Introduction

Changing Masculinities in a Changing Iran

Sometime in 1945, renowned author and playwright Sadeq Hedayat published one of his most popular works, the bitingly satirical play *Haji Aqa* (Mr. Haji). The protagonist is Haji Aqa Abu Turab, an elderly and old-fashioned wheeler-dealer who lives in Tehran during the last years of Reza Shah’s rule (1925–1941). Haji Aqa stands for all that is corrupt, immoral, and harmful in Iranian society. He is a “fixer” who helps men of various social strata and origins to succeed in business or in politics in order to advance his own goals. He does not hesitate to cheat and lie, always preferring to swindle others than to be swindled himself.

Haji is the son of a tobacco merchant who made a fortune from hoarding during the Tobacco Revolt of 1891–1892, profiteering from what is usually considered the inaugural event of the Iranian nationalist movement. Despite his wealth, Haji himself is stingy, especially when his family is concerned. He has several *‘aqdi* (permanently married) wives as well as two temporary ones and numerous children, all of whom he regards with equal distaste. His wives repay him by having affairs, which result in more children Haji pretends are his own. Haji’s appearance is unattractive: he has “stubby, hairy calves” and hands, “saucer eyes,” and he wears “grubby canvas shoes” and a threadbare camelhair cloak. His deteriorating physical condition is further manifest in his “swollen testicles,” the result of orchitis that makes him sterile.

Haji has little regard for modern knowledge and education. Uneducated himself, he did send his son to study in Europe, but this turned out to be a waste of money as the son proved to be a good-for-nothing dandy, who nevertheless found himself a comfortable position as a driver in court. Haji Aqa sees the effects of modernization in Iran as nothing more than the spread of debauchery and indecency. Moreover, he pretends to be pious and religious while in fact he neglects the most basic duties of a Muslim. In short, in looks and beliefs, in morals and
family life, Haji Aqa is the absolute opposite of all that a “good” or “proper man” is supposed to be.\(^1\)

Notwithstanding his glaring shortcomings, Haji is highly regarded by townspeople, bazaar merchants and even government ministers. Men who go on pilgrimage entrust to him the care of their property, their wives, and their children, even though he often proves to be unworthy of this trust. He claims that his word is so valuable in the bazaar that he can “pawn” a hair of his mustache and get 50 million tuman worth of goods for it. His acquaintances (but not members of his household) believe Haji to be a javannard: a trustworthy and honest man to whom all may apply for help, an ideal man. Thus, Hedayat suggests that underneath the respectable and pious façade of Haji Aqa (and, implicitly, men like him) lie thoroughly rotten bodies and characters. The fact that Haji’s ailment is located in his testicles further stresses the infirmity of his masculinity.

As Haji Aqa is a satire on Iranian society, Haji’s figure represents a masculinity that by the 1940s had become outmoded and engendered reproach and ridicule: that of the prominent bazaari, who clings to conservative views and lifestyles and pretends to be an exemplar of decency and respectability. For Hedayat, this is what Iranian men ought not to be. Yet in nineteenth-century Iran, when the protagonist was born, many of his characteristics were part of a widely acceptable notion of an appropriate masculinity. Age, a large family and a big household, business acumen and the ability to mediate and influence people’s careers and fortunes, religiosity and conservatism were all deemed essential to the construction of honorable masculinity. Even the ridiculed canvas shoes and camelhair cloak were worn by respectable men. How, then, did it transpire that by the 1940s these laudable qualities came to be denounced as a source of all that was evil in Iranian society? How did another ideal of masculinity that presented the opposite of Haji Aqa – a young, patriotic, educated, westernized, and monogamous man – emerge and develop since the late nineteenth century?

\(^1\) Sadeq Hedayat and Introduction by Lois Beck, Hāji Āghā: Portrait of an Iranian Confidence Man, trans. G. M. Wickens (Austin, TX: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1979); Minoo Moallem, Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy In Iran (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 71–72.
This book deals with the construction and development of a new model of masculinity that began to evolve in Iran in the late nineteenth century, and subsequently became hegemonic during Reza Shah Pahlavi’s reign. The book traces the ideals and images that formed the new hegemonic masculinity, its representations and the practices and experiences of Iranian men who embodied, articulated, imitated, or rejected it. Being considered a “real man” meant completely different things in late-nineteenth-century and mid-twentieth-century Iran. In Reza Shah’s period men lived, dressed, and behaved in a new fashion, and held new notions and beliefs regarding science and education, patriotism, love, marriage, sexuality, and their own bodies. These changes were not coincidental, as masculinity is not natural but historical and changing: they were contingent on specific sociocultural and political dynamics, and were culturally produced and actively promoted by individuals and groups, as well as through state indoctrination and coercion. This book looks at the men advocating and embodying the new masculinity and at how the cluster of images, ideas, and practices associated with it served their material and ideological interests. It also looks at the men excluded from the new masculinity and how their different masculinities were portrayed and imagined.

Tracing the formation and changes of hegemonic masculinity in Iran is important in and of itself. This book offers more, however. Investigating changing male ideals, representations, practices, and norms also allows us to reexamine some of the most important and widely researched processes in the history of modern Iran from a new gendered perspective, one that does not place women at its center. During the period studied here, Iran has experienced the rise of nationalism, the emergence of a new urban elite, and the related emergence and development of new forms of education. It has witnessed various projects of modernization from the establishment of a centralized government, state bureaucracy, and army, through the building of transportation and communication infrastructure, to the introduction and adoption of Western dress, leisure practices, and family models. Whereas many studies from recent years have considered the gender aspect of these processes, usually their focus has been on women, or on the impact modernization processes had on women’s lives. This book aims to complement these studies, by focusing on the masculine side of the gender equation.
The extensive changes mentioned above had their origins in the early nineteenth century, but became prominent and accelerated during the last quarter of that century. Even earlier, political and military defeats by imperialist powers such as Russia (in the Russo-Persian wars of 1804–1813 and 1826–1827) and Great Britain (in 1856–1857), alongside technological and diplomatic developments, increasingly exposed Iranians to the changing world outside their country’s borders. Communications technologies were imported and a first telegraph line connected Tehran to the Russian border in 1868. In 1872, a concession granted to the British Baron Julius de Reuter launched a period of concession hunting by the colonial Western powers. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Iran experienced the growing spread of Persian-language newspapers as well as of photography.

Humiliated by defeat and emboldened by the introduction of new technologies, reforms aiming to enhance Iran’s international status were suggested and debated, and sociocultural changes took hold mostly among educated, urban, elite Iranian men—the chief historical actors in this book. They were the ones most exposed to modern education and European ideas and practices. They were also the main advocates of modernizing reforms, many of which shaped and were affected by notions of masculinity and femininity.

One such reform was the introduction of modern, Western-style education beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Modern education and the press had an important role in introducing nationalism and patriotism to the Iranian public, and the turn of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence and growth of an Iranian nationalist

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movement that succeeded in mobilizing crowds in mass events such as the Tobacco Revolt and the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911). Rising nationalism engendered a heated debate on the benefits and dangers of westernization. Western objects, ideas, knowledge, and practices had been entering Iran at an accelerated pace since the late nineteenth century – and their adoption or rejection caused strife and enmity among different sections of Iranian society. This book critically applies the analytical tools of masculinity studies to a history of Iranian masculinities, and to their development and interrelations with the significant processes of modernization outlined above.


Modernization and westernization were taken a step forward during the reign of Reza Shah, who, together with a government and a bureaucracy manned by supporters of reform, wished to make Iran and Iranians the equals of westerners, and did not shy away from coercion in order to promote this aim. When Reza Shah was forced by the Allies to abdicate in 1941, a distinct change could be detected in Iranian notions and perceptions of masculinity. The model of masculinity, whose bearers now represented the country’s new professional, political, and cultural elite, reached a hegemonic position in state and society. The late 1930s was also the period when Western or Western-style education began to spread beyond the narrow ranks of elite groups. In the following decades, as more and more strata of society got access to higher, scientific education, new social groups with new resources of power began to take their place in the national arena. Furthermore, the spread of mass media technologies such as the radio (from the late 1930s) and television (from 1958) contributed to the dissemination of Western norms, ideas, and practices among wider audiences. Starting in the 1940s, new politics drew participants from hitherto uninvolved segments of Iranian society. All of these were to eventually contest the hegemony of elite men with Western education and some of the traits of masculinity that these men represented. Accordingly, the book ends in 1941 although, naturally, masculinities in Iran continued and still continue to evolve and change.


Gender and Masculinity in the Middle East

From the 1990s and to a greater extent since the early 2000s, historians began to explore masculinities in Western and non-Western societies. Scholars of Middle Eastern history called for greater inclusion of masculinity studies in scholarship on gender in the Middle East, but it seems that little has been done so far and most research on gender history in the Middle East still focuses on women and femininity. In recent years, there has been a trickle of articles and doctoral dissertations on various aspects of the history of Middle Eastern masculinities,


but the field is still in its infancy. A notable exception is Wilson Chacko Jacob’s study of masculinity in Egypt. Two multidisciplinary edited volumes on Middle Eastern and Islamic masculinities preceded his work, but were mostly not informed by masculinity studies or theory, and did not offer a coherent body of knowledge. One field of study that did attract the attention of numerous historians is the history of male homosexuality in the Middle East, on which several books were published. The historiography of sexuality in the Middle East and in Iran has focused mostly on marriage and the family, but considerably less on male heterosexual sexuality or on women’s sexuality. Studies of Middle Eastern masculinities in disciplines outside


14 Janet Afary, Sexual Politics in Modern Iran (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Willem M. Floor, A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran (Washington, DC: Mage, 2008); Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, eds., Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 2008);
history such as sociology, anthropology, and literature explored contemporary societies, with somewhat greater focus on their practices, images, and ideals of masculinity.¹⁵

Historical studies on Iran suffer from a similar imbalance. Many important studies on modern Iranian women have examined women’s changing status in the political, legal, social, and cultural spheres.¹⁶ Women’s roles in the country’s political upheavals have been brought to the fore and their importance in national and political symbolism scrutinized, as well as their struggle for legal rights and better positions in the public and private labor markets.¹⁷ Camron Amin has described


the construction of a modern Iranian woman by individuals and the state between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, showing how Iranian women were imagined and their status reformed. In a way, the present study attempts to do a similar thing for the modern Iranian man: looking at how this figure was imagined and reformed, by whom and for whom. My research has gained tremendously from the research of the scholars who had introduced masculinity to the historical research of gender in Iran. These are first and foremost Afsaneh Najmabadi in her studies of Qajar sexuality, Joanna de Groot in her consideration of masculinity and nationalism, and Minoo Moallem, who is to the best of my knowledge the first Iranian scholar to have referred to the concept of hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Its Critiques

Sociologist Raewyn Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity has been a useful analytical tool in this study, and one of the most influential concepts in masculinity studies. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity consists of the practices, traits, and behaviors that turn a male human being into a “real man.” These change significantly in

