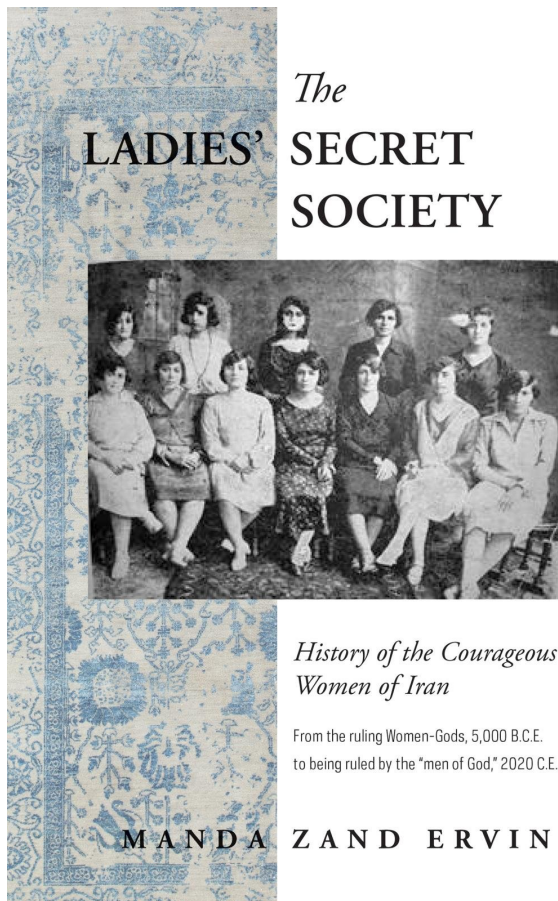


MEF Review of The Ladies' Secret Society

by Sarah Katz



The Ladies' Secret Society provides a rich, comprehensive account of the journey of Iranian women since ancient days, when certain women were revered as divinity, to contemporary times, when the Islamic Republic jails women who remove their hijabs in public.

Ervin, an Iranian-American writer and human rights activist, tells the stories of individual women struggling against repression from the beginning of the Arab conquests through the relative emancipation of the shah's reign, through the loss of most of those gains under the Islamist regime. She paints a striking and seamless picture of Western imperialism's positive impact on women's rights, focusing on the ways females gained societal and political freedoms under the shah's leadership as he embraced Western values including greater equality for women.

The book also tackles the external pressures that can inspire the push for change from within: in this case, of women

against Iran's Islamist leaders. Accounts of experiences of minorities within Iran, including Jewish women, are also fascinating. They struggled under the Islamic Republic's despotism, even as they feared special penalties for being "impure" persons and compelled to dress according to the dictates of another religion.

The graphics, which illustrate the dynamic sociopolitical landscape of women's experiences in Iran, are a highlight, especially as they document changes resulting from European colonialism.

In all, this is a literary gem.

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