

## 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*<sup>2</sup>, 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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<sup>2</sup> . 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”.



**Fig.1:** Safavid women without mask and veil in *Shah Abbas I* period

#### 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<sup>3</sup> 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*<sup>4</sup> 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*<sup>5</sup> 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.”

<sup>3</sup> . 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*.

<sup>4</sup> . *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.

<sup>5</sup> . *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<sup>6</sup>, 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 Abbas*'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*<sup>7</sup>, a chapter focuses on the degeneration in the *Safavid* dynasty. He mentions that servants of teahouses were Georgian boys

<sup>6</sup> . *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*.

<sup>7</sup> . *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 the other anecdote about these boys in *Saroutghi*'s territory – ruler of *Guilan* – in his book, which we hint it here:

*Saroughti* 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 Olearius*<sup>8</sup> 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.

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<sup>8</sup>. *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.



**Fig.2:** A woman with veil covering her body and can see with the split in front of her eyes

## 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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