H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Janet Afary. *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xviii + 423 pp. $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-89846-1; $34.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-72708-2.

Reviewed by Setrag Manoukian (Institute of Islamic Studies)
Published on H-Levant (January, 2013)
Commissioned by Wilson C. Jacob

Sentimental Education in the Age of Anxiety: A Tale about Sex in Modern Iran

In the last ten years or so, the study of sexuality and gender in Iran has expanded significantly. Historians, social scientists, and literary critics have worked to make sex and gender analytical categories to approach some of the most pressing historiographic and cultural questions about Iran. Iran's relationship with the West, nationalism, subject formation, and, most of all, "modernity," have been interrogated through analyses of sex and gender.[1]

Janet Afary's *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* takes into account these works, but, unlike those books, presents less a new interpretation of Iranian history and society, than a descriptive overview of the ideas Iranians have held about sex in the last hundred and fifty years, the laws they have been subjected to, and the evolving condition of women during the period under discussion. The book offers a variegated picture of the changing opinions and attitudes of Iranians regarding sex and gender relations, presenting a wealth of information drawn from a diverse set of sources.

From this it follows that the expression "sexual politics" in the title should in my view be understood as referring to the relationship between changing ideas about sex, and the political positions and initiatives of either state-sponsored or oppositional groups (especially in the second and third part of the volume, see below). Unlike the books mentioned above, Afary is not really concerned with the "politics of sex," that is, an analysis of the ways in which sexuality contributes to articulate social relations or a study of how desire and/or pleasure are trajectories of subject formation.

Likewise, though the construction of gender is interrogated, categories such as "women" and "men" remain relatively stable throughout the narrative and what changes is their "practices," understood here as the kind of sexual relations they engage in (hetero or homo, legally and/or morally sanctioned or not). The book does present a history of how ideas about what is good and what is evil in sex and gender relations have been changing in Iran and how the Iranian state contributed to defining these shifting boundaries, but offers no "genealogy of morals" and relatively little discussion of what is at stake in these shifts in terms of the conditions of possibility they establish and the interdictions they implement. Though a wealth of examples illustrate how "normative heterosexuality" became the dominant form of sexual relations in twentieth-century Iran, it is less clear what kinds of effects this had (and continues to have) in defining what a man or a woman was and what the constitutive exclusions produced in its wake were.

The descriptive approach of the book is also evinced in the use Afary makes of the term "modern" and its correlate concept, "modernity." While one of the organizing principles of the book revolves around the distinction between "pre-modern" and "modern" discourses and practices, this distinction is used less as an analytical tool and more as a descriptive sociological marker of certain people, discourses and practices, and/or a timeframe. Here are a few examples of her usage: in discussing Farrokhzad's poetry Afari writes that it "deals with the life of the modern urban woman" (p. 229); in describing the difference between "indoor and outdoor social lives" among the youth in the Islamic Republic she writes that some of these young women and men "belonged to the more modern sectors of society dating from the pre-revolutionary period" while others belonged to "the tradition-bound bazaari and clerical classes" (p. 337); analyzing the first Iranian GLBT magazine that began to be published in 2004, she writes that the journal "encourage[s] a more modern gay culture" (p. 352). One does not get a sense of what it means to become modern women and men in twentieth-century Iran, as much as understand that the fact of being (already) modern, albeit in different degrees, structures one's relationship to sexuality.

So modernity becomes a normative idea through which the history of sexuality is retrospectively made sense of.

This does not mean that Afary does not offer a substantive view of the history of sexuality in Iran. She argues that in the last one hundred and fifty years Iran has shifted from being a society in which pleasure was conceptualized mostly in homoerotic terms and marriage was a contract about wealth and reproduction to being one in which "normative heterosexuality" has become the rule and "companionate marriage and intimacy" the expectation, although a gay culture might be said to be emerging in the present. This view is read against the changing position of women, who are Afary's primary concern.

In this sense her assertion that the first two chapters are about "the interplay between constraint and agency" in women's lives is an apt description for the whole book, which reads sexual relations by distinguishing "consensual" from "hierarchical" ones and those that involve emotional investment (see, for example, p. 36) from those that do not. Consent, equality, and emotional intimacy are thus posited as the norms and hopes of all women. State politics are throughout the book measured against this ideal (sometimes, at least implicitly, equated with modernity itself, see p. 291). Though less explicitly, homosexual relations are also read through the grid of the "interplay of constraint and agency" with the probably unintended outcome that they are to a certain extent discussed in terms of an underlying heterosexual ideal.

Throughout the book Afari juxtaposes her account of the "progress" towards modernity and agency, with a description of what she often calls "anxieties," that is, conscious or unconscious doubts and the symbolic or physical violence this process has entailed (see pp. 206, 221, 236, 244, 256, 260, 327). Afari draws this vocabulary from Eric Fromm's diagnosis of the malaise that accompanies the loss of old certainties in the face of modernity (p. 200). But this vision is also a common trope in the historiography of modern Iran. History is seen as a linear trajectory of modernization (and, in this case, a sentimental education towards heterosexuality and its complementary gay culture) that people either embrace, "negotiate," or oppose. It is in the latter case that anxieties are produced. The greatest anxiety of all is the revolution of 1979, which is seen as a movement that derailed and appropriated modernity towards its own ends. Within this framework, sexuality is relevant insofar as it is a sign for analyzing political views and/or moral attitudes, especially in relation to the place of women in society. This is a functional reading of sex. On the one hand this approach distracts from a discussion about the discourse of sex itself. On the other hand it makes sexuality into just another rubric for a larger interpretation of Iranian society. In the last analysis, one is tempted to ask: what does it mean that sex in Iran has been normalized to the extent that it has become an acceptable category of academic discourse?

The book is organized in three parts. Part 1, "Premodern Practices," describes the state of sexual relations in Iran in the second half of the nineteenth century, though it also relies on much earlier sources in order to cover the themes that are addressed. Part 1 also works as the foil against which parts 2 and 3, about "modern Iran," are organized (what is similar and what has changed from the premodern period). Afary proposes a typology of relations distinguishing between "formal marriage" (chapter 1), "slave concubinage" (chapter 2), and "class, status-defined homosexuality" (chapter 3).

Part 2, "Towards a Westernized Modernity," recounts in four chapters the "road to an ethos of monogamous, heterosexual marriage," as the title of the fourth chapter illustrates. Afari examines political discourses on sexuality in twentieth-century Iran and narrates the history of women's political participation and changing gender norms, alternating a discussion of elite, middle-, and working-class experiences. The history of twentieth-century Iran is the background for a fresh look at the history of women. Chapter 4 looks at the constitutional revolution and the emergence of what Afari calls a "Westernized modernity" and women's growing visibility in the public sphere. Chapter 5 narrates Reza Shah Pahlavi's politics and focuses on the ban on the veil in 1936, but also on new norms of hygiene and reforms in education and law that together disciplined women's bodies and minds towards the ideal of a modern, heterosexual, and Westernized Iranian woman. Afari juxtaposes this account with a description of the "anxieties" that accompanied this process of (self-) reformation among both women and men, and devotes the final section of the chapter to a discussion of sexuality in the literature of the period which highlights the contradictions built into the emerging heterosexual ideal.

Chapters 6 and 7 alternate between a discussion of the political history of Iran from the 1940s to the 1960s and a narration of women's "modernization:" romantic love, divorce, and suffrage are the main points of articulation. Afari describes the implementation of legal reforms in family law, the differences between rural and urban Iran, and the changing discourse on sexuality (read for example in Farrokhzad's poetry), along with a descrip-

tion of the monarchist "women's movement." Chapter 8 analyzes the growing politicization of Iranian society and the split between leftist and guerrilla movements on one side, and Islamist movements on the other. Afari details women's participation in these movements as well as the growing concerns around women's bodies and their sexuality.

Part 3, "Forging an Islamist Modernity and Beyond," is devoted to the period from the revolution of 1979 up to today. While chapter 9 is devoted to the position of women in the wake of the revolution, chapter 10 describes the new ideal woman postulated by the Islamic Republic and narrates the birth of what is called "Islamic feminism," a movement that articulates a discourse on the emancipation of women drawing from either militant forms of Islam or more liberal, reformist approaches, such as those popular in the 1990s and up to Mohammad Khatami's presidency. Chapter 11 describes the Islamic Republic's implementation of family planning and the conflicted emergence of what Afari describes as "the gay lifestyle" against the background of a growing concern for women's and human rights. In the conclusion, Afari presents an overview on the status of women in contemporary Iran, discussing the current articulation of the women's movement, their employment and family life, but also focusing on new forms of sexuality. It is however in the last paragraphs of the introduction that one finds a concise closing statement that reviews retrospectively the history narrated in the book and announces more transformations in the near future. Afari notes that "today we are witnessing a sexual awakening that builds on the nation's rich, religious, cultural and social repertoire," a "sexual revolution that began more than a century ago" and is "approaching a critical stage" (p. 16). What new "anxieties" might this supposed revolution generate?

The book draws on a wide variety of materials: newspapers and magazines, travel accounts, novels and poetry, religious treatises, contemporary academic works, interviews, reported opinions, Web sites, and some archival sources. This richness offers a panoramic view of the topic and a review cannot do justice to it. The book is a treasure trove for anyone interested in the history of women and sexuality in Iran. However, only occasionally does Afari discuss in depth the scope and specificity of this material. In many cases, empirically minded historians will wonder how representative or reliable these materials are, while scholars inclined towards discourse analysis will note the absence of any discussion of the specific representational modalities of these materials, which are mostly "mined for information," as they say. In my view it is in fact a merit of Afari's book to leave enough room for alternative readings of her own text, to the extent that readers interested in the history of sex will find here a wealth of information that sometimes transcends the main concerns of the author and can therefore be the ground for alternative histories of sex.

The cover of the book and the numerous images offer an impressive counterpoint to the narrative. However, they are rarely analyzed in depth and therefore work as illustrations of the textual descriptions rather than as part and parcel of the argumentation.

In sum, Afari's book should be of interest to anyone who is looking for an in-depth overview of discussions about sex in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran, and to those who are interested in understanding the pervasive anxiety about the lack of, and desire for, a set of ideals (consent, intimacy, equality) that constitute the normative ground of much contemporary debate about the history, politics, and gender relations of modern Iran.

Note

[1]. To name but the most cited among these works: Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister. Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards. Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Setrag Manoukian. Review of Afary, Janet, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran.* H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33412

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.