

Prologue

Sexpionage and the Female Body

On May 28, 2019, the news of the murder of Mitra Ostad, the younger second wife of Mohammad Ali Najafi, a high-profile reformist, an ally of the Iranian president, and a former mayor of Tehran, proliferated the news and social media platforms.¹ Najafi confessed to killing his wife in a domestic dispute. Ostad was killed with bullet wounds to the heart and arm. In the span of a month, news of Mehdi Hashemi's second marriage with Mahnush Sadeghi became the focus of Iran's news outlets. Hashemi is a well-known actor, screenwriter, and director whose first wife is the famous actress Golab Adineh. Sadeghi is a young actress. While Hashemi initially denied this news, he later confessed to his marriage to Sadeghi in a letter.² This is, however, not the first time that Iran's news and social media outlets are attending to the private lives of celebrities or high-profile figures and benefiting from it. A reformist politician, 'Attaollah Mohajerani was also at the center of political scandals because of the news about his *'aqdi* and *sigheh* wives in 2004. What is important here is that these are three instances of cases where high-profile and famous, older men have entered relationships with younger women and have become the focus of scandalous representations resulting in the exposure of these women to harsh criticism, gendered violence, and, in the recent case of Ostad, a murder. What follows is a brief summary of Najafi and Ostad's case and my analysis in regard to the main argument of this book – mapping out sociocultural, religious, political corruption on the female body and the elimination of this female body on the grounds that it poses a threat to the structure, reputation, and “the greater good.” In all these cases, the women exposed to stigmatization and

¹ Some news outlets refer to Ostad as Najafi's *sigheh* wife and believe that she is mentioned as his second wife for respect.

² Thanks to Parvaneh Hosseini and Elham Naeef, who pointed out this potential connection to me.

exploitation of patriarchal sociopolitical institutions are either temporary or second wives.³

Najafi and Ostad's case made waves after Iran's state broadcaster showed footage of him at a Tehran police station, sipping tea and smiling with police officers as he confessed to killing his thirty-five-year-old wife, Mitra Ostad. The initial coverage of the killing raised questions over how Iranian news outlets report on issues of domestic violence. The weapon Najafi purportedly used to kill his wife and a white pillow with a hole stained by gunpowder residue was on display for parts of the trial. At the time, the state broadcaster, IRIB News, showed footage of an interview with Najafi in which he is not handcuffed, and the police officers and reporter interviewing him appear to treat him with deference. The reporter questioning him also appeared to handle the gun that was believed to be the murder weapon, showing it to the camera, and loading and unloading bullets from the weapon's magazine. The footage spread quickly on social media, with many criticizing it as inappropriate.

The treatment of Najafi, who had murdered his wife, by the law enforcement and the news broadcasters is a reflection of gendered and sociopolitical power dynamics harking back to the corruption of a sociopolitical system that contributes to the exploitation and manipulation of women by men and institutions that men dominate. Much like Moshfeq-e Kazemi's *Tehran-e Makhuf*, Jamalzadeh's *Ma'sumeh Shirazi*, Golestan's "Safar-e 'Esmat," and Chubak's *Sang-e Sabur*, this case highlights women's suffering at the hands of a patriarchal system that considers women a property to be owned or a commodity to be used, exchanged, sold, or murdered. These women are viewed as objects to be desired, but not as capable of being subjects in their own right. The case also elucidates the ways that the law enforcement and the news outlets dissociate the murder and the eliminated woman's body from the case, dehumanizing Ostad, and seeing her as a resource to be benefitted from. The case is representative of the ways that the female body simultaneously fluctuates as an object of power, a site of social inscription, and a threat to the status quo with regard to women's subjectivity and autonomy – Ostad was murdered because she was going to expose Najafi; she was a potential threat. This is a commentary on the decadence of the social and political systems of

³ Thanks to Nayereh Tohidi, who suggested that I write this analysis.

society, as well as the male objectification of young women, especially by high-ranking political figures.

The case raised questions about Iran's elite power dynamics, as well as gendered violence. Meanwhile, Najafi's fellow reformists claimed that Ostad had been hired by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps to lure Najafi into marriage and keep him under her control, lest he reveals "shocking" information about widespread financial corruption in the municipality of Tehran. While in charge of running Tehran municipality, Najafi had threatened to reveal a series of financial irregularities during his predecessor, IRGC brigadier-general, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf's term as the mayor that pointed to corruption. However, the threat never materialized, and Najafi abruptly resigned on grounds of an unknown illness. But many believe that Najafi was forced out by hard-liners after viewing a dance performance by school-girls. Najafi married Ostad months after he resigned. Later, it was revealed that the mayor had secretly married Ostad, a former actress. Pictures circulated on social media showed Najafi with his new wife in affectionate poses – a shocking development in conservative Iran. The case set off a debate between reformists and the country's governing conservatives. Conservatives said the case was an example of the moral corruption of reformists who do not live the devout lifestyle required of government officials. Conservative newspapers printed photos of Najafi on their front pages with one saying the scandal was a "bullet in the heart of reform." On the contrary, the reformists said they believed that Najafi had been framed. During his interviews after the murder, Najafi brought to the fore his suspicions about Ostad's potential role as a *parastu* (a woman acting as seductress while serving as a political insider agent for the opposite political party – sexpionage), too. Najafi said that he believed Ostad was in contact with intelligence officials, and the two had violent arguments because she threatened to expose him. Najafi also mentioned the fact that Ostad had sexual relationships with other *na-mahram* men. With this comment, Najafi exhibits his hypocrisy by blaming a murdered woman without a voice to defend herself for multiple, simultaneous relationships, while he was "allegedly" part of one of those relationships (his claim for the reason for their marriage) – a clear reference to the gendered double standards inherent in relationships between men and women where a man can enjoy multiple relationships simultaneously but a woman is condemned for such activity.

The case therefore sheds light on the ways that various sociopolitical institutions reduce women to the corporeal, instrumentalizing the female body to political advantage without viewing individual women as autonomous subjects. While in *Zendegi-ye Khosusi*, Parisa and Ebrahim's relationship is not the exact same one between Ostad and Najafi, one might reflect on scenes and conversations from the film which hark to the events surrounding Ostad's murder. For instance, consider the first scene where Parisa and Ebrahim meet and make some connections leading to the idea that Parisa could be considered a potential *parastu*, too. Ebrahim and Parisa meet at a party where both reformists and conservatives are attending with their family members. In fact, Ebrahim and Parisa strike a conversation right after Ebrahim has a heated conversation with the editor-in-chief of a hard-line newspaper, who is a member of the opposite political party to which Ebrahim belongs. Such parties are generally private and invitation-only based; however, Parisa – a nonpartisan woman – has been invited. Such instances make one think that Parisa might have been serving the opposite political party, namely, the hard-liners, while functioning as a temporary wife/seducress – sexpionage. The similarities between Parisa's name and the symbolic significance of *parastu* are also important here. Both the case and the film portray the unsettling balance of the political and the personal, double standards, and gendered inequality, and the inimical power of patriarchy to protect and maintain male dominance.

Regardless of all these debates between the reformists and the hard-liners, Najafi was sentenced to *qesas* (retribution in-kind) for killing his second wife on July 30 for charges of premeditated murder, battery, and possession of an unlicensed firearm. Najafi could repeal this verdict in twenty days. On August 14, news of Najafi being pardoned by Ostad's family infiltrated news and social media. In an Instagram post, Ostad's brother wrote, "We have forgiven Mr. Najafi, setting aside [the issue of] our beloved's blood, and we are contended for not bargaining over her blood." The fact that a woman has been murdered and a man (her brother) decides to forgive the male murderer also speaks to the dominant patriarchal discourses – men forgiving one another while a female body has been eradicated. This is also in line with my analysis of *Showkaran* and *Zendegi-ye Khosusi* where the male murderers of the female characters get away with the murder easily.

It is believed that this is the first time a high-profile political figure with a clean background and a long history of serving the regime is imprisoned for the murder of his wife. However, the focus on Najafi's sipping tea or the handling of the gun has taken the spotlight away from the murder of a woman. The manner in which news and social media handled the murder of a woman pushed the elimination of the female body to the margins (and to a great extent this marginalization of a woman's murder), contributing to the normalization of such gendered domestic violence and murder cases. Again, the way that these political parties approached this murder and the portrayal of the murder in the news outlets, including reformist and hard-line newspapers, speaks to not only the normalization of the murder of a woman who was a potential threat to the so-called "greater good," but it also speaks about the ways that this female body has been commodified and commercialized in a capitalist system to become a tool of payback for opponent political parties and newspapers while the murder and the elimination of the murdered woman's body and her rights have been forgotten. This brings me back to one of the main arguments in the book which is the mapping out of the sociocultural, religious, and political corruptions of a society upon the female body.

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PART I

General Overview

Introduction

Body Politics and Sigheh Marriages

Society often projects ideas of difference onto the human body by placing the body in prescribed roles that determine how it should behave socially and politically. Dichotomies based on gender, ability, aesthetic, age, and sexual identity, among others, highlight the instability of public and private borders, and subject the body to recognition or discrimination based on the body's proximity to those boundaries. Transgressing the limits of dichotomy (-ies) or identity (-ies) can deprive an individual of the right to claims of corporeal agency.

The realm of the political includes issues of personal agency associated with the body itself, including but not limited to sexual violence, contraception, reproduction, and personal aesthetic or style, and operate as markers of status and power. Within the purview of human existence, contemporary societies often organize and politicize bodies based on their sex and race, and seek to limit or to grant access to political power to those bodies based on their specific occupations, religions, and intimate relationships. A body's departure from its prearranged sexual, racial, or gender roles could subject it to physical, emotional, and sexual assault, and since the female body is disproportionately victimized by sexual violence, it is therefore marked as vulnerable and subordinate. Such a categorization associates the female body with excessive, frivolous emotion and paints it as unsuitable for the production or pursuit of sound knowledge.

Because bodies provide the foundation upon which societies are built,¹ it is necessary to study how crossing the borders of private and public boundaries subjects women to policing and stigmatization, potentially robbing them of their subjectivity and agency, and to analyze the ways in which the dismissal of the fluidity of a woman's bodily

¹ See Carol Delaney and Deborah Kaspin, *Investigating Culture: An Experiential Introduction to Anthropology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 196.

existence in mainstream politics compounds issues of exclusion and autonomy for women who seek to appear in the public sphere.

Hence, focusing on the intersections of gender and other societal constructs broadens the scope of what is studied in regard to body politics, formal and informal marriages, and sex work in modern Iranian literature and film, as well as the processes of nation building and modernization, among others. Under Iran's civil law, there are two recognized types of marriage: formal marriage (*nekah*) and temporary marriage (*sigheh* or *mut'a*). While formal marriage establishes a more enduring union with the intention of creating a family, temporary marriage is often of shorter duration. In many ways it is a form of concubinage, and requires a set of negotiations about the length, monetary exchange, and the nature of sexual relationships. *Sigheh* marriage has had a long history in the Arabian Peninsula and was practiced in the region even before the emergence of Islam, which positions it as a cultural practice rather than a religious tradition. In this type of marriage, there is no divorce because the union dissolves at the end of a designated term. While the primary purpose of formal marriage is the establishment of family and procreation, *sigheh* marriages are mainly for the gratification of sexual desires, often but not exclusively those of men, which is why Iran's middle-class, urban, and educated population has been viewing it as a type of sex work.² Therefore, despite the legality and legitimization of both marriages in Shi'i Islam (in Iran), *sigheh* marriages carry a social stigma that marks the couple, particularly the women who enter such marriages, and the institution itself, as inferior. A *sigheh* wife does enjoy certain liberties: autonomy to engage in personal, nonsexual relationships, maintain outside interests, leave the household without the husband's permission, live in a city where the husband does not reside, or even take a job. Nonetheless, because the practice is viewed as taboo in society, most *sigheh* women suffer from vulnerability and insecurity, and most men keep their *sigheh* relationship secret.

² While not all *sigheh* women are viewed as sex workers, several of the cultural productions under study highlight *sigheh* women who ultimately turn to sex work; therefore, I use "*sigheh*" and "sex work" with a slash to signify this parallelism in the works. I also use the term "sex worker" instead of "prostitute," signaling my participation in a larger set of feminist discourses that seek to redefine women's voices, humanity, and issues of labor with respect to sex work. For more information on using the term "sex work" instead of "prostitute," see Global Network of Sex Work Projects at www.nswp.org/.

This book examines the representation of *sigheh* women in both the Pahlavi era and the era of the Islamic Republic. For the Pahlavi period, I am looking at three novels and two short stories: Morteza Moshfeq-e Kazemi's *Tehran-e Makhuf* (*Horrid Tehran*, 1922), Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh's *Ma'sumeh Shirazi* (*Ma'sumeh of Shiraz*, 1954), Ebrahim Golestan's "Safar-e 'Esmat" ("Esmat's Journey," 1967), Sadeq Chubak's *Sang-e Sabur* (*The Patient Stone*, 1966), and Jalal Al-e Ahmad's "Jashn-e Farkhondeh" ("The Auspicious Celebration," 1969). For the period of the Islamic Republic, I turn to two cinematic works: Behruz Afkhami's *Showkaran* (*Hemlock*, 2000) and Mohammad Hossein Farahbakhsh's *Zendegi-ye Khosusi* (*Private Life*, 2011). These works, each of which is significant with respect to its historical context, reflect the manner in which the practice of *sigheh* impacts women by calling into question how sexuality works as a form of political analysis and power, since sexuality itself is now both a private and political matter – private in the sense that it is unique to each body and political in the sense that it is often policed under the auspices of the state. While I focus on modern Iranian cultural productions, the book attempts to move beyond the literary and cinematic realms and examines in-depth a rather controversial social institution that has been the subject of disdain for many Iranian feminists and has also captured the imagination of many Western observers.

Questioning how the body is used as a battlefield for power gives me room to analyze the fluidity of inclusion and privilege, and conversely, ostracism and marginalization. How do societies decide who is, or who is not, included in society? How should the state approach its response to the growing unanswered political demands of the bodies that cannot, or will not, remain within normative boundaries? How do physical representations of difference inform power dynamics? When bodies are policed and regulated, does that impact society? How so? In what ways do those bodies that transgress normative boundaries and state boundaries challenge power relations on the national stage? What role do moral perspectives and virtues play in society's regulation and protection of bodies?

In that sense, my analysis examines the figure of the *sigheh* woman as the abject sexual other in Iranian fiction written under the Pahlavi regime and in films produced during the Islamic Republic. Because bodies are the bedrock upon which societies stand, exploring how and why women's bodies – including those of *sigheh* women characters – engage with the state and society is critical to our understanding of what

constitutes a transgressing body; how that body is excluded, marginalized, or threatened; how is it that social and moral norms inform political attitudes toward that body; and how does that body threaten normative narratives.

Looking at history, we can see that monogamy was the norm for the vast majority of the Iranian nation at the turn of the twentieth century. Polygamy, both formal and informal marriages, were practiced among the well to do. The head of a tribe might have two wives and a wealthy merchant might also have more than one wife. Despite various gender reforms, in poor rural and urban communities, the institution of marriage remained much the same, though the institution went through dramatic changes in urban middle-class communities. During the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925–41), the state placed a great deal of emphasis on health and hygiene and in particular began to battle the spread of venereal diseases. As a result of these educational campaigns, men's inclination to visit sex workers was reduced. The health campaign of the Reza Shah period should have also targeted *sigheh* marriages, in its attempt to reduce the spread of venereal diseases. But the state chose not to do so for a variety of reasons. One major reason was that arranging *sigheh* marriages was a lucrative source of income for many clerics who acted as brokers. The clerics refused to accept any links between *sigheh* marriages and the spread of venereal diseases and the state chose not to address this issue. Under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–79), monogamy was still the norm in rural and migrant communities and the practice of engaging in *sigheh* marriages became less common and was primarily continued around major shrines, in Qom and Mashhad for example. The Pahlavi regime adopted an attitude of benign tolerance toward *sigheh* marriages and essentially swept the issues concerning *sigheh* under the rug.

The literature and cinema of modern Iran reflect the changes and reforms to *sigheh* over the years. After the Islamic Revolution (1979), the state began to encourage *sigheh* marriages for both married and unmarried men and unmarried women. As the stigma of the Pahlavi regime against *sigheh* was reduced, married men once again more freely turned to *sigheh* marriages, which gave them easy access to sexual partners other than their wives. During and after the Iran–Iraq war (1980–8), the state pressured young war widows to contract *sigheh* marriages as a solution to the economic burdens of the war. This was the state's solution to the moral dilemma of having many young