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sexual politics in modern Iran

Janet Afary, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2009, 423pp.,
ISBN: 978-0-521-72708-2, £18.99 (pbk)

the politics of women's rights in Iran

Arezoo Osanloo, Princeton University Press, Woodstock, 2009, 258pp.,
ISBN: 978-0-691-13547-2, £13.50 (pbk)

rethinking global sisterhood: western feminism and Iran

Nima Naghibi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2007, 187pp.,
ISBN: 978-0-8166-4760-7, US\$22.50 (pbk)

The socio-political location and legal status of Iranian women in the past 100 years has created much scholarly debate and reflection. In this review I look at three recent volumes in this category that examine the politics of gender in Iran at both local and international levels.

The first, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, by Janet Afary, provides a panoramic view of great detail and depth of the history and politics of religious, social and legal discourses in sexuality in Iran in the modern era. Afary's extensive literature survey interrelates the evolutionary paths in marriage laws, sexual practices, Shi'ite Islamic jurisprudence and notions of modernity and secularism. The survey is thus an interdisciplinary archival and analytical feat observing cycles of change in attitudes and behaviours, and notably the continued resistance of Iranian women against an unjust legal system. Through historical documents, diverse literary and visual cultural artefacts, and the accounts of individuals, Afary chronicles the journey of Iran's complex discourses of femininity, and to some extent masculinity and gay/lesbian practices and rights.

Part 1 illuminates the premodern traits in sexual practice and desire in marriage and homosexuality, and their relationship with both Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions regarding age and consent in marriage, purity and virginity and polygamy and fertility. Although similar cultural models in Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Hinduism are identified, reference is made to similar beliefs and the Austrian physician Jakob Eduard Polak (1818–1891), who taught medicine in Tehran in the mid-nineteenth century. He is cited as promoting the dominant prejudices that 'early marriage prevented a host of physical ailments that contemporary European society attributed to the womb' (p. 27).

Westernised modernity, imperialist policies, unveiling, reform, heterosexual monogamous marriage, suffrage and intellectual and political trajectories are the focus of Part 2. The interconnectedness of the age of enlightenment, and cultural and political reform around 1900, we learn, brought Persian translations of a host of Iranian diaspora newspapers from Istanbul, Calcutta and Cairo, advocating gender reform in Iran and influencing the emergence of independent Iranian women's organisations and their new agenda. Afary proposes that by the 1950s, 'a strict demarcation existed between economic or political rights on the one hand, and sexual and personal ones, on the other'. She argues that although leftist and nationalist parties recognised 'pay equity, health, education, and the right to vote', greater individual rights that 'challenged the marriage and family structure were deemed unacceptable' and 'bourgeois' (pp. 177–178). The subsequent decades carried large-scale programmes of modernisation and unprecedented degrees of freedom and expression, characterised by the secular, urban, sexually explicit and award winning poetry of the late Forough Farrokhzad (1935–1967), and the legendary Simin Behbahani (1927). However, a sense of alienation prevailed for many who opposed the speed of so called 'Westernised' behaviours and sought an Islamist movement.

In Part 3, the complex and multifaceted impact of the Islamic Revolution on women's rights is examined. Here, the Islamic regime's sexual economy, Islamic feminism, new politics of birth control, increase in prostitution and drug abuse and the current developments in youth cultures displaying sexual freedom at grassroots are discussed. Afary succeeds in demonstrating the multi-agency of Iranian women despite the limitations. This has resulted in a redefinition of women's identities through their writings and press, and multiple civil society campaigns, producing new debates about the meaning of women's rights and legal status in the family law.

This post 1979 period is also addressed in the second volume under review, *The Politics of Women's Rights in Iran*, by Arzoo Osanloo. This explores the ways in which the discourse of 'rights' has evolved to a position where Iranian women occupy the forefront of public debates about civic, human, as well as women's rights. Although considering the Islamic regime's perceptions in the initial years of the Revolution, associating women's rights with 'corrupt' Western concepts of liberalisation and individualism, Osanloo further interrogates the discursive underpinnings of 'rights' according to international perceptions. She maintains that any discourse of rights is ultimately bound by the historical and political specificities of local social and cultural practices. The universalist position of a discourse, which is essentially Euro-American, encompassing colonialism and global power relations, is thus problematized by the author. She argues that the complexities in the notion of rights in Iran require equally complex research methodologies in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of its context and development.

In six chapters, Osanloo locates and presents 'specific sites' where 'women's discussions about and perceptions of their rights' could be observed and narrated. This is 'to collect data that would account for the historical and ideological ruptures that impact women's perceptions of rights' (p. 9). Chapter 1, 'A Genealogy of "Women's Rights" in Iran' traces the 'rights talk' back to the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911), continued through to the anti-Western 1979 Revolutionary discourse. Developments during the period of reform and presidency of Mohammad Khatami is narrated in Chapter 2, 'Producing States: Women's Participation and the Dialogic of Rights' in order to 'provide room for debate about contemporary political and social issues and in turn produce new visions of statist practices' (p. 49). Chapter 3 'Qur'anic Meetings: "Doing the Cultural Work"' analyses and explores the interplay of civic and spiritual, and family and individual dynamics in women's lives. In Chapters 4 and 5 women's participatory roles in the process of 'rights construction' become more evident in a variety of moving narratives. These relate how ably women manage to juxtapose modern secular urban citizenry and Islamic traditions in dialogic sites of rights meaningful to them, taking into consideration the interrelations, relevance and distinctions between the private and public spheres.

In her closing chapter, '"Women's Rights" as Exhibition at the Brink of War', Osanloo posits a final discursive twist and a dilemma that further relates to any Muslim majority country. In order to legitimise attacks on Muslims, the author asserts, the United States, the country of her residence, and the Bush presidency adopt and promote a discourse of 'global war on terror' and 'the axis of evil'. She relates that a 'manual for victory' entitled 'An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror' is thus legitimised and published by the US government. This, the author asserts, results in women becoming the site of critical struggles where Imperialism uses 'freedom as a defining point of cultural difference between America and "Islamic" culture' (p. 201).

Nima Naghibi's volume, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran*, makes a similar critique of the Western liberationist and 'universal sisterhood' discourses of Western women's involvement in Persia/Iran in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Naghibi describes the consistent mal representation of the Persian woman as simply abject, exotic, alien, veiled, passive and silent, by the evangelical 'adventuresses' from the nineteenth century patriarchal West particularly ironic. She argues that both Western and state-sponsored Pahlavi (1925–1979) feminists overlooked women's agency, participation and contributions at significant junctures in Iranian political history.

As with Afary, Naghibi employs visual cultural artefacts in her research methodology taking advantage of the data in moving image, both cinematic and documentary/fact and fiction in order to deconstruct the cultural nuances and forms of sexuality among women in Iran. She is further self-reflexive and explains how as a literary scholar-researcher, she has to compete with the micro

politics of disciplinary hierarchies in academia imposed particularly by 'historians', as well as the macro geopolitics of post-9/11 from the White House. She recounts how she herself, as a diasporic subject in the post Islamic revolutionary age, has felt 'the effects of the discursive shift in the West from "exotic Persian" to "fundamentalist Islamist" and, more specifically, to "oppressed Muslim woman"' (p. ix). Like all of us, she routinely experiences how Western liberal feminists once again wish to enlighten and rescue their Muslim sister/other 'from beneath the brutalising weight of Islam'! Naghibi references 'the fiasco of the American occupation of Iraq, and how that was structured around similar discursive representations of its oppressed and long-suffering people, including and especially its women and children' (p. xi).

As with the other two volumes, Naghibi traces her argument through a series of key texts and events. In Chapter 1 'Enlightening the Other: Christian Sisters and Intrepid Adventuresses' and Chapter 2 'Scopophilic Desires: Unveiling Iranian Women', the construction of the Persian woman in an unequal pedagogical relationship to Western women is critiqued. This is as beings who need 'enlightening' and must be unveiled, exemplified in the writings of Presbyterian and Anglican women missionaries such as Gertrude Bell, *Persian Pictures* (1849), and Ella Syke, *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle* (1901) and *Persia and Its People*. She argues how compulsory deveiling (1936) and reveiling (1983) were implicated in validating the colonial agenda by positioning Iranian women's self-identity through an embrace of Western cultural forms and representations. Chapter 3 'Global Sisters in Revolutionary Iran' discusses a chain of contradictory elements in the Iranian multitrajectory discourse of feminism in both the Pahlavi and post-revolutionary eras, associated with the Women's Organisation of Iran, non-Iranian feminists from Paris and New York, and Iranian feminist scholars in the diaspora. In Chapter 4, 'Female Homosocial Communities in Iranian Feminist Film', the author sensitively and insightfully demonstrates how women under the Islamic regime are able to engage in forms of bonding with each other, at times also erotic and mobilise their voice and articulate their demands for political inclusion. We read that the women might be 'veiled but they are neither modest nor chaste. They mobilise their voices to articulate their demands for inclusion – as equals to men – in the Iranian national conscience and under Islamic law' (p. 111).

In conclusion, the three complementary volumes in this review provide a critical multifaceted overview of the socio-political development of gender debates in Iran, and significantly in relation to the ethics of our post-colonial era. They create vital reading for researchers in gender studies and politics globally, further highlighting the activism of Iranian women. Afary's particular strength is her meticulous archival examination of a masculinist history of sexual politics in Iran. The 84 illustrations, some characteristically witty and humorous, offer a crucial visual dimension with critical cultural and historical nuances and shifts in

perspectives over time. Osanloo's book is a timely discussion that not only critiques the limitations of the Islamic Republic's stance on women's rights, but also queries the Western gaze and political agenda often viewing the non-Christian as the alien Other. It provides a fresh perspective on the ways in which contemporary urban women in Iran construct and articulate a discourse of 'rights' relevant to their lives. Similarly, Naghibi's volume problematises both the negative lens of the Western traveller, as well as the desire of those in Iran, especially during the Pahlavi regime, to be saved by their 'Western sisters'. In prompting the reader to rethink global sisterhood, she asserts that Western feminists have to grow to better appreciate and understand the position of women activists within the Islamic Republic. The three volumes thus make significant contributions to demystifying the lives and intellectual and sexual trajectories among Iranian women.

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