

Abnousse Shalmani

Khomeini, Sade and Me

Translated from the French
by Charlotte Coombe

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Phone: +31 (0)76 523 3533. Email: info@worldeditions.org.

Tehran, 1983

When I was a little girl, I felt a strong desire to get naked in the school playground. It wasn't because of the intense heat: it was an act of provocation. The same kind of provocation that made me play leapfrog in the school mosque. It was physical.

I don't want to wear that thing. It's so ugly! No way! And with the logic that is so unique to children: okay then, but just you wait and see. I'll get my revenge! I will wear that tight, suffocating grey headscarf, but you'll see. And lots of them did see. My arse.

I don't want to wear the veil, but I have to put it on to go to school, and sometimes when I go out in the street, go shopping or see my friends. I do it. But as soon as the bell rings at the end of the day, I take it off. Not just the grey hijab, but also the regulation dress and the equally regulation and equally grey trousers. I hide in the stairwell or take refuge in the toilets, just before my classmates make their way out of the school gates. I take it all off, or sometimes I keep my

knickers on, depending on how the mood takes me. Then I ball everything up and stuff it in my schoolbag, and off I go, sprinting at full pelt toward the main gate, dodging the Crows who spring into action at the sight of my naked bottom. I score points: half a point for one Crow dodged, one point for two Crows dodged, three points if a Crow trips up over the hem of her chador*, and so on.

I win every time: they don't know how to run in a chador. I end up in the car that is waiting for me with the driver—who is also the gardener—of the big house in Tehran where my great-aunt and uncle live along with my two younger aunts. My parents live just down the road in an apartment—my father hung on to his independence—but we spend most of our time up at the big house. I put my knickers and white T-shirt back on; there's no point being naked in the car. The driver-gardener will tell on me, I know it. The last time he did that, I chased him round the garden with the watering hose. There is a mutual dislike between us; he hates my cats that live in the garden and ruin all his handiwork; and I hate the fact that he's the only one who doesn't laugh at my crazy naked dash. If he complains—again—to my great-aunt, I swear I'll pull up all the tulips he has just planted.

Why did I find such pleasure in exposing myself time and time again? Above all, it was fun. It is always amusing for a six-year-old child to make adults run around. Those adults

* A large cloth worn as a combination head covering, veil, and shawl usually by Muslim women especially in Iran.

in particular, more so than others. Bundled up in their black chadors, the Crow-women chased and hurled themselves at me. It's surprising, the hysteria that a naked child provokes. I had fun, I amused my classmates, I enraged the Crows, and I worried my family. I had become the centre of attention for lots of people; I had become a hero among my schoolmates, even the older ones. And nobody that mattered, not my father, nor my mother, not my aunts nor my uncle had ever punished me for it.

I'm sure they thought I might be slightly unhinged, because each time I was suspended from school I did the same thing again, reducing my mother and the driver-gardener to nervous wrecks. But after witnessing one of my ridiculous chases, my family's laughter outweighed their concerns about my mental health. As the Crow-women carried on with their duties, painting my city and my childhood black, I carried on getting naked.

I wasn't the only one playing that game. Nudity was on everybody's minds, just *before* and *after* the Revolution of the mullahs. To this day I can still hear the questions, the uncertainty and tension over a skirt that revealed too much ankle, or a blouse that was too low-cut for dinner at the So-and-sos'. A full-body inspection was an essential ritual before leaving the house. 'You're crazy! You can't go out *like that!*' was the standard dressing-down you received before you faced the outside world. The morality police and their 'guardians of the Revolution' kept a close watch on every street corner. They scrutinized the men and women passing by, observing them with an unhealthy interest, a

self-appointed voyeurism, a systematic ogling, trying to spot the slightest sliver of skin that might have escaped the family's vigilance. The way the Beards and Crows look at you is anything but discreet. Despite firmly advocating the disappearance of the body and insulting anyone who dares to raise their eyes, they let their own eyes wander freely over the terrified crowd, undressing them, in the name of the law.

I did not understand how I was the only one getting naked. Every day I observed the ritual of my mothers and aunts putting on their hijabs and I was revolted: meekly they covered themselves before going out—even though, every time, like some kind of incantation, they cursed Khomeini and all the Beards the world over. But children need heroes. And it would be an understatement to say that the Beards were not exactly heroes for me. My mother and my aunts had not even tried to remove, rip or trample their veils, as I had done when they made me try on the headscarf for the first time. Their lack of revolt was revolting to me.

I do remember one morning, though, when my mother had woken up in a strange, agitated sort of mood. My little brother had just been born and she was totally exhausted. She was holding my hijab in her hand, when suddenly she flung it to the floor and pulled a different scarf out of a drawer. It was bright red with an Indian pattern on it, and moreover it was see-through. She fastened it round my chin. Of course, I did not pass the clothing inspection at the school entrance. I was sent straight home. Though she never used me like that as a form of rebellion ever again, I

remember her mischievous smile as she saw me getting out of the car, just twenty minutes after I had left for school. Perhaps she had simply wanted her oldest child at home with her that day, or perhaps it was the absurdity of the swathes of grey covering her little girl that had impulsively made her dress me in red. Either way, I was incredibly proud of my mother that day.

And the men? How did they protect their identities? They didn't! They all looked the same. They didn't dare to bare their arms or legs either, and it was rare to see someone without a moustache or a beard. If women dared to wear a colourful scarf, or men dared to wear a tie, if women wore lipstick or men attempted a flowery Hawaiian shirt, they would swiftly be whisked away to the local police station or to a shop—formerly a tea shop—which was now used as an office by the morality police. There, morality was dealt out to them in the form of shouts and insults. Or worse. But in those cases, you were sent to the cell. A real cell in a real prison. If the Crows and Beards were to be believed, a bare forearm or manicured nails were tantamount to a rejection of God and an act of treason against Ayatollah Khomeini—it was always about him. My bare bottom was therefore a supreme insult, the ultimate act of revolt. Nowadays, although I do understand the mechanism of ultra-contagious fear, I cannot come to terms with it. The ease with which everyone is made to look like everyone else is still a strange source of anxiety for me. What if everyone had taken all their clothes off, like me? What if all the random passers-by in the streets of Tehran had suddenly

whipped off all their clothes? Would Khomeini have sent in his army to open fire on a crowd of naked people? The Revolution might have ended right then and there.

The guardians of the Revolution were the lords of the street, and it would have been *impossible* for me to take my clothes off there. They were far tougher than the schoolyard Crows; convinced of their righteousness, victorious. I not only couldn't, because I was always with someone when I went out; but I also didn't need to, because the veil wasn't actually obligatory in the street for little girls under the age of eight. It depended on which neighbourhood you were going to. In the bazaar or the administrative districts my mother always covered my head, while in the more affluent areas of northern Tehran we could leave my hair uncovered. Everybody was obsessed with the body, or rather with the absence of it. Tehran had become just a sea of faces.

My youngest aunt—my favourite one, the one with the ample bust—was in Paris during the Revolution. She returned to Tehran just afterwards, on 'holiday'. For a long time she was the most optimistic of her sisters, before caving in to bitterness too. On the flight back to Tehran, she covered her head. As soon as she got off the plane and came face-to-face with a zealous soldier of the new regime—among the ordinary travellers, baggage handlers, customs officers, the secret and less secret police, hidden agents—she felt naked. She was covered head to toe and remembers how she was sweating in her closed shoes, which were far too hot for wearing in a Tehran summer. Even so, she still felt naked. In the eyes of those 'Mr. and Mrs. Morality' types

who were everywhere, her lips were too well-defined, her eyes too almond-shaped, her body too accustomed to moving freely. And for those ambassadors of morality, she was an insult to decency, to religion, to Khomeini. Later on, in the street, in restaurants, and even in the doctors' waiting room, everywhere that—whether you liked it or not—men and women had to be in the same space, and so women had to be covered, she still felt naked. Victimized. She returned to Paris post-haste, where she could even be chatted up without feeling that same naked feeling. For it was that, above all, which led to the veiling of women: pervasive sexual desire.

One of my older cousins told me how he was totally shaken up when as a young man he had inadvertently touched the finger of our first cousin, a girl of thirteen who wore the veil. He had never thought she was beautiful, in fact she was far too young and incredibly pious, but this unexpected contact had aroused something in him. To this day, now as a forty-year-old man living in Europe, he still remembers the sensuality of that little fingertip.

As soon as a man entered the stairwell, the supermarket, the bus, the headmistress's office or the lift, there was always that little gesture which had become automatic: adjusting your headscarf. And of course this gesture caught the eye, fanned the desire. For the majority of veiled Iranian women, it was a form of flirting disguised as extreme pioussness. But I know one woman who did not play the game of false modesty. She was a friend of the family, famous for the sensual way she adjusted her headscarf: it was the dance of

the seven veils, albeit in reverse, but every bit as mesmerizing. I recently found out that she has remarried for the fourth time in Miami. In 1960s Tehran she had taken over the family business from her father, a pastry chef by trade. She successfully developed the business from a regional to a national level. As a child she had fascinated me, just as she enthralled my father, who would spend entire nights drinking and debating with her. She was easily in her forties and never left the house without make-up on, neither *before* nor *after* the Revolution, and her regulation clothing was such a pale grey that in the sombre streets, all you could see was her. She said she was too old to be afraid. Every time she got arrested, she managed to get herself freed thanks to her numerous contacts. She was not easily deterred. But in 1982 she decided to go to San Diego to join the Iranian community there, living as they did in Tehran before the Revolution. I know that she still plays cards every night, sometimes all night, and that she often has to wake her son up at 4 a.m. to get him to lend her the money to finish her game. I remember how she used to laugh at all the gossip and how she had such vulgar language that my mother would blush before she had even opened her mouth. This friend of the family was the only woman who openly congratulated me for baring my bottom. She leaned in toward my mother and whispered in her ear, 'You should be thrilled to have a daughter like that, despite the poker you and your sisters have up your arses.' This family friend was the only other woman I knew who also exposed herself to people.