

Introduction

Years ago, in the heat of a polemical exchange with a historian of Qajar Iran (1785–1925), who expressed regret and dismay that doing Qajar women’s history was impossible because few historical sources and solid extant records about women of that period existed, I retorted, “But if we use gender analytically, sources about men are also sources about women.” From the moment of its utterance, the sentence began to haunt me: How do we employ gender analytically so as to write history differently, to write history from which women are not absent and gender is not a missing category; one in which issues of gender and women are not afterthoughts and appendixes?

To consider gender as an analytical category (Scott 1988) poses questions different from those relevant for retrieving women’s history (Scott 2001). My questions became, What work did gender do in the making of Iranian modernity, and how did it perform this cultural labor? If central concepts of Iranian modernity were gendered, *how* were they gendered, and *what* effects did their genderedness produce for constitution of Iranian men and women of modernity (Felski 1995)?

From the late eighteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth century, Iranian modernity was shaped in the rearticulation of concepts like nation (*millat*), politics (*siasat*), homeland (*vatan*), and knowledge (*‘ilm*).¹ These reconceptualizations depended on notions of gender. Until the first decade of the twentieth century, when women began to claim their place as sisters-in-the-nation, nation was largely conceived and visualized as a brotherhood, and homeland as female, a beloved, and a mother. Closely linked to the maleness of nation and the femaleness of homeland was the concept of *namus* (honor). *Namus*, transported from its religious affiliation (*namus-i Islam*), was reclaimed as a national concern

(*namus-i Iran*), like *millat*, which also changed from a religious to a national community. Its meaning embraces the idea of a woman's purity (*'ismat*) and the integrity of the nation, *namus* was constituted as subject to male possession and protection in both domains; gender honor and national honor intimately informed each other.

The Iranian national emblem was a male lion holding a sword, with a (fe)male sun rising from behind his torso. But why (fe)male? In an earlier version of this manuscript, I used no parentheses in this word. Like so many modern Iranians, I grew up thinking of the sun as *khawrshid khanum*, lady sun. But as I was finishing my manuscript, I became uneasy, aware that something was amiss. In particular, I realized that my association of beautiful faces with femininity and femaleness, and thus my unquestioning reading of the sun in the national emblem as female, did not correspond to nineteenth-century Qajar sensibilities. In the Qajar period, a beautiful face could belong to either a young male or a female with identical features. My unease at this recognition was not incidental and localized. Sexuality and masculinity crept into several chapters of the book as haunting afterthoughts. For instance, when I looked at the genealogy of the nineteenth-century concepts of love and homeland, I ran into "sex trouble." Homeland had an unmistakable feminine genealogy through its double connection to soil and to womb. By the end of the nineteenth century, in the writings of male nationalists, love of homeland was evidently the heteroerotic love of male Iranians for a female homeland. But this love was rooted in Sufi (Islamic mystic) love, which was male homoerotic. How did a deeply male homoerotic concept become usable as a heteroerotic one? How did this sex change, so to speak, happen?

I had read Iran's "long nineteenth century" as a time shaped by the transformation of gender. Yet this change had depended on the transformation of sexuality. Like current historiographers of Iranian modernity, for example, I had assumed that the Iranian-European cultural encounter had pivoted on European gender heterosociality, with the public visibility of European women as the key signifier of cultural difference. This narrative, I came to conclude, was an already-heteronormalized narrative of the heteronormalization of love and the feminization of beauty. Part 1 explores this proposition.

This conclusion turned out to be more radical for my manuscript than I had anticipated. My project of writing a history of Iranian modernity in which issues of gender and women would not be afterthoughts and appendixes had produced its own afterthoughts and appendixes. In a tortuous and belabored way, through years of focusing exclusively on uncovering

“the gendered tropes of Iranian modernity,” I came to appreciate that Eve Sedgwick’s proposition that “an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, *not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance* to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition” was highly pertinent to my study of Iranian modernity (Sedgwick 1990, 1, my emphasis). I ended up reconceptualizing and rewriting the entire manuscript. Indeed, I had to reread my sources.

This book began as a project on gender in the formation of Iranian modernity on iconic, narrative, metaphoric, and social levels. But I had overlooked another labor of gender: its production as a binary, man/woman. Thinking of gender as man/woman turned out to be a very modern imperative. I had overlooked the erasures that made this binary of gender possible in the first place. As I reread and rethought the entire project, I was first intrigued and then obsessed by a remarkable amnesia and the work of that amnesia in conceptualizing the gender of modernity. Simply put, 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. In part 1 and chapter 5, I confront the assumed normalcy of the man/woman binary by mapping modes of maleness in nineteenth-century Iran that were distinct from manhood.

Moreover, gender as a binary has since become a template for categories of modern sexuality. Our contemporary binary of gender translates any fractures of masculinity into effeminization. Nineteenth-century Iranian culture, however, had other ways of naming, such as *amrad* (young adolescent male) and *mukhannas* (an adult man desiring to be an object of desire for adult men), that were not equated with effeminacy. I suspect similar remapping is called for when thinking of women and females, although in this book I do not pursue this line of inquiry.

In the nineteenth century, homoeroticism and same-sex practices came to mark Iran as backward; heteronormalization of eros and sex became a condition of “achieving modernity,” a project that called for heterosocialization of public space and a reconfiguration of family life. While we may consider a society in which men and women mix at all levels as less gender stratified, that very notion of mixing assumes a binary of the two kinds, men as one gender category and women as the other. In that sense, modern heterosocialization became, paradoxically, productive of gender as a binary.² For the past two centuries, Iranian (and Islamicate) modernity and its historiography have regarded the veil as the gender marker of cultural

difference between Iran (Islam) and Europe. This dominant view has ignored the veil's other cultural effect, namely, its work as a marker of homosocial homoerotic affectionate bonds among both women and men. The veil's backwardness, I will argue in chapter 5, stood for the backwardness of homosociality and homoerotic affectivity.

Before addressing these issues further, however, I would like to go back to the lion-and-sun, which I discuss in chapter 3.³ That chapter focuses on gender's work for modernity on a symbolic level, the Iranian national emblem of lion-and-sun that was first formally adopted in 1836. In the course of the following century, it went through a period in which the sun burst into a magnificent Qajari (fe)male face, while the lion became more masculinized. By the early twentieth century, however, the sun lost most of its facial markings, and by the mid-1930s all such features were erased. The emblem was fully geometrized in the 1970s before it was finally discarded by the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. Chapter 3 explores this history to unravel the sedimented levels of meaning that this trajectory reveals: What did the initial blossoming of the (fe)male sun signify, and how can we understand its subsequent erasure and the total masculinization of the national emblem?

Qajar Iran began with a concept of love embedded in Sufi allegorical associations. Love and desire in this discourse were intimately linked with beauty and could be generated in a man at least as easily by a beautiful young male as by a young female. In early Qajar art, for instance, beauty was not distinguished by gender. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, a highly gender-differentiated portrayal of beauty emerged, along with a concept of love that assumed heterosexuality as natural.

How did this enormous cultural transformation take place? One element, I suggest, is that in the nineteenth century Iranians became acutely aware that adult man-amrad love and sexual practices prevalent in Iran were considered vices by Europeans. As "another gaze" entered the scene of desire, Iranian men interacting with Europeans in Iran or abroad became highly sensitized to the idea that their desire was now under European scrutiny. Homoerotic desire had to be covered. One marker of modernity became the transformation of homoeroticism into masqueraded heteroeros.⁴ Chapter 2 maps out this enormous cultural shift by studying iconic changes in Qajar paintings and the transformation of a particularly powerful popular narrative, the story of Shaykh San'an.

The central argument in chapter 2 raises an important methodological problem for which I do not have a simple answer. During many presentations of material from this chapter, I was asked variations of the same

question: Am I suggesting that Europe was responsible for these transformations? Am I suggesting a causal link between the increasing interactions between Iran and Europe and the transformation of sexuality and gender in nineteenth-century Iran? What about “internal causes”? On one level, these questions are unanswerable. When dealing with the kind of radical historical transformations of genders and sexualities that I sketch out in this book, it is wise to remember that innumerable contingent events and concepts went into their making. Our historiography can never be a history of things as they really happened at their time. This implies that pinpointing causes could only be a historiographical effect.

I cannot answer the hypothetical question of what would have happened had Iran not profoundly interacted with Europe. Moreover, I find it difficult to make a separation between internal and external developments, as they become so intermeshed and progressively so as the century unfolds. Iranian-European cultural interactions go back at least to the sixteenth century. By the nineteenth century, they had become much more intense and involved a wider circle of Iranians beyond the Court. Much cultural hybridization was also mediated through the increasing interactions between Iran and the Indian subcontinent and the Ottoman Empire. I suspect that on the cultural level, more so than on the economic, administrative, and military levels, the interactions were a two-way street. Just as this cultural traffic transformed Iranian gender and sexual sensibilities, European gender and sexual mores were also changed through interactions with other societies that Europe “discovered” and, in some cases, colonized (Mendus and Randall 1989; Bleys 1995). The repeated question about European impact perhaps indicates “a fear of influence,” an anxiety that recognition of effects of European-Iranian interactions may translate into “denial of agency” for Iranians. I could not disagree with this idea more. Agency does not need a power vacuum to exist. On the contrary, agency would be meaningless outside a matrix of power. Nineteenth-century Iranians lived their cultural lives within a given world of power relations, within a cacophony of “hearing and overhearing” (Siegel 1997, 6). Neither Iranians nor Europeans invented themselves out of whole cloth.

My story of the nineteenth century is a contingent rather than a causal one. Agency and causation work in many directions. As Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi has suggested, “In the interplay of looks between Asians and Europeans, there was no steady position of spectatorship, no objective observer. . . . The field of vision and the making of meaning were perspectival, contestatory, and theatrical” (2001, 36). Power, of course, was not an even field, but that does not mean that cultural agency flowed in one

direction. That we worry about the question of agency in one direction but never consider the impact of “the East” on “the West” as an issue of denial of agency for Europe is a colonial/anticolonial legacy that continues to inform our current thinking.⁵

The first three chapters of this book depend heavily on visual texts for their main arguments. In 1994–95, when I was deeply puzzled over transformations of the sun of the national emblem, Layla Diba (then the Kevorkian curator of Islamic art at the Brooklyn Museum) generously invited me to join a group of scholars who were preparing the exhibition *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch, 1785–1925*.⁶ The exhibition and the many symposia organized around it did more than give me an appreciation of Qajar art. I came to realize what a critical and powerfully rich source art historical resources provide for understanding a society’s history and culture.

Using visual texts as primary material for historical writing challenges the priority we usually accord to textual evidence over visual material. Historians often use visual material illustratively rather than analytically. Art historians, as well, sometimes draw a line between narrative and nonnarrative sources, accepting a level of interpretive speculativeness about the latter that is denied for the former.⁷ 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.⁸

In the case of nineteenth-century Iran we have an abundance of representations of women. But, as I have argued elsewhere, these paintings cannot be assumed to represent actual women (Najmabadi 1998a). This can be a source of disappointment and frustration for a social historian, for Qajar art seems largely devoid of social information (Diba 1989). Using feminist theories of representation, however, can turn these visual texts into rich sources for studying gender and sexuality (Pollock 1988). This is especially critical for the earlier decades of the nineteenth century. In that century’s later decades, and of course even more so early in the twentieth century, issues of sexuality and gender become more explicit topics of political discourse and social critique, making the use of written texts as the main primary material more plausible.

Visual texts are in a sense similar to dreams: a sedimentation of some of the most significant cultural meanings that become accessible through

reading methods that feminist art historians, film theorists, and psychoanalytically informed cultural historians have developed.⁹ In fact, working with visual texts made me more conscious of avoiding the presumption of transparency about textual sources, on which I depend more for the later chapters of this book.

The nineteenth-century heteronormalization of love was central to the shaping of a number of political and cultural transformations that signify Iranian modernity. Feminization of the category “beloved” made the figure of Iran as a female beloved available to the male national brotherhood. Heteronormalization of love thus performed patriotic labor, making the entire discourse of protection of woman—a body that needs to be defended against alien designs, intrusion, and penetration—and the defense of honor available to nationalism. Iran as a female beloved, in turn, consolidated love as heteroeros. It made the transformation of marriage from a procreative to a romantic contract possible, performing romantic labor for the production of the companionate wife. Such wives demanded that men do away with their same-sex affairs—leaving a birthmark of disavowal of male homosexuality on the modernist project of women’s emancipation.

Concomitantly, modernity held out the promise of opening the public space to women and treating the educated modernist woman as a citizen and a compatriot. Chapter 5 considers the politics of public visibility and the contest over the gender of space in Iran that ensued from these reconfigurations. It maps the effects of heterosocialization on women’s language, verbal and somatic, and on female homosocial space. The chapter concludes with a critical assessment of women’s disillusionment with important aspects of modernist heterosocial promise.

In chapter 6 I address the effects of heterosexualization of love for reimagining marriage as a romantic rather than a procreative contract. Romantic heteroerotic love entered the scene of Iranian modernity as a tragedy in which the ideal happy ending, the marriage between modern man and woman, was blocked by political and cultural forces, such as despotic government, ignorant people, unconscionable behavior by men of religion, and lawlessness of the country. Men’s and women’s writings on romantic marriage display a divergence. The proposition of marriage as a romantic contract demanded women to prioritize love and loyalty to husband over their female-female bonds. From the start, this was a high-risk proposition for women, and was perceived by them as such, especially when men advocated romanticization of marriage while still wishing to keep the prerogatives of marriage as a sexual/procreative contract, to be polygynous and divorce at will. All the early women’s writing on marriage centered on

the critique of polygyny and easy divorce by men. These critiques were combined with demands on men to disavow male homosexual practices that were seen to endanger the possibility of a companionate marriage.

As women were reimagined as companionate wives for the modern citizen-men, their procreativity was also reconfigured into new notions of motherhood, fueled by the modernist drive for progress and science. Chapter 7 examines the modern educational regimes and their regulatory and emancipatory impulses. Not only did educated motherhood enable women's quest for education but schools also provided a space within which women would claim citizenship. Yet women's claims as compatriots of men were contained by the protectionist prerogatives of the masculine over the feminine, real and allegorical. Chapter 8 describes the effects of these tensions for women's national claims.

The final chapter focuses on feminism's productive work of a different kind: screening away the sexuality of modernity. Issues of gender and sexuality were central to the formation of modernist and countermodernist discourses, and these contestations continue to be central to contemporary politics of Iran and many other Islamic societies of the Middle East (Paidar 1995). Yet the centrality of this marker of difference, and its current prized place in the revisionist historiography of modernity, has come to screen away the other category of difference: the figure of the *ghilman* (the young male object of desire) and the historical memory of male homoeroticism and same-sex practices. Feminist critique of Iranian modernity has focused on the disciplinary work of the figure of female excess—the “Westoxicated” woman, one who mindlessly imitates “the West.” In a troubling sense, this emphasis has complemented feminism's burden of birth—its disavowal of male homoeroticism.

This book began as a project of gendering historiography of Iranian modernity, by showing that the work of gender was not a “leftover” effect of the “traditional” but a central effect of modernity itself. Yet the project has ended in an elsewhere—of sexuality. If this book begins the work of making us uncomfortable with feminist complicities in modernist erasures, and moves to bring closer together studies of modern genders and sexualities in Iran, it will have achieved more than I could have hoped for.