

Exploring the field of middle-eastern gender history

Book Review

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Sexual Politics of Modern Iran

By Janet Afary

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Sexual Politics of Modern Iran by Janet Afary is an important resource for those who want to understand shifting gender roles in Iran. The book meticulously explores the relationship between power, gender, and patriarchy and explains how the Iranian political and sexual context has been shaped in the past century.

Janet Afary reveals that the women's movement, which was a response to the Iranian system of patriarchy, is not a new phenomenon. She does this by shedding light on the evolution of sexuality in Iranian society in the past century and the women's struggle for equal rights under the law. The book draws on historical documents, literature, poetry, letters and oral testimony that are enriched with a number of photographs, paintings, posters, newspaper cartoons and family portraits. She applies a broader theoretical framework on relevant passages from contemporary women's magazines, historical documents, literature, letters and oral testimony to a wide range of texts such as pre-modern Persian poetry, harem memoirs, testimonies from her own family members and texts by female activists.

Sexual Politics in Modern Iran is organized into three sections. The first part covers late Qajar history, "Pre-modern practices" until the end of the Constitutional Period. The second part emphasizes westernized modernity and the history of women under the Pahlavi Dynasty. The third part covers the history of women from the Islamic Revolution to Islamist Modernity.

Afary argues that the construction of modern sexuality was a historical process (confusing) in Iran as it was in the West. 'The first part of the book, which includes chapters on 'Formal marriage', 'Slave concubinage', temporary marriage, harem wives, class, 'status-defined homosexuality', and 'rituals of courtship' can be perceived as orientalist. The impacts of modernization and the project of normalizing heterosexuality led to drastic changes in the norms of intergenerational homoeroticism. In the late 19th, romantic and sexual attachments between adolescent boys and men, and sometimes between adult male couples, appear to have been the norm.

The second part focuses on imperialist politics and state interventions in redefining normative sexuality, purity, unveiling bodies, romantic love, suffrage, marriage reform, and the threat of female sexuality. The Pahlavi political and military dynasty sought to 'modernize' gender norms. They did this by initiating the 'Women's Awakening' Project which included implementing policies such as the criminalization of the veil in 1936. During this period, some important reforms were made which included giving women autonomy over marriage-choices and raising the legal minimum age of marriage. The poetry of Forough Farokhzad and Sadeq Hedayat provided some examples of the shifting conceptualization of homosexuality, heterosexuality and gender roles.

The final part of Afary's analysis contextualizes why the political left, as well as, some women's movements, allied with hard-line clerics- a move which has been considered regressive in West. It emphasizes that Islamist women's movements were shaped as a response to shifting gender roles and the gradual emergence of the sexual, social and financial empowerment Iranian woman. By unraveling hundreds of years of sexual history she deconstructs stereotypes such as the passive, veiled Muslim woman who is oppressed by a "backward" political and religious regime.

The last part of the book details the "The Islamic Revolution, its sexual economy, and the Left", the "emergence of Islamic feminism" and "Birth control, female sexual awakening, and the gay lifestyle". It draws on the many advantages that women and normative heterosexuality gained under the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as the stringent gender restrictions, which are a reaction to these changes. The interactions, contradictions and excesses between state policies to control the female body, and leftist or Islamic women movements to dismantle the Iran's patriarchal societal framework, has led to shifts in gender roles.

The Islamist state maintained some of the modernization programs that were implemented under the Pahlavu regime such as birth control and health care services to limit fertility. Although this is also an example of the states control over the female body, hundreds of thousands of women used these opportunities to enhance their life, particularly in villages.

Janet Afary's example of Marziyeh Dabbagh provides a particularly fascinating picture of these interactions and contradictions. Dabbagh was Khomeini's bodyguard and a top military commander. As Afary states, even as Khomeini was denouncing the ability of women to function in public: "She wore modest modern clothes, drove a car, traveled, socialized, and spent much time away from her family, all without feeling guilty, since Khomeini himself had sanctioned her activities" (259). Because of her proximity to the leadership of the Islamist state and her compliance with the wishes of Khomeini, Dabbagh could push the traditional social limits of her conservative family which allowed her to achieve some level of individualized equality.

By providing a thorough analysis of Iranian culture and history, the book is accessible to all readers, even those with little knowledge of gender and politics in Iran.

Biographical note

Majid Rafizadeh is an Iranian/Syrian scholar and columnist for *Harvard International Review*. He is currently conducting research at Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He initially came to the United States on a Fulbright teaching Scholarship and taught in the Religious Studies Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has worked at the United Nations and International Committee for the Red Cross. Majid has appeared as a media commentator on U.S foreign policy and the Middle East. He is native speaker of Arabic and Persian, and his other languages are Hebrew, English, French and Dari.