freeing women to lay aside the veil and forsake laziness and to support and cooperate with men.²⁴ The veiling of women "has spawned and spread thousands upon thousands of corrupt and immoral tendencies."²⁵ In her sophisticated view, an educated man should lead his wife out of the home.²⁶ She praises women (and this is prior to their "emancipation") as knowledgeable because they read about other countries and the situation of women in those countries, such as suffragettes in Europe, who are rising to demand their right to be "included in the affairs of Europe."²⁷

The three other memoirists write about their accomplishments in an environment of government-sponsored opportunities for women. However, Taj is able to propose in her memoir a future she did not inhabit. She matured in a time of limited opportunities for women to contribute to society, to her obvious distress. She died at the age of fifty-two, isolated, poor, and in bad health. Yet Taj's father is presented to the reader as a positive presence in her life. He selected a boy her own age rather than an old man for marriage. His assassination had a negative impact on Taj's (and her mother's) privileged position in the court. In a society in which systemic patriarchy inevitably molded the life of a female, no matter the political or social context, the patriarch determined the possibilities of a female's life. This situation did not diminish automatically in the period of government initiatives introduced at the beginning of this discussion. Whether females searched for work

²³Taj al-Saltana, *Crowning Anguish*, 283–84.

²⁴Taj al-Saltana, *Crowning Anguish*, 286.

²⁵Taj al-Saltana, *Crowning Anguish*, 292.

²⁶Taj al-Saltana, *Crowning Anguish*, 292.

²⁷Taj al-Saltana, *Crowning Anguish*, 285.

is open to question. Marriage and motherhood were the principal tasks in a woman's life.²⁸

Sattareh Farman Farmaian avoided the dominance of the family patriarch (her father) at the decisive juncture in her young adult life, when she was making plans to go abroad to further her education.²⁹ Her mother protested but did not forbid her to go, even though she did not want her daughter to leave home. Based on the information about Sattareh's mother provided in the memoir, her mother and other females of her generation, born into a context of limited opportunities and marriage at an early age, were influenced by the changing environment of their daughters. Although each memoir is a personal story set in unique circumstances, the context for the three memoirists featured in the following discussion is a society in transition. Their context is a mixture of opportunities provided by the government's initiatives for women and limitations that represented the will of the patriarch, the male guardian.

Sattareh Farman Farmaian uses her memoir to chart an unusual journey from a royal household of over a thousand persons, including the separate households of her father's wives, to the establishment and direction of the first school of social work in Iran. She established the Tehran School of Social Work with government backing in 1958. It was a private school with a two-year program to train social workers and the first institution for social work education in Iran. Sattareh was its director until the 1979 Revolution.

Her father was sixty when she was born. Sattareh was the fifteenth of his thirty-six children. Her father was a member of the Qajar royal family, a military man in charge of campaigns and diplomacy at a very high level of responsibility. He lost his preeminent position as a Qajar prince with the accession of Reza Shah in 1925. Her mother, a pious, observant woman, was born in the religious city of Qom. She

²⁸Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 159.

²⁹Sattareh Farman Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from Her Father's Harem through the Islamic Revolution*, with Dona Munker (New York: First Anchor Books, 1993).

married at twelve when her husband was fifty and was the third of his eight wives. Her mother's attitude toward Sattareh was influenced by a reliance on traditional norms of female behavior which mandated a modest, restrained, and obedient demeanor. Sattareh's father was a man born to power and privilege. He promoted a modern education for both his daughters and his sons. He wanted them to be prepared for a different future that he had the foresight to realize they would inhabit as adults.

After Sattareh finished her primary education in a girls' school at twelve, her father chose the American Bethel Girls School in the Presbyterian missionary compound, some three miles from the royal home. The culture of the American Girls School encouraged the female students to argue rather than to passively accept what they were taught. This was a contradiction to the norms of family. The culture in her new school, which promoted independence, offered a new template for Sattareh's behavior, one that matched her natural inclinations. Sattareh took as her female model Miss Jane (Elizabeth) Doolittle, who lived successfully without the benefit of a male guardian.³⁰ Sattareh grew aware of another way of life for a woman and that the female culture of the family compound was not universal.

A significant event in the life that fate assigned her at birth was the loss of her father (referred to as *Shazdeh* by Sattareh) in 1939 when Sattareh was about eighteen years old. With his death, she lost her male guardian and the custodian of her fate. She was free to pursue a path of her own choosing: "Long ago I set out into the world with my arms wide-open [. . .] I would, I could never have stayed home in the *andarun* [the quarters reserved for the women inhabitants of a spacious traditional home]. Not if someone had offered me five diamond rings."³¹

The path she chose for herself had a shaky beginning. Prior to the customary Friday gathering of all the children to meet with the head of

³⁰Farman Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia*, 58–59.

³¹Farman Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia*, 304. These are the final words of the memoir, in the epilogue.

the household, Sattareh asked her mother to formally request permission from her father to continue her education in Europe. Her brothers were already attending school there, and Sattareh felt that her education in Persia was backward compared with her brothers' education in Europe. When her mother approached Sattareh's father and asked on behalf of Sattareh in the presence of the entire family for permission to go abroad to study, her father replied immediately and with no hesitation that it would be a waste of money to send his daughter abroad for education: "A woman will be nothing." This reply made Sattareh ashamed. At the same time, it propelled her to pursue her burgeoning interest in helping those in need: "Someday, I vowed, I'll show them all—women are not nothing. If he doesn't marry me off first, I'm going to do something with my life. Just let them watch. One day I'm going to prove that a woman can be somebody, too."³²

While her sisters tended toward the typical path of marriage and motherhood, Sattareh was an individual with plans she made for herself, from the very beginning of her memories of her life. The information she provides about herself leaves the impression of a person who was spirited and bold from early childhood (there are examples of her tomboy ways, playing in the grounds of her home with her young male relatives). Her personality continued to exhibit boldness into her teenage years, despite her mother's criticism and efforts to enforce female behavior. Her choice of a profession and the steps she took to realize her aspirations add to the portrait of Sattareh as a motivated, determined, and fearless woman, ready to take advantage of any opportunity that came her way. Her courage and nerve stood her in good stead during her final years of living in Iran, during a time of grave danger in the first year of the 1979 Revolution. She survived detention by the authorities based on accusations of a few of her male students. She was saved because of counterevidence based on her previous work and kind deeds.³³

Sattareh was the only woman in the family to become a professional working woman. Inhabiting a similar social and cultural context,

³²Farman Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia*, 91.

³³Farman Farmaian, *Daughter of Persia*, 356–68.

her female siblings followed a typical and traditional course of early marriage and motherhood. Most of the young members of her extended family attended college in Europe or America. Her brothers had businesses or were professionals: engineers, architects, economists, and professors. Sattareh's daughter married a graduate student she met during her university studies in the United States. She lived for a time in Iran with her mother and eventually settled in the United States. Sattareh joined her daughter there for a new and productive life following the events of 1979.

Sattareh's memoir suggests that had her father not died at a time when her wish to study abroad was taking shape and she already had secret plans to depart Iran for study in the United States, she would have succumbed to traditional expectations (her protestation at the end of her memoir notwithstanding). She might have found an outlet for her verve, creativity, and intelligence (to name a few elements of her special talent to be productive) in Persia. But would she have been able to establish a school of social work that laid the foundation of a continuing role for social work in the following decades? For Sattareh, the awakening of the Iranian woman was an opportunity that permitted her to display the attributes of the capable woman.

Najmeh Najafi was born in 1930 (the Internet offers no information about a date of death). She was a child when the unveiling law was passed in 1936. She grew up in the context of the government's program to awaken the Persian woman. When the government's awakening program was twelve years old, Najmeh was eighteen. Najmeh's comments on government initiatives tend to focus on how they directly affect peoples' lives rather than on how they supported her work. She refers to the fact that Reza Shah made it illegal to close the bazaars during the month of Ramadan and there were few people out during the daytime. Celebrations occur with "the coming of the crescent moon," and then, people celebrate and feast. Her own comment is that "Reza Shah must be right in demanding that the people should not spend the whole month in inactivity. It seemed to me that people

could draw near to God, still working day by day.”³⁴ She mentions Reza Shah’s law forbidding child marriage: “The girl according to law, must be sixteen.” But she takes care to make clear that “still many girls marry at eleven, twelve, or thirteen.”³⁵ Najmeh’s memoir *Persia Is My Heart* suggests that she applied for government assistance to aid her projects. Thus, she awakened herself, rather than being awakened.

Persia Is My Heart is Najmeh’s first memoir of three. It is an important document for an appreciation of Najmeh as an individual with personal characteristics that were crucial to her journey to a life of public service. Two additional memoirs of Najmeh’s are helpful for including the role of human agency in the discussion of the powerful influences of government and patriarchy to the understanding of her context.³⁶ As suggested throughout this paper, despite the government’s project to awaken women with the objective to extend their participation in the life of the community, their roles as wife and mother continued to be a predominant family preference, motivated by long-held patriarchal values. Najmeh’s journey from a sheltered life in a conservative, pious home into the wider world emerges from her memoirs as self-initiated. Her profession as a social worker appears motivated by a family experience. She devoted her adult life to improving the life of the villagers of Iran. In Sarbandan, her village of choice, she provided the inhabitants with instruction on new methods of cleanliness. She oversaw the construction of a health clinic, a bathhouse, and a school for girls.

In her first memoir, Najmeh expresses disinterest in the “fenced-in world of the home.”³⁷ At the same time, she is critical of the lack of social interaction between young males and females as she was growing up. She credits reading books for widening her knowledge of life.³⁸ She took the steps necessary for a life of her own choosing: a life

³⁴Najmeh Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart: An Autobiography by Najmeh Najafi Told to Helen Hinckley* (New York: Harper, 1953), 72.

³⁵Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart*, 89.

³⁶Najmeh Najafi, *A Wall and Three Willows*, with Helen Hinckley (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); and Najmeh Najafi and Helen Hinckley, *Reveille for a Persian Village* (London: V. Gollancz, 1958).

³⁷Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart*, 215.

³⁸Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart*, 107.

of service, marriage, and motherhood, an untypical combination for her time. Najmeh was essentially the author of her own fate in a context of government objectives and patriarchal limitations. Her early dream to help people never left her.

Najmeh was born into a prominent family. She barely remembered her father since he died while she was still young (she does not reveal her age). She knew that her father was well-educated and had attended schools in Arabia, Egypt, and Europe. He served as an adviser and teacher to Ahmad Shah, the last of the Qajar shahs.³⁹ Although her household continued to be defined by her father's example, there was no longer a male guardian to provide patriarchal conditioning. Nowhere in the memoirs does she make this point. But her father's death undoubtedly affected Najmeh's choices, especially as a young adult. Her mother was an observant Muslim. Najmeh was brought up to be a pious Muslim and continued to be observant throughout her life. The females in her family, particularly the older generation, were religiously observant like her mother, who all her life wore the chador and covered her face in the presence of men outside the family circle. Najmeh was often separated from her mother and shared little of her professional life with her because "she was not in close enough touch with the modern world to counsel me."⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Najmeh sorely missed her mother when she died. Najmeh found it difficult to live without her comforting, supportive, helpful presence.⁴¹ Najmeh's relationship with her mother shares similarities with Sattareh's relationship with hers. Both mothers had little education and were married before they were teenagers. In their later life, love for their daughters prompted them to cross the boundaries of limited experience. Sattareh's mother learned to write letters to correspond with members of the young generation who were continually traveling. Najmeh's mother cared for her daughter's children, despite family disapproval.

³⁹Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart*, 13.

⁴⁰Najafi, *Wall and Three Willows*, 164.

⁴¹Najafi, *Wall and Three Willows*, 164.

After Najmeh finished studying at a design school with top grades in her class, she wanted to travel to learn about the world. She needed money to support this wish. So she set up a business for herself, a high fashion ladies' wear shop that designed and sold handmade clothes to wealthy female patrons. Najmeh hired girls from caves in the mountains behind Tehran and trained them to work in her shop. She tells us that this experience taught her about running a business as well as about human nature.⁴² On a visit to the Tehran bazaar to buy the special textiles she needed for the dresses she designed and sewed, she decided to visit the section of the bazaar reserved for prominent and influential merchants. The textile broker greeted her with indifference, expecting little from a woman. But she managed to impress the merchant with her knowledge of textiles and her business experience. The merchant began to speak to her like an equal. She says that she felt for the first time in her life as if she were a man: "Not a doll, not a drudge, not a woman—but a man."⁴³ It is evident that she was gaining confidence to deal with each new step she created for herself, toward her final choice of a profession.

Najmeh learned about working and its challenges beyond the protection of her home. She took lessons from the books she read, and from her experience in the bazaar with the broker of fine fabrics. Yet she feels "there was much still to learn about my people and their problems [. . .] I wondered where I could learn—learn exactly—how to help my poor people."⁴⁴ A dream took shape of establishing a small factory in a village to employ women in productive work to make simple, comfortable, attractive clothes, particularly for village women to make them feel attractive and proud of themselves. With her plan firmly in her mind, she told her family that she was going to America to study.⁴⁵ Her two older sisters were shocked. Her mother said that one year away from her business life would be good for her.

Najmeh's first experience of village life occurred in her childhood when she accompanied her mother and the family servant to a village to

⁴²Najafi, *Wall and Three Willows*, 187–204.

⁴³Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart*, 209.

⁴⁴Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart*, 216.

⁴⁵Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart*, 226.

celebrate the Prophet's birthday by taking food to poor people. The village was about ten miles away. "I had seen nothing in Tehran to prepare me for the village,"⁴⁶ she says. She finds the village to be "so strange, so ugly." But she finds the people "beautiful" despite their hard work and lack of food. Najmeh reveals her sensitive and unprejudiced nature (in addition to her self-motivation) when she tells us that her realistic acceptance of a situation she could not change pained her.⁴⁷

Najmeh learned about village problems through her work in the villages. She tells us how the people live the lives of their fathers. The link with the past offered security, a sense of belonging; in it was nurtured the seed of their family relationships, which gave them the love without which life would be impossible. She gives an insight into the principles that govern her work, asking "how can we overthrow their way of life because they are unenlightened, their practices unsanitary, their methods obsolete [. . .] Villagers fear three things: hunger, disease, and the government agent."⁴⁸ Change in life habits was not a priority on the agenda of villagers.

Najmeh conquered patriarchal culture through her ability to comprehend how it manifested itself in village life. She began her relationship with the leadership of Sarbandan with sincere words. At first, an important man in the affairs of the village, Mashdi Mokhtar (sometimes, Najmeh refers to him as *Mash'hadī Mokhtar*), took her sincere words as "dangerous flattery."⁴⁹ He soon became one of Najmeh's most steadfast and influential supporters. He was open to her ideas both to better the village and to enhance his own position. Mokhtar's father had willed him a plot of land in the village for a school. Najmeh arranged a meeting with him in front of the village council men. She orchestrated him to change his mind and donate the land for a clinic which the village desperately needed. The village had a school (for boys only). Najmeh convinced Mokhtar to be a philanthropist rather than a landowner. She

⁴⁶Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart*, 41.

⁴⁷Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart*, 43.

⁴⁸Najafi and Hinckley, *Reveille for a Persian Village*, 140.

⁴⁹Najafi and Hinckley, *Reveille for a Persian Village*, 25.

showed her skill with people, and Mokhtar showed his better side to her and to the village. He was a role model for assisting Najmeh to put the village needs first.⁵⁰ Najmeh came to consider herself a resident of the village of Sarbandan as an outcome of her relationships and accomplishments. By the time she left Sarbandan for other work, she was thoroughly attached to the village and its people, cleanliness, and beauty. She left to start a new fight against superstition, uncleanness, and fear. But Sarbandan had become her home: “My heart, my future would lie in this awakened Persian village.”⁵¹ Najmeh’s memoir illustrates Amin’s point about the enduring tradition of male guardianship (i.e., patriarchy) in a wider context of social change.⁵² The lives of the women in Sarbandan changed in areas crucial to their survival, but only with the assistance of Najmeh and Mokhtar.

Najmeh was a wife and mother with a profession. She sought training in social work in the United States, and returned to Iran to improve the life of villagers. She found a way to work with the men who made the decisions for the village. By combining marriage, motherhood, and work, she challenged deeply held patriarchal expectations of female responsibility. Her marriage survived the challenges of work, children, and her husband’s difficulty in accepting his wife’s divided attention. For the first years of her marriage, her mother-in-law expressed her disapproval of Najmeh as a wife by shunning her. Her mother looked after Najmeh’s son and daughter, but Najmeh’s siblings found it difficult to understand her passion to help the unfortunate. Of all the men in Najmeh’s personal life and working life (e.g., the officials she dealt with in her efforts to raise money for her village projects, and the elders of Sarbandan and other villages), the most difficult person for her to deal with was one she had married. Her husband’s displeasure became even more apparent after the birth of their two children, when Najmeh felt even more deeply her need to work, a need that had not left

⁵⁰Najafi and Hinckley, *Reveille for a Persian Village*, 74–75.

⁵¹Najafi and Hinckley, *Reveille for a Persian Village*, 265.

⁵²Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 245.

her. Neither her husband's family nor her own appreciated Najmeh's mixed loyalties to her family and profession.

Her husband ultimately conquered his patriarchal displeasure. Najmeh vowed to bring together the different parts of herself: administrator, organizer, social worker, wife, and mother. Her story ends with the arm of her husband around Najmeh's shoulder in a gesture signifying that an understanding has been reached.⁵³

Najmeh's life and work illustrates the enduring tradition of male guardianship in a context of social, cultural, and political change for females.⁵⁴ As she writes, "When Reza took the veil from the women's faces he should have thought of a way to remove the veil from the minds of men. It is the most difficult veil for women to penetrate."⁵⁵ Najmeh is an example of "The Capable Woman"⁵⁶ whose life illustrates how patriarchy, represented by fathers and husbands, continued to define women's relationships at work and at home. However, as her memoir illustrates effectively, a woman with Najmeh's strength of purpose could maneuver her circumstances to make her aspirations a reality. She left a legacy of improvements in Sarbandan. Young people would live differently than their parents.⁵⁷

In her memoir, Shusha Guppy is a young girl with a dilemma. Should she be guided by the patriarchal expectations of female behavior promoted by her conservative parents? Or should her school and neighbors, who provide examples of a new concept of a female's life, influence her behavior? In Shusha's memoir, her personal inclinations lead her to leave her family and pursue study in Paris. She loved music and was naturally gifted with a lovely singing voice. Her father, influenced by Islamic tradition, frowned upon Guppy singing in public when she reached puberty. She eventually made Europe her home.⁵⁸

⁵³Najafi, *Wall and Three Willows*, 207.

⁵⁴Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 245.

⁵⁵Najafi, *Persia Is My Heart*, 220–21.

⁵⁶Amin, "The Capable Woman," chap. 6 in *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 142.

⁵⁷Najafi, "An End and a Beginning," chap. 17 in *Wall and Three Willows*, 202.

⁵⁸Shusha Guppy, *The Blindfold Horse: Memories of a Persian Childhood* (London: Tauris

The family lived in a house her parents purchased when she was a child. It was close to Tehran University's Faculty of Letters, where her father held the chair of philosophy. It was a Persian-style home but without the separate quarters for men and women that characterized a traditional home. Her maternal grandfather was charged by Reza Shah with preparing a new civil code for the "new Persia." Reza Shah laid the groundwork for a judiciary supervised by a ministry of justice with courts, judges, and lawyers. Shusha's father developed the civil code adopted by the government. Her paternal and maternal grandfathers were schooled in the traditional *madrassa* system. Her father, the son of a *mujtahid* and himself a *mujtahid*, was schooled in the old style, with its emphasis on the traditional syllabus of religiously based subjects. He requested and was allowed to wear his cleric's apparel when he was in the university. Shusha comments that "However progressive and enlightened, my father still wore the traditional priestly costume of cloak-and-turban."⁵⁹

As her memoir amply illustrates, Shusha's experience growing up was a confusion of two different contexts: home and school. Shusha was born in 1935. She matured in the context of the unveiling law of 1936. She was guided by parents who were modern in their willingness to accept change, but traditional in how they raised Shusha and presented themselves to society, especially in their neighborhood. Shusha had competing guidelines for female behavior: one, the patriarchal requirements, and the other, a new concept of the Iranian woman promoted by the awakening. The exposure to both led to Shusha's confusion: a virtual crisis of identity. It is a frank and personal response to an awakening which was motivated by official directives and personal desires.

Shusha attended Scheherazad, a new nursery school and the first and only such Western-style school in Persia. The school celebrated Women's Emancipation Day (i.e., the unveiling law of 1936) with a performance of Little Red Riding Hood. Shusha played the grandmother and was

Parke Paperbacks, 2004).

⁵⁹Guppy, *Blindfold Horse*, 109.

asked to sing a lullaby. She then attended Norooz, one of the many state schools founded by the Ministry of Education. “School became more enjoyable as we started artistic activities,” she says. Her mother attended a performance but did not encourage Shusha to sing and act. No other member of the family ever came to see her perform. After the age of twelve, her family did not allow Shusha to sing in public. She did not want to embarrass her family. But watching while others sang in school productions was painful for her.⁶⁰

Shusha observed and was captivated by the behavior of her neighbor Mrs. Ramy.⁶¹ Mrs. Ramy earned a meager salary working for the government. Yet she proudly walked to work with her head uncovered, wearing a dress that showed her bare arms. Her uncovered face was covered with makeup. Mrs. Ramy was not religiously observant and did not perform the daily prayers or fast during Ramadan. She was an unusual presence in Shusha’s conservative neighborhood. She was married, but she paid no attention to her husband. He had been a courtier in the royal household of the Qajar Dynasty, which preceded Reza Shah. He did not have the skills to transfer to the new professional requirements. He became an alcoholic, and Mrs. Ramy became the sole wage earner. Shusha comments on how rare it was for a woman to work outside the home and appear in public with uncovered arms. Mrs. Ramy gave her daughter, Shireen, freedom to dress and act as she pleased. Shireen wore short dresses, curled her hair, put on lipstick, went to parties for boys and girls, and danced with boys. Shireen befriended Shusha. She became Shusha’s guide for entering a world where males and females socialized together. She gave Shusha advice about love, babies, movie stars, and the world outside Persia. In essence, she gave Shusha the tools she needed for a new life outside the traditional range for females.

Shusha was born into the traditional culture of her parents. The 1930s to 1950s were confusing decades for her social development. Shusha’s parents tried to accommodate their daughter while maintaining their

⁶⁰Guppy, *Blindfold Horse*, 131.

⁶¹Guppy, *Blindfold Horse*, 105–8.

traditional ways. But they were warier of hurting the feelings of those who respected Shusha's father and the family's elevated standing. It was her teenage years at the lycée that pointed her in the direction that her life eventually took. Freed from the bonds of tradition, she writes that "the years at the lycée were the time of awakening—emotional, artistic and political; of passionate friendship—ties I thought would last forever."⁶² She discovered venues in Tehran for music, literature, the cinema, and the theatre, much of these arts new and imported from the West.⁶³ "Every day there was a new book by a Russian, German, French, English or American writer" to "devour."⁶⁴

Shusha developed a life of her own choosing. She left her family to study in Paris. Her eldest brother was in Germany with the foreign service. Cousins and friends of the family were traveling to all parts of the world as students or married couples. Another brother lived in Paris. She settled in Europe, where her talent as a singer and journalist was recognized.

Shusha was born at a point in history that offered females the opportunity to acquire a modern education in a government school, to work in government-sponsored jobs, and to express themselves in their behavior and writing. They were also faced with traditions that held sway over most females and dominated their lives, despite the awakening. Shusha and her friends were eager to forsake "antiquated customs and prohibitions."⁶⁵

Shusha Guppy had personal ambitions based on her talent for music. She did not find a home for herself as a modern Iranian woman. Najmeh Najafi's aspirations were tied to her community, as were Sattareh Farman Farmaian's. Both women had the opportunity to realize their ambitions in the context of the awakened woman. Amin pinpoints his objective in *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman* as the study of "the interplay between notions of male guardianship

⁶²Guppy, *Blindfold Horse*, 146.

⁶³Guppy, *Blindfold Horse*, 146.

⁶⁴Guppy, *Blindfold Horse*, 147.

⁶⁵Guppy, *Blindfold Horse*, 109.

and modern Iranian womanhood in public debate, in state policy and propaganda, in popular culture (or, at least, the culture of educated city dwellers) and in the memories of individuals who experienced this period of history.”⁶⁶ He takes this point further when he refers to the discussion in gender studies about the relative merit of consulting historical and social processes and women’s reported experiences.⁶⁷ The lives of the women in the memoirs discussed in this paper provide an additional access into women’s experiences.

To what extent was the government-sponsored vision of the Iranian woman as the “face” of the new Iran a social reality? To what extent did systemic patriarchy, which was not publicly addressed during the two decades of the government’s project to create the modern Iranian woman, continue to influence if not control the life of a woman? Perhaps the clearest evidence of the changes in female opportunities and expectations in the first half of the twentieth century lies not only in the accomplishments of the memoirists discussed in this article, but in the vastly different opportunities available to the memoirists and their mothers. Less clear is the extent to which change was open to the next generation of females. The youngest females in Sattareh’s extended family were educated, often abroad. But it is not clear whether professions other than marriage were available to them. At the 1965 celebration of the opening in Sarbandan of the factory for women to weave, some of the village girls who were Najmeh’s assistants returned to celebrate with her. One was a social worker and married with children. Another was a supervisor of schools. Another supervised women’s activities and appeared weekly on the radio to describe these activities. There was undoubtedly change at the level of the family. Yet there is no evidence of systemic change which would lead these hard-working, motivated females into positions of leadership. There is no indication of limiting the boundaries of male guardianship, a major component of social reality. Despite Reza Shah’s government’s initiatives

⁶⁶Amin, “The ‘Woman’s Awakening’ Reconsidered,” chap. 1 in *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 6.

⁶⁷Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 258n23.

on behalf of women in the 1930s–40s, the government failed to endorse women by giving them full citizenship through suffrage (Iranian women obtained the vote in 1963). Although Europe was the role model for the government’s awakened woman, the Persian version did not in substance match the European and American images of the modern woman.⁶⁸

The new Persian woman, a phenomenon of the 1930s–40s, although awakened, was not empowered to take the further step of structuring society in a way that spoke to female needs and values. The memoirists discussed here extended the area defined for females by patriarchal tradition, to reveal themselves and their accomplishments to society. However, the memoirs of the women discussed in this paper suggest that in the context of the reality of their time, women were prisoners of society’s expectations of the female role in society and the home. A woman was denied the opportunity to invalidate what did not suit her. She could appeal. She was denied the power to repeal.

⁶⁸Amin, chap. 6 in *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 198–99.