

Prurience in Persia:

The Lascivious World of Qajar Iran



Luxúria Persa: O mundo lascivo da dinastia Qajar do Irã

by Joobin Bekhrad

Desde tempos imemoriais, minha amada terra natal é conhecida, em diversas iterações, como “Irã”. Isso se traduz literalmente como “a terra dos Arianos”. Mas aqui, arianos não são um grupo de doidos de extrema direita inclinados à destruição, ao invés disso, os antigos povos iranianos e do norte da Índia, exclusivamente (sinto muito, Adolf). Estas tribos – meus ancestrais – se denominavam *arya*, o que significa “nobre”. Enquanto alguns deles, como o ilustre profeta Zaratustra e Ciro, o Grande, certamente eram nobres, o termo não é exatamente a primeira coisa que vem à mente quando pensamos em outras pessoas. Já disse, ad nauseam, e sendo assim, vale repetir novamente: nós, iranianos, somos bem loucos. Nós definimos o ethos de sexo, drogas e rock and roll muito antes de Ian Dury criar este termo. Moderação, em geral, não existe em nosso léxico; como foi rapidamente notado por viajantes europeus entre o século XVII e o começo do século XX, iranianos – desde que possam – amam beber excessivamente, ficar completamente chapados, se refastelar em luxo e, é claro, trepar muito. Como uma estadia em Teerã (com alguma privacidade, é claro) mostrará, pouco mudou, e é possível que nada tenha mudado. Caso a frondosa capital iraniana não esteja no seu itinerário, você pode dar uma volta pelos bulevares plásticos-fantásticos de Los Angeles, lar da maior comunidade iraniana fora do país (carinhosamente apelidados de Teerãnges). Eu estou fazendo certa generalização, é claro, mas dá para entender onde eu quero chegar. Bem, o que dizer? Para alguns, quanto mais quente, melhor.

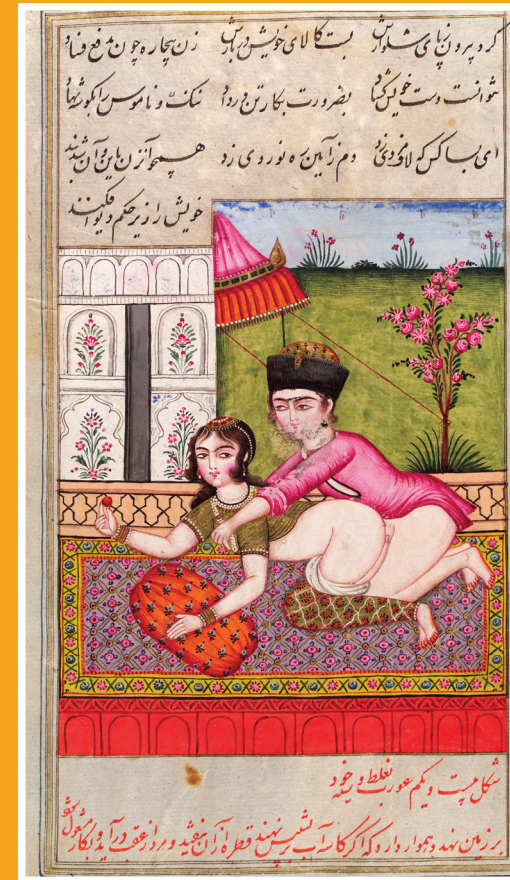
Since time immemorial, my beloved homeland has been known, in various iterations, as ‘Iran’. This literally translates to ‘Land of the Aryans’, the Aryans being not a group of right-wing nutters bent on destruction, but rather, the ancient Iranian and northern Indian peoples exclusively (sorry, Adolf). These tribespeople — my ancestors — knew themselves as *arya*, meaning ‘noble’. While some of them, like the illustrious prophet Zaratustra and Cyrus the Great, certainly were noble, the term isn’t exactly the first to come to mind (to put things lightly) when it comes to others. I’ve said it ad nauseam, and, as such, I might as well say it again: we Iranians are a wild bunch. We defined the sex, drugs, and rock and roll ethos long before Ian Dury ever coined the term. Moderation, generally speaking, has no place in our lexicon; as European travellers between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries were quick to note, Iranians — so far as they are able to — love to drink to excess, get stoned out of their gourd, wallow in luxury, and, of course, fuck around. As a sojourn in Tehran (behind closed doors, of course) will show, little, if anything, has changed. Should the leafy Iranian capital not happen to be on your itinerary, though, you can always go for a cruise on the plastic-fantastic boulevards of Los Angeles, home to the largest Iranian community outside the country (affectionately known as ‘Teherangels’). I’m generalising to a degree, of course, but you get my drift. What can I say? Some like it hot.

Esta pequena história não diz respeito aos príncipes persas e as louras fatais da Rodeo Drive, mas a um grupo que foi a encarnação viva de tudo que é devasso e profano: os Qajar (reinado que durou de 1785 - 1925). Quando não estavam ocupados sugando o sangue dos meus compatriotas e literalmente vendendo porções do Irã para potências estrangeiras, todo mundo estava comendo todo mundo. Quanto as “orgias” e “cortesãs” frequentemente citados nos diários de viagens já mencionados, temos apenas escassos relatos - talvez devido ao decoro e o respeito a propriedade dos europeus em questão. Felizmente, entretanto, os artistas da época estavam lá para ilustrar, em vívidos detalhes, as obscenas cruzadas eróticas do que foi, de outra forma, o período mais negro e patético da história recente do Irã. Levando isto em consideração, eu talvez esteja sendo muito crítico destes demônios cheios de tesão; afinal, quando você está cercado de morte e decadência, venalidade, corrupção e decrepitude moral, o que se pode fazer além de abrir uma garrafa de Shiraz e tirar as calças? Omar Khayyaman provavelmente concordaria, se este bom vivant par excellence ainda estivesse entre nós.

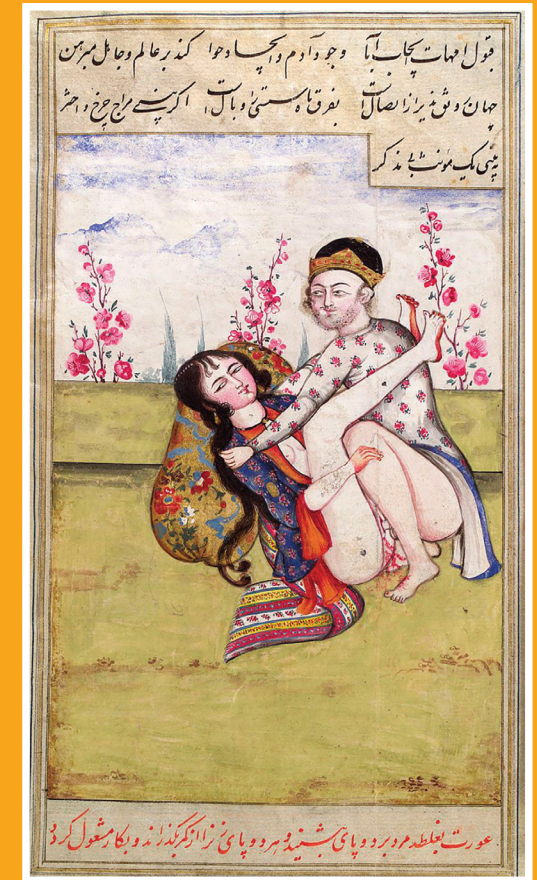
Porém, os artistas da dinastia Qajar não foram os primeiros a darem asas a sua imaginação-zinha maliciosa. Antes, na ‘idade de ouro’ dos Safavids (que reinaram de 1501 - 1736), como resultado das sensibilidades predominantes e o intercâmbio cultural com a Europa, os temas e ideias eróticos se esgueiraram até as obras dos artistas da corte. As emblemáticas miniaturas de Reza Abbasi são um exemplo. Uma das mais conhecidas, que mostra um casal de jo-

This little story concerns not the Persian princes and blonde bombshells of Rodeo Drive, but rather, a lot that was the living embodiment of all that was debauched and unholy: the Qajars (r. 1785 - 1925). When they weren't sucking the blood of my countrymen dry and literally selling Iran piecemeal to foreign powers, there was a whole lot of shagging going on. Where the ‘orgies’ and ‘strumpets’ often remarked upon in the aforementioned travelogues are concerned, we have — perhaps owing to the esteem for propriety and decorum held by the Europeans in question — only scant accounts. Thankfully, however, the artists of the age were around to illustrate, in vivid detail, the salacious sexcapes of what was otherwise the darkest and most pathetic period in Iran's recent history. Taking this into consideration, I'm possibly being too judgmental of these shag-fiends; after all, when all around you is death and decay, venality and corruption, and moral decrepitude, what else can you do but crack open a bottle of Shiraz and pull your slacks down? Omar Khayyaman would likely agree, were that bon vivant par excellence around today.

The artists of the Qajar era weren't the first to let their naughty little imaginations run wild, however. Earlier, in the ‘golden age’ of the Safavids (r. 1501 - 1736), as a result of prevailing sensibilities and cultural exchanges with Europe, erotic themes and ideas found their way into the oeuvres of court artists. Take the iconic Persian miniatures of Reza Abbasi, for instance. One of his most well-known, a young couple embracing, their hands slipping into each other's robes, leaves just the



vens se abraçando, com suas mãos deslizando para dentro de seus roupões, deixa suficiente espaço para a imaginação (não é como se fossem encerrar o assunto depois de uns amassos, não é?). Também temos, é claro, os seus nus reclinados e cenas de jovens bonitas que estão loucas para suas vestes diáfanas sejam arrancadas. Por outro lado, temos os afrescos do palácio de Chehel Sotoon (literalmente ‘Quarenta Colunas’) em Isfahan, muitos dos quais foram cobertos com reboco pelo diabólico príncipe Zell ol Soltan dos Qajar, em uma tentativa tosca de apagar vestígios dos Safavids. Debaxo do reboco (que foi, felizmente, removido posteriormente, após Reza Xá



right amount to the imagination (it's not like they're going to call it a day after a bit of touchy and feely, is it?). There are also, of course, his reclining nudes and scenes of pretty young things itching to have their diaphanous blouses torn asunder. On the other hand are the frescoes of the Chehel Sotoon (lit. ‘Forty Columns’) palace in Esfahan, many of which were covered in plaster by the diabolical Qajar prince Zell ol Soltan, in a philistine attempt to erase traces of the Safavids. Underneath the plaster (which was, fortunately, later removed, after Reza Shah Pahlavi kicked the pendulous arse of the last Qajar monarch) can be seen topless Iranian belles getting



Pahlavi ter dado um chute na bunda suspensa do último monarca Qajar) podemos ver belezas iranianas de peitos nus muito amigáveis aos portugueses, a princesa armênia Shirin se banhando nua frente ao lendário imperador Cosroes, e dançarinas esculturais com sorrisos pudicos se contorcendo em festins organizados pelo Xá Ismail e Xá Abbas, o Grande (este que tinha uma forte queda pelas cortesãs, de acordo com Pietro Della Valle). Nada mal para uma dinastia que declarou o islamismo Xiita a religião oficial do Irã, né?

Dando prosseguimento ao legado artístico e as inovações dos artistas da corte Safavid, os da dinastia Qajar levaram as representações de cenas



friendly with the Portuguese, the Armenian princess Shirin bathing in the nude before the storied Persian emperor Khosrow, and shapely dancers with coy smiles writhing about at feasts held by Shah Ismail and Shah Abbas the Great (the one who liked his strumpets, according to Pietro Della Valle). Not bad for a dynasty that declared Shi'a Islam the official state religion of Iran, eh?

Building upon the artistic legacy and innovations of the Safavid court artists, those of the Qajar era took the depiction of such lusty scenes to new heights (not to mention their appendages). If the Persian princess Shahrzad — or, 'Scheherazade', as she is known in the

luxuriosas a novas alturas (sem mencionar seus apêndices). Se a princesa persa Shahrzad — ou Xerazade, como é conhecida no Ocidente — narrou mil e um contos para apaziguar o Príncipe Shahryar (Shariar), os artistas do reinado Qajar aparentemente representaram tantas cenas apimentadas quanto ela, se não foram mais. Pouco importava quais eram as suas preferências sexuais; havia algo para saciar cada capricho e cada desejo. Sexo hétero, pederastia, bestialidade, coito inter-racial — tudo que você precisava fazer era escolher algo deste verdadeiro bufê de indecência, relaxar, e gozar. Os Qajar eram um bando de filhos da mãe degradados, e qualquer ínfima parte de prudência ou vergonha foi lançada pela janela (provavelmente junto com suas cuecas). Em uma pintura do eminente artista da corte Abolhassan Ghaffari (também conhecido como 'Sani ol Molk'), uma revoada de criadas olha horrorizada enquanto um nobre e sua garota se agarram com gosto. Em outra, uma beldade pode ser vista gozando de todos os prazeres que um cachorro selvagem pode oferecer e, em outra parte, em uma miniatura em particular, uma mulher cavalga o falo de um amante indolente, com a ajuda de um balanço que é puxado para cima e para baixo por um companheiro leal.

Mas o erótico não era celebrado apenas em manuscritos e pinturas. Cenas libidinosas podiam ser vistas em objetos mundanos, como os ghalyans (os cachimbos d'água originais), caixas de laca e espelhos. A erótica tão pouco estava limitada às esferas dos pintores e ilustradores, como as fotografias de haréns de Antoin Sevruguin, entre outros, podem demonstrar. Em uma das imagens de Sevruguin, por exemplo,

West — had spun a thousand and one tales to mollify Prince Shahryar, the artists of the Qajar era seemingly limned just as many, if not more, saucy scenes. It mattered little what your sexual preferences were; there was always something to satiate your every whim and desire. Straight sex, pederasty, bestiality, interracial coitus — all you had to do was take your pick from this veritable smorgasbord of smut to get your rocks off. The Qajars being rather debased sons-of-guns, any modicum of prudence or shame they might have had was tossed to the wind (most likely along with their underpants). In one painting by the eminent court artist Abolhassan Ghaffari (a.k.a. 'Sani ol Molk'), a covey of maidservants looks on in horror as a nobleman and his girl get down and dirty. In another, a beauty can be seen enjoying all the pleasures a wild dog has to offer, and, elsewhere, in one peculiar miniature, a woman rides on the phallus of a supine lover, by way of a swing pulled up and down by a trusty companion.

It wasn't only in manuscripts and paintings that the erotic was celebrated, though. Such raunchy scenes could also be seen on everyday objects, such as ghalyans (the original water-pipes), lacquer boxes, and mirrors. Nor was erotica limited to the domain of painters and illustrators, as evidenced by the harem photographs of Antoin Sevruguin and others. In one of Sevruguin's images, for instance, a fully nude prostitute (well, I suppose she is wearing a bangle) is seen reclining on a jumble of Persian textiles, while in a slightly more ... discreet photograph, one lies in a suggestive pose, smirking naughtily with her stomach and

سنان بست طلب با چاکانه از آن کج که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 زین آمدن شاه عاقلک چو غنمش سرگین ان کوی در آخر ترک لایوسکی کرد
 شد خرق دریا با جوی برون که بجای جوی حشمت

شکل پنجم مرد و زن
 وز نر بالای خود زود و در زود که نشاند و کجا در جهان که در اندامش کوه

سر کوه را در حضور بستند بجل زوی که در حشمت آلی در و طالع است سی
 مرد عارف بدوستی استی چون صورتی نمی غیر و این عاشق است منی که
 حسن منی جوادان با عشق آن معذور آریا عارف عاشق آن چاکانه
 صورت محل تصویر

شکل ششم مرد و زن
 ماند وزن را از روی غلطی در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

شد جز بر نیاندی بر نیانی سیده در آن میان با بی چکد آب کل بر میگویند
 شکله که در مغز او دم صدف در شاخ جهان بختی بچاک آب و اش سخته
 ز کس میری آن است است نسبت مان که بر میگویند و شمار زوی که در کعبه
 بر و آید با تا سوختند

شکل هفتم مرد و زن
 مرد و زن در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

ماتی در فراق ایستاد بعد عمری که چو آن ایستاد کرد جایش فراموشند
 عشق زوی بوی نهاد آغا که پیشش نشون آید روی بر خاک پسلیک
 کاه بر روی او کشیدیم کاه بر پای ایضا چشم که بدوست در کعبه
 که زلبهای است شوخوری

شکل هشتم مرد و زن
 مرد و زن در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

و مرا از جادو بود و در آن است بکوشه خود را رسانیدش ما درین پل و در
 دوران آمده و وفغان داشت که همچنان دست زوی بدار که بر کعبه
 اورا بجز با بجزه بر دود در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 از برم کند و در برم آورد و در هم دست در دل فخری میداد دست در کعبه
 او در او دم کاه از بجای برخواست

شکل نهم مرد و زن
 مرد و زن در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

چنان فرود بوسید چو بجز منهای کل خوار باشد بهار تازه چون کن در حاک
 سر و در کنار یک جهان بخل روی زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 زحمتش چشم بد در خواب چو دیده نقش او در آب لب و دندان زود که
 لبش زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

شکل دهم مرد و زن
 مرد و زن در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

دو دلبر مرد و در خواب یکا مبر که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 آن زن که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 دل ایشان فراموشم یار که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 زحمتش چشم بد در خواب چو دیده نقش او در آب لب و دندان زود که

شکل یازدهم مرد و زن
 مرد و زن در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

نموده با وجود آنکه در پادشاهت این چهره تعاقبت نمود و در هر جای
 آن زن که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 دل ایشان فراموشم یار که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 زحمتش چشم بد در خواب چو دیده نقش او در آب لب و دندان زود که

شکل بیستم مرد و زن
 مرد و زن در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

بموشک عشق کجا مرا چو داری در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 که در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 مصو تا در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 که در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

شکل بیست و یکم مرد و زن
 مرد و زن در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

بعل غنچه چو بکوی که ره باغ نمان از سوزن سپهر بر آمد چشم ز زود که
 که در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 بر آمد چشم ز زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت
 که در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

شکل بیست و دوم مرد و زن
 مرد و زن در زود که در کعبه کس کام زود و عصبیت

uma prostituta completamente nua (bem, devo admitir que ela está vestindo uma pulseira) é vista se reclinando contra um emaranhado de produtos têxteis persas, enquanto em uma fotografia um pouco mais...discreta, uma se deita em uma pose sugestiva, sorrindo atrevidamente com sua barriga e suas pernas esbeltas a mostra. Poderíamos dizer que a flor em sua mão é, bem, irônica, considerando que essa moça já deu suas voltinhas – e depois deu mais algumas.

Nem é preciso dizer, tendo em vista todos estes assuntos excitantes, que nem sempre fizemos jus a nossa suposta “nobreza”; mas, com prazeres tão eróticos ainda prontos para serem colhidos no jardim do pecado que foi o Irã dos Qajar, quem quer ser nobre? Se o fogo do inferno é o que preocupa alguns de meus compatriotas mais pudicos, eu sugiro que se inspirem nas palavras de Khayyam: Tudo que disseram não era nada além de ar quente, Oh, Saghi! Além do mais, sempre teremos nossos profetas sagrados, imperadores temíveis e dervixes poetas para acobertar nossa picardia e nossas indiscrições. O que estão esperando, então? A terra das rosas e do rouxinol – e dos voluptuosos – chama.

An award-winning writer, Joobin Bekhrad (BBA, MSc.) is the founder and Editor of REORIENT and the Canadian Desk Editor of ArtAsiaPacific. He has also contributed to a host of other notable publications, such as Columbia University's Columbia Journal (where he served as the Guest Editor in late 2016), The New York Times, The Economist, The Financial Times, The Guardian, The Independent, Forbes, and the BBC, been interviewed by ones like Newsweek, Monocle, PRI, and the CBC, and seen his articles translated into a wide variety of languages. In 2015, Joobin was granted an International Award for Art Criticism (IAAC) by London's Royal College of Art. In addition to his many articles, he is also the author of a translation of Omar Khayyam's Robaiyat from Persian into English, a novella (Coming Down Again), a book of essays and stories (With My Head in the Clouds and Stars in My Eyes), and a volume of poetry (Lovers of Light).

slender legs exposed. The flower in her hand is, you might say, ironic, considering that this lass has been around — and then some.

It goes without saying, in light of all this titillating talk, that we haven't always lived up to our presupposed 'nobility'; but, with such erotic delights still ripe for the picking from the garden of sin that was Qajar Iran, who wants to be noble? If it's hellfire some of my more prudish compatriots are worried about, I'd suggest they take their cues from Khayyam: All that they've said is but hot air, O Saghi! Besides, we'll always have our hallowed prophets, redoubtable emperors, and dervish poets to cover up for our naughtiness and indiscretion. What is anyone waiting for, then? The land of roses and nightingales — and voluptuaries — beckons.

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