



Let's Talk About Sex and Gender: The Case of Iran

A Book Review

Hafsa Kanjwal

During a widely reported and controversial lecture at Columbia University in New York, the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, boldly declared: "In Iran we don't have homosexuals like in your country."¹ His statement, which caused ripples internationally, especially in the United States, underscores prolonged tensions on the subject of gender and sexuality in modern Iran, a nation experiencing what many have called "a sexual revolution."² How do we come to understand the history behind these tensions? How does this history relate to the broader historiography of gender and sexuality in the Islamicate?³ This review will look at two recent works, both published in the past decade, that have attempted to address these questions. The first book, entitled *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, by Afsaneh Najmabadi draws upon visual and literary material from nineteenth century Iran during the Qajar period to demonstrate the centrality of gender and sexuality to the shaping of modern culture and politics in Iran.

Hafsa Kanjwal, is a doctoral candidate in the joint degree program in History and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She graduated from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University in 2008 with a degree in Regional Studies of the Muslim World.

The second book, entitled *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, by Janet Afary describes the evolution of sexuality in Iran as well as the struggle for women's equal rights from the nineteenth century to the present day. Although both books overlap in themes they explore and the conclusions they draw, Najmabadi's book proves to be more unconventional as it moves beyond the traditional historiography of women and gender in Islamicate societies, while Afary's book is firmly situated within it.

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE ISLAMICATE

The literature on gender and sexuality in Muslim societies multiplied significantly in the early 1990's with classics such as Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* and Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist's Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*. In addition to highlighting the equality of women and men by reinterpreting the foundational sources of Islam (the Quran and the Prophetic *Sunnah*), these works sought to incorporate the role of women in

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traditional Islamic history. They emphasized the feminist foundations of the Muslim faith, primarily manifested through the example of the Prophet Muhammed and his interactions with the women around him, including his wives. They also detailed the downfall of this history and situated it within the Islamicate's encounter with European conservative mores in the pre-colonial period and, later on, the negative impact of the colonial and nationalist periods on women's lives. The work on the nationalist period (immediately after colonialism) focused primarily on how the modern nation state constructed and disciplined gender and the role of women, as evidenced in *Women, Islam and the State*, by Deniz Kandiyoti. This work also highlighted the ways in which women resisted patriarchal structures (colonial, nationalist, or religious) and negotiated their agency within such structures. For example, Kandiyoti explored the relative autonomy that women in polygamous marriages in sub-Saharan Africa exercise, especially in regards to their economic status.

Many of these initial writers also sought to reconcile Islam and Muslim history with notions of Western feminism, but were criticized by some Muslims for seeking to enforce Western notions of feminism and women's rights on the Muslim World. Thus, a more deconstructive discussion of gender and sexuality was often overlooked in an attempt to highlight the historical role of women in Muslim societies. For these reasons, it is important to emphasize that the study of gender and sexuality in Muslim societies cannot be separated from contemporary politics, both local and transnational. This work continues to assert its relevance in current discourse about the role of women in Islam. Even while discussing the history of the role of women in the early Muslim community nearly 1400 years ago, comparisons or contrasts to present times are made, a prime example of how contemporary conditions impel historical constructions. These new historical constructions "talk back" to hegemonic Orientalist and colonial constructions of the Muslim woman as oppressed, submissive, and lacking agency.

As with women's history in general, the study of gender and sexuality in the Islamicate has been limited. Much of the study has been based on the assumption of two distinct genders and sexes: the male and the female and the masculine and the feminine. Unlike later feminist theory, which challenges the whole construction of gender and sex, this scholarship has mainly operated through a heterosexual paradigm. In this way, this scholarship remains heteronormative. Furthermore, in an attempt to write women into Muslim history, feminist historians have often overlooked the study of men and male sexuality. Slowly, however, we are witnessing a shift away from the "add women and stir" approach to one that challenges gender binaries and approaches gender from an analytical perspective.⁴ Joan Scott's highly influential article, *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis* argues that the study of gender must go beyond the study of women. Scott states that gender analysis must encompass gender's role in constituting social relationships more broadly and in signifying other relationships of power.

SUMMARY AND CONTRIBUTION OF NAJMABADI'S WORK

In *Women with Mustaches*, Najmabadi was greatly influenced by Scott's theoretical contribution. She mentions in her introduction that "to consider gender as an analytical category poses questions different from those relevant for retrieving women's history. My questions became, what work did gender do in the making of Iranian modernity, and how did it perform this cultural labor?"⁵ The number of ways in which Najmabadi's book has transformed and moved beyond the traditional historiography of gender in Muslim societies is remarkable.

The Islamic Unlike other feminist historians of Iran who have explored the role of women and their agency within heterosexual and patriarchal relations of power, Najmabadi manages to "queer" Iranian, and thus Islamicate, history. Queer theory destabilizes and radically questions all forms of identity that presume to be the norm.

Thus, the theory rejects the binary categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality when analyzing social identities, arguing that these categories are not inherent, but socially constructed. Using this approach, Najmabadi states that the viewing of gender in terms of male/female is a modern day imperative and was culturally produced.⁶ She argues that this binary of male/female did not exist during the nineteenth century Qajar dynasty in Iran, especially when it came to notions of love and beauty. She states that, “the taken-for-granted man/woman binary has screened out other nineteenth-century gender positionalities and has ignored the interrelated transfigurations of sexuality in the same period.”⁷ For example, there were different modes of maleness in nineteenth century Iran that were distinct from manhood and are not captured by the male/female binary. These include the male *amrad* (young adolescent beardless male) and *mukhannas* (an adult man desiring to be an object of desire for adult men). A modern day understanding of these two identities that “fractures masculinity” would be translated as effeminization, but this identification did not exist in Qajar Iran.⁸

Najmabadi’s work is also unique in its use of sources. To be certain, written sources of women’s history during the Qajar time period are difficult to come across. Furthermore, access to these sources for U.S.-based academics is challenging due to diplomatic hostilities between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States. Najmabadi uses visual representations, including paintings, illustrations, photographs, state symbols, banners, medallions, and political cartoons, in addition to more traditional sources such as travelogues and mystical poetry, to revisit the configurations of gender. Her use of visual sources also offers the historiography of gender and sexuality in the Islamicate a new direction since most of the existing literature is based on scriptural and textual sources. She states that:

When presenting an argument articulated through visual documentation, one is often asked to produce supporting texts. One is rarely

asked to produce visual material to support an argument based on textual evidence. Written texts are often assumed to have an apparent self-sufficiency and transparency that visual texts are assumed to lack. The challenge for me was learning how to “read” visual texts historically and to use methods of visual interpretation to craft a historical argument....Working with visual texts made me more conscious of avoiding the presumption of transparency about textual sources.⁹

It is through the Persian paintings of the Qajar time period that Najmabadi is able to argue that ideas of beauty during this era were not gendered. Rather, certain traits such as a lean waist, thick eyebrows, and a thin mustache were considered beautiful, irrespective of the holder’s gender. In one such painting, entitled *Embracing Lovers* by Muhammad Sadiq, the attribution of male or female to the two figures becomes difficult, as they both exhibit these uniform traits of beauty. Najmabadi argues that there were not notions of “female beauty” or “male handsomeness”—both were identical.¹⁰

Najmabadi also challenges the dominant notion that same-sex or homosexual practices are a result of strict gender segregation and veiling. This assumption again stems from a heteronormative view of gender and sexuality that does not account for alternative sexualities. The *amrad* served as an object of male desire and was present in Sufi love poetry, painting, erotica and satire. In terms of actual sexual practices, Najmabadi hesitates from labeling certain acts “homosexual” as that is, again, a modern imperative. She states that sexual practices were not fixed into lifelong patterns of sexual desire and that many married, elite men (including clergy) would engage in these acts with *amrads* they desired. She argues that:

In the sociocultural world of the Qajars, despite theological condemnations and punitive actions aimed against same-sex practices, in particular against sodomy

(liwat), the domain of paradisiacal pleasure was populated by the ghilman and the hur, and male love was focused on the beloved male. Ideas of beauty were ungendered. Within this cultural world, certain same-sex practices occurred in daily life, in spite of the edicts of kings and the clergy to the contrary.¹¹

Najmabadi persuasively argues that the disappearance of the *amrad* from public representation in the nineteenth century accompanied the reformulation of gender binaries during the modern period. The transition to the modern period created a number of tensions in relation to sexuality. This reformulation largely occurred because of Iranians' encounter with Europe, primarily through elite Iranian males travelling to Europe and European travelers to Iran. Nineteenth century Iranians, wanting to be accepted by Europe, became aware that the socially-accepted *amrad* love and sexual practices in Iran were considered vices by the Europeans. Homoerotic desire had to be covered as it was deemed "backwards" and heterosocial European cultural practices heteronormalized Iranian males' sensibilities.¹²

The most interesting discussion of this heteronormalization is in the chapter "The Tragedy of Romantic Marriage." Najmabadi argues that whereas marriage during much of the Qajar period was for procreation purposes (and this allowed male-male love and female-female love to exist outside of the marriage), at the eve of modernity marriage became romanticized, and love and desire overlapped with family.¹³ The nation and homeland also became gendered as the modern Iranian nation state became a male collective in charge of protecting the female homeland.¹⁴ Najmabadi points to visual representations from this time period that showcase the construction of the masculinity of the state and the femininity of the homeland. For example, in curtain-paintings

and postcards depicting Reza Khan, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Khan is portrayed as a highly masculine military man who is called to save the feeble woman, who depicts the nation.

A significant theoretical contribution of this book to the historiography occurs in the second part of the book, where Najmabadi gives voice to women. She states that although women become objects of the gender disciplining of the modern nation state, they also serve as agents who pressure their husbands to distance themselves from their homosocial behavior and same-sex actions. As women "come out", the *amrad* is "closeted." Thus, the heteronormalization of love and the opening of public spaces and discourses to the now unveiled modern Iranian woman results in the veiling of male homosexuality. This is why a certain tension exists between Iranian feminism and homosexuality: one arose as a result of silencing the other. The impact of this silencing exists even in the contemporary period, although Najmabadi refrains from making stark judgments on the Iranian revolution and contemporary politics in Iran.¹⁵ In fact, Najmabadi seems to be making a stronger argument for how historians should view gender and sexuality broadly speaking, rather than situating herself within

polemical discourses on these topics in the context of modern-day Iran. Her subtle intervention is noteworthy; Najmabadi allows her scholarship to create a new theoretical paradigm for understanding gender and sexuality in the Islamicate, without making judgments on contemporary anxieties.

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As refreshing as Najmabadi's approach is, a shortage of sources limit her book's argument. Although Najmabadi explores the development of male-male love, little is mentioned on the evolution of female-female love. In addition, her focus is primarily on the Iranian urban elite. It would have been interesting to gain the perspective of the lower or rural classes: how did their notions of gender and sexuality overlap between the premodern and the modern period?

Perhaps this is a question that cannot be answered. Nonetheless, an exploration of the stratification may prove fruitful as these classes may not have interacted with the Europeans as much as the urban elite. Did they preserve premodern views of sexuality for longer? Lastly, although Najmabadi refers to sexual relationships that were motivated by social status and age differences, she does not further elaborate on the reasons for these homoerotic relations. These three issues provide a critical space for future historians to examine.

SUMMARY AND CONTRIBUTION OF AFARY'S WORK

In her study of this period, Afary explores much of the same themes as Najmabadi, including the evolution of marriage, the role of the *amrad*, and same-sex relations, which she labels "status-defined homosexuality." Afary reiterates Najmabadi's argument that premodern Iran was more diverse in its sexual mores and practices, rooted in homoerotic mystic poetry. She also affirms that the construction of modern heterosexuality was a historical process that was propelled by the encounter with Europe. Afary goes deeper in her exploration of the struggle for women's rights that was contemporaneous with the veiling of male homosexuality. She states that women in the early 20th century regarded normative heterosexuality as an advance "because it meant a man would actually love a woman rather than merely maintain her as object of procreation."¹⁶ Echoing Najmabadi, Afary states that it was the triple introduction of normative monogamy, normative heterosexuality, and companionate (instead of procreative) marriage in the first part of the 20th century that dramatically changed gender relations in Iran.

Unlike Najmabadi, Afary is firmly situated within the conventional historiographical approach to gender and sexuality in the Islamicate, as is seen by her primary focus on textual sources. Although her book includes a

number of photographs and illustrations, in contrast to Najmabadi, Afary does not analyze them. Afary's use of the visual is illustrative, rather than analytical. In her narrative of the Qajar period she uses European travel accounts, harem memoirs, and literary sources (primarily mystical love poetry). Her analysis of the role of women in this time takes advantage of familiar Orientalist tropes, with an emphasis on harem life, the veil, slavery, and concubines. In describing this period, she also uses letters of European doctors who worked in Iran, and her analysis becomes reflective of Western sensibilities. However, her section on marriage and the different types of marriages, including temporary marriages and nonsexual marriage, during this time period is nuanced and informative, especially in its use of local sources such as legal documents.

The remainder of the book is split into two sections: one on the Pahlavi dynasty and the other on the Islamic Revolution and its aftermath. The term "sexual politics" in the title of the book refers to the struggle for women's rights, gay and lesbian rights, as well as the role of gender in social movements in Iran. Afary here displays a formidable command of critical theory, relying primarily on Foucault, especially when discussing the seductive power of the Islamic Revolution for the Iranian public, as well as James Scott's "hidden transcripts"¹⁷ and feminist theory, including third world feminists such as Chandra Mohanty. A significant contribution of this book is the chapter entitled *The Rise of Leftist Guerrilla Organizations and Islamist Movements*, which explores the unexpected alliance between secular leftist groups and Islamists, who were united in their attempt to bring down the Pahlavi dynasty. Both also felt threatened by the women's rights movement under the Pahlavi dynasty and viewed women's empowerment as a threat to their nationalist and/or Islamist goals. The sources in these two sections are also diverse, ranging from women's magazines to underground leftist activist manuals.

Today Afary's emphasis on women's acts of resistance against the patriarchal order and her focus on women's agency, situates her firmly within the conventional historiography of gender and sexuality in the Islamicate. In her discussion of enforced veiling, Afary points to the ways in which women in Iran used the veil as an opportunity to slip outside of their homes and meet with their secret lovers. These "acts of resistance" are highlighted throughout the book. Saba Mahmood, author of *Politics of Piety*, argues that Western feminists are preoccupied by the notion of female agency, and perpetually seek to view women's actions as either subverting or resisting male domination¹⁸. Mahmood is critical of this approach as it rules out the possibility of studying the ways in which norms are performed and inhabited, and not necessarily resisted. Instead of resisting, how are Iranian women performing and inhabiting norms, including veiling, some of which the Western observer may deem patriarchal? Afary has no answer to this question.

Afary's theoretical conservatism is seen also in her discussion of homosexuality (including practices of boy concubinage and adult *man-amrad* relations). Unlike Najmabadi, she does not challenge the dominant hegemonic interpretation of gender segregation as contributing to the prevalence of homosexual acts and practices in Muslim societies. She states that "segregation might have contributed to the widespread existence of homoerotic relations...the need for love and companionship missing in many marital relationships may have also contributed to the widespread practice of same-sex relations."¹⁹ By marking homosexuality and heterosexuality as two distinct spheres, Afary maintains a heteronormative position that upholds gender binaries (homosexual vs. heterosexual), and does not move beyond them when it comes to approaching the nuanced nature of sexual practices and desires.

She argues, like many before her, that Western imperialist powers have opportunistically used the issue of the rights of Muslim women for their strategic interests and

abandoned it when it no longer fits their purposes.²⁰ In many ways, this book serves to deconstruct the stereotypes of the passive, veiled, agency-lacking Muslim woman. Her discussion of Islamism in Iran, although critical, is also reflective of the existing literature that views Islamist politics as being both progressive and at the same time a hindrance towards women's rights.²¹ Nonetheless, the description of the Basiji Sisters, who were an all-women's military training group during the Khomeini era is intriguing. For Afary, Islamism is a response to deep-seated anxieties about changing gender roles; but it is also sophisticated and "modern" in its manifestations. As with the issue of agency, understandings of Islamism and the role of women always situate women in the role of negotiating or subverting the system. It does not address how they inhabit the system or create an alternative system.

Although Afary's work is expansive, covering over 200 years, and detailed, her theoretical approach is conventional. It is undoubtedly steeped in Western secular feminist discourse, a discourse she uses to cover the premodern, modern, and contemporary periods. She focuses on typical Western feminist tropes such as agency and resistance and primarily studies Iranian women from that framework. It is also evident that throughout the book Afary has a strong political agenda, and this agenda drives most of her narrative. She is closely aligned with the feminist movement in Iran, as evidenced by her dedicating the book to the "One Million Signatures Campaign", a movement that seeks to change the laws that restrict women's rights in marriage, divorce and inheritance. She is highly critical of the current leadership in Iran, leading *Foreign Policy* to label her book as one of the

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“Eight books that Ahmadinejad doesn’t want you to read.”²² It is in this context that we should view her reading of “resistance” into many of the actions of women at all time periods, a reading perhaps driven more by her own politics than that of the women of Iran.

The topic of gender and sexuality in the Islamicate has garnered significant scholarly attention in recent decades, not unlike the attention it has garnered in spaces outside of academia. Both Najmabadi and Afary’s work are important to read for anyone with an interest in gender history as well as the modern Middle East. Their theoretical contributions remain two-fold: the first is in their discussion of alternative modes of masculinity and the diverse sexual mores of the premodern period. The second is in their discussion of the “veiling” of these diverse sexual mores in conjunction with the rise of the feminist movement and calls for greater women’s rights.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author’s own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

Works Cited

- ¹ His response was to a question posed to him at the lecture in September of 2007 about the treatment of homosexuals in Iran, especially in light of allegations of executions of a number of homosexuals in the country. Please see:
<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5hATGOzv6YSmgeMY1zdYbdpyrG2cw>
- ² For an in depth explanation of the term “sexual revolution” in relation to modern Iran, please see *Passionate Uprisings: Iran’s Sexual Revolution*, by Pardis Mahdavi. The book is an ethnographic study of the sexual behaviors and practices of the Iranian young elite
- ³ The term “Islamicate” was coined by historian Marshall Hodgson who, in the *Venture of Islam*, defined it as referring not only to the “religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims” (59). I prefer the use of the term “Islamicate” over terms such as the “Muslim World” or the “Islamic World” as the latter has a more geo-political connotation. I will also use the term “Muslim societies” interchangeably with “Islamicate.”
- ⁴ Theorist Judith Butler has been pivotal in reshaping our understanding of gender as a binary. Please see her works *Gender Trouble* and *Undoing Gender* for further insight. Butler argues against the gender constructions of the norms of the female and the male. Her work on gender performativity has been used by scholars to discuss the Muslim practice of veiling.
- ⁵ Najmabadi, Afsaneh, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 1
- ⁶ Najmabadi is drawing heavily from Judith Butler’s discussions on the production of gender norms.
- ⁷ Najmabadi 3
- ⁸ Najmabadi 3
- ⁹ Najmabadi 6-7
- ¹⁰ Najmabadi 11
- ¹¹ Najmabadi 25. The *ghilman*, according to the Quran, are divine beautiful male youths, forever young, who work in heaven, alongside their female counterparts called the *huris*, in the service of the righteous Muslims.
- ¹² Najmabadi 38-39
- ¹³ Najmabadi 156
- ¹⁴ Najmabadi 128
- ¹⁵ I was actually surprised to read a book on the history of gender and sexuality in Iran that did not make reference to the Ayatollah Khomeini. I double-checked the index and discovered there was one small reference—in the Notes section of the book.
- ¹⁶ Afary, Janet, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.
- ¹⁷ Hidden transcripts are the discourses of dominated or oppressed groups that happen offstage, outside of the direct observation of power holders.
- ¹⁸ Mahmood, Saba, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8. Mahmood’s book is a significant contribution to feminist theory as it challenges and critiques many of the “secular-liberal” Western assumptions of feminist theory, especially when they are applied to non-Western societies. It is a must read for anyone interested in the study of gender and sexuality outside of the West.
- ¹⁹ Afary 81
- ²⁰ Afary 372. For more on the role of women in Islamist movements, please see the Carnegie Endowments

report "Women in Islamist Movements" and Valentine Moghadam's article "Islamist Movements and Women's Responses in the Middle East".

²¹ For more on the role of women in Islamist movements, please see the Carnegie Endowments report "Women in Islamist Movements" and Valentine Moghadam's article "Islamist Movements and Women's Responses in the Middle East"

²² Clawson, Patrick, "Eight Books Ahmadinejad doesn't want you to read," Foreign Policy, June 24, 2009, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/06/24/8_book_you_need_to_read_on_iran> (accessed December 17, 2010).