

*Crowning Anguish*  
*Memoirs of a Persian Princess*  
*from the Harem to Modernity*  
1884-1914

By Taj al-Saltana, edited with introduction and notes by Abbas Amanat.  
Translation of the memoirs by Anna Vanzan and Amin Neshati.

Several books written by children of Qajar (19<sup>th</sup> century Iranian) royalty have been published in recent years. *Crowning Anguish* is, to my mind, the book most likely to be of interest to Habibi readers. It is an extraordinary memoir written by Taj al-Saltana, daughter of Naser al-Din Shah (ruled 1848 – 1896), the fourth king of the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925). Born in 1884, Taj's life spans the dying decades of Qajar rule and its ultimate end, first in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, and in the takeover of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925.

The memoir is in the form of a tale told to her teacher in explanation of some of her behavior and life choices; it chronicles, from the perspective of a child and young woman in her father's, and later her husband's, *anderun* (private family quarters), a period of turmoil and change in late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century Iranian history. In it, Taj gives fascinating glimpses of Qajar court life, the intrigues, dangers, liaisons, and struggles for control.

Among the most interesting aspects of the memoir are Taj's education and feminism. She received some private tutoring in the *anderun*, but was largely self-educated, and read voraciously from classical and contemporary European literature in translation. As a result, she developed a notion that the best path for Iranian families would be for Iranian women to discard the veil, and receive education sufficient to allow them to work outside the home. Her view was that by doing so couples could choose to marry for love, thus reducing the many social ills that result from arranged marriages, such as marital infidelity and divorce. Women could contribute to the family and national economies, rather than staying at home bored and getting into trouble.

While the memoir focuses on Taj's life, it depicts vividly some of the most interesting political events of late-19<sup>th</sup>- early-20<sup>th</sup>-century Iran, which are oddly reminiscent of events of more recent times. In particular, the call during anti-crown protests of 1891-92 for the overthrow of the Shah and the raising of the highest Shi'ite leader to the position of "Supreme Exemplar" seem to mirror the events leading to the (counter-) revolution of 1979.

Dancers and musicians do not appear to advantage in these memoirs. Taj's own attitudes accurately reflect the general attitude towards professional performers, though perhaps colored by the fact that her own husband had affairs with one of the dancing girls from the visiting Russian circus, and also with a male dancer. During the reign of Taj's brother, Mozaffar al-Din Shah, the family was shocked by the "constant coming and going of female musicians, and prostitutes who disguised themselves as musicians". Taj compares this with the situation during her father's life: "I could not remember female musicians in my father's harem, with the exception of wedding feasts, and then it was only male musicians. It was impossible to find a single whore among them." Taj describes a boy dancer: "Renowned throughout the town, the boy had a thousand adoring lovers. Being a dancer, however, he was unworthy of being anyone's beloved."

Taj herself was (in her own estimation) an accomplished musician; but, since she restricted her musical performances to her own amusement, she escaped the censure heaped upon professionals. She studied *târ* (Persian long-necked lute) with Mirza Abdollah, one of the great

performers of the Qajar era; she claims that her *târ*-playing skills soon surpassed those of her teacher! She was, apparently, much admired (but not for her music!) by one of the greatest of contemporary Iranian composers, 'Aref-e Qazvini, whose rakish photograph also appears in the book.

The book begins with a 100-page introduction by Abbas Amanat that provides a fine description of the historical context of the memoirs; most of the terminology, personalities, and cultural tidbits needed to follow the memoirs are included. The book involves a long list of *dramatis personæ*; an alphabetized set of biographical sketches of each of the major characters is provided at the end, and is a big help. The reader new to things Iranian might do well to read it immediately after the introduction, before going on to the memoir itself.

The illustrations of *Crowning Anguish* alone would make the book of great interest to aficionados of Middle Eastern history, culture, and arts. It includes many photographs and paintings of Iranian court ladies in their *shalite* (short skirt) attire, as well as depictions of court life, palaces, and ministers. Among my favorites are the etching of a Persian woman in *shalite* on page 26, the etching of Ziba Khanum in *shalite* on page 31, the famous posed photograph of 'Aref on page 57, and the mid-life photo of Taj herself in European dress on page 311.