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GENDER RELATIONS I

GENDER RELATIONS in Persia

i. IN MODERN PERSIA.

Gender relations, a culturally and historically defined system that regulates male/female interactions, has been central to the discourses of modernity and counter modernity in contemporary Persia. The concept of gender, however, is still not part of an available lexicon: there is no common equivalent for the term in the Persian language (Najmabadi, 1991-92, p. 6). The study of gender relations has only recently emerged as an analytical category in the field of Iranian studies (Paidar, 1995, p. 1). While essentialist accounts, often written from a male perspective and presented as a divinely ordained and immutable order, abound (e.g, Moṭahharī, Šarīʿatī), few systematic explorations of the social, institutional, and linguistic dimensions of gender relations have been undertaken. The findings presented here are indeed exploratory and, often, tentative.

Gender relations in contemporary Persia defy any typical characterization. Economic variables, ethnic background, education, religious inclination, disparities among urban and tribal populations, and personal pre-dispositions

mitigate and, at times, contradict the absoluteness of any general outline. Furthermore, in recent decades gender relations have gone through profound transformation. Conventional allocations of power, space, and resources have been challenged, modifying gender hierarchies and inequities. Modernization, desegregation, women's rights movements, urbanization, changes in legislation, expansion of the communication media, adaptation to national and international pressures, and re-Islamization have affected notions of masculinity and femininity, refashioning the relationships between men and women.

Although belied by a more complex social reality and beneath temporal and local variations, three interrelated patterns permeate gender relations in contemporary Persia. They are (1) segregation of the sexes, (2) male domination/female subordination, and (3) the primary role of woman as wife and mother within the family unit.

SEGREGATION OF THE SEXES

In addition to divides defined by class, religious, ethnic, and generational differences, there has existed in Persia another division of the social order, one based on sex. This axis, around which society was, and, to a certain extent, continues to be organized, kept the world of men and women apart. Traditionally, men engaged in activities outside the house in the public sphere of politics and the market place. The world of women, on the other hand, was indoors. It was private and domestic. While men were the legitimate wanderers, the ideal woman was expected to maintain a closed-in existence that did not intrude on or merge with the outside world. She was a person of few transactions. She covered her body, guarded her honor, controlled her desires, measured her words, and remained in her "proper place."

One of the most compelling justifications for sex-segregation has been the belief that sexual desire is easily stimulated in both sexes and, if unregulated, can cause social mayhem and disorder. To channel sexual conduct properly, various forms of physical and symbolic barriers were created between the two sexes. To protect the integrity of the male line of descent, women's sexuality was closely monitored and contained. Key cultural concepts, none of which have an exact equivalent in the English language, such as *ḡayrat* (honor/machismo), *najābat* (purity/decency), *nāmūs* (chastity/reputation), and *ḥojb o ḥayā* (modesty/shame) have revolved around women's sexual integrity. The virginity of unmarried girls, the fidelity of married women, and the sexual

abstinence of widows and divorcees were symbols of communal dignity. With such a strong emphasis placed upon confining and controlling women's sexuality, rape was considered a powerful tool of revenge and intimidation.

Women's chastity has been inextricably linked with space. While mobility has always been valued and admired in men, it has often been associated with opportunity for sexual promiscuity in women. *Ḵīābāngard* (street-walker), *velgard* (vagrant), and *harjāʾī* (belonging or existing everywhere) are terms synonymous with prostitution when applied to women. *Gomrāh kardan* and *az rāh ba dar bordan* (leading astray) are equivalent to seducing. The veil (see ČADOR), the most conspicuous expression of sex-segregation, like the hymen (*parda-ye bekarat),* is perceived to be a physical impediment, an obstacle to men's and women's sexual temptation.

More than a religious ordinance, sex-segregation has always been related to such matters as power, domination, and exclusion. Sanctified in the name of religion, physiology, safety, or beauty, it has restricted women's mobility. Although it has curtailed man/woman access to one another, it has only affected women's control of, and access to, the public domain. Politically, it has excluded them from certain crucial activities. Economically, it has confronted them with difficulties in fully exercising their legal rights. Occupationally, it has prevented them from pursuing a variety of careers in the public sector. Educationally, it has denied them easy access to public educational institutions. Artistically, it has hampered their potential to fully develop their talent in public forms of art.

Although idealized, gendered allocation of space has never been fully actualized. Older women, deemed asexual, were allowed greater physical mobility. Women of the lower classes, agriculturalists, and tribal women could ill afford to observe ideals of seclusion (Beck, Friedl, Hegland, Razvi). Moreover, prompted by forces of modernity, women began to appear more and more in public places in the mid-nineteenth century. Beginning with their sporadic but vital activism in religious movements (Amanat, Bayat, F. Milani), continuing with their active role in the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11 (see FEMINIST MOVEMENTS ii), leading to their vastly increased access to the public arena in the Pahlavi era and their mass participation in the 1979 Revolution (see FEMINIST MOVEMENTS iii and iv), women expanded their public presence and demanded expansion of their citizenship rights. The Mandatory Unveiling Act of 1936, the right to education for girls (see EDUCATION xxvi), the Suffrage Act of 1963, and greater employment

opportunities accorded them public voice, visibility, and mobility. Slow at first, desegregation gained momentum in the 1940s and 1950s. It had a transformative impact on gender relations.

The tradition of contemporary women writers best reflects both desegregation and the desire to reformulate gender relations. Although for centuries women's silence and public self-effacement were idealized, fetishized, even spiritualized, women broke this spell of textual invisibility coincidentally with their attempt to unveil in the mid-nineteenth century (F. Milani). A large number of women, especially Ṭāhera Qorrat-al-ʿAyn (1814-52), Parvin Eʿteṣāmī (1907-41), Sīmīn Dānešvar (b. 1921), Sīmīn Behbahānī (b. 1921), Forūḡ Farroḵzād (1935-67; q.v.), Ṭāhera Ṣaffārzāda (b. 1936), Mahšīd Amīršāhī (b. 1937), Šahrnūš Pārsīpūr (b. 1946), and Golī Taraqqī (b. 1939) reappraised gender norms and patterns on a very intimate level. Aware of the many limitations imposed upon men and women in the name of masculinity and femininity, they reformulated gender relations freed from conventional sex-stereotyped modes of thoughts and emotions. As cloistered women left their homes, however, reshaping traditionally masculine spaces, anxiety over family breakdown increased. Many writers, philosophers, and social critics wrote about the breakdown of the moral fabric of society. Women became the emblem of threatening changes. Tainted with a nagging anxiety over their sexual morality, they were perceived to disturb "natural" gender categories. Blurred now was the boundary between public and private arenas, and blurred with it, too, was any sense of stability. The "half-naked" (i.e., unveiled) woman parading in the streets was portrayed as sexually licentious, an easy prey, open to "penetration." This image of the violated (and violating) woman became the paradigm of Persia, the motherland, with Persian man in the role of an emasculated son who could not protect his mother. The perceived erosion of male authority and territory became a real challenge to many men's sense of manliness.

Persian narratives of the last few decades are saturated with the theme of imperiled manhood. A sizable body of literature decries the dishonored man, the soft male, the womanly man (Āl-e Aḥmad, Dānešvar, Saʿedī, Šādmān). It laments the sharp decline in the old and cherished ideals of masculinity. From Muslim clergy to progressive writers to politicians and scholars, men and women alike warned against this unfortunate degeneracy. Not only were fictive characters denounced as being unmanned, but so too were prominent political figures. Moḥammad Rezā Shah Pahlavī described his own prime

minister, Moḥammad Moṣaddeq, as a person who was hysterical, lacked manliness, and who cried like a woman (Pahlavi, pp. 139-40). Prime Minister Amīr ʿAbbās Hoveydā was denigrated as an effeminate homosexual (Doldom, p. 63-66; A. Milani, p. 154). The shah himself was not spared such accusations (Rafizadeh, p. 215).

A society characterized for centuries by its glorification of masculinity was witnessing a crisis. The implications and ramifications of this challenge remain to be fully analyzed and understood. But as vestiges of conventional gender relations eroded, the desire for a more familiar lifestyle intensified. As notions of masculinity were further challenged, the need to accentuate the differences between the sexes increased and veiling became essential to the articulation of manhood. For, as a system of visual communication, the veil expresses gendered identity unambiguously. It evokes femininity and creates an essential woman who is presumed to be different from men. As a defining female garment, polarizing rather than uniting the sexes, it dramatizes the differences between them. A veiled woman makes a man, any man, appear more masculine by contrast. The veil is, in fact, so associated with femininity that a man who veils himself is degraded to the level of a symbolic woman, hence denied his privileged, manly position. For example, the escape from Persia of Abu'l-Ḥasan Banī Ṣadr, the first president of the Islamic Republic, and of Masʿūd Rajawī, the leader of the Mojāhedīn-e Ḵalq, allegedly using a veil as a disguise, has been used as evidence not only of their cowardice but also their effeminate nature. The veil is a marker of masculine authority.

Given the fact that gender apartheid is deeply embedded, it is not surprising the "re-Islamization" of Persia, soon after the Revolution of 1978-79, began with a massive campaign to "purify" the public space of women. Thousands upon thousands of women were coerced into early retirement; others lost their jobs; many went into exile. Women vanished as entertainers. They disappeared from cinema screens (Nafici, p. 138). In the rare instances when they were given roles in films, it was mainly as mother or wife—confined to the private domain of the home. In order for women's appearance in public to be legitimized, it had to be de-sexualized. It became the focus of regulatory efforts. Regardless of their faith or inclination, women were forced to cover themselves (*ḥejāb-e eslāmī*). Social interaction between men and women was prohibited. Women were segregated in mosques, schools, universities, beaches, and buses.

MALE DOMINATION/FEMALE SUBORDINATION

A woman's underprivileged position in Persian society is symbolically expressed even before she is born. Women who are pregnant with sons are believed to be more alert, agile, even more beautiful. They are presumed to be active and good-tempered (see CHILDREN ii). The subdued reaction to the delivery of a baby girl often contrasts with the jubilation caused by the occasion of the birth of a boy (see CHILDREN iv; Ṣaffārzāda, p. 110). The unequal treatment of boys and girls continues throughout life. Boys are often pampered more than girls; their wishes and desires are more readily fulfilled. They are usually breast-fed for a longer period. While masculinity is associated with courage, strength, action, generosity, emotional reserve, and honor (Dehḵodā, s.v. *mardānīya*), the traits traditionally attributed to women are those appropriate to a servile condition. So celebrated is masculinity, that "manly women" who possess certain characteristics associated with masculinity, are usually admired, while effeminate men are ridiculed and devalued. As a member of the weaker sex (*żaʿīfa*), a woman is expected to be deferential, discreet, patient, industrious, resigned, nurturing, quiet, and unassertive (Esterabadi, p. 49). Gender distinctions and stereotypes become justification for social hierarchies. Being perceived as more emotional, women are presumed to be intellectually inferior to men, with half of a man's brain (*Taʾdīb al-neswān*, p. 255). Their implied deficiency in the decision-making process, coupled with their lack of rationality (*zanhā yak danda kam dārand*), sanction their legal treatment as minors. They "need" the protection of men whose manliness derives partly from their domination over and patronage of women.

An imbalance of power, however, does not imply that men are all-powerful, women all-powerless, just as male domination does not mean all men are equally powerful. Subordination is not synonymous with powerlessness and control is not solely a male prerogative. True as the dominance-subordination pattern might be, male power is neither complete nor unmitigated. Women have found superstitious ways of curbing men's domination, wielding considerable influence and power (Friedl, 1994, p. 151). They have always been in control of the basic necessities of life, such as food, childbearing, and child-rearing. Men are frequently like guests in their own homes. Freed from primary domestic responsibilities, they have to rely heavily on women for their everyday needs. Traditionally, women considered home their territory and did not appreciate or welcome men's interference in or lingering occupancy of their space. They developed a female world with its own complicated structure, conventions, rituals, and powers.

This female community which often eluded and excluded men became a source of fascination and terror for men who seemed to fear women's secret power. Persian literature illustrates the continual engagement of men in devising defensive strategies to protect their domination. Page after page is filled with men's advice to each other to keep a check on women lest they lose control. Seen as manipulators, women are often portrayed as potential aggressors whose attraction is irresistible and whose power to deceive is limitless. Most writers formulate their paradigms of guile with women in mind. *Ḥīlat, kayd* or *makr* (guile), although not gendered words, are frequently feminized. The wily female characters of Persian literature have their counterparts in religion and folklore. Although in the koranic story of creation the loss of life in paradise is not brought about by Eve (Qurʾān 20:120, 7:20), and though she is exonerated from her charge of sole culpability, in literature, popular narratives, and even religious tracts (Bīāzār Šīrāzī, p. 88), she is held accountable for cajoling her husband. She carries the burden of responsibility for tricking Adam and causing their subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Mother of mankind, so too, she remains mother of their misery. As the temptress and the seducer, Eve continues to be viewed as the prototype of womanly shiftiness.

While the wily woman is said to be sneaky and equated with disguise and duplicity, men's guile is neither essentialized nor vilified. One is portrayed as sexual and emotional manipulation, as ruse. The other is believed to be imaginative strategy, a sign of mental agility, clever creativity. Although some of the most popular heroes of Persian literature such as Rostam, Yūsof, Ḵosrow, and Rāmīn frequently rely on tricks, they are never presented as liars or crooks. Their cunning is often justified, valorized, even aestheticized (Davis; F. Milani).

Male domination finds legal and penal articulations in Persian civil codes. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic is a most recent expression of a gender ideology that relegates women to second class citizenship. Paradoxically, whereas a woman's vote is equal to that of a man, her testimony is valued as half that of a man (article 33) and *dīa*, the compensation paid to the family of a murdered woman, according to the Law of Retribution and Punishment (article 46), is half that of the *dīa* for a murdered man. Men and women, however, are subject to the same punishment if they commit a crime even though females reach the age of legal maturity six years earlier than males. Amendment 1 of Article 1210 defines maturity at nine lunar years for girls and

fifteen for boys. Addressing men and women based on their sex within the "God-willed" order, the Constitution amplifies gender hierarchies and inequities. Drawing heavily on male-centered interpretations of koranic gender laws, it inculcates a hierarchy within the family unit—and by extension in the society at large—where men exercise control over women. The family, like the country, is organized into a well defined hierarchy with clear chains of command.

PRIMARY ROLE OF WOMAN AS WIFE AND MOTHER

Family, the foundational unit of Persian society, was traditionally an oasis in which men could find refuge from the outside world, women could fulfill their domestic obligations, and children, future citizens, could be properly raised. Although older forms of arranged marriages are giving way to new patterns of courtship and romantic aspirations, priority is still given to the couple's complementarity: man as breadwinner, woman as homemaker. Further, marriage remains the rule and celibacy the exception for either sex.

Marriage is believed to be the most important life choice for a woman. So crucial is her role as wife that her identity revolves around it. This is reflected in the Persian language itself. *Zan* refers to both a woman and a wife. Terms of address such as *bānū* (a married woman) or *dūšīza* (an unmarried girl) are based on the marital status of a woman. Men are not addressed based on their conjugal status. While boys turn into men with full-fledged citizenship rights upon reaching maturity, girls become women through marriage. If not married off on time, they become *pir doḵtar* (a spinster) or *toršīde* (soured), both derogatory remarks reserved for "old maids."

In spite of the great importance attached to marriage, the most publicly affectionate ties are not conjugal but intergenerational. The relationship between a mother and her children, especially her sons, is cherished and celebrated more publicly than all other relationships. *Behešt zīr pāy-e mādarān ast* (paradise lies at mothers' feet), a saying attributed to the prophet Moḥammad, is a common adage. The father/son relationship, on the other hand, is not commemorated as often. At times, the conflictual relationship between fathers and sons, even the murder of sons by their fathers, is emphasized and written about (Barāhanī, Davis, Hoveyda, A. Milani, p. 14; Omidsalar). In rare cases where the theme of matricide finds public expression, the focus is on the adversarial relations between two women: the mother and her son's lover/(future) wife. They compete for the love and

attention of a man (Īraj Mīrzā, p. 191).

The patriarchal family, based on the Islamic religious law (*šarīʿa*), was officially in effect in Persia until 1346 Š./1967 when the Family Protection Law (*Qānūn-e ḥemāyat-e ḵānevādeh*) went into effect. Unlike previous gender-based policies which tacitly reinforced women's domestic obligations, the Family Protection Law acknowledged women's rights for their own sake. It challenged, for the first time, men's authority within the family. A man could no longer marry an additional wife without the consent of his first wife. He was not automatically granted the custody of his children (see FAMILY LAW iii; Bagley; Pakizagi). Although many women activists and especially the Women's Organization of Iran (Sāzmān-e zanān-e Irān) had lobbied for more radical reforms in family status laws, this was nonetheless a watershed in legislative and cultural terms.

The Islamic Republic proceeded quickly to re-institute the patriarchal family. Two weeks after the Revolution, on 26 February 1979, the Family Protection Law was rescinded. Maintaining that the rebirth of the Islamic society would be possible only through the re-Islamization of the nuclear family, the Constitution of the Islamic Republic suspended previous reforms in personal status laws. Based on the discourse of natural differences between men and women, it undermined women's position within the family. It lowered the age of marriage to nine for girls and fifteen for boys. It lifted restrictions on polygamy and man's exclusive right to divorce by repudiation. It returned automatic custodial rights to the father or the male paternal kin.

In marriage and divorce, it is the man who negotiates the beginning or the termination of a contract. He can marry more than one wife and has the option to engage in as many temporary marriages (*sīḡa*, *motʿa*) as he wishes (Hādī, Haeri, Zaynālī). Often a woman, regardless of her age, cannot legally choose her first husband without the consent of her father or paternal kin (Haeri; Kār). She cannot marry a non-Muslim. She cannot have a career, or leave the country without the permission of her husband. She cannot choose the family's place of residence and must reside in the domicile chosen by her husband. If a wife is habitually disobedient, e.g., by leaving home without permission, she is regarded as recalcitrant (*nāšeza*), and the husband may withhold her maintenance (*nafaqa*) and has the right to divorce her without any recompense.

Since marriage is not a sacrament, but rather a contract, it is dissoluble.

Divorce is a lawful option for irreconcilable differences between married couples. Article 1133 of the civil code gives men the exclusive right to dissolve a marriage (see DIVORCE iii and iv). A man, however, can give his wife the legal power to initiate divorce proceedings. Since marriage is viewed as a contract, some stipulations can be included in it. As for custodial rights (*ḥeżānat*), mothers have the preferential right to the custody of her sons until they are two and of their daughters up to their seventh year. As soon as she remarries, however, a mother loses even her minimal custodial rights (Pākzād, p. 176). Fathers are the legal guardians (*walī*) of their children. They automatically pass on their citizenship and last name to them.

The man-as-breadwinner ethos pervades the Constitution. Privileged with leadership within the family (Article 1105 of the civil code) because of some innate and some acquired traits, he is also "charged" with the protection and maintenance of the family unit and its members. Women's submission to the "head" of the household is rewarded with financial support commensurate with her social status (*nafaqa*). The system is thus viewed as equitable because *nafaqa* is presented as man's obligation and woman's right. A woman's primary obligation is obedience to her husband. Her most valuable service is fulfillment of his sexual desires (*tamkīn*). The husband enjoys ownership rights over her sexual organs. Marital sex, even when she does not desire to engage in it, is a wifely duty. *Mahrīya* (dower or bride price) is related to the consummation of marriage. Article 1086 of the civil code states that *mahrīya* would not be paid to a woman if she refuses to submit herself sexually to her husband. The same rule applies to *nafaqa*. A woman's refusal to have sex with her husband is grounds for him not to pay maintenance (Article 1108).

Twenty years after the Revolution, the contradictions between normative morality and social realities, between legislation and social practices, are widening and growing rapidly. In spite of legal restrictions, substantial transformations are affecting gender relations. Many men and women are moving out of preordained cultural frames and territories, stretching fields of action and imagination. Many previously "purged" women, highly educated and skilled, are reappearing in the work place. Women, seeking educational, occupational, political, and cultural options outside the traditional domestic sphere, are invading previously all-male territories. Men are becoming more active participants in family life. The leadership/obedience pattern within the family is being replaced by a more democratic family structure.

The laws, following rather than anticipating the trend in gender relations, are

being revised and amended. Although family laws have been particularly resistant to reform, familial rights and obligations are being reconfigured. The shift in the official discourse of the Islamic Republic regarding certain family laws is a clear indication of this dramatic restructuring. The 1992 "Amendments to Divorce Regulations," for instance, curtails men's right to repudiation and places a monetary value on women's domestic labor during the course of the marriage (see FEMINIST MOVEMENTS iv). Gender relations in contemporary Persia, a complex mixture of protest and accommodation, of resistance and acquiescence, of tradition and modernity, continues to be the focus of intense debate. It has captured the cultural imagination and is often at the center of political discourse.

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