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THE POLITICS OF FASHION
BY RONI MOORE NEUMANN
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THE POLITICS OF FASHION

Iranian-born JACQUELINE SAPER shares insight into her award-winning memoir.

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Jacqueline Saper: Educator, Historian and Writer

Words by Roni Moore Neumann

Human Beings are like parts of the body,

Created from one essence.

When one part is hurt and in pain,

Others cannot remain in peace and quiet.

If the misery of others leaves you indifferent and with no feelings of sorrow,

then you cannot be called a human being.

Displayed at the entrance of the United Nations, this poem was included in President Carter's toast to the Shah of Iran during the New Year's Eve State Dinner in 1978 at Niavaran Palace in Tehran.

"A hyphenate," says Wilmette's Jacqueline Saper, during a recent sunny Saturday. "That's what I would consider myself – an educator, a historian and a writer."

Her memoir, "**From Miniskirt to Hijab: A Girl in Revolutionary Iran**," is an award-winning, first-hand account of her experience, and that of her family's, in Iran from the 1970's -- including the Revolution in 1979 -- through 1987, as they emigrated to the United States. In the book, Saper shares her riveting personal story as she witnessed events that fundamentally shaped her family's destiny and world history.

With many memoirs about Iran, Saper's is compelling given that it is rooted in her Jewish heritage. "The Jewish community was one-third of one percent of the population. Although small in size, it was vibrant and productive. Because Iran is an Islamic nation, after the revolution, as a minority, I had a different experience that the majority did not have."

"Second, I'm bi-cultural, which was unheard of in the Iranian Jewish community. Third, I experienced Iran in its three distinctive eras. A teenager in the monarchy, an adult during the revolution, and a wife and mother in the Islamic Republic."

The pre-revolutionary Iran of her youth was secular, where Saper wore miniskirts and bellbottoms, listened to American music, and watched American television.

Born to an English mother, Stella, and an Iranian father, Rahman, she was named Jacqueline, in honor of the then-first lady, Jacqueline Kennedy.

Her parents met in the late 1940s at a social dance in England held for University of Birmingham students. Her father was an international student in the chemical engineering department; her mother was pursuing a degree in journalism.

At the end of the school term, her father returned to his homeland. For two years, Rahmat and Stella exchanged love letters and photographs by post. The couple was married in Tehran, the circumstances of which were highly unusual, given that most marriages in Iran were arranged.

Jacqueline's early life was one of privilege; her father was a scientist and university professor. Her mother was a self-made career woman. Their family had live-in maids who became like family and ultimately whose knowledge of Islamic traditions later helped Saper survive, as did the fact that she's bilingual, fluently speaking both English and Farsi.

In the book and a related Tedx talk, Saper describes her life in fashion. "My clothes tell the story of the Iranian revolution," she said.

Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, as dictated by the government, Saper's wardrobe swerved dramatically from colorful western-style fashions to, as she says, "a strict version of hijab." For eight years, Saper covered every strand of her hair and wore loose clothing in navy, black, brown, or grey.

"Morality police" roamed the streets of Tehran, confronting and arresting women who were dressed improperly; women were banned from being judges; even singing, dancing, and riding a bike in public for women was strictly forbidden.

It was during this time that Saper, who had married a surgeon at the age of 18. She became a mother at 19 with the birth of her daughter and four years later, she had a son.

In 1987, Saper, along with her husband and young family, emigrated to the United States/ After an initial period in Houston, the family moved to the Midwest. For many years, Jacqueline had a career as a CPA and her husband was a surgeon; her daughter is a lawyer, and her son is a doctor. Today, they are grandparents – their granddaughter Juliana is about the age her daughter was when she arrived in this country from Iran. A full circle.

As Saper says, "The joy of fashion is to make a choice. When that choice is taken away, we lose our freedom of expression."

"Choosing what you wear every day is a privilege not to be taken for granted," she concluded.

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