

Libération, le 24.04.2008:

L'activiste féministe iranienne Nahid Jafari a été condamnée à six mois de prison et dix coups de fouet avec sursis par le tribunal révolutionnaire de Téhéran. Elle a été reconnue coupable de tentative de trouble de l'ordre public, pour avoir manifesté son soutien à cinq autres féministes. Elle est la troisième militante de la cause des femmes ainsi condamnée.

Dangerous body

Titre français : Iran, la peur du corps charnel au sein du corps social



Something odd I regularly noticed in Iran was the funny way Iranians wrapped everything in plastic. They protect most objects, like chairs and armchairs, like keyboards, car seats, mobile screens, even the clock in the *madraseh*, with plastic.

In Tehran, you see lots of women in the streets, going to work or to study, driving a car, and you may think it is only the way they dress which is controlled, and that apart from that they have freedom.

But it seems that, in the Iranian society, there are rules for intimacy as well. The ubiquitous mullahs enter the personal sphere and dictate how men and women should relate, or actually should not.

Love is under close watch and couples do not touch and avoid eye contact in public. There should not be any contact between the sexes. Men only address men, while their wives are ignored. So the handshake between sexes is something forbidden and, if I was sometimes gratified with one, I guessed it meant a lot for the man transgressing that rule.

Men and women who are not married should not be sitting next to each other, which leads to clever domino games in all public places, public transport, etc...

The body in particular is under close control and the female one seems to be of the uttermost interest. It is lovingly wrapped or, should I say, fearfully wrapped in double layers: the head is covered twice, tightly zipped around or on the face, in case the first *burka* should fall, due to wind or some other event, just to be on the safe side ("on n'est jamais trop prudent"); and if it is not enough, hands will clutch the material and/or the teeth will. The full length of the body is covered and you even see white gloves covering hands and, more commonly, elegant socks in the sandals. Just in case a hand or a foot would try and escape...Not only is the skin being covered, but the whole female figure is being masked and made shapeless. The body is certainly overheating in all the wrapping but, never mind, it is the right thing to do. Likewise, housewives know it, when putting food in the freezer, it might be best to wrap it twice in zip locks (plastic bags), just to be on the safe side.

It is therefore shocking to see the frescoes of the *Chehel Setun* Palace in Esfahan. The women depicted seem to be enjoying total freedom while happily showing parts of their bodies, lightly adorned with colourful draperies, and they are not whores but ladies. Thus, there was a time when the body was free.

Of course, in many Tehran circles and in modern homes, the people try not to care about rules and act as freely as possible. They do so to certain extremes sometimes, which are a consequence of such deep taboos. Surely, the intrusive life codes cannot be easily shaken off. They are interiorised, mentally and bodily absorbed.

The *hejab* itself is not a problem, it is the tip of the iceberg. It is the visible part of the negation of the body, which has been imposed for years. And that itself, is part of a series of deprivations of freedom.

The body must be so powerful it has to be muted and banned. Everyone is guilty of having one. The body has therefore to be controlled and women's bodies in particular, as well as images of women, as well as women's singing voices, have to be censored.

In traditional families, people cannot meet the other sex freely and, like in western archaic times, they end up marrying someone they do not love, or not marrying at all. And being an educated woman makes it all the more difficult.



You often see girls holding other girls' hands, hugging, holding the other's waist, staying in physical contact with their friend. Stranger to our eyes is to see mature heterosexual men doing so, but it is a common sight. The other sex's taboo being so strong, they touch their friends all the more. It is nice to see such demonstrations of affection and tenderness, if it were not for the frustration and sadness that lie beneath.

Sexual repression is palpable and when twice, I got smacked hard on the buttocks, I could not blame the individuals who did it.

Women touch me and hold me very easily and often. Amongst women, a female naked body is no big deal. We are alike and it seems our body is part of a bigger female body.

But outside the female sphere, I feel women have to apologize for having a body. They have to try and be as invisible as possible. They will get no reward for it, invisibility being compulsory. And the more beautiful they are, the less their beauty should be seen.

Or, as a nice saying goes, "A woman is like a pearl, she should keep her beauty hidden for her husband to see". Poisonous beauty. Dangerous flesh.

A neurosis applies itself as a system of tacit rules, which are unwillingly and often unconsciously obeyed by the person suffering from it, and the people living with that person. It might consist, in one given space, in physically avoiding something that is invisible for the simple reason it is not there. But fear is there. Those everyday acrobatics have deep reasons hidden in the psyche and cannot easily be switched off.

Wouldn't such a neurosis be taking place in Iran on the scale of the whole country ?

The whole of Iranian society seems to me to have adapted to a system where bodies have to be wrapped, as objects have to be, in order to protect them and avoid any contact which could either soil or/and infect them. Purity (*taharat*) is a central idea in this religious society, where people perform rituals of cleaning, covering and behaving through fear of the impure (*najis*). Moral dirt is pervasive and might touch your hand, so beware. The people who obey those rituals do so without thinking about it, they are dancing a dance they know by heart; they have absorbed the order and the habits dictated and carefully nurtured by those above.

But some Iranians obviously feel they lack freedom (not even mentioning prohibition on alcohol and the upcoming ban on smoking). Many people we met were craving for contact with westerners because they have a dream of a freer life in the west. A man we met told us that, "even an ant, if it had a visa, would leave the country".

Iranians often have, I find, a very serious expression, which is no wonder, seen the war and hardships they have endured and the rest they go on enduring (a mystery to me is the outcome of the recent elections). I hope the future will be kinder to them.

They have kindness and generosity, and I will always remember a young lady holding a flower in the Hafez tomb in Shiraz.

Loeiza Jacq, 2005





jogging in Esfahan



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Loeïza Jacq, www.loeiza.com, loeiza@loeiza.com, +33 (0)663 911 888