

IN PRAISE OF BIG NOSES

(Personal Reflection)

Afshan Jafar Persis M. Karim
 & Erynn Masi de Casanova, eds

in Global
 Beauty
 Local Bodies

When I was a child growing up in the suburban San Francisco Bay area town of Walnut Creek, I was aware of the ways in which my difference was cast in my look. Although my mother was from France, I had inherited many of my father's distinctly Iranian features: large brown eyes, thick dark hair, long eyelashes, plentiful eyebrows, and olive-tinted skin. Although my father was a handsome man, his exceedingly large nose and well-sized ears were an inescapable part of his distinctively foreign look. Until my adolescence I managed to avoid thinking of my nose at all. It was only when my older sister turned 19, and after a number of Iranian female relatives immigrated to the United States, that I became aware of how the bountifulness of my proboscis presented deficiencies to my blossoming beauty. When my father's two older daughters from his first marriage in Iran arrived in the United States, I was only ten, but I could see in their faces something of how they both resembled and didn't resemble my sister and me. Indeed, it was in that central region of their face, the nose, that they lost any familial connection. At one point in my early adolescence, I remember seeing one of my older female cousins at a family party for *Norouz*, the Persian New Year, with a large white bandage across her face. Although I was too shy to ask my cousin what had happened to cause the black and blue bruises under her eyes and the gauze bandages that concealed her nose, I surmised that it was part

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of an Iranian family tradition that might be visited upon me in the future. When I finally asked my father about my cousin's wounded face, he blurted out smiling, "well, my dear, in case you hadn't noticed, we've got a few people in this family with big noses."

The contagion of nose-reduction operations that I later came to know as "nose jobs" seemed more and more prevalent with each passing year. During the early 1970s, when Iran and the United States were close allies and when there was relative ease of movement between the two countries, plastic surgery had become big business in Iran. The influx of Western culture, US-made products, and the influence of American movies and television had transformed the landscape of aesthetics and beauty in that country. Iranian women sought to be more beautiful through blonde hair, smaller noses, and shorter skirt hems. My father, who arrived in the United States long before the largest number of Iranian immigrants came, was unaware of this trend; but when his female relatives began arriving in this country in the mid-1970s, they brought with them this same culture of beauty. Each year, when my Iranian relatives got together to celebrate the Persian New Year, I began to notice a tell-tale look among the women of my family: large brown eyes, voluptuous lips, and small, perfectly sculpted, Anglo-looking noses. Some were small and upturned, others were perfectly triangular and proportional; mostly though, they looked similar—as if they'd been reworked by the same plastic surgeon, who had taken away nature's unique character on each of their faces.

Around my fourteenth birthday, during that awkward phase when most adolescents begin exuding hormones and their features appear scarily large and unsettled on their still child-like faces and bodies, I realized I was being recruited into this cult of Iranian beauty. The first occasion was at my aunt's house when she told me that I should pluck my eyebrows and suggested a nose job so that I could become "more beautiful." On another occasion, my half-sister Lily gave me a lesson in upper lip depilation and gently suggested something similar. "You are beautiful, but we Karims have large calves and large noses." Even though I recognized the truth of her statement about the calves, I asked her what she meant about the noses. "You know, me and Cima

(my other half-sister) both had nose jobs in Iran. You should get one too." Several months after that conversation, I became more aware that the odds were against me when I overheard my sister Avesta speaking quietly behind a closed door to my father about his financial support so she could get "the operation." I remember it being around the time of her twenty-third birthday. Although my sister didn't live at home, I knew that she had felt increasingly self-conscious about her large nose and its disproportionate size relative to the rest of her face. Unlike me, she possessed many of my mother's features: petite build, light brown curly hair, fair skin, and the recessive gene of green eyes. In our family, the nose job seemed to correspond with the approaching age of marriageability; the change of nose at early adulthood was in effect an indicator of being "on the market" for a suitor.

In the days after my sister's surgery, I saw her only once in the white bandages and with deep bruises under her eyes before she retreated to her apartment to recover and heal. After she recovered, she came over several times and showed off her nose like it was a brand new car. She held her head high and let her new nose, reduced and trimmed, signal her more ordinary and less ethnically marked face. For her, the operation had been a double success: she was more aesthetically aligned with American beauty norms and she had eradicated her Middle Eastern heritage, a part of herself with which she was never comfortable. She had also participated in a rite of passage that she shared with our two other sisters, and despite her distance from them, it was a way she belonged and I didn't. Of the four girls in my family, I was now the only one with my original nose.

I managed to avoid the topic of nose jobs until around the time I turned 18, when my father, who was acutely aware of the long-standing tradition and the rising costs of such an operation, asked me if I wanted to get one. He told me that along with savings he'd been putting aside for my college education, he'd also saved an additional \$3,000 in the event that I wanted to join my sisters in the nose-reduction club. Although I appreciated the gesture, deep down, I was distressed by his offer. "But do you think I need one? Do you think I am not beautiful

enough?" He laughed and responded by saying that I looked like him, and that as his daughter I would always be beautiful in his eyes. "But do you think I have such a big nose?" I pleaded. "Your nose is a smaller version of mine," he said. "I regard the nose as a sign of character, and on you it is part of the total aspect of your beauty. But what is inside is what determines how others see you." My father, who was deeply prone to philosophical answers, did not stop there. He answered me by offering an expression in Persian, "*cheshm-tan ashaq mibineh*"—it is your eyes that see beauty—quite similar to "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder," in English. "You are beautiful," he said, "but it is up to you to decide."

After thinking about it for several weeks, I decided not to get my nose "fixed" and instead took the money that my father put aside and used it for a trip to study abroad in my senior year of high school. I was aware that I was making a choice, an intellectual and feminist choice that would set me apart from some of my sisters and other female relatives. I was both proud and a little ambivalent about the choice I had made.

Ironically, it was years later that I would meet a man who possessed a large nose and who would later become my husband. Although he was Jewish and not Iranian, I felt a strange affinity for being with someone whose proboscis was even larger than mine. We both laughed at the idea that we came from cultures that sought to diminish the size of the nose, and that ultimately, we were better equipped to deal with the hotter climes with our large noses. Perhaps it was a subconscious appreciation for how my own father justified large noses in men with sexual virility and character. As I grew older I came to appreciate how my own nose belonged on my face, with my other features—large eyes, and a pronounced chin—but whatever the case, I no longer fretted about it.

Recently I watched the entire "Star Trek: Next Generation" series on DVD with my husband and nine-year-old son, encountering the race of people in outer space identified as the *Ferengi*. I became aware again how powerful the image of large noses is as a marker of foreignness and outsider-ness. (The *Ferengi* do not belong to the United Federation of Planets and are in fact a bit rogue.) In fact, the word "farangi" in Persian means literally

"foreigner." The characters on this TV show are attributed with being greedy and solely motivated by profit—a characteristic that has been associated with anti-Semitic stereotypes, and more recently with both Arabs and Iranians. The negative association of the *Ferengi* on a popular late twentieth-century sci-fi television show was no longer about Jews but about other Middle Eastern people—Saudis, Iranians, and other oil-producing Arab nations that have become associated with avarice, profiteering, and a militaristic sensibility. In addition to being sinister and mercenary, the *Ferengi* are also unappealingly sexist; they are disdainful and disturbed to see the women of the Starship Enterprise serving alongside men in leadership roles.

More recently, I came to appreciate my large nose again when I learned in a 2009 news story on CBS by Jaime Holguin that Iran is now the "Nose Job Capital of the World." In a country where aesthetic beauty is limited by the efforts of the government to curb public displays of sexuality, both men and women seek to alter their appearance in response to the limited and restrictive codes of dress and bodily presentation. While liposuction and breast augmentation are the most prevalent procedures in the United States, in Iran, a nose job has become standard practice (at a mere \$1,500). According to some news reports, the nose job is one of the few ways that women can and do alter their appearance when they are required to cover their hair and much of their bodies and are discouraged from wearing makeup. Ironically, this act of personal expression represents a rare opportunity for young Iranians who want to show resistance against anti-Western sentiments by the government and model images of European and American men and women in fashion magazines.

In 2006, director Mehrdad Oskouei captured the Iranian national obsession with nose jobs in Iran in a short documentary called, "Nose, Iranian Style" (whose title is a play on an earlier documentary called, "Divorce, Iranian Style"). In his slightly humorous documentary, Oskouei considers the epidemic of nose jobs that is estimated at 60,000 to 70,000 operations each year. The Italian photographer Fabio Bucciarelli documents the national obsession with rhinoplasty in his photo essay, "Nose Job: Iran, 2009," which appears both on his website as well

as in the US-based online newsmagazine *Tehran Bureau*. His series of photographs, shot in Tehran in 2009, features young men and women who wear a single rectangular bandage across their nose in the postsurgical recovery stage. Each of his subjects (an equal number of men and women) pose for the photo as if to say, "I own my body, I own my nose. And I can alter my nose myself if I please." Unlike my sister, who hid her bandages and waited to reveal her "new" look to the world until after she was completely healed, this series of photos documents the seeming defiance encompassed by getting plastic surgery to look less Iranian and more Western. The bandage itself is seen as part of an aesthetic rebelliousness (see www.fabiobucciarellis.com/portfolio-item/nose-job/).

While I understand my own vexed relationship with my nose, I have also come to accept the body as a site for cultural, aesthetic, and personal meaning that changes over time and across cultures. I've come to accept my nose as both a sign of my heritage and have resisted altering it because of how others have construed its aesthetic value through a singular lens. Instead, I see my nose in a larger, global context that offers multiple significations and meanings.

At last, I turned to poetry to praise it:

IN PRAISE OF BIG NOSES

Persis M. Karim

I am the only one of four sisters
who hasn't gone under the knife.
I resisted the pleas of my aunt and sisters
to become "more beautiful," "more you."
I've kept my stately proboscis
intact—choosing not to excise its grandeur.

It suits me, I suppose—evidence of my father,
those people who live in the dryer, hotter climes
of the Mediterranean, in high desert plateaus,
cooling themselves with naso-thermo-regulation.
My old Jewish boyfriend used to say *how do the goyim
breathe from those things anyway?*

On my wedding day, my husband, also Jewish
and rather plentiful in that region of his face
completed his vows by saying "there is no guarantee in love,
but of this, I am certain: if we have a child he or she
will have a really big nose." When I nuzzle him
with mine, he pulls back his face, jumps

at the coldness of its tip. Contrary to popular belief, the nose
is not merely cosmetic—it can gauge temperature beyond the
body.

And that's another thing, I've realized about the nose—
that smell is an underrated sense, perhaps a gift.
Imagine the possibilities for amplification: aromas
of jasmine, apple pie, saffron, lemon, rose,

might grow more intense, depending on the height
and angle of that fleshy mound. I admit to having no
scientific evidence for this, but I do wonder
what happens when a person alters
the things they were born with.

Whole industries were born from Iranian women
watching blonde, petite-nosed movie stars
who made them forget their own striking beauty
took thousands of years to evolve, only to be undone
by someone who decided that hairless, plucked, tucked,
sliced, nipped, and trimmed, were the loveliest

of them all. I like to think of the nose as great art
waiting to be discovered. Like those large-nosed kings
depicted on sides of temples, on papyrus, on caves, in
colorful

Mayan pictographs like *Popul Voh*. Noses were signs
of nobility and prowess. Any king with a puny one
might have been thought of as small and impotent.

These days, I get a steady stream of emails offering penis
enlargement. But that's hidden, visible only
in bedroom interludes. The nose is the public display
of one's endowments—the relief map of a human face.
I study people's noses in order to read their origins—
to situate my gaze, to find how far out

in the world they really are.¹



Figure 3.1 Proud, big-nosed Iranian American women (from l to r): Mona Kayhani, Persis M. Karim, and Aphrodite Desirée Navab.

Photo: Persis M. Karim

NOTE

1. "In Praise of Big Noses" by Persis Karim first appeared in the special "Iran issue" of *The Atlanta Review* 16(2) (2010): 45–46.