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Autobiographical Reflections: My Story

By Ronak Karami

I was born in the middle of hell and the gates of heaven
were closed to me
as far as I remember I was the child of hell
and heaven seemed so boring to me
for this reason, I made the third gate the third realm
my labyrinth shaped realm
with my name on the gates

I have never shared my story in such detail with anyone. I am sharing it now because I want to have the power to help people, in a way that nobody helped me during my most difficult times. I want people to know that even under great difficulties, people can try to make their way, to become powerful in ways previously unimaginable.

My Childhood

I was born an orphan: my mother died due to cancer around six months after she gave birth to me at the age of 26 or 27 and my father, having a zest for life, left my sister and me to his parents and married again. That second marriage did not satisfy him, because he married many times after that. I was born in Shiraz, Iran, but my sister (who is four years older than me) and I grew up in Kermanshah, in our grandparents' house. Growing up in their home was very different for us since being so young, I knew and understood nothing our situation while she knew and remembered everything. Our grandparents decided not to tell me the truth about my parents, so I thought they were my birth parents until I was nine. My grandfather was a Judge and my grandmother was a Homemaker. My sister and I grew up in a very crowded house, where there was always tension among the members of the family: we had two uncles and one aunt who did not get along with each other and our grandparents added to the tension instead of handling it. My grandfather, whom I trusted the most in this world, had a heart attack and died before my eyes when I was nine years old. It was that same year that I was told I was an orphan. So, I was raised in a house where I never felt safe, and I always had the fear that something might happen to me or those whom I love.

Growing up, I rarely saw my birth father, but I preferred not to spend time with him, because I hated him. However, my sister put her hopes in him. She always used to sit on the stairs which faced the entrance door to wait for him for hours when we were kids so that he might appear and save her from the asylum that we called "home". Of course, he never showed up because he was busy with women and drugs all the time. My aunt got married when I was four years old to a man twelve years older than she, because my grandparents advised her to choose him. When I grew up, she told me that she couldn't even bear his smell when he tried to kiss her for the first time. My younger uncle was only six years older than me, and I used to think that he was my brother because he was our playmate. He also faced so many issues in the house because my older uncle often beat him.

Meanwhile, my sister was sexually abused by our older uncle for a very long period. He got married when I was nine, but that did not stop him from abusing my sister. I knew something was going on, but I never knew the whole story. I found out about this incident when I was about 21, since my sister revealed everything to me: "Whenever he came to pick me up after school, he took me to some dark and damp narrow alley, took out his penis, and asked me to lick it" said my sister. The worst part for me was to find out that everyone in the family was aware that my older uncle abused my sister, but they did not act on it. I also realized that my grandfather had a stroke partly because he found out about what had happened between my older uncle and my sister. My older uncle never dared to approach me, however, because I was the apple of my grandparents' eyes. However, when I was four years old, I was abused by someone in the family whose name I cannot reveal because it will cause me trouble, still to this day. As a child, I often witnessed my sister being beaten nearly to death by my older uncle for not being obedient enough when she was only 10 years old. He required us to wear a scarf even though we were not yet of an age where we had to wear a veil. No one in the family bothered to stop my older uncle because they were so immersed in their own problems, that they simply did not care.

Coming of Age

After my grandfather died, relationships among the family members got more intense because there were disputes about our heritage. Only four of us were living in the house, because my aunt and my older uncle were married; thus, my grandmother decided that we should move to another city, Isfahan, and start things over. Within some years, I noticed that my body was changing, and I started to have my period. I was growing up rapidly, and it was difficult for me to control my emotions. I experienced my first emotional relationship with a boy when I was thirteen years old. I call it an emotional experience, because I never had any physical relationship with guys until I was nineteen years old. After my grandmother found out about my emotional relationship, she got so mad that she said she did not want to have my sister and me in her house, and so we left. My older uncle agreed to have us in his home for a while; hence, we left our school and went to Tehran-the capital of Iran-to live with him. As soon as we arrived there, he punished us for being in relationships with guys by whipping us to the point that our bodies bled. He enjoyed whipping us so much that he did it again from time to time for different reasons. He had different ways of torturing us such as shaving our hair or eyebrows and smashing our heads against the wall. The situation became so unbearable that I decided to run away and become a prostitute to get rid of my older uncle and make my own way in life; however, my sister stopped me. She told me about the parents of our birth mother whom I had never known and suggested we go and live with them.

It was the very first time that I visited the family of my birth mother: unlike my father's family, they were poor, and they struggled for life. Thus, my sister and I put all our hopes on our mother's family so that they might take care of us for a while. Among our four uncles and four aunts, none of them were willing to take care of us, not even for some months. We had to stay there because we had no place to go and every day they insulted us in various ways. They took us to the doctor to check if we were virgins and although we were virgins, they called us "whores". I somehow got used to the word "whore" from that time, because I was called by that word more than my real name. I really cared about my schooling and never wanted to quit, so I started to beg my grandmother (the one who raised me) to accept us again but she refused. The only person who did his best to make our situation better was my younger uncle whom I knew as my brother. However, he committed suicide at the age of twenty--the same summer tired of struggling in the

family. His death was a shock to my sister and me as we had already had the worst experiences of our lives the same year.

After my younger uncle's death, my grandmother who raised me accepted to take care of me but not my sister because she believed that we enticed each other to commit bad deeds. Although my grandmother knew that my older uncle would abuse my sister again, she sent my sister to his house without mercy. My sister could not finish high school because she changed her place of residence, from one to another and finally, she got married at the age of nineteen to a guy who has mental issues. She has two kids now and her life is very scary as her husband locks her in the house, beats her nearly to death, and doesn't feed her and her children well. The family boundaries have a high value among Iranians; yet, although everyone in our family knows how horrible my sister's situation is, no one offers to help. Not only has the family refused to help her, but they all abandoned her a long time ago.

Starting My Academic Education

Despite all the difficulties, I got accepted in a high-ranking university, Shahid Chamran University, for my B.A in English Literature; however, I transferred to another high-ranked University, the University of Isfahan because my grandmother could not live alone, and I felt I must be with her. It was then that my troubles with boys began. I grew into an attractive woman whom many men wanted to possess. Despite the common belief that physical beauty is an asset, my attractiveness created troubles for me rather than comfort or opportunity. Many of my female friends were scared that their boyfriends would want to be with me; accordingly, I never had the opportunity to develop close female friendships. On the other hand, I could not be friends with guys because in most cases they wanted to be more than just a friend or only to have sex with me. There have been many times I have been threatened by men whom I rejected, and some have even tried to molest me. They knew I had no sources of support and the law does not work for my benefit. I also got low marks many times at school because of my appearance: the professors were scared that if they give me a good mark (which I deserved) other students would think that something was going on between us, as I was once told by one of my professors. Moreover, some of the professors were unkind to me, because I refused to cover my hair completely. Additionally, I had some professors who tried to flirt with me, and since I showed no interest, they used their power as a professor for revenge. Thus, I have felt lonely most of my life.

I was twenty-three years old when I experienced love for the first time in my life. The person with whom I was in love with did not live in Iran, so it was a difficult situation to handle. Having strong religious beliefs, my grandmother was opposed to me being in a relationship outside of marriage, and she started to push me to get married to my boyfriend. As I never felt safe and secure in my life, I was too scared to lose my boyfriend; thus, we decided to get married. Yet, his family did not agree for many reasons and after a long period of arguing, he left me. I had many proposals, but most of the time their families did not consent, because I was an orphan, and I did not have a rich family, so they believed I was not good for their sons. In many cases, the families thought that because of my beauty, I must be vain. In their views, I could not be smart or sophisticated, because I am attractive, which is a common belief. I felt crushed. No place on earth seemed to be a safe place for me.

I experienced so much sexual abused during my 20s. Even though society blames women when they are sexually abused for dressing provocatively, I had experienced sexual abuse in the street even when I wore no make-up and had on the simplest clothes possible. For instance, there were many times-when strange men took their penis out in the car and asked me to get in while calling me "slut". I was scared to death in these cases, and when I talked about it with some

classmates, many of my male classmates called me delusional as they thought I was exaggerating. Having such experiences drove me to feminism, in order to understand how Iranian women have been suppressed through history by various institutions such as the law.

The Fight for Gaining a Place in Feminism

After finishing my B.A in English literature, I started my master's education in the same major, and I found a job as an English instructor in a language institution. As soon as I started my M.A, I made a plan to leave Iran when I finished to study gender studies for my Ph.D. I became interested in the field mostly because of my situation and personal experiences. I looked around me and I saw my sister living with a psycho; I saw my aunt living with an old man who preferred his mother to his wife and children, and I saw me, a twenty-year-old woman who had been abused emotionally, physically, and sexually many times in her life. Hence, I started to read about feminism. I demanded guidance from my professors; however, not only did they have limited knowledge, but they also misled me with misinformation about women's studies. Many of my professors thought that the field of women's studies was nonsense, and I was only interested because of my unhappiness. Many others thought that I was being seduced by western advertisements on the subject. I decided to ignore them and downloaded as many resources as I could. I started with *The Second Sex* by Simon de Beauvoir; I familiarized myself with the waves of feminism, and then I started to read manifestos and numerous pieces of literature from feminist thinkers of each wave. I taught myself gender studies concepts, the aesthetic of feminism, and the situation of Iranian women through history. I developed an interest in writing essays and attended conferences on women's studies in Iran. No professor in my university ever taught me how I should write an essay. Therefore, I decided to read the instructions from books and to follow them with the proper format. When I finished my first essay, I asked one of my professors to review it for me and the only feedback he gave me was a thumbs down.

I realized that I needed to be more sophisticated and knowledgeable; thus, I spent more time on my essays. As I wrote, I thought about all those women that I have known in my life who had been repressed, silenced, and abused. After months of working, I started to search for an appropriate journal for my essays, and I found the *Journal of International Women Studies* (JIWS) on the Scopus list. The Journal's interests and ranking got my attention, so I decided to send my essays to them. After two or three months, the Journal sent me feedback highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of my essays and asking me to work on them and resubmit. I was so happy that my essays were reviewed, because I had thought I would not be sophisticated enough in this field. The Journal's comments were very helpful to me because it was the first time that someone taught me how I should write an essay. I did as the Journal reviewers asked of me and after months of revisions, they finally agreed to publish my essays. Later that year, I attended three international conferences that were held in Iran, as a published lecturer.

Hoping that I would be able to get a scholarship, I decided to apply to some American and Canadian universities in Gender Studies. Even though there were so many obstacles in my way, I prepared everything that was necessary for these universities. The price for the IELTS and GRE, the application fees, and my documents' English translations, was very high for me, and I could not afford them; however, I worked as hard as I could to earn the money. Besides, I needed three recommendation letters from my professors for each university, and it was very difficult for me to find professors who agree to recommend me, because most of them did not want me to continue my education in gender studies. They offered help only if I continued in English literature. With difficulty, I found three professors who agreed to write recommendations for me, and I was finally

able to apply. Yet, by the time I paid the application fee and the site was closed, one of the recommenders refused to help me. In fact, he thought that in preventing me from completing the application, he was doing me a favor; hence, I was very disappointed, and I thought I failed. After going through so much trouble, I finally found a substitution for that professor and I finished the application process.

The process of becoming admitted did not go well: some American universities rejected me only six or seven days after I applied (which I thought was not typical because the applications take months to be processed) and others rejected me as the subject of my proposed thesis was about Iranian girls; they said they prefer to choose those students who have the same interests as the supervisors and Iranian studies was not among these. While working on my resume, I felt ill a lot and the doctors told me that due to the stress I had a high risk of getting MS. On the other hand, my grandmother was pushing me to get married to someone (no matter whom), because she said she could not be responsible for me anymore. I was unable to be independent and live alone both because of my financial issues and because Iranian society thinks less of unmarried women who live alone. It was a desperate time for me, because I put all my hopes into getting the scholarship. Although I had finished my courses in the university with an average of 19.80/20 (A+), I had to withdraw before I defended my dissertation, because my supervisor expressed romantic interest in me, and when I ignored him he decided not to read my dissertation or help the process to go further. For each semester that he delayed the process I had to pay the university; thus, I had no choice but to withdraw. I was also very nervous during that time as the relationship between Iran and the USA became more intense because of US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, and they spoke of war. I was stressed also because I lived in a city where the government prepares nuclear facilities, and I was sure it would be one of the places that would be bombed if there were a war.

In the intervening time, a friend of mine who is French and whom I had hosted before in Iran, offered to support me to come to Paris and live there. I registered for French classes, and I applied for a visa. I am writing this from Paris, where I now live, attending a language school and working on essays, hoping that this year I will be accepted into a good university. I have also changed the subject of my proposed thesis and decided to work on Canadian or French girls and women instead of Iranians. There are many feminisms that are indigenous in origin and are publicizing and promoting their own issues, demanding their voices be heard, so that western feminists are now more aware of the multiple forms of feminism. However, in the case of a country like Iran there are many complications: the government is very strict about this subject and presents false impressions to the world.

Although living in Paris has brought me one step closer to my goal, it is very difficult and scary. I am the one who is an outsider both in her own country and in other countries, in my own family and in other families. I face new challenges every day of my life, and they are difficult to overcome. During this last year, I have had doubts about whether I am a feminist or not, because I have felt excluded from this concept: having feminist thoughts is not welcomed in my country and as an indigenous woman I feel like an outsider in the western world. However, I continue to be moved by *Laugh of The Medusa* by Helen Cixous. When I first read it, I was amazed by the strong language and the new structure as well as the irony she used to defend women. I decided to bring “L’écriture Feminine” to Persian literature; hence, at the moment, I am writing a novella using the text, a very challenging and difficult task to do. Although western feminism tries to show that it has been successful in including indigenous and non-western women, it still has a long way to achieve that goal. Iranian women are largely invisible to the world partly because of the political situation of Iran. All women’s issues need to be prioritized. Thus, if I find my place in this field of

study, I will write and work not only for Iranian women but also for all oppressed genders, across various nationalities. I am only at the beginning of my path, and I try to be useful for as many people as I can regardless of their nationality or gender. I want my readers to know that if they are living in a difficult situation, they must try to make their own way and to become powerful in ways previously unimaginable. For now, I continue to work on my language, apply to graduate programs and publish with the *Journal of International Women Studies*, which has been a great help to me as they reviewed my essays precisely and patiently. Additionally, not only did they welcomed the subjects I have chosen but they have also added to my knowledge about these matters by introducing me to many useful resources on Iranian women's issues. The following three essays are works I started in Iran and finished in Paris and they are the result of my self-education; they are my early contributions to knowledge about Iranian women and the impact of the Iranian state on the lives of women.