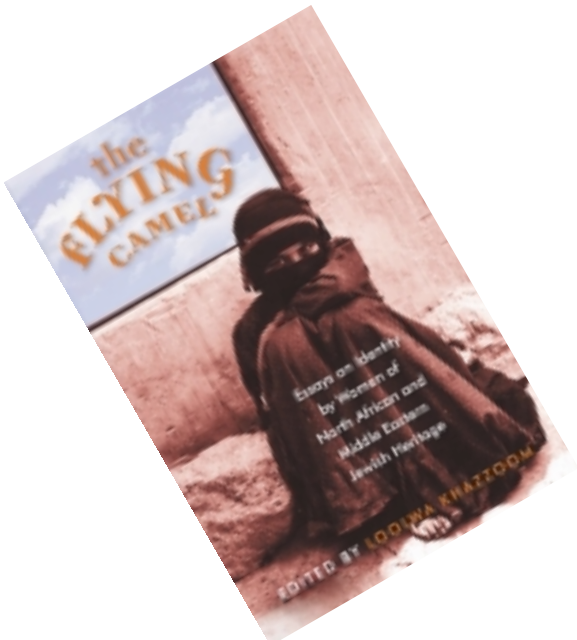
BEHIND THE Veil

Jewish women of North African and Middle Eastern descent lift the shroud of mystery and secrecy.



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identity

Jewish

Among the piles of boxes in my attic, I found a long, black, silk robe with the initials "LK" embroidered in red on the back. I examined the garment, holding it close to my body. It had to be mine, given the initials. But I had no memory of it. I could not have worn it as a child; even at my height of 5 feet 7 inches, it was too long for me.

LK. Suddenly it dawned on me: My grandmother, LouLou Khazzoom, must have thought it charmingly exotic to embroider her initials in English, instead of in Judeo-Arabic, her mother tongue. This was her *abayah*, the full-body covering Muslim women wear in general and Jewish women wore when going outdoors in Iraq. I slipped my arms through the sleeves and lifted it over my head.

When I looked in the mirror, two brown eyes peered back at me, through a mass of black material around my

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face. As I felt the weight of the full-body veil, I also felt resentment rising inside. I imagined walking through the streets of Baghdad, yearning deeply to throw my head back and laugh, sing, twirl around in the sunshine. I wondered if my grandmother experienced this resentment, retreating to a shrouded inner world day after day when she stepped outside.

Who was my grandmother, besides my father's mother? All the stories I heard about her were through my father. Like the story about how my grandfather, madly in love with her, took her across the Tigris River during a flood in the city. Alone in a boat for hours, they were required to get engaged when they returned to shore—my grandfather's plan all along. How did my grandmother feel about it, I began to wonder as I grew up. Did she even feel entitled to have an opinion on the matter? I will never know; she died before I was born.

When I ask my aunts about women's experience of Jewish life in Iraq, they accept and embrace "the woman's role" with impunity and condemn me for questioning it. The traditional veil, it seemed, not only covered the bodies of the Khazzoom women; it also permeated our souls.

I have found this veil appearing in many forms, touching each layer of the experience of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish women. It has appeared externally and internally, physically and metaphorically. For Jewish women, donning the veil reflected not only men's codes in relation to women but also Muslim codes in relation to Jews. Since the Muslim conquest of the region about 1,300 years ago, Jews indigenous to North Africa and the Middle East suddenly found themselves second-class citizens, beholden to the laws of Islam—including the injunction that women wear veils. In this context, the veil also acted as a symbol of the struggle to pass as someone else or stand tall as oneself, at times a life-and-death choice for Jews in the region.

Today, North African and Middle Eastern Jewish women continue to live in the shadows of metaphoric veils that threaten to shroud our identity and history. Here some courageous women from those diverse communities have stepped forth from the shadows, daring to speak out. They possess the refreshing viewpoint of those on the edge, insiders and outsiders to many different worlds. They refuse to be defined as "other" or "less than" by any of the communities to which they belong. Their vivid, gripping narratives sweep readers into a journey of discovery, unveiling the rich, multi-colored texture of identities commonly portrayed as one-dimensional or black and white.

They are hybrids of past and present, old and new, East and West. I pray that telling their stories will help lift the veil off our collective bodies, psyches and souls. I pray that we finally will be recognized, accepted and loved for who we are. I pray that we finally will throw our heads back and laugh, sing, twirl around in the sunshine. Just as LouLou Khazzoom may have wanted to do 100 years ago.

—Loolwa Khazzoom

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Background: detail from *Mizrach* by Phillip Cohen, 1861, from HUC Skirball Museum. Photographed by John Reed Forsman.

ESCAPE FROM LIBYA

When the Six Day War broke out between Israel and its Arab neighbors, I was 19, working at a British engineering company in Tripoli, Libya. My mother called to say thousands of people had taken to the streets rioting and burning Jewish properties. She begged me to find a hiding place because it was too dangerous for me to return home.

Although Jews had lived in Libya for hundreds of years, we were forced to live as *Dhimmis*, second class citizens. We were not given citizenship and did not enjoy basic human rights or freedom of movement. I knew a war with Israel would further enflame anti-Jewish sentiment, giving mobs *carte blanche* to indulge their worst instincts.

One of the British engineers in the company, a Christian, agreed to hide me in his home. From there, I watched the fires consume my father's oil warehouse. Instead of fighting the flames, firemen stood on top of their engines, raising balled fists and shaking hands with the excited crowd. The authorities did not pursue the rioters because they condoned the violence. Killing people, rampaging and burning Jewish properties went on for days.

Towards the end of June, three weeks after I had gone into hiding, I received a call at the office from my cousin Moris. His voice full of excitement, he said the Libyan government was allowing all Jews to leave the country. They were freezing our assets—properties, homes and bank accounts, and they would permit us to take only a few suitcases and a little money—but we would be free to go.

The day we left, armed soldiers put us on a truck to escort us "safely" to the airport—which my father had paid them handsomely to do. Instead, they dumped us on the side of the road. We then caught an airport bus, which was mysteriously empty and stopped suddenly in the middle of the desert. The driver said there was engine trouble and allegedly sent the conductor to get help. I looked to my father for support, but he was frozen in horror. I darted off the bus and began to run. My whole body shook with fear, but anger drove me forward.

> *"The driver crouched near the bus, holding a box of matches. I realized the plan was to set the bus on fire with my family in it. My heart hammered."*
>
> — GINA MALAKA BUBLIL

When I reached the office of a gas station, the conductor of the bus was there, holding the phone. I snatched it out of his hand and called the British engineer who had hidden me. "We're in danger," I said quickly in English. When I turned to leave, three men, including the conductor, blocked the door. I was petrified. My throat tightened. My heart pounded. I forced my way through the door and ran straight for 20 minutes back to the bus.

The first thing I noticed was the driver crouched near the bus, and a pool of liquid beneath it—gasoline he had discharged

from the tank! He held a box of matches in his hand. I realized the plan was to set the bus on fire with my family still in it. My heart hammered.

Just then, my friend the British engineer drove up. My family scampered off the bus, jumped into his Jeep and we sped off to the airport. Upon our arrival, the porters refused to touch our luggage and spit on us. When a young man asked to see our passports, he exclaimed in disbelief, "Bublil family?! You are not supposed to be here!" If we had any doubts about a plot to kill us, they were promptly dispelled.

Forty-five minutes later, we landed in Malta. Forty-five minutes from oppression to freedom.

In Malta, we boarded a plane to Rome. After a short flight, we landed in the Italian capital. We saw a large, friendly crowd waiting for their relatives. They were waving their arms, talking and laughing. A handsome young man winked at me and with a dashing smile said, "*Ciao!*" Then I looked up and saw the most beautiful sight—a sign that read BENVENUTI A ROMA!

—Gina Malaka Bublil

FEATHERS AND HAIR

For my cousin's Ziba's Iranian wedding, the men and women went about their preparations separately. A few men from the bride's and groom's families gathered with the rabbi in a secluded room to negotiate and argue the terms of my cousin's wedding contract: the amount of the *mehrieh*, the dowry.

The women divided into two groups: The more prestigious ones—my grandmother, the mothers of the bride and groom, some aunts and known women of the community—went to a festive room replete with large pillows on Persian carpets. They ate trays of sweets, limeade and *sharbat*. They munched on *noghl* and showered the bride with them, as they covered their mouths with their *chadors* and ululated, Kililili!

The second group of women—including my mother, my sister, myself, the washer-woman and her daughter—sat out on low stools in the backyard to pluck and clean mounds of chickens for the

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wedding reception. I sat by the dead chickens angry, resentful and hurt for being excluded from the party, missing whatever was going on in there. But good girls did not complain.

I had finished plucking my third bird when I noticed the *bandandaz* entering the hallway, a small basket of thread in one hand and a colorful *chador* around her face. I had seen her before. I had watched her hold one end of a string between her teeth and loop the other end next to a woman's face, legs or arms and pull, swiftly removing hair. Body hair was an obsession with most Iranians. Middle Eastern women tend to have dark and sometimes abundant body hair, the growth of which is often synonymous with the loss of childhood beauty and innocence. Its removal makes women more appealing to Iranian men.

We were almost to the end of the pile of chickens when we heard heart-wrenching screams from Ziba. I was about to run and help my cousin when my mother pulled me down with a knowing smile on her face. What was happening? I dared not ask. When my mother left briefly to fetch water for spraying the feathers (to keep them from flying), one of the cleaning women whispered to me, "They are doing her private parts!"

I could not get the humiliating image out of my mind: Ziba with her legs spread in front of all those modestly covered women, while someone plucked hair from a part of her body so private we were not even allowed to name it. This public spectacle to me signified a woman's loss of self-determination and control over her own destiny. I was only 14, a year older than my mother at her wedding, and three years younger than Ziba. Instead of accepting the custom as a wonderful show of support and camaraderie, as other women were doing, I wondered: Why did Ziba's mother and grandmother allow the ceremony? How could they watch her in so much pain? How could they allow the humiliation?

After my cousin's wedding, I didn't know if I could ever find the courage to defy the standards of life for a Jewish woman from a small town in Iran. Not being able to fight the traditions, the *bandandazi* being just a small example, I left the country in 1975, four years before an Islamic Revolution made life for women and Jews even more unbearable than it already had been.

A decade after my cousin's wedding, I married my Ashkenazi husband in the U.S. I so desperately wanted to distance myself from my past, my culture and my country of birth that I eliminated even the smallest trace of my own heritage from the ceremony. I walked down the aisle American style. The music had an Eastern European flavor. The caterer served breasts of chicken stuffed with wild rice, not Iranian stews made with chopped herbs, not aromatic rice topped with crusty, saffron-colored *tadig*. With one exception, none of my Iranian aunts living in the U.S. attended the wedding to sing for me *vasoonak*, the traditional Shirazi Jewish wedding songs.

My grandmother came from Iran for my wedding, a few days early. She brought her *ghalyoun*, waterpipe, and Iranian tobacco. She sat cross-legged on the floor and sipped hot tea flavored with fresh mint, a sugar lump in the back of her cheek. At one point she put her lips to my aunt's ear, signaled towards me, and in a loud whisper asked, "Has she taken care of the stuff?" Initially, I did not know what she meant. When I realized the meaning of her words, a rush of blood shot through my body like a jolt of lightening. The memory of my cousin's wedding flooded my mind with a momentary feeling of despair and disbelief. How could have I forgotten?

I composed myself, and with a smile, replied, "Yes, definitely." And in a small voice she could not hear, I added, "For generations to come."

—Farideh Dayanim Goldin

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