

## Introduction

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A few years ago, at a conference on Middle Eastern women in Bellagio, Italy, an anthropologist asked me, “How exactly does a historian of gender go about researching her field?” It was a surprising but valid question, given the relatively recent origin of the field of Middle Eastern gender history. The short answer is that since there are often a small number of historical documents that deal directly with women’s issues, much of Middle East gender history is about rereading existing texts, asking how their authors conceptualized masculinity and femininity for their time. The historian must also have a keen eye for silences and gaps in historical records, which can be very revealing. One also needs to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to capture those subtle transformations in gender roles that are not reflected in historical accounts. Forays into poetry, short stories, novels, cartoons, cinema, as well as works by cultural anthropologists, sociologists, literary critics, and economists of the region can yield great results.

Perhaps the best way to answer the question, and also shed light on the theoretical orientation of this book, is to take the reader through the processes that led to its writing. Initially, I had hoped to explain the underlying gender dynamics of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and its aftermath, here building on the important contributions of Eliz Sanasarian (1982), Parvin Paidar (1995), and more recently Hamideh Sedghi (2007) on women’s history and gender policies of the twentieth century. However, my conceptions of the book expanded after conducting a series of seminars at Purdue University on the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, the French post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault, contemporary feminist theory, and also co-authoring, with Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* (2005). I gradually concluded that these theoretical writings could provide valuable insights into (1) the exuberance with which women from the *bazaar* and clerical families had embraced the Islamic Revolution and (2) the role of the Islamist state in releasing lower middle-class youth from the grips of their highly patriarchal families.

2 Sexual politics in modern Iran

Historians of the Middle East in the US seldom employ the perspectives of the Frankfurt School with respect to the family and the authoritarian character. Michel Foucault belongs to a different branch of critical theory, but he had also theorized the impact of modernity on the family. As against most members of the Frankfurt School, who had followed Freud's views on sexuality and modernity more or less uncritically, Foucault offered original insights on sexuality by making homosexuality as central as heterosexuality. Once that was done, the attack on homosexuality that accompanied the vaunted sexual liberation of the early twentieth century could be discerned more clearly. Whether or not one agreed with Foucault's overall perspectives on modernity, it was hard not to appreciate his enormous contribution to our understanding of modern sexuality. But what were the consequences of modernity for gender and sexuality in the Middle East, where even talking about the pervasive homoeroticism of the region's premodern culture had been labeled "Orientalism"? Increasingly, I found that sexuality occupied an undeniably crucial place in Iran's history. One could not simply talk about gender and women's rights, particularly rights within marriage, without also addressing the subject of same-sex relations.

The publication of Sirus Shamisa's *Shahedbazi dar Adabiyat-e Farsi* (2002), which deals with same-sex relations in Persian literature, gave me a wonderful excuse to revisit some of the medieval Persian classics from this angle, works that I reread alongside scholarly commentaries on Sufism, most notably those of Annemarie Schimmel (1975) and Julie Scott Meisami (1987). I emerged from this excursion with a new appreciation for the Foucauldian concept of the "ethics of love" as I concentrated on the rituals of male courtship in Persian literature. I also realized that Sufi love, which had always been celebrated for its religious and ethnic tolerance and its break with orthodoxy, might also have embodied a new "ethics of love." This literary-philosophical tradition seemed to break with the conventional status-defined homosexuality of the Middle Eastern/Muslim world and its rigidly hierarchical social order, aspiring to a new and more reciprocal (homosexual) love.

To pursue the concept of love in modern Persian literature, I also reread many of the literary works of the twentieth century, particularly from the formative period of the 1920s through the 1940s. One of the major preoccupations of the writers of this era had been the ideal of companionate marriage. Some, such as Bozorg 'Alavi, were celebrating companionate marriage with the understanding that it would not necessarily provide greater happiness for women. Others, such as Sadeq Hedayat, lamented the loss of a world where sexualities were more ambivalent, and heterosexuality was not yet normative in the modern sense.

Reading through several new books on homosexuality in the Middle East, including some of the unpublished works of Everett Rowson who was kind enough to share his work with me, reassured me that I was on the right track. Khaled El-Rouayheb (2005), Walter Andrews and Mehmet Kalpakli (2005) had suggested a link between gender segregation and the pervasive homoeroticism of the Muslim Middle East, indicating that these relationships were fueled by a need for companionship rather than lack of sex. Both of these works addressed the idealistic as well as the abusive dimensions of same-sex relations. Afsaneh Najmabadi had adopted a less critical attitude toward status-defined homosexuality in nineteenth-century Iran and also resisted a connection between gender segregation and homoeroticism. But her new work also linked male homosexual practices to women's demands for more companionate marriages (2005, 8).

Late nineteenth-century intellectuals such as Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani had initiated the debate on *normative heterosexuality* and companionate marriage. In recent theories of sexuality, normative sexuality has come to mean accepting heterosexual relations (and rejecting homosexual ones) as the only proper and healthy sexual behavior. In the twenty-first century, notions of normative heterosexuality are seen as oppressive. However, early twentieth-century advocates of women's rights in Iran and the Middle East saw this problem differently. They regarded normative heterosexuality as an advance because they believed it meant a man would actually love a woman, rather than merely maintain her as an object of procreation.

During the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, liberal and leftist publications campaigned for companionate marriage but not yet normative heterosexuality. The latter gradually impacted Iran from the north and the west. The more modernist Shi'i Azeri intellectuals of the Russian Caucasus initiated a wide criticism of homosexuality, especially the Tbilisi-based newspaper *Molla Nasreddin*. This illustrated satirical paper, which circulated among Iranian intellectuals and ordinary people alike, was enormously popular in the region because of its graphic cartoons. The paper was also known for its advocacy of companionate marriage and opposition to both pedophilia and pederasty.

For details on the contemporary gay subculture in Iran, I turned to GLBT (Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgendered) activists inside Iran and abroad. After the public hanging of two teenagers in Mashhad in the summer of 2005 on charges of homosexuality, I began a discussion with editors of *MAHA*, one of the first electronic journals of the Iranian GLBT community, and other members of this community such as Arsham Parsi. I also read through publications such as *Homan*, *Cheragh*, and *Hamjens-e*

*Man*, which have done much to illuminate the practices of homosexuality and heterosexuality in contemporary Iranian society.

I became aware of a number of other fundamental cultural changes the nation had experienced in the twentieth century, in the process of developing a series of lectures on the evolution of democracy in modern Iran. Iran has undergone not one but several paradigm shifts with respect to gender and sexuality, around the notions of social justice, purity, adulthood, and agency. At the same time it would be an overgeneralization to speak of a complete change of mores in modern Iran, as if earlier notions of justice, purity, and adulthood have been discarded and new ones have taken their place entirely. I began to think about a paradigm shift around the concept of purity, partly under the influence of Mary Douglas's important work, *Purity and Danger* ([1966] 2002). I was interested in the nature of this change – from religious/ritualistic notions of purity to modern concepts of hygiene – and its implications for women's bodies. A second distinct paradigm shift involved age and adulthood. Earlier, girls were married young, often at or before puberty, while status-defined homosexuality involved sex between adolescent and sometimes younger boys and adult men. Social attitudes about the proper age for sex would change, especially by the 1930s. The legal age of marriage for girls would increase to fifteen while adult men's sex with boys would be prohibited.

A third paradigm shift involved notions of social justice. In premodern Iran, as in Greco-Roman or medieval European societies, distributive justice had applied different standards to different social groups in order to maintain a social hierarchy. In contrast, modern justice aspires to treat people of different classes, ethnicities, and genders as formally equal. That (male) Iranian citizens had to be treated equally before the law regardless of their social status or religion, that mutilation constituted cruel and inhuman punishment, that Iran should resolutely adhere to international anti-slavery conventions, and that laws should be uniformly applied in different cities and towns, were all principles that were introduced during the course of the Constitutional Revolution. However, family law, including the rights of women in marriage and divorce, inheritance, and child custody, continued to be defined according to old concepts of justice. The contrast between modern and premodern, *shari'a*-based,<sup>1</sup> ideals of justice remained a persistent theme in the struggles for women's rights.

These issues alerted me to the category of class, which some of us who have turned to cultural history have tended to play down. The idea that Muslim societies could ban homosexuality but tolerate semi-covert

<sup>1</sup> Rules and regulations that are derived in principle from the Qur'an and traditions relating to the words and deeds of the Prophet and the Shi'i imams that govern the lives of Shi'i Muslims.

man–boy relationships was corroborated in Iran. However, these relations varied in many ways, and, as in the Greco-Roman world, the degree of class difference between the boy and the man often determined how overt the relationship might be. The same was true of the institution of temporary marriage. As Shahla Haeri has shown in her pioneering study, temporary marriage was more than an outlet for sexual pleasure. It was also a means of circumventing social segregation (Haeri 1989). But an important element in the institution of temporary marriage was also class. Temporary wives provided a lucrative source of income for *bazaar* merchants, who kept these women in their employ. High-status men who kept boy concubines or contracted temporary marriage disapproved of their own daughters becoming temporary wives or their sons becoming boy concubines, unless the prospective male partners were of much higher social status. The institution of slavery also had a profound effect on gender and sexual mores, as master–slave relations transformed all other social relations, particularly those of marriage.

The marriage and divorce certificates and police reports which Mansoureh Ettihadieh and her student Elham Malekzadeh kindly forwarded from Tehran, provided another venue for examining the concept of agency in nineteenth-century Iran. I also pored over numerous harem memoirs, as well as accounts by European travelers written in English, French, and occasionally German. In reading the European memoirs I had expected to find mostly Orientalist perspectives on Iranian women's passivity and submission. To be sure, there was plenty of that. But I also discovered some surprisingly different accounts, especially in the works of women travelers and male court physicians. These narratives, court certificates, and police reports chronicled women's resistance, highlighting the usefulness of the veil in secret sexual encounters, the preponderance of hymen repair and abortion, and women's appeals to police to control unruly husbands.

In a visit to Iran in spring 2005, I noticed some dramatic changes in sexual mores and realized that the nation was quietly moving toward a sexual revolution. It was a revolution that was taking place behind the *hijab* and closed doors, and also working itself out at different stages in rural communities, as Erika Friedl, Mary Hegland, and Soraya Tremayne, who have carried out ethnographic work in villages, have demonstrated. Soon a group of courageous Iranian feminists affiliated with the online journal *Zanestan* began the Million Signatures Campaign, demanding equal rights for women in marriage and the family. The state has tried to bring an end to this campaign and other recent feminist efforts through harassment and intimidation. *Zanestan* has been blocked, forcing the editors to launch the campaign from other Internet sites. In January 2008,

the large-circulation feminist magazine *Zanan* was also shut down after sixteen years of publication on the grounds that it showed Iranian women in a “dark light” and was a “threat to the psychological security of society.”

This book is dedicated to these courageous feminists in the hope that it might give historical context to their efforts. What follows is the largely untold story of Iran’s unfinished sexual revolution, while we listen to the voices of young Iranian women and men who are making history on the ground even as these words are being written.

Most studies of nineteenth-century Iran have painted a chaotic social canvas, focusing on imperialist designs, the intrigues of Qajar rulers, or the poverty, hunger, and ill health of the masses. A focus on the evolution of the institution of marriage offers a different perspective. Qajar Iran had a rigidly hierarchical social order, with a clearly defined class, ethnic, and religious structure and an entrenched pattern of family obligations. Religious beliefs provided the basis for shared values. Many cherished a relative sense of security fostered by communal identities. Marriage was nearly universal, holding families and communities together. Parents found a spouse for their son or daughter and provided the means for their marriage. At or before puberty, the young bride moved in with the groom’s family, where the mother-in-law taught her how to be a wife and mother. Reported crimes were low in a world where girls, boys, and women endured or quietly resisted incest, sexual molestation, and rape. Monogamy was the norm for the vast majority of urban, rural, and tribal communities. But among the upper classes, the practices of polygamy and of keeping boy concubines were common.

Three prevalent types of legally sanctioned, heterosexual intimacy existed among the urban elites of this period: *nekah*, or formal marriage; *sigheh*, or temporary marriage; and slave concubinage. *Nekah* was usually contracted between a man and woman of more or less equal social status. A wife in a *nekah* marriage was known as an ‘*aqdi* wife. *Nekah* was intended to be permanent, but the husband could terminate it by divorce. *Sigheh*, a Shi’i institution, was a renewable contract of marriage for a defined duration, from a few hours to ninety-nine years. *Sigheh* provided sex for pleasure and was often contracted between a lower-class woman and a man of higher social standing. The wife in a *sigheh* marriage was also known as a *sigheh*. The institution differed from European concubinage in that the recognized children of a *sigheh* marriage were considered legitimate and eligible for inheritance, although the father could easily deny his paternity (Haeri 1989). The third form of recognized heterosexual intimacy involved the purchase or inheritance of a female slave. Having borne a master’s child, the slave continued to work as a maid/concubine in

the house, though she would normally be manumitted upon the master's death. The children were free and legitimate, provided that the master recognized them. All three of these forms of heterosexual intimacy could be found in the elite harems, together with male slaves and concubines.

The position of an *'aqdi* was relatively stable. By her early thirties, she might be the mother of several grown children and even the matriarch of a family. However, arranged marriage, polygamy, and the extended family often led to weak emotional bonds between an *'aqdi* wife and her husband. While divorce was rare within the rural and urban lower classes, it was more acceptable among the urban middle and upper classes. Strong social ties between the two families, and the financial obligations of a man after divorce, made it difficult, however. The remarriage of a divorced woman from these social strata was justifiable and incurred little stigma.

Strong bonds of love might develop initially in a *nekah* marriage, but sustaining them proved daunting. Family interference and lack of privacy created severe obstacles. Physical intimacy might be confined to the bed, where sex took place quickly and furtively, soon interrupted by children who shared their parents' room. In time, the lack of reliable contraceptives, multiple pregnancies, and high infant mortality rates would exhaust the wife. In addition, social norms encouraged her to minimize her erotic attachment to her husband, and to divert her attention to motherhood and other familial pursuits that earned her more respect and authority.

In elite families, the burdens of physical labor were less onerous, but the impediments to creating and maintaining strong conjugal relations were even more tenacious. A man's rights to divorce and polygamy undermined the couple's emotional investment in one another. The fact that children of all polygamous unions (and any offspring from temporary marriage or a slave concubine) had formal inheritance rights, also weakened the ties between husband and wife (Hodgson 1974, I:341). These male prerogatives reduced the wife's emotional commitment to the husband. Often, romantic feelings for her husband would be transformed over time into a close attachment to her son. Similarly, a husband's easy access to other women and the presence of the mother-in-law in the house reduced his commitment to the happiness of his wife.

However, girls and wives did not always succumb to these pressures. There were no "Great Refusals" in this period, no large-scale public forms of resistance, but in James Scott's apt characterization, numerous smaller and more readily available "weapons of the weak" were deployed in daily life (Scott 1985). Young women resisted their parents' choice of suitors and attempted to exercise some influence over the process. Aided by resourceful midwives and love brokers, women underwent secret hymen repair and abortions, and sought medicinal, magical, and even illicit solutions to

a husband's infertility. Wives exercised a measure of control in bed, in the kitchen, and in the general management of the house and the children. Their influence manifested itself in their propensity to withhold or grant favors. A wife could refuse to share in her husband's pleasure in bed, even if she complied with his demand for sexual intimacy. She gained prestige by organizing elaborate dinner parties, keeping her house meticulously clean, and developing extensive information about his relatives. She often called on relatives, neighbors, and even the police in cases of domestic violence. Combined with her skills as a hostess, the decline of erotic bonds with her husband as she grew older might boost her stock in the eyes of her mother-in-law, who had less fear of her daughter-in-law's sway over her son. Often the wife's ties with her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law effectively isolated the husband among the household's most powerful women. Alternatively, the wife could strike a balance in her own house by reinforcing her relationship with the family into which her sister-in-law had married. Should her concerted efforts to control her husband fail, a woman could resist her husband's decision to take another wife and try to wreck his second wedding, sometimes by attempting suicide. Overall, the wife invested less in the emotional relationship with her husband and more in the relationship with her children and his or her kin. As she grew older, the wife could become a powerful matriarch who exercised control over the life of her sons and her daughters-in-law, thereby also asserting increased authority over her husband in his old age.

Nineteenth-century Iranian society did not adhere to modern definitions or sensibilities concerning same-sex relations. Although legally prohibited, homosexual sex was common, and homoerotic passion was accommodated. Falling in love with a youth and celebrating that love were recognized practices, as long as the lovers remained circumspect and observed certain conventions. Elite urban men often flouted these conventions. In the royal court and among government officials, wealthy merchants, and clerics, the practice of keeping boy concubines was widespread and commonly known; close, homosexual relations between free adult men were less often discussed or divulged, however. Among married women, same-sex relations known as sisterhood vows were also culturally recognized practices. Although we have much less information on female homosexuality, we know that such courtships involved an exchange of gifts, travel to a shrine, and cultivation of affection between the partners. Finally, while people were expected to observe rigid social hierarchies, such social orders could be breached in both heterosexual and homosexual unions. The slave who gave birth to a son could become a *sigheh* wife. The favorite *sigheh* often became an '*aqdi*, and the chosen boy concubine could rise to a high post at the royal court.



Gender and sexual conventions changed as a result of protracted encounters with the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Western Europe, the rise of democratic reforms, and the advent of modern nationalism. By the early twentieth century, the foreign slave trade was restricted, while the Constitutional Revolution dismantled the harems. Several Iranian journals and many women's associations campaigned in favor of greater women's rights although in the course of the revolution, the most vocal advocate of new gender and sexual mores, the journal *Molla Nasreddin*, emerged from outside the country in Tbilisi (modern Georgia). An Azeri-Iranian diaspora publication, the journal advocated companionate marriage and criticized sexual relationships with minor children, including the institution of child marriage. It also suggested a link between men's intransigence toward gender reforms and their reluctance to abandon sex-segregated homosocial spaces. Notably, *Molla Nasreddin* became the first publication in the Shi'i Muslim world to endorse normative heterosexuality. In the decades that followed, other Iranian intellectuals, first in the diaspora and later within Iran, continued to push for the type of agenda initiated by *Molla Nasreddin*.

In the late 1930s, modernization in Iran came to involve the use of the police to enforce new disciplinary practices on women's and men's bodies, a process that accelerated after women were unveiled by state decree. Women's bodies became sites of political and cultural struggle, complicated further by the subjection of unveiled women to an intense public gaze and sexual harassment. Reforms in health and hygiene in this period had an equally important impact. Old rituals of purification, which had marked public and private spaces for men and women, were reinterpreted in light of modern sciences, which featured explanations involving germs and sickness. With religious justifications for gender segregation weakening, and the state encouraging greater public participation by women, social hierarchies loosened. As a new Civil Code raised the legal age of marriage for girls to fifteen and further eroded the hierarchies that had enforced gender segregation, Iranian women began to assert themselves through schools, clubs, and other institutions of civil society.

Leading intellectuals of this era such as Ahmad Kasravi developed new normative discourses on sexuality and marriage. Although marriages were still arranged by parents and required paternal approval, a more companionate form of marriage gained greater approval. Support for formal polygamy (having multiple 'aqdi wives) and status-defined homosexuality sharply declined, while heterosexual monogamy came to be seen as the new norm. Paralleling earlier patterns in the West, the urban communities of Iran became less accepting of pedophilic relationships, regardless of context. Overt bisexuality became less prevalent among men and women

of the middle and upper classes. People of the upper classes, including a new generation of men in the Pahlavi dynasty, also abandoned the practice of keeping multiple wives. The old middle classes, composed of those affiliated with the *bazaar*, the clerical families, and the tribal leaders, continued to practice polygamy, although even in these instances the number was usually limited to two wives.

From 1941 to 1953, Iran experienced a period of relative political freedom from the Pahlavi autocracy as the Allies ousted Reza Shah Pahlavi in favor of his young son Muhammad Reza Shah, and a variety of political parties emerged. Subsequently the struggle for the nationalization of oil, led by Prime Minister Muhammad Mosaddeq and the National Front, set Iran against Britain. Gender issues were just beneath the surface of these economic and political conflicts, however. Contemporary periodicals reveal that the struggle over women's suffrage became highly contentious during these years, dividing the National Front. Had the Western powers allowed Mosaddeq to carry out his twin projects of social reform and national independence, these issues might have been resolved peacefully. Instead, the 1953 Anglo-American coup derailed the democratic movement, and Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi returned to power.

Although the shah crushed democracy with brutality, he continued to support gender modernization. In the 1950s and 1960s, companionate marriage and the nuclear family began to supplant strictly arranged unions and the remnants of formal polygamy within the new urban middle classes. In addition, the influence of the extended family over the nuclear one was mitigated. Young men took a more assertive part in choosing their spouses, and young urban women gradually followed suit. A rising generation of educated women, among them university professors, lawyers, Members of Parliament, and leaders of the state-sponsored Women's Organization of Iran (WOI), began to cautiously campaign for new laws granting women substantially greater marital rights.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the WOI assisted in reforming the institution of marriage, partially legalizing abortion as well. It also helped enact laws that granted women greater rights in divorce, placing limitations on men's unilateral right to divorce and child custody. Polygamy was legally restricted and subject to the permission of the first wife. The emergence of a modern gay lifestyle in a few sectors of the urban elite also caused social anxiety.

These changes were more dramatic than their counterparts in Europe, in part because they took place over the relatively short period of about seventy years. The triple introduction of normative monogamy, normative heterosexuality, and companionate marriage in the first part of the twentieth century, and the dramatic changes that took place in the status