Women’s Status during the Safavid Period

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Abstract: In the early sixteenth century, Iran was united under the rule of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), the greatest dynasty which emerged in Iran during the Islamic period. The roots of the Safavid dynasty can be traced back to the "Safaviyeh", a 14th century Sufi order founded in Ardebil by a Sunni dervish named Sheikh Safi al-Din (1252-1334). The Safavids declared Shia Islam the state religion and used proselytizing and force to convert the large majority of Muslims in Iran to the Shia sect. As Shia Islam was recognized in this period, more social limitations formed against women; for example use of the mask and veil was formalized for them. Women’s status differed depending upon the geographic region, ethnic groups and the Safavid kings. Courtier women had more limitations than others but sometimes due to the weakness of some of the kings, these women came to power and all the country's political affairs were managed by them. In this paper, we have had a historical view on the women's status and their limitations during the Safavid period.

Keywords: Women’s status, Historical view, Powerful women, Prostitutes, Woman-posing boys, Safavid dynasty

1 Introduction

In the early sixteenth century, Iran was united under the rule of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), the greatest dynasty which emerged in Iran during the Islamic period. The roots of the Safavid dynasty can be traced back to the "Safaviyeh", a 14th century Sufi order founded in the city of Ardabil in the Azerbaijan region of Iran by a Sunni dervish named Sheikh Safi al-Din (1252-1334). In that era, Iran had a variety of settled peoples; in addition to Persians it had Kurds, Arabs, Turkmans and Baluchis to name a few. Safavid's power over various tribes was not strong enough to consolidate an absolute supremacy; tribal leaders remained who had been tribal chieftains and considered their tribes to be independent. However, the Safavids laid claim to authority over all that had been Persia. From their base in Ardabil, the Safavids established control over all of Persia and reasserted the Iranian identity of the region, thus becoming the first native dynasty since the Sassanids to establish a unified Iranian state. The first ruler of this dynasty, Shah Ismail established his power about 1501 and he declared Shia Islam the state religion and used proselytizing and force to convert the large majority of Muslims in Iran to the Shia sect. Chronologically, Shah Ismail, Shah Tahmasp I, Shah Abbas I, Shah Safi I, Shah Abbas II, Shah Soleiman, Shah Soltan Hossein, Shah Tahmasp II came in power in this dynasty.

As Shia Islam was recognized in this period, more social limitations formed against women. They had to use mask and veil in public and must attend in public just in case of emergency. Women couldn’t hand household affairs.

Courtier women had more limitations than others but sometimes due to the weakness of some of the kings, these women came to power and all the country's political affairs were managed by them.

In this paper, at first we have a historical view on the women's status and their limitations during the Safavid period and then we will have a view on powerful women, prostitutes and their status, woman-posing boys in the Safavid dynasty; finally, we will look at the observations of the court travelers about different sorts of women in this period.

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2 Historical view on the women’s status and their limitations during the Safavid period

Referring to Ferrier, there were six categories of women in Safavid period: “the married wives of those in the upper reaches of society”; “the large rural region living in a more communal manner in tribal associations up and down the countryside and in permanent agricultural settlements in villages and small towns”; “those engaged in arts and crafts and industrial activities in a more organized manner within towns and cities”; “those who had contracted temporary marriages”; “the slaves of both sexes”; and “the prostitutes”. The ways that these women participated in the life of society differed and their status was different during each Safavid king. We will have a general view on some of these women during different Kings of Safavid.

2.1 Women’s status in Shah Ismail I monarchy

As Ismail was founder of the Safavid dynasty, he passed most of his time in war. Also, since women handed in war at the first of his period, they went and fought like their husbands. Shah Ismail was not afraid of killing women in war; he even killed pregnant women of enemy although he was a religious person. Here, we mention to two orders of Shah Ismail for showing his wickedness against women:

“Shah Ismail ordered to split 300 prostitutes dreadfully in Tabriz.”

"When Shah Ismail heard his mother married with one of the emirs of enemy, he ordered to decapitate his mother in front of him.”

Generally as Shah Ismail was a religious person, women must not be seen in public except in case of emergency.

2.2 Women’s status in Shah Tahmasp I monarchy

Limitations against women had been collected in 70 rules which named ordinance of Shah Tahmasp in this monarchy. Here we mention to three of these rules for declaring women status in this period.

“Women had not to be seen in public except in case of emergency.”

“Women and oldwives were not permitted for walking and horsing in the public passageways”

“The girls more than 12 years old must not be seen in public”

Shah Tahmasp I passed at least 10 years of his monarchy in carousing and philandering. Shah forwent the tax of cabarets and it was the cause of spreading prostitution in his territory. After these years, Shah Tahmasp I repented suddenly and he forbade everyone to carouse and philander.

2.3 Women’s status in Shah Abbas I monarchy

Women had more freedom in Shah Abbas I period. Normal women were being seen in public but courtier and governmental women were being seen in public seldom yet.

Shah Abbas determined especial days of bonfire for women. Shah also chose Wednesdays of each week for women walking in Si-o-se Pol and Chahar Bagh, where they could walk without mask and veil and no man was allowed to attend there in this especial day.

About women’s freedom in Shah Abbas I period, we can refer to ambassador of Spain observations in his journey with Shah to Kashan; he mentioned to women who didn’t use mask and veil in presence of Shah.

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2 R. W. Ferrier was a European traveler. He traveled to Iran 50 years after Shaha Abbas and wrote a book in the title of “a journey to Persia”.

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2.4 Women’s status in Shah Safi I monarchy

During Shah Safi I dynasty women had to cover themselves completely in public. Shah had more than 300 beautiful women in his harem whom slept with one time and then donated them to courtier emirs; these women and their equipments were put in the kajawah of camel and sent to emir’s harem by order of Shah; the emir should superintend this kind of women carefully because this gift showed Shah’s attention to them.

As Shah Safi I liked Armenian girls, same as Shah Abbas I, Armenian people espoused their girls before 12 years old for preventing them to enter the Shah’s Harem but Shah didn’t forbear these girls and sent them to his harem as soon as he interested in them.

Courtier persons and chiefs of clans endued their girls or beautiful girls of their villains for showing their supererogation to Shah, and Shah, after sleeping one time with them, denoted them to courtier emirs or sent them back to their family.

2.5 Women’s status in Shah Abbas II monarchy

Shah Abbas II monarchy was one of the hardest periods for women in Safavid dynasty. Courtier women had utmost limitations in this period, referring to Chardin’s statements. Courtier women refused sleeping with Shah because he ordered to kill the Childs who born by women of his harem for decreasing maintainers of power. If these women could save and send their child out of harem, shah blinded the child as soon as he became aware.

As Shah Abbas II was a bowler and chimerical person, he did lots of inhumane treatments; for example, burning women was usual in his monarchy. Even, Shah had especial ovens for burning people. Here we mention to some of Shah Abbas II’s crimes against courtier women for showing their status in this period:

“As Shah Abbas killed courtier women’s children, courtier women were afraid of sleeping with him; Tavernier mentioned to this point in his book and referred to the day when Shah ordered to burn three women of Harem who just refused sleeping with him.”

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3. The word Haram in Arabic refers to that which is forbidden, and Harim or Harem means the women's section of a home, which is forbidden to males who are not unrelated to the household. This prohibition is maintained in order to protect female kin and family honor. Institutions similar to the harem existed in the pre-Islamic civilizations of the Middle East, in the courts of pre-Islamic Assyria, Persia, and Egypt. It became firmly established under the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad and became associated in the West with the Ottoman, Mamluk, Safavid and Mughal.

4. Jean-Baptiste Chardin, also known as Sir John Chardin, was a French jeweler and traveler whose ten-volume book The Travels of Sir John Chardin is regarded as one of the finest works of early Western scholarship on Persia and the Near East. He traveled to Persia two times and stayed 6 years there each time (1664-1677). He wrote a book entitled “Voyage en Perse et aux Indes Orientales”; in this book there is useful information about Safavid dynasty.

5. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier was a French traveler and pioneer of trade with India, and traveled through Persia and Ottoman. He traveled to Persia several times during Shah Safi, Shah Abbas II and Shah Soleiman periods (1632-1668). He wrote a book about his travels and observations, providing useful information about Safavid dynasty.
“In the observations of Careri, he mentioned that Shah ordered to burn three women who just refused Shah’s drinking invitation.”

These kind of occurrences happened frequently in Shah Abbas II monarchy until Shah repented in last years of his power.

3 Powerful women

As Shia Islam was recognized in this period, more social limitations formed against women; for example use of the mask and veil was formalized for them. Courtier women had not to be seen in public without mask, veil and guard and they had more limitations than others; however, sometimes due to the weakness of some of the kings, these women came to power and all the country’s political affairs were managed by them. In this section, we mention to these women in Safavid dynasty.

Princess Pari Khan Khanum was one of the most powerful women in Safavid dynasty. She was the second oldest and "most beloved daughter" of Shah Tahmasp. She profoundly influenced the shah, courtier persons and chiefs of clans. After Shah Tahmasp died, she helped her brother Ismail Mirza – Tahmasp's oldest son – to come to power, but she was penitent after a couple of months due to Ismail Mirza's abnormal behavior and finally killed him and decided to help Mohammad Mirza Khodabandeh to come to power, but this time Mahd-i Ulya – Mohammad Mirza Khodabandeh’s wife – influenced her husband to kill Pari Khan Khanum and hang her head in Qazvin gate.

Mahd-i Ulya was the other powerful woman in this dynasty who came to power due to the weakness of Mohammad Mirza Khodabandeh and managed all the country's political affairs. Governmental chiefs protested against her as she began to inordinate interference. She opposed with all clans chiefs and finally a community of dissenters killed Mahd-i Ulya and her mother in Harem and plundered their chattels.

Zeinab Beigum – Shah Abbas's unmarried aunt – was one of the most powerful women in Shah Abbas I monarchy. She was managing Harem of Shah Abbas and Shah was consulting with her in the most important political affairs. Zeinab Beigum’s influence decreased in the middle of Shah Abbas monarchy insomuch as Shah banished her to Qazvin from Isfahan, but a few years later Shah returned her to Isfahan and she managed Harem of Shah Abbas again and lived in Isfahan with respect till Shah Abbas was in power. Shah Safi came to power after Shah Abbas’s death; he killed all Shah Abbass’s maintainers and ousted Zeinab Beigum from Royal Harem.

Dalale Qezi was one of the most important woman jesters in Shah Abbas monarchy. She was very witty and beaming. She was accompanying Shah in his journeys and was not using Hijab, veil and mask unlike other women of this period. All the courtiers and chiefs had to revere her, because Shah liked her too much and was consulting with her in some political affairs.

4 Woman-posing boys in the Safavid dynasty

Women-posing boys were those boys who made up and dressed like women and proffered themselves to men. As Chardin mentioned in his book, women-posing boys were present in the teahouses of Tabriz and Yerevan. Referring to his observation, one day Shah Abbas II demanded one of these boys for passing time with him. The boy was so angry after king’s molestation and attacked to his boss and Shah Abbas II ordered to kill that boy, while Shah Abbas I would have ordered to kill teahouse man if this had occurred in his monarchy.

In “Politics and Economics in the Safavid Era” written by Mohammad Ebrahim Bastani Parizi, a chapter focuses on the degeneration in the Safavid dynasty. He mentions that servants of teahouses were Georgian boys.

6. Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri (1651–1725) was a seventeenth century Italian adventurer and traveler. He started his travels in 1693 and after finishing his travels in 1698, he published six books about his observations and events, of which the second volume belongs to his observations in Persia.

7. Mohammad Ebrahim Bastani Parizi is an Iranian historian and author of non-fiction books. His numerous books (over 40) are mostly popular reads on topics such as the history of Iran and the history of his hometown Kerman.
who were 10-16 years old. They were dressing like prostitutes and their hair was long as the girls. They had to
dance and perform passion stories to persuade customers of teahouses; the customers could choose any of these
boys for taking and passing time with them. The teahouse with the most beautiful and attractive boys had more
customers.

Tavernier mentioned to the other anecdote about these boys in Saroutghi’s territory – ruler of Guilan – in his
book, which we hint it here:

Saroutghi had a beautiful slave boy that molested him. The slave went to Isfahan – Safavid capital in Shah
Abbas I monarchy – for visiting Shah and telling the truth. Shah gave him the rule of Guilan after hearing his
statements and ordered to send Saroutghi’s head as soon as he will arrive to Guilan. As Saroutghi guessed why
the slave went to Isfahan, decided to cut penis of his own and went to visit Shah Abbas I. Shah forgave him
when saw that he punished himself in this manner and gave the power to him again. In Shah Safi period,
Saroutghi became chancellor and as Chardin mentioned in his book, Saroutghi wore a long brogan for storing
his urine in it and finally died by order of Shah Abbas II.

5 The observations of the court travelers about different sorts of women in this period
As we mentioned before, depending upon the geographic region, ethnic groups and the Safavid kings, the
limitations against women were different. Careri has mentioned to Armenian women in his book and explained
that they were covering their hair with a white flaxy kerchief and fastening it under their mentum. They were
tressing piece of their hair and putting it in a small velure bagging and loosing it in their shoulder; also they
were using different kinds of jewels.

Adam Olearius8 has written about Safavid women in his book. He mentioned that Iranian women were never
seen in public without mask and veil, they were using a white veil covering all their body and there was only a
split in front of their eyes from which they could be able to see.

Tavernier also mentioned to Safavid women’s social status and their life in his book. He declared that nobody
could see Iranian women except their husband. The middle and low category women of society just were being
seen when they wanted to take shower in the public baths. They were covering all of their body with long veil
and they just could locate their way by the split in front of their eyes. Women couldn’t hand household affairs
and their life was wasting with smoking and servants’ massages. Women had no friend except females and
eunuchs. When the courtier women wanted to go out of home, eunuchs had to get rid of men in their
passageways by using cudgel and they had to kill any man who was remained in courtier women’s way even
though he had felt in asleep. Here, we mention to two occurrences which show dangers of closing to courtier
women in Safavid dynasty:

“In one of the Shah Abbas II trips to countryside, a servant of Shah was sleeping in pavilion. When one of
Shah’s women came in and saw the servant started shouting and eunuchs killed him as soon as arrived there.”
The other occurrence happened in Shah Safi’s monarchy – Shah Abbas II’s father:

“When Shah Safi went to countryside with his women, an aggrieved villain decided to meet Shah in
countryside for telling realities but Shah shot as soon as saw that he was closing to women’s camp.

8 Adam Olearius was a German scholar, mathematician, geographer and librarian. He became secretary to the ambassador
sent by Frederick III - Duke of Holstein-Gottorp – to the Shah Safi court in the Safavid dynasty, and published two books
about the events and observations during his travels.
6 Conclusion

Declaration of Shia Islam as the state religion of Persia was cause of most women’s social limitations in Safavid dynasty. They did not have legal rights, individual freedom, personal access to wealth and ownership. The quality of life for women wholly depended upon the disposition of their husbands. Women were wasting their life by smoking, eating, sleeping and child birthing and it was also true in the case of courtier women. Women had to cover all of their body by veil in public and strangers must not see them. Women just were able to participate in feminine’s banquet and family party and had not to be present in men’s committees. Their entertainments were just talking, eating, laughing and sometimes dancing and singing lonely with no man and they had no friend except females and eunuchs. Courtier women had the same life; they just could pass their times with embellishing, showering, dancing, singing, playing, storytelling. Although they had more limitations than others, sometimes due to the weakness of some of the kings, these women came to power and all the country's political affairs were managed by them. Their power depended upon their talent and skill to influence the men.

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