

“Where did the handsome beloved go?": Discourses of Heteronormalization in Qajar Iran

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## **Abstract**

### **“Where did the handsome beloved go?”: Discourses of Heteronormalization in Qajar Iran**

**Jasmin Ghorbani**

This thesis explores the cultural and spiritual significance of Iran’s premodern culture of homoeroticism and traces the role of European epistemological hegemony in the erasure of these once accepted and celebrated practices from Iran’s cultural memory as part of a broader project modernization during the nineteenth century. I examine travelogues of both Europeans and Iranians travelling between these two societies and their reflections on gender and sexual differences, from intrigue and enchantment to alienation and disgust, tracing the emergent dialogue between these societies and its impact on the discourse of Iranian modernity. Extant studies of gender and sexuality in Iran have drawn connections between the scrutiny of the European gaze and its influence on Iranian notions of modernity, however many stop short in their interrogation of how this process of forgetting contributed to the erasure of same-sex desire both historically and historiographically. Drawing on queer and postcolonial theory, I examine the epistemological power dynamics that influenced this transformation to demonstrate that Iran’s process of heteronormalization marked more than a mere shift in erotic sensibilities, but rather was part of a larger project of regulating gender and sexuality to further modernizing aims. This research bears implications both for understanding how this historical erasure impacts contemporary discourse about queerness in Iran as well as methodological considerations regarding how scholarship inadvertently reproduces hegemonic heteronormative epistemologies in the study of gender and sexuality in non-Western contexts.

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## **Dedication**

To Mama, Baba & Dina

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## Introduction

During the Qajar period (1796-1925), Iranian conceptions of gender and sexuality underwent dramatic transformations as part of Iran's broader trajectory of modernization. During this time, Iran's formerly sanctioned and venerated culture of homoeroticism- the celebration of same-sex desire in literary and visual culture, the accepted practice of both male and female same-sex relations- was reformed in favour of a heteronormative gender order. This shift, as with Iran's discourse of modernity more broadly, was heavily influenced by the entrance of the European gaze into the Iranian imagination as contact between Iran and Europe intensified over the course of the nineteenth century. As an increasing number of Europeans came into contact with Iranian social mores, same-sex practices became a site of scrutiny, signifying Iran's "backwardness" in the eyes of these European travelers.<sup>1</sup>

During this time, many Iranians also traveled to Europe where they were exposed to European heterosocial norms that differed dramatically from the homosocial organization of Qajar society. Iranians were struck by the visibility of and access to women in public space, prompting inward critique about Iran's own social customs. This process of observing, and being observed, had profound epistemic implications that reshaped gender and sexual norms in Iranian society.

Iran's "long nineteenth century" was marked by uncertainty about the nation's trajectory, which, as Naghmeh Sohrabi suggests, can be summed up by an internal tension between a narrative of decline and one of modernization.<sup>2</sup> While this dilemma typically centered military, economic and political concerns, it was equally central to questions surrounding gender and

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<sup>1</sup> Najmabadi, Afsaneh, and American Council of Learned Societies. *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. 1st ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005 p. 1-7.

<sup>2</sup> Sohrabi, Naghmeh. *Taken for Wonder : Nineteenth Century Travel Writing from Iran to Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012 p. 7.

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sexuality in Iran. The circulation of European-authored travelogues about Iran and Iranian-authored travelogues about Europe helped to consolidate a discourse of modernity shaped by self-Other dichotomies which positioned Europe as Iran's "idealized other."<sup>3</sup>

By the early twentieth century, Iran's longstanding culture of homoeroticism had been effectively erased from cultural memory through systematic rejection and reconfiguration toward heteronormative modernity.<sup>4</sup> This "deliberate forgetting of the homoerotic past"<sup>5</sup>, led to the marginalization of same-sex desire as Iran's formerly celebrated culture of homoeroticism and homosociality was recast as "backward," deviant, and fundamentally incompatible with modernity.

The connection between increased contact with Europe during the nineteenth century and Iran's trajectory toward a heteronormative gender order is well established in contemporary scholarship. However, much of this scholarship stops short in its interrogation of this process of forgetting and its implications in obscuring not only the culturally specific practices associated with it, but the ability to locate same-sex desire in premodern Iran. This historiographical gap can be partly attributed to the pervasiveness of what Karma Lochrie terms the "heterosexual

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<sup>3</sup> Abedinifard, Mostafa. "Iran's "Self-Deprecating Modernity": Toward Decolonizing Collective Self-Critique." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 3 (2021): 407.

<sup>4</sup> Afary, Janet. 2009;2014;. *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*. Cambridge;New York;: Cambridge University Press p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> Babayan, Kathryn, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and Harvard University. Center for Middle Eastern Studies. *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*. Vol. 39.;39;. Cambridge, MA: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2008 p. 11.

paradigms of scholarship”. That is, a deeply embedded scholarly tendency to naturalize and universalize heterosexuality and binary notions of gender.<sup>6</sup> These paradigms place limitations on

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the study of gender and sexuality by imposing heteronormative, binary structures of analysis onto historical contexts to which they do not belong.

In the case of premodern Iran, scholars have reproduced these heteronormative epistemologies in multiple ways. First, through desexualization of premodern homoerotic bonds, particularly male Sufi master-disciple bonds, recognition of same-sex desire in premodern Iran is denied and the cultural significance of these practices and their erotic dimensions are obscured. Second, scholarship has tended to perpetuate the notion that the prevalence of same-sex practices in Iran was a result of its homosocial structure, thus marking same-sex desire not as an independent configuration of desire in its own right, but as derivative of heterosexuality. Third, scholarship on gender and sexuality in modern Iran tends to focus more on gender than on sexuality. That is, there is a large focus on the ways in which gender was mobilized in Iran’s project of modernity to reconfigure ideas about nationhood and heterosexual marriage. Indeed, this process is intimately linked with the reconfiguration of sexual norms in Iran and thus the disappearance of Iran’s culture of homoeroticism. However, this tends to overlook the historical process of marginalization of same-sex desire in Iran, leading to its remarginalization in historiography. Thus, the history of premodern Iran’s culture of homoeroticism has faced an erasure on two fronts: First, the historical erasure that took place during Iran’s period of

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<sup>6</sup> Lochrie, Karma. "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies." In *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, edited by Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz. N - New ed., 180. United States: University of Minnesota Press, 1997 p. 180-181.

modernity during which Iran's culture of homoeroticism, and with it, same-sex desire and practices were effectively marginalized, and a second historiographical erasure in which contemporary scholars have overlooked or reproduced this marginalization in contemporary historical narratives.

This thesis has two primary aims. First, it traces the processes of what Said first identified as "epistemological imperialism" that influenced the naturalization of heteronormative ways of understanding gender and sexuality in late-nineteenth Iranian society. Second, it interrogates and disrupts the perpetuation of these heteronormative epistemologies in contemporary scholarship through a combined queer and postcolonial framework.

### **Historiography**

Afsaneh Najmabadi's *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* is a foundational work in the historiography of gender and sexuality in Iran. Employing gender as a primary analytical category, Najmabadi traces nineteenth century transformations in accepted sexual practices, aesthetic conventions and conceptions of love. She illuminates an early Qajar-era culture of homoeroticism, in which male same-sex desire and gender ambiguous conceptions of beauty were culturally recognized and widely represented in literary and visual culture. This book follows the gradual transformation away from these once dominant conceptions of gender and sexuality toward a heteronormative gender order. This book also engages with topics of nationalism, marriage, and the evolving cultural roles of women. Najmabadi's work highlights nineteenth century transformations away

from Iran's culture of homoeroticism, noting that same-sex practices, by the end of the nineteenth century, became a source of political and moral critique.<sup>7</sup>

Najmabadi also engages with the methodological issue of naming and locating same-sex desire in Iranian history, acknowledging that while the use of modern identity categories such as "gay" or "lesbian" should not be applied to historical contexts that predate them, there are risks associated with refusing to name these desires altogether. She cautions that "locating same-sex identification" exclusively in the modern West, risks rendering homosexuality as external to

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other cultures. It also risks introducing a "radical alterity with the past," producing the premodern as radically unintelligible. Najmabadi's pioneering work provides a strong starting point for rethinking approaches to historicizing gender and sexuality in Iran without flattening the complexity of culturally specific desires, acts and identities.<sup>8</sup>

Janet Afary's *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* is another major work in this field. Tracing a similar trajectory of transformation as Najmabadi's book, although with a larger temporal scope, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* is a history of gender and sexual dynamics in Iran from the premodern to contemporary period. Afary details premodern practices of marriage, concubinage, and status defined homosexuality, and the movement "toward a Westernized modernity", arguing a causal relationship between increased interaction with Europe during the nineteenth century and the subsequent transformations of gender norms.<sup>9</sup>

Afary's work is a major contribution to the field that elaborates on some areas of premodern gender and sexuality- particularly female same-sex relations, more than previous

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<sup>7</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*

authors have. However, I would argue that her analysis does not go far enough in terms of interrogating the heteronormative frameworks embedded in the narratives of modernization that she examines. For instance, she accepts the notion that the prevalence of same-sex practices was a result of the homosocial organization of premodern Iranian society – in other words, men’s lack of access to women – without adequate interrogation of the implications of this claim. This gap in her analysis risks reproducing Western heteronormative narratives that identify same-sex desire as derivative of heterosexual desire, denying its recognition as an independent form of desire. Further, while Afary does place substantial focus on sexuality in premodern Iran, her analysis of the period of modernization is largely focused on gender, overlooking the epistemic implications of “Westernized modernity” on the erasure and marginalization of same-sex desire in Iran. This thesis addresses some of these gaps in depth in a later chapter.

The broader discourse of modernity emerging in nineteenth and early twentieth century Iran is central to the transformations in gender and sexuality that took place during the same period. Scholars of Iranian modernity have demonstrated that Europe functioned as an epistemic and normative reference point, particularly for Iranian elites. While not focusing on gender and sexuality in particular, these contributions are invaluable in articulating the relationship between the European gaze and Iranian modernity.

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi’s *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography*, while not centering gender and sexuality, offers a valuable analysis of the origins of Iranian modernity, challenging the notion of modernity as inherently European.<sup>10</sup> This book complicates the notion that the dialogue between Europe and Iran was a one sided

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<sup>10</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi, Mohamad. *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography*. New York;Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK;: Palgrave, 2001.

exchange, arguing that Iranian modernity was co-constituted through both Orientalist and Occidental discourses.

Mostafa Abedinifard's "Iran's 'Self-Deprecating Modernity': Toward Decolonizing Collective Self-Critique" examines the phenomenon of self-critique expressed by Iranian intellectuals during Iran's period of modernization as Europe came to be regarded as Iran's "idealized other." Abedinifard illustrates a direct influence of the scrutinous European gaze on the intellectual discourse of modernization in Iran, highlighting the emotional dimensions of this phenomenon as Iranians employed "self-ridiculing critique" as a strategy of modernization.<sup>11</sup> As he argues, in "seeking to cure the 'figurative diseases' of the debilitated and 'sickly motherland',

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Iranian modernists mobilized the scrutinous European gaze into a regulatory apparatus for the formation and enforcement of "Westernized" modernity.<sup>12</sup> Abedinifard's work is incredibly valuable for illustrating the converging influences of European scrutiny and internal narratives of decline on the shaping of Iranian modernity.

Iranian modernity was not only a political, economic and military project but also a sexual, gendered and reproductive one. Modernization entailed the reorientation of intimate life through the promotion of companionate heterosexual marriage, the regulation of women's visibility via unveiling and reconfiguration of normative masculinity and femininity. As the perceived excess of Iranian gender and sexual norms, and particularly the prevalence of samesex practices, came to mark Iran as outside of historical "progress", reformist anxieties about national decline were increasingly channeled through concerns about gender disorder and sexual

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<sup>11</sup> Abedinifard, Mostafa. "Iran's "Self-Deprecating Modernity": Toward Decolonizing Collective Self-Critique." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 3 (2021) p. 411.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p. 411.

deviance. As a result, the achievement of modernity became inseparable from efforts to enforce a heteronormative gender order.

This thesis builds upon existing historiography by placing a focus on the epistemic dimensions of Iran's transformation toward a heteronormative gender order. Rather than accepting this transformation as merely an organic shift in erotic sensibilities, I link these transformations to orientalist discourses that influenced Iranian ideas about progress vis à vis gender and sexual norms. In doing so, I demonstrate that calls for heteronormative reform did not only reflect concerns with eroticism but also broader concerns about national strength. Further, this thesis disrupts the perpetuation of heteronormative historiographical narratives that have obscured understandings of premodern Iranian gender and sexual norms by engaging directly with historiographical gaps through a queer, postcolonial framework.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This thesis employs a combination of queer theory and postcolonial theory to illustrate the epistemological and regulatory dimensions of Iran's encounters with European Orientalist discourses on premodern Iranian gender and sexual norms. Issues of epistemological power dynamics are often backgrounded in accounts of this period, yet an understanding of the processes through which this knowledge was produced and naturalized is essential in illustrating how European hegemony contributed to the marginalization of same-sex desire and nonbinary gender expression through mechanisms of heteronormalization.

This thesis draws from several concepts articulated in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, conceptualizing gender and sexuality not as stable facts, but as social constructions enforced through regulatory practices. For Butler, heteronormativity functions as a regulatory apparatus.

In the Iranian context, the emergence of a modern, binary heteronormative framework and the pathologizing of same-sex desire, should be understood not only as shift in cultural preferences but as the result of a new regulatory framework- epistemic, social, and legal, that reorientated notions of normative desire.<sup>13</sup>

This thesis also draws on concepts from Edward Said's *Orientalism* to illustrate how these heteronormative epistemologies gained legitimacy and authority in the nineteenth century Iranian context. Said argues that the construction of the 'Orient' for Western consumption functioned not only through military domination but through the production of authoritative knowledge that reinforced presumed European superiority in contrast to Oriental

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"backwardness". This system maintained what Said refers to as a "flexible positional superiority" that created a power dynamic in intellectual and cultural exchange that favoured Europe.<sup>14</sup>

While Iran was not a colony of any European nation, it was not outside the influence of imperial power. Through travel writing, diplomatic relations and at times even scientific and medical discourse, European epistemologies of gender, sexuality and civilization were upheld as superior and universal while Iranian ways of knowing were marked as backward and antiquated. Combined with the influence of decline narratives also associated with Orientalist discourse, these Western epistemologies exerted substantial influence on the "Orient". In the Iranian context, these discourses were internalized and rearticulated as a powerful discourse of selfcritique that greatly influenced modernity.

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<sup>13</sup> Butler, Judith, Taylor & Francis eBooks - CRKN, CRKN MiL Collection, and Inc ebrary. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 1;2nd;[10th anniversary].;2nd; ed. New York: Routledge, 1999;2007;2011;2006;2002;.

<sup>14</sup> Said, Edward W., and ProQuest (Firm). *orientalism*. First Vintage books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1978;1979;.

Bringing Butler and Said into conversation with one another allows me to demonstrate that heteronormalization was not a result of Iranians' passive admiration or idealization of European norms. Rather, heteronormativity became authoritative as a result of the epistemological hegemony of the West. In this context, Iran's social reconfiguration toward a binary, heteronormative gender order can be understood as the outcome of interconnected processes of imperial knowledge production and regulatory practices.

### **Naming Desire, Queering History?**

A key methodological challenge in historicizing gender and sexuality is one of naming desire. As Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi argue in *Islamicate Sexualities*, it is

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necessary to think carefully about “the intricate dance between erotic desires, acts and identities”.<sup>15</sup> This sort of precision is especially necessary when examining gender and sexuality across temporal and culture distances. Modern categories for identifying same-sex desire (“gay”, “lesbian”, “homosexual”) are just that- modern constructs that emerged within a specific nineteenth and twentieth century Western context. To transpose these terms uncritically to describe premodern desires and practices risks distorting these culturally specific ways of knowing and embodying gender and sexuality.

For this reason, I will avoid modern identity-based naming that presumes shared understanding with its modern origins. In this thesis I primarily rely on the term

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<sup>15</sup> Babayan, Kathryn, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and Harvard University. Center for Middle Eastern Studies. *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*. Vol. 39.;39;. Cambridge, MA: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2008 p. 13. <sup>16</sup> Najmabadi *Women with Mustaches* p. 3. & Afary, *Sexual Politics* p. 86.

“homoeroticism” to describe the broader erotic sensibilities of premodern Iranian society and the term “same-sex” to describe particular sexual acts. While the term “same-sex” carries its own burden of reinforcing a binary understanding of sex that may not fully translate into the premodern Iranian context, premodern Iranians *were* concerned with sex in many contexts. Distinctions between male and female were socially significant and both sex and gender were an important distinction that played a role in determining the acceptability of specific acts. Gender in the premodern Iranian context, was not confined to rigid binaries, offering a variety of categories that could exist within “maleness” that did not necessarily constitute “maniless”. Where applicable, this thesis uses culturally specific naming in reference to these available categories: “amrad” - a young male who was the object of desire for older adult men; “mukhannas” - an adult male wishing to be the object of desire for other adult men, and “ma’bun” - an adult man who assumes the receptive role in male same-sex relations.<sup>16</sup>

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As Babayan and Najmabadi point out, assigning the label of “same-sex” to describe relations also threatens to detract from recognition of the “asymmetry in power” that often defined homoerotic bonds.<sup>16</sup> To combat this tendency, I elaborate on the various class, age, and power dynamics that informed same-sex desire, in order to complicate the idea that “same-sex” relations were necessarily without power imbalances.

These methodological considerations speak to a broader tension between maintaining historical specificity and avoiding the erasure of same-sex desire and nonbinary gender expression from premodern histories. As Lochrie argues, much of the tension involved in “queering history” revolves around language and the struggle of naming desire. But to queer the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid p. xii.

past does not mean searching for or imposing modern gay or lesbian identities in cultural and temporal contexts to which they do not belong. Rather it entails disrupting heteronormative epistemologies by thinking critically about their naturalization. In this context, the term “queer” should be understood as “a category marking the sexual as the site of a variety of cultural struggles”.<sup>17</sup>

This approach is informed by an understanding that gender is not a stable, universal constant. Rather, it is constructed and enforced culturally and historically through regulatory practices, aesthetic conventions and broader systems of power. This thesis seeks to illuminate how same-sex desire and nonbinary gender expression were integrated into premodern Iranian culture, to understand the cultural specificity of these practices on their own terms, and to trace how they were later marginalized through a process of modernization informed by Orientalist and self-orientalist ideas about gender and sexuality.

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### Sources

This thesis relies primarily on travel texts as a primary source base. Examining both European-authored travelogues about Iran and Iranian-authored travelogues about Europe, I trace the emerging discourse of civilizational comparison and self-Other dichotomies within these texts. Due to their observational nature, these texts are uniquely concentrated sources for these discourses. These texts are also contextually significant as they served an important role in the production of knowledge in their time; European-authored accounts of Iran reveal the shaping of Orientalist “knowledge” about Iran, reinforcing notions of moral degeneracy and civilizational

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<sup>17</sup> Lochrie, *Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies* p. 180-181.

decline, while Iranian-authored accounts reflect the tensions between fascination, alienation and self-critique that informed later modern discourse.

The chapters of this thesis are structured to follow the evolution of gender and sexuality from the premodern to the period of modernization. Chapter one draws on Persian poetry, advice literature and satirical texts to introduce Iran's premodern culture of homoeroticism with the aim of understanding it on its own terms through its representations in Iranian-authored literature across various genres. Chapter two examines European-authored travel accounts of Iran, analyzing how these texts constructed an Orientalist narrative of premodern Iranian gender and sexual norms. Chapter three focuses on Iranian-authored travel accounts of Europe, examining the emergence of Iran's self-critical, self-othering discourse. Together, these chapters trace the discursive terrain through which modern Iranian notions of gender and sexual normativity were formulated and enforced.

### **Chapter One: Earthly Beauty, Divine Love: A Culture of (Homo)eroticism in Premodern Iran**

*“A man of understanding went into a trance, drowned in the sea of discovery. When he came to, one of his friends asked him cheerfully. ‘What gift have you brought us from the garden you were in?’ ‘I had in mind,’ he said, ‘when I came to a rose bush, to fill my skirt with roses as gifts for my friends. However, when I arrived, the scent of roses so intoxicated me that I lost my skirt.’”*<sup>18</sup>

The paradisiacal rose gardens evoked in classical Persian poetry were important sites of eroticism in the premodern Iranian imagination. Replete with intoxicating imagery of sensual delights and populated by beautiful companions of both sexes, these “paradises of love”

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<sup>18</sup> Shaykh Mushrifuddin Sa'di of Shiraz ; new English translation by Wheeler M. Thackston, and Sa'di. *The Gulistan (Rose Garden) of Sa'di : Bilingual English and Persian Edition with Vocabulary* گلستان سعدی . Translated by W. M. Thackston. Bethesda, Maryland: Ibex Publishers, 2008, p. 2.

frequently functioned as settings for amorous encounters - including homoerotic ones.<sup>19</sup> A central motif in classical Persian literature, particularly in courtly ghazal poetry, the garden served several important purposes, functioning as an allegorical space, a site of spiritual reflection, and importantly, as a mechanism for the articulation and contemplation of human ideals. As Julie Scott Meisami observes in “Allegorical Gardens in the Persian Poetic Tradition: Nezami, Rumi, Hafez”, the garden, as an artifact of human creation, represented beauty, order and ideal design, often portrayed in contrast to the unpredictable and chaotic wilderness. Thus the garden and the elements within it, from its pristine natural features to the intoxicating beauty of the beloved who often appeared as male, were seen as a reflection of the ideal.<sup>21</sup> In this way, the presence of the male beloved in the garden can be read as a reflection of premodern Iranian ideals that celebrated homoerotic expression and practices. According to Meisami, the male beloved, as a fixture in classical Persian literature, was “not only not condemned, but widely

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tolerated and frequently highly esteemed.”<sup>20</sup> The prevalence of homoerotic love in these idyllic gardens reflects pre-modern Iranian conceptions of gender and sexuality in which homoerotic bonds were not only socially sanctioned but imbued with spiritual and cultural significance.

Indeed, premodern Iranian society accommodated a variety of forms of homoerotic expression into the late Qajar era. From intimate master-disciple relationships in Sufi communities, to elaborate cultures of same-sex courtship embedded in everyday social life,

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<sup>19</sup> Meisami, Julie Scott. “Allegorical Gardens in the Persian Poetic Tradition: Nezami, Rumi, Hafez.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 2 (1985) pp. 229-231 and Meisami, Julie Scott. *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*. Course Book. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 245. <sup>21</sup> Ibid p. 229.

<sup>20</sup> Meisami, Julie Scott. *Medieval Persian Court Poetry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 246. <sup>23</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, p. 86-87.

same-sex practices were, in many contexts, an accepted- and expected- part of life in pre-twentieth century Iran.<sup>23</sup>

Much of the existing scholarship on gender and sexuality in premodern Iran approaches these histories with a reluctance to name same-sex desire and practices directly. Homoerotic bonds are often desexualized or reframed in ways that minimize their erotic dimensions. While many scholars are rightly cautious about employing terminology such as “homosexual” or “gay” - modern terms belonging to a different time – to categorize same-sex practices in premodern Iran, in this attempt to avoid the use of anachronistic terminology, many still inadvertently reproduce equally ahistorical heteronormative, binary categorizations and analysis to describe these same practices. While it is important to avoid transposing modern categories describing homoerotic desire into historical contexts to which they do not belong, it is equally unproductive to impose a heteronormative -and equally out of place- framework for analyzing these histories. This reluctance to name same-sex desire in Iran and to understand it on its own historical terms undermines these culturally specific ways of understanding gender and sexuality.

Premodern Iranian society did not operate according to a rigid heteronormative, binary understanding of gender and sexuality. Rather it was home to a complex sexual landscape in which a variety of forms of homoerotic expression and same-sex intimacy were normalized alongside the institution of heterosexual marriage. As Ladan Rahbari has suggested, it is more accurate to think of accepted practices and forms of erotic expression as existing on a continuum

rather than within fixed categories.<sup>21</sup> Within these “nonbinary discourses”, the acceptability of various acts was determined not only by gender but also “age, class and status.”<sup>22</sup>

This chapter seeks to move beyond binary, heteronormative readings of same-sex desire by examining how gender and erotic desire functioned within premodern Iranian epistemologies— that is, within a gender and sexual framework distinct from modern, heteronormative conceptions of desire. The term “premodern” as I use it here, refers to a period of time spanning centuries during which time gender and sexual norms undoubtedly shifted and evolved. Most of the texts examined in this chapter were produced between the sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries, though much of the spiritual, literary and aesthetic traditions discussed have origins in the medieval era. My purpose in referencing “premodern Iran” is not to suggest that gender and sexual norms were uniform and static throughout this vast period of time- rather, it is to distinguish the time periods before and after Iran adopted a heteronormative framework for understanding and regulating gender and sexual expression. While it is certainly true that gender and sexual norms shifted and evolved throughout this period, the archive reveals an enduring thread in the articulation of same-sex desire across genres, bound by conventions rooted in the language, symbolism and aesthetics of Sufi mysticism. An understanding of this continuity is essential in formulating a nuanced understanding of the break between premodern and modern

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notions of gender and sexuality in Iran that occurred in late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century.

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<sup>21</sup> Rahbari, Ladan. ““Their Beastly Manner””: Discourses of Non-Binary Gender and Sexuality in Shi’ite Safavid Persia.” *Open Cultural Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): p. 767.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid* p. 758.

This chapter does not endeavor to present Iran’s premodern gender and sexual landscape as a queer utopia. On the contrary, prevailing religious and patriarchal structures imposed constraints on acceptable forms of homoerotic expression and practice. Rather, this chapter seeks to illuminate the cultural specificity of same-sex practices and nonbinary nature of gender and sexual categories and practices with attention to the various ways their original cultural context has been obscured by the imposition of heteronormative analysis in contemporary scholarship.

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### **The Beloved & Spiritualized Homoeroticism**

Classical Persian poetry is replete with references to the Beloved- the moon-faced, cypress statured wine bearer whose ruby lips and bow-shaped brow intoxicated his admirers and epitomized human beauty. In the ghazal poetry written by Sufi masters, the Beloved was most often male- specifically, a beautiful male youth.<sup>23</sup> The Persian language is ungendered, allowing a perceived linguistic ambiguity in the gender of the beloved, especially in translation; however, other signifiers, such as the frequent identification of the beloved with the distinctly male roles of wine-bearer (sāqi) or soldier reveal to us that the Beloved was often unambiguously male.<sup>24</sup>

The gender of the beloved is often misconstrued in translation and scholarship, sometimes unintentionally, and sometimes in an effort to “straighten” the overtly homoerotic themes present in Sufi poetry as part of what Matthew Thomas Miller identifies as a pervasive

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<sup>23</sup> Yarshater, E. “The Theme of Wine-Drinking and the Concept of the Beloved in Early Persian Poetry.” *Studia Islamica*, no. 13 (1960): p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

tendency to “desexualize [or] allegorize” Sufi literature in order to make it more palatable for contemporary audiences. But the significance of the male beloved in these poems was not gender blind, his role not interchangeable with a female beloved. Rather, the male beloved was an important fixture not only in Persian literary tradition, but in the spiritual practices of Sufi mystics, serving as an earthly trainer to prepare mystics for their eventual encounter with divine love.<sup>25</sup>

Sufi mysticism fostered male homoerotic bonds in medieval Iran through the philosophy and practice of *shāhidbāzī*. Literally meaning “playing the witness” and also understood as “gazing at the male beauty”, *shāhidbāzī* refers to the practice of gazing at and contemplating the beauty of young males (shāhids) in the pursuit of divine beauty and love.<sup>26</sup> The practice of *shāhidbāzī* was part of a Sufi’s journey to the “reconstruction of the self, [and] initia[tion]“(re)discovery of, and union with, the divine beloved.”<sup>27</sup> Sufis sought earthly love as a bridge to the divine. This pursuit of divine beauty found its earthly form in male youths, who were considered the epitome of human beauty.<sup>28</sup>

Scholars often suggest that *shāhidbāzī* should be understood as a non-sexual practice purely in the pursuit of the love of God and that did not involve physical consummation with the earthly beloved, often citing premodern religious discourses that cautioned against the practice

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<sup>25</sup> Miller, Matthew Thomas. “Embodying the Beloved: Embodiment, (Homo)eroticism, and the Straightening of Desire in the Hagiographic Tradition of Fakhr Al-Dīn Irāqī.” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 21, no. 1 (2018): 3.

<sup>26</sup> Yaghoobi, Claudia. *Subjectivity in 'Attar, Persian Sufism, and European Mysticism*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2017, p. 73.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

<sup>28</sup> Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975 p. 89.

altogether for fear of it leading to forbidden sexual acts. While this scholarship generally acknowledges that these relationships did lead to carnal acts, their significance is typically

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backgrounded, obscuring the culturally specific role of these relationships- including their physical elements, in Sufi practice. Claudia Yaghoobi, for example, acknowledges that the master-disciple relationship sometimes led to physical acts, but implies that these encounters were mostly incidental, without acknowledging the spiritual significance of the physical dimensions of these relationships.<sup>29</sup> This desexualized representation of Sufi practice does not tell the full story- while it is true that some Sufi circles discouraged carnal relations with the beloved, others encouraged it.

For some Sufis, communion with the earthly beloved was an essential part of the pursuit of divine love. As Miller argues, for many on the Sufi path, this love was not just theoretical, but was firmly rooted in the physical world, with the earthly beloved serving as a “‘metaphoric bridge’ to, or ‘mirror’ of the divine Beloved.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, for many, passionate engagement with the earthly beloved- including sensual and sexual relations was more than incidental, it was an essential component of the journey toward the discovery of the divine Beloved. As with the mistranslation of the male Beloved in classical Persian poetry, the allegorization and desexualization of the practice of *shāhidbāzī* by scholars functions to “straighten” our understanding of gender and sexual practices in premodern Iran and flattening their complexity.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Yaghoobi, Claudia. *Subjectivity in 'Attar, Persian Sufism, and European Mysticism*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2017 p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, *Embodying the Beloved* p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* p. 4.

Some women also pursued the Sufi path, although they did so less commonly than men, mainly due to assumptions about their spiritual capacity relative to their male counterparts. Due to women's association with childbirth and domestic labour, they were associated with "the body

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and its debasing functions" while men were viewed as having greater proximity to the "mind and heart", faculties understood as being more conducive to spiritual enlightenment.

Despite these gendered constraints, many women still pursued Sufism. Many female mystics remained single due to negative associations with sexually active women.<sup>32</sup> In this context, Sufi women were often perceived as "asexual or genderless", a characterization that legitimized their spiritual authority, while reconciling the stigma surrounding female sexuality.<sup>33</sup> In spite of prevailing societal expectations of and beliefs about women that discouraged female Sufis from pursuing the same embodied earthly love that was ubiquitous among their male counterparts, Sufi women did sometimes engage in homoerotic relationships as part of their spiritual pursuits.<sup>34</sup>

To be sure, Islamic law forbids both male and female same-sex relations, at least in the earthly life. The Qur'an explicitly condemns sodomy while the hadith literature identifies punishments for both male female same-sex acts.<sup>35</sup> Thus, at the most formal level of religious law, same-sex acts are clearly identified as transgressive.

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<sup>32</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, p. 100.

<sup>33</sup> Xavier, Merin Shobhana. "Gendering the Divine: Women, Femininity, and Queer Identities on the Sufi Path 1." In *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender*, edited by Howe, Justine. 1st ed., 163-179: Routledge, 2021, p. 165.

<sup>34</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, p. 100.

<sup>35</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, p. 81. Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, p. 18.

Yet, the Qur’anic promise of the ghilman and the hur – beautiful male and female companions of paradise – complicate this notion of prohibition. Though their roles as companions is somewhat ambiguous, it has been argued that both the ghilman (handsome menservants) and hur (beautiful virgin maidens) can be interpreted as sexual companions.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, homoerotic bonds could exist as an ideal but not necessarily as an embodied practice

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– at least not including those acts directly forbidden. However, this should not be taken to mean that these forbidden acts did not occur. Rather, it highlights the distinction between religious ideals and lived social realities.

Despite the explicit religious condemnation of same-sex acts, premodern Iran, like many other premodern Muslim societies, permitted homoerotic love and expression in a variety of forms, including in spiritual practice. Though this may appear on the surface to be contradictory, a closer analysis of premodern Iranian ways of naming and categorizing -or not categorizing- human types and behaviours reveals the ways in which homoeroticism was embraced by Islamic Iranian society and even within the practice of Islamic mysticism. As Najmabadi notes, according to premodern Iranian discourses on religious permissibility, “sin belonged to the domain of deeds”, thus desire was considered acceptable, so long as the desire did not lead one to forbidden sexual acts.<sup>37</sup> Khaled El-Rouayheb further contextualizes what appears to modern sensibilities to be a contradiction in premodern Muslim societies tolerating “homosexual” practices; “It may seem natural for modern historians to gloss over the distinction between committing sodomy and expressing passionate love for a youth, and to describe both activities as

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<sup>36</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, p. 82.

<sup>37</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, p. 18.

manifestations of “homosexuality.” But this only goes to show that the term is anachronistic and unhelpful in this particular context.” He argues that because the category of “homosexual” did not exist in premodern Arab-Islamic societies, it is not a useful term for making sense of sexuality during this time.<sup>38</sup>

This insight can equally be applied in the context of premodern Iran, a society which lacked the modern notion of “homosexual” as a human type, instead identifying particular acts as

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either permissible or transgressive. While sex between two men or two women was forbidden, these acts were distinguished from other forms of homoerotic expression such as an adult man expressing passionate love for a male youth in poetry.<sup>39</sup> This allowed premodern Iranian society to accommodate a wide range of homoerotic expression within the bounds of religious permissibility, creating space for same-sex bonds to be cultivated and celebrated with cultural and spiritual significance. This also frequently allowed even those behaviors deemed as transgressive to be overlooked, despite prevailing religious ideals, provided they were discrete.<sup>40</sup>

### **Male Homoerotic Culture in Everyday Social Space**

Male same-sex practices in premodern Iran were not limited to the realm of Sufi philosophy and practice. Beyond these spiritual bounds, same-sex relations between men were a common and generally accepted practice in pre-modern Iran. Although men were expected to marry and fulfill their procreative obligations, this did not rule out homoerotic experiences

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<sup>38</sup> Rouayheb, Khaled El. *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*. 1st ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005;2009; p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, p. 81.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 79.

outside of marriage.<sup>41</sup> In fact it was often expected that throughout a man's life, he would have a variety of sexual experiences with both sexes.<sup>42</sup> Rather than categorizing sexual identities into fixed categories, desire was viewed as fluid and situational, with relationships often being defined by age, positionality and class in addition to gender.

*Qabusnamah* (1083), an advice text in the "Mirror for Princes" genre- a genre outlining principles of governance and moral conduct for rulers, contains several references to male same-sex practices.<sup>43</sup> *Qabusnamah* includes sections on a variety of subjects from dining etiquette and

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hunting to sexual pleasure and marriage. In a chapter entitled "On Taking One's Pleasure", young men are advised against confining their attraction to one sex; "during the summer let your desires incline towards youths and during the winter towards women."<sup>44</sup> This passage does not present male same-sex desire as deviant or transgressive but rather as a natural dimension of the male experience, albeit with the expectation that opposite-sex attraction is also present.

The culture of male homoeroticism in everyday social spaces, in many ways mirrored the conventions and aesthetics of Sufi homoeroticism, wherein a beautiful male youth typically served as the object of an older adult man's affection. Places where men gathered such as gymnasiums and public baths were common sites of male same-sex encounters, facilitating the practice of adult men admiring and courting male youths. Coffeehouses were also closely associated with male homoerotic culture as young male dancers and prostitutes, scantily dressed

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<sup>41</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, p. 20.

<sup>42</sup> Kai Kā'ūs ibn Iskandar, *A Mirror for Princes, the Qābūs Nāma*. Translated by Reuben Levy. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1951 p. 78.

<sup>43</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics* p. 86.

<sup>44</sup> 47 Iskandar, *A Mirror for Princes*, p. 78.

with braided hair, would entertain patrons. According to Janet Afary “the most popular coffeehouses were the ones reputed to have the best-looking boys, whose services customers could purchase.”<sup>45</sup>

The beautiful adolescent males who entertained adult men were known as *amrads*. Like the Beloved in Sufi homoerotic culture, the amrad was the object of adult male affections, the faint hint of the first growth of his mustache representing the epitome of beauty. As Najmabadi notes, the feature which most distinguished him as beautiful also marked the end of his youth; “That hint of a mustache (khatt) heralded the beginning of the end of his status as an object of desire for adult men and his own movement into adult manhood. It signaled the beginning of his lover’s loss.”<sup>46</sup> A young male’s status as an amrad was temporary- the growth of his beard would signal this transition out of amradhood and into adult manhood, and once he had made his passage into manhood, he was no longer an acceptable object of male desire.<sup>47</sup>

Europeans travelling to Iran during this period frequently feminized the amrads, describing them as young males dressed as women, who assumed the feminine role in sexual encounters. Similarly, many scholars feminize the amrad, using language that suggests he assumed a “feminine” role in courtship and sexual encounters. However there is no evidence to suggest that these males wanted to appear feminine; “In nineteenth-century Iran, adult men who shaved their beards were called amradnuma (looking like an amrad) and not zan'numa (looking like a woman).” For Iranians, the term *amrad* was not feminine. The feminization of these male figures is problematic as it reduces premodern Iranian notions of gender and sexuality to binary categories when the reality is a much more complex, culturally specific understanding of gender

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<sup>45</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics* p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> Najmabadi *Women with Mustaches* p. 15-17.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid* p. 17.

categories. The identification of amrads as effeminate, and the further implication that homoerotic desire in premodern Iran was born out of a lack of access to women in a homosocial society, what Najmabadi refers to as “transcribing homoeroticism as frustrated heterosexual desire” reduces this complexity in understanding of gender to binary categories into which the amrad, as Iranians understood him, does not fit.<sup>48</sup> Such arguments place emphasis on a heteronormative understanding of gender and sexuality, discounting Iran's native conceptions of gender in premodern Iran. For Iranians during the premodern era, these males were not associated with femininity- rather they reflected a culture where erotic beauty could be possessed by both males and females, and in which the adolescent male with a faint hint of a mustache epitomized erotic beauty.<sup>49</sup>

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While amrads did not occupy a categorically feminine position in male same-sex relations, they were expected to occupy their prescribed role in an asymmetrical dynamic with an adult man. As Afary notes, men were not defined by their sexual preferences but rather by their positionality in these presumed asymmetrical relationships. Adult men were expected to occupy the “active” role sexually while amrads were to occupy the “passive” role. Because the period of amradhood was only a temporary phase of a male’s life, he was expected, once he reached adulthood, to move on from his position as the desired to become the desirer.

An adult male, his maturity signaled by the growth of a full beard, who sought to continue being the object of desire for other adult men (*ma’bun*) was regarded as deviant, and his same-sex desire made him a subject of ridicule. Similarly, adult males identified as *mukhannaths*– those who adopted the dress and mannerisms of women- occupied a socially

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid p. 16.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid p. 11-13.

ambiguous position. Mukhannaths were implicitly recognized in Iranian male homoerotic culture, often working as entertainers, though like ma'buns, they occupied a transgressive embodiment of maleness as they diverged from the idealized amrad-adult man same-sex dynamic, subverting the expected progression from passive youth to active adult.<sup>50</sup>

Despite these conventions, male homoerotic culture was not entirely limited to this asymmetrical model as some men did engage in homoerotic bonds and same-sex relations with one another on equal terms. This could entail discreet sexual encounters between adult men or even longer term relationships more closely resembling a romantic partnership. Though these relationships transgressed social ideals, they nevertheless existed within the broader landscape of male homoerotic culture.<sup>51</sup>

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Male homoerotic culture in premodern Iran fostered a variety of forms of homoerotic desire and relationships from asymmetrical to equal and from socially sanctioned to transgressive, demonstrating that male homoerotic desire was not merely a manifestation of frustrated heterosexual desire produced by the homosociality of Iranian society. Rather, it emphasizes that premodern notions of gender and sexuality in Iran were fluid and nonbinary, viewing beauty and eroticism as largely ungendered. This culture of homoeroticism allowed a socially sanctioned environment for same-sex desires to be expressed both within and- with discretion- outside the bounds of normative manhood.

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<sup>50</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, p. 86.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid* p. 96.

## Female Homoerotic Culture and Vows of Sisterhood

Women also commonly engaged in homoerotic bonds with one another, and as in the case of male same-sex relations, these relationships were accepted within the confines of certain conventions. Intimate bonds between women were common and often possessed romantic, sexual or spiritual dimensions. Public baths, shrines, and homes were all common gathering places for married women to socialize, and thus, common sites for the cultivation of intimate relationships between women.<sup>52</sup> Sources documenting women's social worlds in premodern Iran are much more limited compared to those of men. References to female same-sex practices appear in some European-authored travelogues, describing sex between women in Safavid harems, often in a sensationalized manner that represent Iranian women as deviant and oversexed. Some Persian advice texts also reference sex and sisterhood bonds between women, sometimes satirizing these practices. Both European and Iranian (male) authored sources reveal

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patriarchal anxieties surrounding women's sexual autonomy, often interpreting female same-sex desire as a threat to men and to heterosexual unions that needed to be confined and controlled. Still, the archives reveal a female homoerotic culture in which bonds between women were upheld -at least among women- as sacred, and the rituals that sealed them were imbued with spiritual significance and steeped in the language and aesthetics of Sufi mysticism.<sup>53</sup>

Sisterhood *sigehs* (vows of sisterhood) were a common way for women to solidify their bonds with one another.<sup>54</sup> A common practice among elite, married women, sisterhood bonds

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<sup>52</sup> Atkinson, James. *Customs and Manners of the Women of Persia and their Domestic Superstitions*. London: Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1832 p. 53.

<sup>53</sup> Babayan, Kathryn. *The City as Anthology : Eroticism and Urbanity in Early Modern Isfahan*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2021, 240.

<sup>54</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 80.

often carried homoerotic connotations.<sup>55</sup> *Customs and manners of the women in Persia and their domestic superstitions* - an English translation of the original text, *Kulsum Naneh* – is a satirical text attributed to Aqa Jamal Khansari. While the exact original publication date is unclear, it is known to have originated in the Safavid era (1501-1736).<sup>56</sup>

*Kulsum Naneh* outlines the social customs of the domestic lives of women in Iran with a satirical slant, presenting itself as an authoritative text by a group of women lawgivers, advising women on all manners of domestic life from marriage and childbirth to folk rituals.<sup>57</sup> Despite being satirical in nature, it is an insightful glimpse into the domestic lives of women in premodern Iran- and the anxieties they provoked in Iranian men. *Kulsum Naneh* offers a wealth of information about social customs, folk beliefs and daily life.

In its final chapter, the text illustrates rituals associated with the tying of sisterhood bonds, from courtship to ceremony. Khansari describes in great detail the process of seeking a

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sisterhood bond through a formal proposal and the ceremony that would follow a successful courtship. According to Khansari, a woman interested in entering a sisterhood bond with another would prepare a meticulously assembled tray of sweets, with a beautifully dressed doll or puppet placed at the centre.<sup>58</sup> The tray would be delivered to her beloved by a “confidential domestic” who would present the tray and announce its sender. If the recipient wished to accept the proposal, she would kiss the doll and tip the bearer, sending a sequined veil back to her suitor. If

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>56</sup> “Kulsum Nanah.” Women’s Worlds in Qajar Iran, September 22, 2012.

<http://www.qajarwomen.org/en/items/1018A43.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Kuls ūm, Nah’nah. 1832. *Customs and Manners of the Women of Persia and Their Domestic Superstitions*. . Translated by James Atkinson. New York: B. Franklin, p. v.

<sup>58</sup> There is some variation in interpretations of this ritual; for example Afary notes that a dildo made of wax may be placed instead of a doll. (See Afary 102) <sup>62</sup> Atkinson, *Customs and Manners*, 88-89.



divine love. Sisters entered into these sworn relationships “as a means of attaining intimacy with god, which also allowed for intimacy with one another”<sup>63</sup> It is evident by the elaborate, spectacular nature of these ceremonies that the tying of sisterhood vows was cause for celebration in women’s social circles. Equally important, was the maintenance of these bonds;

“when two women are strongly attached to each other, they must continue inseparable friends through good report and evil report, and be ever faithful to the last; and when one of them dies, the survivor, whether in her promenades in the rose garden, visiting the bath, or assisting at the making of semnu, must keep her deceased favourite in remembrance, and in her devotions never forget to pray for her happiness in the next world”<sup>64</sup>

Afary, who has written about sisterhood *sighs*, elaborates on these traditions and their significance, suggesting that a husband was expected to accommodate his wife's relationships with her sister, and that it was generally considered improper for him to prevent her from spending time with her sister. In some cases, a husband’s contempt for his wife’s relationship with her sister would result in divorce. In these instances, the woman would often maintain her relationship with their sister without remarrying.<sup>65</sup> Though it is Khasnari’s intention to satirize

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these practices, his focus on sisterhood vows suggest that these relationships and their associated rituals were important to women and that these beliefs and practices were a source of anxiety for men.<sup>66</sup> Despite their prevalence and cultural recognition, these relationships were still subject to scrutiny, particularly by men, and more specifically, the husbands of women who engaged in

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<sup>63</sup> Babayan, *The City as Anthology*, p. 180.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid* p. 78.

<sup>65</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 102-103.

<sup>66</sup> Babayan & Najmabadi, *Islamicate Sexualities* p. 250.

these relationships. As Babayan observes, female same-sex relationships seem to have been subject to greater scrutiny than men's, due to patriarchal constraints on women's behaviour: "In the representation of male homoerotic desire, wives generally are not mentioned. In contrast, in tales of female homoeroticism, the reader usually is not allowed to forget the hapless distraught, or revengeful husband".<sup>67</sup>

While men were able to "lead a sexual double life", by partaking in both heterosexual marriage and same-sex relationships, women could not do the same without provoking scrutiny.<sup>68</sup>

*Kulsum Naneh* emphasizes the importance of companionship between women, homoerotic and otherwise; "For a woman to be without familiar friends of her own sex is reckoned a heavy misfortune".<sup>69</sup> While it is not always clear whether these passages refer to homoerotic/sexual bonds or simply intimate platonic relationships between women, the distinction is not always relevant. As Najmabadi notes, during this period, the line between homosocial and homosexual behaviours between women was not clearly drawn- women engaged in a variety of affectionate bonds including sexual ones.<sup>70</sup>

This culture of female homoeroticism reflects a premodern, preheteronormative understanding of gender, sexuality and eros in which heterosexual marriage was not viewed as

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the exclusive, or even primary site of passionate love and companionship for women, placing increased importance on relationships between women, both platonic and homoerotic. It would not be until the late nineteenth century that a popular shift toward companionate marriage would

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid p. 24.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Atkinson, *Customs and Manners*, p. 74.

<sup>70</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, p. 38.

place greater expectation on marriage as the primary site of romantic and sexual companionship. This is not to suggest that female same-sex desire during this period was born out of the inaccessibility or inadequacy of heterosexual companionship. Rather, female homosocial and homoerotic bonds created a socially acceptable space for same-sex desire to be expressed.

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Homoerotic expression and same-sex practices among both men and women continued to be widely practiced and socially accepted in Iran into the late Qajar era, though, as Najmabadi observes, by the nineteenth century, Iranian notions of beauty, gender, and sexuality had begun to shift as heteronormative notions of love began to be favoured in art and poetry and homoerotic expressions that had once been upheld as ideal became a point of ridicule and moral unease among the elite.<sup>71</sup> This shift coincides with the entrance of the European gaze into Iranian imagination as Qajar foreign policy fostered increased contact between Europe and Iran, and thus greater travel between these two locales. As European travelers published travelogues detailing their encounters with Iranian gender and sexual mores, Iranians became increasingly aware of European scrutiny toward what they perceived as non-normative, “backward” gender and sexual order.<sup>72</sup>

During the nineteenth century, European travel writing would help consolidate an orientalist discourse which cast Iranian gender and sexual mores as deviant and Iranian society as

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid p. 26.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid p. 34.

antiquated and inferior in opposition to European standards of progress and modernity. This perceived inferiority would be internalized by modernist reformers who sought to reconfigure Iranian gender and sexual norms toward a heteronormative gender order.

## Chapter Two: Europeans in Iran

*“In April the nightingales commence their songs, and the rose-trees begin to open their blossoms. Our garden abounded in the former, who used to beguile the entire night with her minstrelsy. But I leave these things to the imagination, which is much more potent than the pen.”*<sup>73</sup>

Europeans have been chronicling their travels to Iran since at least the seventeenth century. European men –and occasionally women– journeyed to Iran often for diplomatic purposes, or to conduct geographic, political or anthropological research, meticulously detailing their experiences in travelogues which were published and widely circulated in Europe.<sup>74</sup> These accounts offered readers a glimpse into Iranian culture and social life, filtered through the lens of the European imagination. Filled with evocative imagery of enchanting gardens, lascivious parties, and secluded harems, these travelogues were widely popular, serving both to feed orientalist intrigue and render Iranian people and culture legible to European audiences. As Said illustrates, the Orient can be imagined as a “theatrical stage” upon which Europeans projected fantastic imagery of “terrors, pleasures, [and] desires” that fed the Western imagination.<sup>75</sup> Travelers constructed an image of Iran informed by a combination of the exotic country they imagined and the reality of what they saw in their travels and thus, as Rudi Mathee observes, “Iran became an imaginary country, an imagined realm that served to confirm and corroborate all

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<sup>73</sup> Sheil, Justin, Mary Leonora Woulfe Sheil, and Nineteenth Century Collections Online: Women and Transnational Networks. *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* J. Murray, 1856 p. 155.

<sup>74</sup> Mathee, Rudolph P. “The Imaginary Realm: Europe’s Enlightenment Image of Early Modern Iran.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30, no. 3 (2010): pp 452. See also Najmabadi *Women with Mustaches* pp. 32.

<sup>75</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 63.

kinds of arguments, hopes, fears, and anxieties.”<sup>76</sup> In this way, travelogues served not only as documentation but as rhetorical tools that produced and proliferated cultural discourse about

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Iran, the morality of its people and its progress relative to European standards of modernity- a discourse that would soon enter the Iranian imagination, fostering anxieties about the nation’s perceived “backwardness”, particularly as it pertained to gender and sexual norms.

The nineteenth century saw a sharp increase in encounters between Europe and Iran, with increased travel in both directions and as a result, increased production and circulation of travelogues, opening up greater opportunity for comparison and scrutiny of Iranian social norms and customs.<sup>77</sup> Of particular interest to Europeans, were the marked differences in gender and sexual norms- particularly as it pertained to the status and visibility of women, as well as the open practice of male homoerotic bonds and same-sex relations. For European (male) travelers in Iran, male social spaces such as coffee houses became sites of spectacle as they encountered young male dancers who appeared to them to be dressed as women and entertained and engaged in sexual relations with adult men. Women’s social spaces on the other hand, due to being much less accessible to male travelers, became sites of rumour and intrigue. Travelers also took note of the homosocial nature of Iranian society- men and women’s social spaces were largely segregated, allowing for limited access to the opposite sex. These images of gender and sexual difference were represented in travel writing as “exoticized narratives of sexual anarchy and utopias of fluidity,”<sup>78</sup> largely stripped of their cultural context and significance and reframed through the European orientalist gaze.

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<sup>76</sup> Mathee “The Imaginary Realm” pp. 456 & 458].

<sup>77</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, p. 32.

<sup>78</sup> Rahbari, “Their Beastly Manner”, p. 676.

Such representations were shaped by European epistemologies of gender and sexuality that rendered Iranian practices intelligible only to the extent that they could be mapped onto familiar binary, heteronormative categories. As such, Europeans often misunderstood and misinterpreted the differences they observed, unconsciously flattening complex gender and sexual norms into familiar binary categories intelligible to European sensibilities. These differences were typically the subject of strong moral scrutiny, with the open practice of male same-sex relations viewed by Europeans as a vice, and the lack of access to women in social spaces becoming a marker of Iran's perceived backwardness. As Najmabadi observes, "By the early nineteenth century, Iranian men had become acutely and increasingly aware that Europeans considered older man-younger man love and sexual practice a vice,"<sup>79</sup> indicating that the European gaze not only impacted external views of Iranian people and culture but that it also began to occupy a central position in the Iranian cultural imagination.

Drawing on Butler's concept of the "matrix of intelligibility", this chapter argues that European travelers interpreted Iranian gender and sexual differences through epistemological frameworks that rendered homoerotic expression, same-sex practices, and nonbinary gender categories as unintelligible except as forms of deviance or backwardness. According to Butler, "persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility."<sup>80</sup> In other words, Europeans made Iranians intelligible by filtering gender and sexual practices through a familiar heteronormative lens that held Iranian norms as inferior. In this way, nineteenth century travelogues helped consolidate an orientalist narrative that positioned Europe as a model of progress and modernity in contrast to Iran's

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<sup>79</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, p. 34.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 22.

perceived backwardness and incompatibility with modernity, symbolized by, among other things, its visible differences in gender and sexual mores.

While this discourse largely took shape in the nineteenth century, this chapter considers European-authored travel texts from as early as the seventeenth century to trace the early roots of writing on Iranian gender and sexual norms and its influence on later nineteenth century works.

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This chapter aims to demonstrate how European heteronormative readings of premodern Iranian gender and sexual norms formed an Orientalist discourse that positioned Iranian norms as backward, deviant, thereby positioning Iran as antiquated and outside historical “progress”.

Much of the scholarship on gender and sexuality in premodern Iran relies heavily on European travel accounts as primary sources. These texts are undoubtedly valuable for their descriptive information, including some of the most detailed available descriptions of same-sex practices, however, their framing of these practices is not neutral - rather they view Iranian culture through the lens of binary, heteronormative notions of gender that is falsely upheld as natural and universal. As a result, Iran’s premodern culture of homoeroticism has undergone a double erasure. Historically, these social customs and aesthetic sensibilities were erased as Iranian norms shifted in favour of heteronormative models of gender and sexuality in the period of modernization. In contemporary scholarship, our understandings of these practices have been obscured by the dominance of heteronormative epistemologies of gender and sexuality. Thus, careful interrogation of this notion of universal heteronormativity is required to avoid reproducing these narratives in contemporary scholarship. Extant studies have achieved this to varying degrees, however there is further still to go in disentangling these heteronormative narratives from our understanding of premodern Iran as vestiges of this universal assumption continue to appear in scholarship.

Afary's *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* for example, reinforces a causal link between gender segregation and the prevalence of same sex practices in premodern Iran, stopping short of offering any critical analysis of the implications of this narrative on the recognition of same-sex desire as a primary form of desire.<sup>81</sup> Afary argues that "most heterosexual relationships lacked romance since marriages were arranged at a young age and consummated around puberty. In contrast to heterosexual courtships, which were brief and restricted to premarital years, close and affectionate male and female homoerotic relations continued much longer in a world where holding hands, touching, and kissing between men and between women were common practices."<sup>82</sup> Though the homosocial nature of premodern Iranian society almost certainly created opportunities for same-sex desires to be fulfilled, the implication that this segregation was the *cause* of these desires reduces homoerotic desire to a situational substitute- a "solution" to a lack of opportunity for heterosexual relations. This notion of same-sex desire existing as situational relies on the assumption that heterosexual desire was privileged as an ideal, with homoerotic desire emerging only in its absence. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, based on Persian texts, including poetry and advice texts, this was not necessarily the case. While heterosexual marriage was an expectation, homoerotic bonds, especially among men, were actively encouraged and celebrated in literary and visual culture.

### **Iran as Other**

European travel writing about Iran is full of cultural comparison, not only between

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<sup>81</sup> 85 Afary, *Sexual Politics*, p. 80.

<sup>82</sup> 86 Ibid.

Europe and Iran but also between Iran and its neighbours, particularly Ottoman Turks and Arabs. European travelers often viewed cultural differences in Iran, particularly when it came to gender and sexual practices, as a sign of Iran's perceived backwardness, incompatible with European notions of modernity. On other occasions however, European travelers described an admiration of and affinity for Iranian customs, expressing great reverence for Iran's cultural achievements, especially compared to Turks and Arabs, whose societies were viewed as more distant from European cultural norms and thus less developed. In these texts, Iran occupies a complex position, distinguished on one hand from Europe by its perceived cultural inferiority while on the other hand, comparing favourably against its neighbours, being viewed as more refined and sophisticated than Ottoman Turks and Arabs.<sup>83</sup> From this discourse emerged a self-Other hierarchy positioning Iran as Europe's "abject Other"<sup>84</sup> while still allowing Iran to occupy an elevated position within the Eastern world.

This tension is illustrated in J.M. Tancoigne's 1808 travelogue in his reflection on his first impressions of the Persian people, in which he praises their manners and sociability, remarking that any traveler is sure to be enchanted by the people of Iran, so long as they do not go beyond superficial interactions:

"If a people were to be judged from first impressions or by appearances, the Persians would doubtless obtain the approbation of all: their politeness carried to excess, their civilities and attentions to a stranger would soon gain his good will, and if he had neglected to study their manners, or had only ordinary communications with them, he must return home very much prepossessed in their favour."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Mathee, "The Imaginary Realm" p. 453.

<sup>84</sup> See Abedinifard, "Iran's Self-Deprecating Modernity" p. 407.

<sup>85</sup> Tancoigne, J. M. *A Narrative of a Journey into Persia and Residence at Teheran; Containing a Descriptive Itinerary from Constantinople to the Persian Capital*. England: W. Wright, 1820, 1820 p. 170.

Here, he foreshadows his broader critique of Iranian cultural mores, tempering his admiration by suggesting that closer familiarity with Iranian social and cultural norms would dispel the initial enchantment he describes. Still, he distinguishes Iran favourably from its neighbours, praising Persians for their amicable disposition, contrasting them with the Turks who he seems to view as less civilized:

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“Without failing to render them all the justice they merit, or omitting the qualities which so eminently distinguish their neighbours, the Turks, I shall add, that they are witty and agreeable, that they are exempt from that barbarous fanaticism, which in some respects inspires us with a just aversion to the Ottomans”<sup>86</sup>

Such evaluations demonstrate how European travelers assessed Iranian character according to its perceived proximity to European ideals of civility, positioning Iran between Europe as the epitome of civility and the Turks and Arabs as its very antithesis. This comparison was not limited to travel literature- rather it reflected a broader European discourse that favoured Iran as having closer proximity to European social and cultural mores, and thus existing as a possible ally with Europe in the context of European-Ottoman rivalry. As Rudi Mathee notes, “to Europe’s eighteenth-century literati, Iranian barbarism remained an enigma. They saw it as different from that of the Ottomans, the real enemy.”<sup>87</sup>

Iran’s perceived tolerance toward Christianity compared to Turks and Arabs was a frequent reference point for travelers in their comparisons between Iran and its neighbours. This is exemplified in Lady Mary Sheil’s comparisons between Iranians and Ottoman Turks: “a

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Mathee, “The Imaginary Realm” p. 461.

Persian never hesitates to rise on receiving a Christian visitor; which is such gall and wormwood to any Ottoman whose official position compels him to show his mark of difference to a European... A Persian has likewise no hesitation in uttering the salutation of Salamun Alikoom, to a Christian, which a Turk would rather suffer martyrdom than do”<sup>88</sup>

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Sheil further states that unlike Turks, “no contempt is felt by the natives of Persia towards Europeans... A Turk, unless he be educated in Europe and therefore denationalized, has seldom any feelings towards a Feringhee but those of dislike and contempt.”<sup>89</sup> This perceived tolerance reinforced European narratives that Iranians existed in greater cultural proximity to Europe than their neighbours, despite simultaneously being viewed as distinctly Eastern and therefore Other.

Iran’s position in this discourse as inferior to Europe yet superior to its neighbours, would become an important factor informing Iran’s discourse of modernity into the nineteenth century. As Mathee illustrates, “the idea that Iranians are different and superior in this and other respects would become a trope in the nineteenth century, giving rise to the racially based notion that, being Aryan, they are more versatile and creative than Arabs, that they are culturally superior and carry the torch of Islamic civilization”<sup>90</sup> As Iranians increasingly gained insight into Europe’s perception of Iran relative to its neighbours, they began to be internalized and rearticulated in Iranian intellectual discourse.<sup>91</sup> Chapter 3 will further elaborate on this self-Other dichotomy from the perspective of Iranians, examining how Iranian travel writing and intellectual discourse

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<sup>88</sup> Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia*, p. 140-141.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid p. 141. *Feringhee*, also spelled *Farangi*, is a Persian word used to refer to Europeans or “Westerners”.

<sup>90</sup> Mathee, “The Imaginary Realm” p. 459.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid p. 450.

engaged with and internalized these comparisons, informing a powerful discourse of self-critique that informed Iranian modernity.

### **The Spectacle of Male Homosexuality in Iran**

European men traveling to Iran frequently reported encounters with open displays of male homoerotic culture and male same-sex relations. From as early as the seventeenth century,

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European travel texts made frequent references to the prevalence of male homoerotic culture citing representations of male-male love in Persian literature, direct encounters with homoerotic displays such as the practice of male youths entertaining adult men and the apparent open practice of male same-sex relations including sodomy. These practices were framed as sinful and indicative of sexual excess and were associated with a perceived lack of regard for Iranian women among Iranian men. These representations reinforced orientalist narratives of moral degeneration while overlooking the cultural significance of these practices in Iranian society.

One of the earliest, and perhaps most influential of these accounts appears in Jean Chardin's *Travels in Persia* (1686). Originally written and published in French, this volume was concurrently published in English and was widely circulated. Chardin's encounters with male homoerotic culture in Iran left a strong impression reflected in his travelogue, containing several references to "the unhappy inclination which the Persians have, to commit that abominable sin against nature, with both sexes."<sup>92</sup> One of the most common sites of these encounters were

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<sup>92</sup> Chardin, John. *Travels in Persia*. London: Argonaut Press, 1927 p. 130. <sup>97</sup>  
Ibid p. 242.

coffeehouses, where men would be entertained by amrads and could even solicit sexual relations with these entertainers:

“These houses were heretofore very infamous places; they were serv'd and entertain'd by beautiful Georgian boys, from ten to sixteen years of age, dress'd after a lewd manner, having their hair ty'd in wefts, like the women; they make 'em dance there, and act and say a thousand immodest things, to move the beholders, who caus'd these boys to be carry'd, every one where he thought proper; and this fell to the lot of those who were the most beautiful and engaging; in such sort, that these coffee-houses were nothing else in reality, but shops for sodomy, which was very terrible to wise and virtuous people”<sup>97</sup>

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Chardin read these male dancers as effeminate, interpreting their appearance and gestures as emulating those of women, though as noted in Chapter 1, the amrad, or young beardless male who was the object of adult male affection, was not considered by Iranians to be a feminine figure. This account reflects a broader pattern of European travelers misreading and misinterpreting Iranian gender norms, making the unfamiliar intelligible by mapping European heteronormative gender norms onto unfamiliar figures and practices. Thus, these practices could only be made sense of as “abominable sin”, looked upon with disgust and condemnation by outsiders.<sup>93</sup>

Chardin’s scrutiny of the open display of same-sex practices may well have influenced future travelers’ perceptions of these practices. As Najmabadi notes, “Chardin’s travelogue endured as the authoritative guide for Europeans who subsequently visited Iran” becoming a “required reading” of sorts for future European travelers, shaping their expectations of what to

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

see, and perhaps influencing how they reported these encounters in their own travel writing. Najmabadi speculates that these subsequent travelers, as a consequence of reading Chardin's travelogue, then anticipated the same sorts of spectacle, recording them in a similar manner in their own travel accounts.<sup>94</sup>

Tancoigne's 1808 Qajar-era travelogue describes similar scenes of gatherings featuring dancing boys, echoing Chardin's condemnatory tone:

"The banquet was long, and animated by music: Persian dancers were also engaged to enliven the scene. Lascivious postures, varied to infinity, composed all the art of those dancers, who are generally boys- their progression, despised as it is by the Persians, is however very lucrative. Cloyed in very early life with all kinds of enjoyments, the

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nobility know no better means of amusing their satiety and they never have a festival at home without this brutal accompaniment.<sup>95</sup>

Like Chardin, Tancoigne reads these performers as feminine, emphasizing their attire and exaggerated movements, painting a picture of extreme sexual excess.

Those dancers are dressed in female habits, and hold metal castanets, in each hand: they generally begin their exercises by various feats of strength and agility; then, changing their gestures and movements, they exhibit all that debauchery and luxury ever invented by the most refined profligacy"<sup>101</sup>

In a later entry, Tancoigne extends his critique to a wider assessment of Iranian social and gender order, associating the pervasiveness of male same-sex practices with what he perceived as Iranian men's indifference to women. This commentary reflects a broader pattern in European

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<sup>94</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, p. 34.

<sup>95</sup> Tancoigne, *A Narrative of a Journey into Persia*, p. 67-68. <sup>101</sup> Ibid.

travel texts of “explaining” same-sex relations as a consequence of Iranian men’s lack of regard for, or lack of access to Iranian women in a homosocial society.

“I have besides, still other vices to reproach them with; the most serious is their injustice and indifference to a sex which elsewhere forms all the charm and happiness of our existence. Women are merely, in the estimation of these men, beings created solely for their pleasures. Preserved by their education and habits from the pains and vicissitudes of love; incapable on the other hand, by their religious prejudices, of appreciating its delights and enjoyments, they have degraded that sentiment to the excess of reserving it at times for their minions, and of turning it into a crime against nature. Many of their poems turn entirely on this inconceivable degeneracy; and their moral depravity is such that far from making a mystery of this new species of amorous intrigue, they appear, on

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the contrary, to take pride in it; and speak publicly of their minions as if they were speaking of their mistresses”<sup>96</sup>

Here, male homoerotic culture is represented as an immoral vice, symptomatic of a broader moral degeneracy which Tancoigne associates with Iranian Islamic culture. Persian poetry celebrating male beauty, rather than being understood as a longstanding aesthetic and literary tradition, is depicted as perverse while the open acknowledgement of male homoerotic culture and same-sex practices, rather than being acknowledged as a morally neutral cultural difference, is labeled as depravity.

Beyond simply documenting encounters with Iranian culture and society, these travelogues produced a discourse which interpreted Iranian gender and sexual norms through a European heteronormative framework in which difference was only made legible as moral

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid p. 174.

corruption, obscuring indigenous understandings of beauty, desire and gender which did not rely on the binaries in which European sexual norms were grounded.

These European encounters with unfamiliar expressions of gender and sexuality exemplify what Butler identifies as the regulatory function of heteronormativity. As Butler argues, “The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine,” where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female.” The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of “identities” cannot “exist”.<sup>97</sup> Europeans could not interpret the appearance and behaviours of amrads except as a failed imitation of femininity, nor could they acknowledge male same-sex desire, except as a consequence of gender segregation. Thus, European encounters with male homoerotic culture in Iran became a

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site for the enforcement of heteronormative binaries that shaped enduring narratives about Iranian morality.

### **The Hidden Worlds of Iranian Women**

Due to the gender-segregated nature of pre-twentieth century Iranian social life, it was rare for male travelers to have access to women’s spaces. As a result, male-authored travel accounts, if they did contain substantial information on women’s social worlds, relied on rumors or secondhand reports. Despite these limitations, there are a small number of references to

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<sup>97</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 23-24.

women's social customs, including references to female same-sex practices. These accounts framed women's social spaces as sites of secrecy, sexual excess and moral degeneration. As Joseph A. Massad argues, "sex was always an important feature of Orientalist fantasy and scholarship", particularly the image of the secluded harem.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, in European accounts of Iran, the harem and the women within it, were highly sensationalized.

Chardin's account of Iranian harems is a prime example of these exaggerated depictions of women's social worlds. While Chardin did not have direct access to women's-only quarters, he reports authoritatively about the conduct of women in harems, writing about the widespread occurrence of romantic and sexual relationships between women:

"They are watched very closely, for fear, it is said, that they might plot or scheme against their rivals, or that they might fall in love with one another. Oriental women have always

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been considered tribades. I have heard it said so often, and to so many people, that they are, and that they have ways of satisfying their passions musically, that I consider it quite certain. They are prevented from doing so as much as possible, because it is claimed that this diminishes their charms and makes them less susceptible to the love of men."<sup>99</sup> Chardin represents female same-sex relations as both ubiquitous and dangerous, suggesting that these relationships were a threat to heterosexual desire. He frames the harem as a socially volatile space:

"Women who have been in the harem report surprising things about the passion with which the girls make love there, about the jealousy that enters into it, as well as the

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<sup>98</sup> Massad, Joseph A. *Desiring Arabs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008 p. 9.

<sup>99</sup> Chardin, John, Sir, and Early English Books Online Ebook Collection. *Journal Du Voyage Du Chevalier Chardin En Perse & Aux Indes Orientales, Par La Mer Noire & Par La Colchide: Qui Contient Le Voyage De Parie à Ispahan*. A Londres: Chez Moses Pitt, 1686 p. 24-25.

jealousy that the favorites harbor toward one another, bordering on fury; about their hatreds, their betrayals, their wicked tricks. They accuse each other and reveal each other's faults."<sup>100</sup>

Here, female same-sex desire is represented not as a meaningful form of erotic desire in its own right, but as a consequence of women's confinement to be prevented through surveillance and control. Although European scrutiny most often focused on male same-sex practices, accounts of female same-sex practice like Chardin's, were similarly condemnatory, often returning to the narrative that the prevalence of these practices was a result of the homosocial nature of Iranian society. Women were deemed vulnerable to same-sex desire because they were isolated from men. This narrative went both ways, as many travel accounts suggested that men were similarly prone to same-sex desire because of a lack of access to women. In both cases, homoerotic desire

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was brushed off as a situational deviation. As noted in the previous chapter, the narrative that homosexual was derivative of unrealized heterosexual desire does not duly acknowledge same-sex desire as a legitimate form of erotic desire. Chardin's account presents women's social spaces as sites of moral danger in need of external regulation, reducing culturally specific practices and intimacies to scandal.

A small number of women also traveled to Iran in the nineteenth century, offering a rare first-hand glimpse into women's social spaces that complicate these sensationalized male-authored narratives. The *Travel Diary of Lady Mary Sheil* (1856) for instance, contains first-hand accounts of life in Iran's harems, bathhouses and other women-only environments. As the wife of a British ambassador, Sheil spent four years in Iran, enjoying exceptional access to elite

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

women's circles and private women-only gatherings, allowing her to document her own first hand encounters in a way that was not accessible to male travelers.

Sheil's travelogue refers extensively to women's segregation from public space, repeatedly referencing women's veiling and exclusion from public life. In her description of her arrival in Tabriz, Sheil describes a grand celebration from which she was excluded on the basis of being a woman;

“Here, preparations on a grand scale were made for a solemn entry, from which I, however, as belonging to the inferior and ignoble class of womankind was excluded, though I was permitted to gaze on the scene at a distance”<sup>101</sup>

Obviously displeased, she continues, “in short, there was everything and everybody, but there was not a single woman for in Persia a woman is nobody.”<sup>102</sup> Elsewhere, Sheil describes restrictions around women's movement through public space, noting that a woman “cannot move abroad without being thickly veiled; she cannot amuse herself by shopping in the bazaars, owing to the attention she would attract unless attired in Persian garments.”<sup>103</sup>

Though Sheil does not make any references to same-sex practices, her distaste for the homosocial organization of Iranian social space carries the same narrative of Iranian backwardness produced in male-authored travel texts. Rather than focusing on sexuality, Sheil's critique zeroes in on what she perceives as the emotional and moral deficiencies of Iranian women. Sheil portrays Iranian women as restless and thrill-seeking; “Persian women seem to me to have no idea of a calm, tranquil life. Novelty, or whatever causes excitement, is what they

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<sup>101</sup> Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia*, p. 86.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid p. 122.

seek, and, I dare say they would be miserable without that stimulus.”<sup>104</sup> She also suggests that they are incapable of cultivating affection for their husbands remarking, “I do not think a Persian woman ever feels the same affection for her husband as some Europeans do.”<sup>105</sup> This perceived moral lack is reinforced by her suggestion that Iranian women “have no strong religious or moral principle” which she attributes to the failing of their husbands and a lack of domestic intimacy.<sup>106</sup> Sheil goes on to explain that women who found themselves neglected by their husbands turned to superstition, using charms, incantations and love potions - practices she presents not as culturally significant ritual and practice, but as evidence of Iranian women’s irrationality and moral weakness.

While Sheil’s travelogue offers a first-hand account of women’s spaces inaccessible to male travelers, her writing ultimately reproduces many of the same narratives of Iranian backwardness and cultural inferiority perpetuated in European male-authored texts. Iranian women are understood only in comparison to European standards of domestic behaviour,

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rationality and virtue. Thus, despite being a woman herself, Sheil’s writing still reinforces Eurocentric heteronormative frameworks that position Iranian approaches to gender relations as inferior and backward.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid p. 144.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

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Europeans continued reporting on Iranian gender and sexual practices throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century.<sup>107</sup> These travel accounts increasingly circulated, not only within Europe but also among Iranian elites, exposing Iranians to European judgements regarding sexuality, gender relations and morality. From these interactions, emerged a discourse that increasingly framed Iranian gender and sexual norms, particularly male same-sex practices and the homosocial nature of Iranian society, as a sign of backwardness incompatible with European notions of modernity. Iranians would begin to internalize this discourse, turning this external gaze inward and leading to the proliferation of an internal self-scrutinizing discourse on gender and sexual norms. At the same time, Iranians increasingly made trips to Europe, experiencing similar surprise, judgment and misinterpretation of the visible gender differences they observed. This two-way cultural dialogue would prove to be profoundly influential on Iranian intellectual discourse during a time of transformation.

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### **Chapter Three: Traversing the Garden of Eden: Iranians in Farangistan and the Discourse of Heteronormative Modernity**

*“If a sorrowing soul traverse these heavenly fields, his head is crowned with flowers of joy, and looking on these saffron beds - luxurious as Kashmir’s - he smiles despite himself. In the gardens and on the paths, beauteous women shine like the sun and rouse the envy of the stars; and the*

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<sup>107</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, p. 37.

*houris [and ghilman]<sup>108</sup> of paradise blush with shame to look upon the rose-cheeked beauties of the earth below, In absolute amazement, I said to Sir Gore Ouseley:*

*If there be paradise on earth  
It is this, oh! It is this!”<sup>109</sup>*

During the nineteenth century, a growing number of Iranians traveled to Europe (*Farangistan*), producing volumes of travel texts detailing encounters in England, France, and Germany among other destinations. Iranians described their encounters in Europe with a sense of fascination and enchantment but also, at times, alienation. Like Europeans traveling to Iran, Iranians in Europe were particularly struck by the stark differences in gender norms that they encountered in their new environment. Women’s visibility in European society, the appearance of unveiled women in public space, and the non-segregated nature of social spaces was striking in contrast to Qajar Iran’s homosocial gender norms.

Iranians were captivated by these differences, often expressing admiration of and at times even a preference for heterosocial European sensibilities. Travelers often wrote at length about their encounters with the beautiful women- *and men-* of Europe. During his travels to England in 1809-10, Iranian Ambassador Mirza Abul Hassan Khan Ilchi likened England’s parks, replete with sights of women and men mingling openly with one another, to the Garden of Eden,

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conveying a familiar enchantment reminiscent of the gardens present in Persian literary tradition.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, p. 47. As Najmabadi notes, the “ghilman” is mentioned in the Persian version of this text but is omitted from the English translation.

<sup>109</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan Khān. *A Persian at the Court of King George, 1809-10 : The Journal of Mirza Abul Hassan Khan*. London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1988, p. 78.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid* p. 24, 78, 169.

At the same time, Iranians felt uneasy in this new environment, often unsure how to navigate unfamiliar social codes. As Najmabadi notes, these encounters with European gender and sexual sensibilities simultaneously encompassed “the culturally familiar paradisaical phantasm of the hur and the ghilman and an unfamiliar spectacle of public heterosociality”.<sup>111</sup> Iranians in Europe were thus simultaneously familiar and estranged- viewing their encounters through the lens of erotic and aesthetic sensibilities familiar to the Iranian imagination, all the while, they were profoundly aware of their Otherness.

These travel accounts were also key sites of cultural comparison and self-critique. As Iranians observed differences in European gender norms, they also turned their attention to Iranian norms, particularly homosociality and women’s veiling, as a subject of critique. As with European-authored texts about Iran, Iranian authored texts about Europe were widely circulated back home and served as important sources of knowledge on Europe.<sup>112</sup> These texts were highly influential in the shaping of Iran’s emerging discourse of modernity during the late nineteenth century, contributing to the shaping of an "Iranian national self".<sup>113</sup> As scholars such as Tavakoli-Targhi and Abedinifard have shown, nineteenth century travelogues were important vehicles for the establishing of self-Other dichotomies, infused with self-conscious, selfdeprecating critique that framed Iran as “backward” in relation to Europe. Gender and sexuality

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<sup>111</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, p. 54-55.

<sup>112</sup> Sohrabi, Naghmeh. *Taken for Wonder : Nineteenth Century Travel Writing from Iran to Europe*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 15.

<sup>113</sup> Motadel, David. "The German Other: Nasir Al-Din Shah's Perceptions of Difference and Gender during His Visits to Germany, 1873-89." *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011): p. 569.

were key sites of this reckoning, as Iran's culture of homoeroticism and homosociality came to be a marker of a perceived civilizational decline.<sup>114</sup>

This chapter traces the complex tensions between Iranian's experiences of fascination and alienation in Europe that emerged from Iranian authored travelogues. This laid the groundwork for a self-critical discourse of modernity that encouraged a shift away from Iran's culture of homoeroticism in favour of the heteronormalization of Iranian gender and sexual norms. I argue that the "heteronormalization" of Iranian men's sensibilities during this time did not mark the disappearance of homoerotic desire but rather its progressive erasure and marginalization, enforced through social reform that favoured heterosociality and placed emphasis on companionate, heterosexual marriage. This process was heavily influenced by conditions of epistemological imperialism. That is, Iranian encounters with European hegemony were highly influential in shaping a discourse of modernity that marked same-sex desire and nonbinary notions of gender as deviant and a symptom of a nation in decline. In this way, the heteronormalization of Iranian gender and sexual norms should be understood not as a natural shift in erotic desire, but as a regulatory apparatus of Iran's broader project of modernity.<sup>121</sup>

Scholarship has tended to highlight the erotic dimensions of Iranian men's fascination with European heterosociality- a narrative that inadvertently supports the claim that the prevalence of same-sex practices in Iran was a result of Iranian men's lack of access to women. I argue however, that a closer reading of these texts reveals a variety of broader concerns about national strength and the scrutiny of the Western gaze.

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<sup>114</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi *Refashioning Iran* & Abedinifard "Iran's Self Deprecating Modernity" <sup>121</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 23.

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### **Women and Gender Difference in Europe**

Iranian-authored travel texts are full of observations about gender difference in Europe. According to David Motadel, for Iranian male travelers, differences in gender relations were perceived as “the most apparent difference between Iran and Europe”.<sup>115</sup> What struck these travelers most was the visibility of European women in public space and their ease in interacting with the opposite sex - a stark contrast to Iran’s homosocial norms where women were largely excluded from every day public space. Iranian encounters with European heterosociality prompted reflection, comparison, and in some cases articulation of a desire for reform.

Mirza Abul Hassan Khan Ilchi’s *Hayratnamah*, or “*Book of Wonder*”, which documented his diplomatic mission to England from 1809-1810, details numerous encounters with elite European women and with European heterosociality. Ilchi traveled to England in the hopes of strengthening British-Iranian ties- a mission that was ultimately unsuccessful, inspiring little interest on the part of England to strengthen ties with Iran. Nevertheless, upon his return to Iran, Mirza Abu Hassan was appointed as the Shah’s advisor on foreign affairs, eventually becoming Iran’s first Foreign Minister and, as such, positioning himself as a significant political figure of the late Qajar era.<sup>116</sup> Despite this, scholars have often overlooked Ilchi’s travelogue as a

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid p. 572.

<sup>116</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan Khān. *A Persian at the Court of King George* p. 17-19.

historical source, contending that it contains nothing of substance.<sup>117</sup> However, *Hayratnamah*, replete with commentary on Ilchi's encounters with gender difference, provides valuable insight

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into how early nineteenth century Iranian elites interacted with and evaluated European gender and sexual norms while engaging in self-critique of Iran's own customs.

As the name suggests, Ilchi described his encounters in England with a sense of fascination. Beginning from the moment of his arrival, Ilchi frames his experience through a lens of enchantment, drawing numerous comparisons to the Garden of Eden. Describing his first look at London, he remarks that despite the rain and snow, "the distant view of the city looked like a paradise to rival the Garden of Eden".<sup>118</sup> The image of the Garden of Eden continues to appear throughout the text, evoking the idea of paradise in a manner reminiscent of the Persian literary tradition. In his description of a party he attended, Ilchi writes:

"Then all the young ladies- fairy-figured, rose-cheeked, jasmine scented - joined hands with the handsome and graceful, cypress-tall young men, and they began to dance in friendly fashion: it might have been the Garden of Eden."<sup>119</sup>

As Tavakoli-Targhi notes, "the European woman (zan-i Farangi) was the locus of gaze and erotic fantasy for many eighteenth and nineteenth century Persiante *voy(ag)eurs* of Europe).<sup>120</sup> It is clear, however, that European men were also. Scholars have tended to overemphasize Iranian fascination with European *women* to make the case that this erotic

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<sup>117</sup> Sohrabi, *Taken for Wonder*, p. 22.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid p. 24.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid p. 169.

<sup>120</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi *Refashioning Iran*, p. 54.

fascination led to a desire to emulate European modes of heteronormativity. However, not all passages discussing the visibility of women are explicitly erotic and those that are, often also contain references to erotic desire for men.

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Ilchi's use of Persian literary motifs of rose-cheeked, cyprus-statured beauties, typically used to describe the Beloved, evoke a sense of idealism. Here, we see a meeting of Iranian and European erotic sensibilities: Ilchi conveys his pleasure in witnessing the visibility of women and their ability to mingle freely with men, while still taking notice of male beauty, likening Englishmen to the *ghilman* – the beautiful male companions of paradise – and employing poetic language that elicits desire for both sexes. While he was clearly enamoured by European *heterosociality*, the paradise he conjures in his descriptions alludes to ambierotic sensibilities. Further, as I will demonstrate shortly, this fascination with European heterosociality was not exclusively concerned with eroticism– it also spoke to issues of national strength for which he perceived heterosociality to be productive.

This idealization of European heterosocial norms was not only expressed by Ilchi. At the same party, Ilchi recounts how his servants, also unfamiliar with European heterosocial norms, express their surprise to see elite men and women mingling freely and dancing with one another, gesturing at a desire to see Iran adopt the same customs: ““What a unique place this is!...Would that our own country could adopt the customs of the English nobility!””.<sup>121</sup> The desire expressed here seems to gesture less toward erotic desire and more so toward a desire to emulate the

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<sup>121</sup> 128 Ibid.

perceived elegance of English nobility. In the context of European hegemony, English customs are associated with advancement and sophistication- qualities associated with national strength.

Women, their veiling, and their visibility in public space became a crucial site of the critiques of Iranian customs expressed in *Hayratnamah* . In recounting a conversation with the wife of the British Prime Minister, Mrs. Perceval, at a dinner party, Ilchi criticizes Iranian women's veiling, framing it as a symbol of confinement:

Observing that such an assembly was strange to me, Mrs Perceval said: 'I see that you are surprised to find men and women eating together. But be fair! Is not our custom better than yours, which keeps a woman hidden behind a veil?' I had to reply: 'Your custom is better indeed. A veiled woman, with downcast eyes, is like a caged bird: when she is released she lacks even the strength to fly around the rose garden. I have traveled the world but never have I encountered a woman such as you, possessed of such beauty and intelligence.'<sup>122</sup>

Ilchi locates the veil as a symbol of his perceived inferiority of Iranian homosocial norms. His praise of Mrs. Perceval serves, beyond flattery, to convey his perceived connection between women's public presence and the cultivation of social sophistication, beauty and intelligence. By contrast, he represented Iranian women as socially and intellectually weak due to their confinement – weakness that he frames as a liability for Iranian society at large.

When later accused of slandering English womanhood, Ilchi reiterates this assessment, elaborating on his perception of the virtues of English women, at the expense of Iranian women:

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<sup>122</sup> 129 Ibid p. 98.

‘As God is my witness I wish the women of Iran could be more like the women of England. Iranian women are chaste because they are forced to be- they are shut away from men; but Englishwomen are chaste by choice. They are free and independent and responsible only to their husbands, whom they look upon as the only men in the world. They do not hide themselves away, but appear veil-less in society; and they honour their husbands' guests as their own friends.’<sup>123</sup>

Here, Ilchi frames his praise for European customs as a matter of virtue and morality. He presents heterosociality not as a threat to chastity or sexual morality, but rather as a social force that actually produces a more voluntary form of it, thus asserting its superiority over Iranian customs.

*Hayratnamah* is an illustrative example of how nineteenth century Iranian encounters with Europe navigated gender difference as a point of cultural comparison. Ilchi’s fascination with European heterosociality and critiques of Iranian gender norms reflect a range of concerns about Iranian progress in the context of European hegemony.

Naser al din Shah Qajar’s 1873 travel diary provides a later example of Iranian encounters with European heterosociality. As the first Iranian monarch to travel to Europe, Naser al din Shah occupied a unique position in shaping elite Iranian perceptions of the West.<sup>124</sup> His travels were highly publicized events with his travel diaries functioning as what Sohrabi terms “imperial self-narrations” directed at both internal audiences in Iran and external audiences in Europe, which through their wide circulation operated as “tools of diplomacy and kingly rule”.<sup>132</sup> His 1873 journey— the first of the three voyages that he would make to Europe over the course

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid p. 135.

<sup>124</sup> Sohrabi, *Taken for Wonder*, p. 18. <sup>132</sup> Ibid p. 76.

of his rule – was explicitly conceived as an effort to cultivate diplomatic friendship, particularly with Britain, and to position Iran strategically on the global stage.<sup>125</sup>

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As with Ilchi’s travelogue, until recently, little historical value has been placed on the Shah’s travel diaries which have often been dismissed as being superficial, repetitive, or lacking in political analysis. Sohrabi observes that scholars have rejected the influence of the Shah’s travels to Europe on modern reforms “since the consensus is that nothing of substance was gained from the king’s travels, then, the thinking goes, the accounts reveal nothing of substance”.<sup>126</sup> However, his diaries, particularly the 1873 account of his first trip to Europe, reflect several important concerns in the context of Iranian modernity, including issues of gender and sexuality.

Like Ilchi, the Shah was struck by the visibility of women in European public space. He makes numerous references to “multitudes of women and maidens” in parks and boulevards.<sup>127</sup> In his description of a London park, he writes: “For lovers, pleasure-hunters, Sybarites, it is a capital nook. Pretty women and graceful ladies continually promenade.... In truth, it is a fairy abode.”<sup>136</sup> The Shah also evokes mystical language in his descriptions of European women, expressing delight at their abundant presence in public spaces through otherworldly imagery.

Yet, as in Ilchi’s accounts, the Shah also took notice of male beauty. At a train station in Prussia, he observed “a large body of troops and officers, all very handsome young men... they

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<sup>125</sup> Sohrabi, *Taken for Wonder*, p. 87.

<sup>126</sup> Sohrabi, *Taken for Wonder* p. 75.

<sup>127</sup> Shah, Nasir al-Din, Nasir al-Din Shah, Shah of Iran, 1831-1896, Redhouse, James W. (James William), Sir, and Canadian Libraries. *Diary of H.M. the Shah of Persia, during His Tour through Europe in A.D. 1873. by J.W. Redhouse. A Verbatim Translation* London J. Murray, 1874 p. 150. <sup>136</sup> *Ibid* p. 113.

were a very pretty soldiery”.<sup>128</sup> The Shah’s appreciation for both male and female beauty indicates that fascination with European heterosociality did not indicate the absence of homoerotic desire.

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While Iranians were certainly fascinated, even enchanted by European heterosociality, this fascination did not necessarily indicate *heterosexual* sensibilities. Though Iranians frequently invoked eroticism in their descriptions of women, they often also did so in their descriptions of men. The likening of European parks to the gardens of paradise inhabited by the ghilman and hur reflect Persian literary traditions that celebrated both homoerotic and heteroerotic desire- erotic sensibilities through which Iranian men read European heterosocial space. Iran’s process of heteronormalization therefore cannot be understood simply as a triumph of heterosexual modernity over Iran’s homoerotic past.

Rather than reflecting a disappearance of same-sex desire, the desires for heterosocial reform in Iran reflected larger concerns about Iran’s national strength in the context of European hegemony- concerns that manifested as anxieties about visible markers of gender difference between Iran and Europe. Many of the critiques of Iranian homosociality identified by Iranian travelers would become key points of Iran’s discourse of modernity as women’s veiling and education became central targets of reform.

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid p. 70.

## The Exoticized Other

While Iranians traveled Europe as observers, they were also being observed, in many instances as an exoticized spectacle. The Shah, like most Iranian travelers, tended to refer to Europeans as a “collective *other*,” referring to *Farangis* (Europeans) rather than specific nationalities.<sup>129</sup> In this way, the Shah drew a clear distinction in his travelogues between the Iranian self and the European Other. On the flip side of this dynamic, Europeans othered Iranians in Europe consistently through exoticization. Iranians were continuously reminded of their otherness in Europe, often finding themselves made into a public display by their very presence as foreign bodies in European space. The Shah’s 1873 travel diary is full of references to these moments of public spectacle as he traveled through Europe from Prussia to England, often drawing massive crowds of onlookers and generating astonishment, disruption and grand public display.

Upon his arrival in Prussia, the Shah describes how “the whole of our suite, princes, household officials & all came there. As the people of this city had never seen a Persian, they were much surprised at sight of us.”<sup>130</sup> Here, the Shah attributes the massive attention he received not to his status as a monarch but rather to the novelty of being “a Persian”, indicating an awareness that he was being viewed not as a sovereign equal but as a foreign spectacle. Rather he was marked as radically Other.

In another particularly striking encounter in the village of Gossensasse, Italy, the Shah and his entourage visited a village church during a Sunday service. Recounting the moment the

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<sup>129</sup> Motadel, David. "The German Other: Nasir Al-Din Shah's Perceptions of Difference and Gender during His Visits to Germany, 1873-89." *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2011): p. 569.

<sup>130</sup> Shah, Nasir al-Din, *Diary of H.M. the Shah of Persia* p. 71.

priest took notice of his party, he recalls: “his speech failed him in the pulpit, and he was thoroughly bewildered in conjecturing who we might be, with these caps and costumes of ours, that had arrived in the church of a village in so remote a corner of Europe.”<sup>131</sup> Here, the Shah’s “caps and costumes” are indicated as the most visible markers of difference that caused him to stand out in European public space, to the point of causing disturbances such as this one.

The same sentiments recur in his descriptions of London: “Both sides of the road , the roofs, the upper stories of the houses, were full of women, men, and children... It was a surprising turmoil.”<sup>132</sup> In Italy he describes the crowds that would gather around his carriage at

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train stops: “great crowds were collected with the hope of seeing us; so much so, that they even fell under the wheels of our carriages in their eagerness.”<sup>133</sup> These encounters are narrated with a combination of astonishment and unease, detailing how the Shah and his entourage were turned into objects of mass curiosity for people all over Europe wanting to catch a glimpse of the Oriental monarch.

As Motadel notes, in the Persian version of the Shah’s diary his embarrassment in these encounters is even more apparent. He expresses shame and a sense of inferiority as a result of these experiences.<sup>134</sup> The Shah’s discomfort suggests that he did not read the gaze of the European public as neutral. Rather, he sensed that he was viewed not as an equal but as an oddity.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid p. 347.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid p. 142.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid p. 355.

<sup>134</sup> Motadel “The German Other” p. 571.

Though Iranians were engaged in a reciprocal process of gazing in their own observations and evaluations of European society and customs, this dynamic was fundamentally asymmetrical. Europe's cultural and epistemological hegemony gave it the authority to define and categorize the Other. Though the Shah had only just arrived in Europe for the first time, his position as the exotic Other was pre-defined.

The experience of being othered in Europe reinforced the same anxieties that prompted Iranian self-critique in relation to Europe. If Europeans were representative of progress and civilization, to be Othered is to be excluded from that representation. In this way, these encounters helped shape a broader discourse of Iranian modernity in which reform was deemed necessary to restore a sense of national strength against the backdrop of European hegemony.

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### **Iran's Discourse of "Westernized" Modernity**

Nineteenth century Iranian travelers' encounters with Europe helped shape a discourse of "Westernized" modernity in Iran. Within this discourse, Europe increasingly functioned as a model of progress and civilization while Iran was cast, by its own elites, as a belated and deficient society in need of reform. As Abedinifard argues, this was a "self-deprecating modernity" characterized by a simultaneous idealization of the West and internalization of inferiority.<sup>135</sup>

As Tavakoli-Targhi argues, Iranian intellectuals had adopted "a fractured conception of historical time that viewed their contemporary European societies ahead of their own time" a conception of time which he argues was used by European anthropologists to treat non-Western

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<sup>135</sup> Abedinifard "Iran's Self-Deprecating Modernity" p. 407.

societies as if they belonged to a different period of history. As a result, much of Iranian modernity's nationalist historiography "assumes the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous Iranian and European societies".<sup>136</sup> This is to say, Iranian modernists engaged in self-orientalizing critique that viewed their own society as antiquated and "backward" in relation to Europe.

This "schizophrenic conception of history"<sup>137</sup> intersected with what Said identifies as the "Aryan myth"- an idea rooted in nineteenth century philology and the discovery of the Indo-European language family, that suggested a shared racial linguistic origin between Ancient Iranians and Europeans. Orientalists praised Iran's ancient, pre-Islamic "Aryan" past while simultaneously classifying nineteenth century Iranian society as a civilization in decline.<sup>138</sup> In this narrative, Iran's glory was relegated to the distant past while its present was marked by

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perceived backwardness. The Aryan myth also enabled racial differentiation within the "Orient." Orientalists were able to separate Iran and "Aryans" from the "Semitic" peoples of the Orient, particularly Arabs, who were viewed as culturally inferior. As Said notes, "the Aryan myth dominated historical and cultural anthropology at the expense of the 'lesser' peoples."<sup>139</sup>

During the late Qajar period, ideas about the "Aryan" were (re)introduced and mobilized in the service of Iranian nationalism.<sup>140</sup> As Motadel observes, the Aryan myth offered "a

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<sup>136</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran* p. 4.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Said, *Orientalism* p. 17 & 99.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid p. 99.

<sup>140</sup> Motadel, David. "Iran and the Aryan Myth." In *Perceptions of Iran*, edited by Ansari, Ali, 119-146: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2014 p. 119.

convenient explanation for the country's apparent backwardness" as decline was framed not as an inherent deficiency of Iranians but as a fall from former glory.<sup>141</sup> This narrative allowed Iranians an imagined proximity to the West as well as an imagined distance from the Orient.

Gender and sexuality were among the most prominent sites of this discourse of modernist reform. In particular, women's bodies became "a terrain of cultural and political contestations".<sup>142</sup> The same issues that marked gender and sexual difference in nineteenth century travel literature- the veiling and visibility of women in public space, Iranian homosociality and homoeroticism, all became central targets of reform. Intellectuals began to demand women's education and women's unveiling while advocating for the eradication of all forms of homoerotic/same-sex practices. As Afary notes, same-sex practices were categorized alongside sexual slavery and pederasty, "lumped together as perverted traditions that had to be eradicated."<sup>143</sup> Iran's long celebrated traditions of homoeroticism were recast as perversion while women's bodies became the target of Iran's project of heteronormalization.

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When speaking about the discourse of Iranian modernity it should be recognized that this intellectual space was largely dominated by elite men who acted as Iran's architects of reform to define ideas of progress and civilization. In this context, women's bodies became sites of reform and symbolic battlegrounds for national discourse. Issues of veiling, women's education, and companionate marriage became central to Iran's modern transformations, but were most often being debated by men. However, as Hasan Javad notes, as elite women were increasingly

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid p. 131.

<sup>142</sup> Tavakoli-Targhi p. 54.

<sup>143</sup> Afary, *Sexual Politics* p. 118.

exposed to “new, mostly European ideas about law, equality, and education”, they began to question long accepted “truths” about their role in Iranian society.<sup>144</sup>

Indeed, Iran’s move toward heteronormative modernity necessitated a reconfiguration of the roles of both men and women. Heteronormativity did not just privilege heterosexual marriage, it sought to establish heterosexual companionate marriage as the centrally sanctioned site of intimacy, reproduction and family. This regulatory project had a dual focus: the disciplining of women’s bodies and the reorientation of male desire. The tensions of this transformation are evident in the exchange between two nineteenth-century texts: *The Education of Women* and *The Vices of Men*.

In 1886/87, an anonymous member of the Qajar family published *Ta’dib al-Nesvan*, or *The Education of Women*, a prescriptive manual intended to educate Iranian women on conduct toward their husbands. A decade later, Bibi Khanom Astarabadi published *Ma’ayeb al-rejal*, or *The Vices of Men* in response. The daughter of a cavalry commander, Bibi Khanom Astarabadi was raised in the royal harem before falling in love and marrying an army officer at age twentythree. When she was thirty-six years old and much to her dismay, Astarabadi’s husband took a

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second wife— a heartbreak that led her to write *The Vices of Men*.<sup>145</sup> *The Vices of Men*, is a scathing critique that systematically dismantled the assumptions of *The Education of Women* and

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<sup>144</sup> Javadi, Hasan, and Willem Floor. 2010. *The Education of Women and the Vices of Men: Two Qajar Tracts*. 1st ed. Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press p. ix

<sup>145</sup> Ibid p. xvi-xviii.

lodged its own grievances at the conduct of Iranian men.<sup>146</sup> Both authors invoke Europe as a reference point for ideal conduct and morality, although to very different ends. This exchange illuminates how new ideals of femininity and masculinity were constructed through the rejection of Iran's homosocial and homoerotic traditions, in order to facilitate broader goals of modernity such as companionate marriage.

*The Education of Women* prescribes a model of disciplined, docile and sexually compliant womanhood, detailing "advice" to regulate nearly every aspect of women's lives from posture and movement, to speech, appearance and sexual behaviour and availability. According to the author, a wife must be obedient, cheerful, patient, and beautiful. She must not question her husband, may never complain and must remain sexually available to her husband.<sup>156</sup> On the maintenance of a woman's appearance the author instructs:

"She must not be without eye shadow and must use rouge, but not excessively, so her face will look natural, not like the red bottom of monkeys; she should not color her lips and cheeks and even her eyes and nose thinking that she has to make herself like a bouquet of flowers."<sup>157</sup>

In his criticism of excessive makeup, he continues: "In Europe, they make little use of rouge, powder, and makeup. Surely, what God has created is better than artificial embellishment."<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid p. x-xi.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid p. x. <sup>157</sup>

Ibid p. 26 <sup>158</sup>

Ibid.

Here, the author invokes European womanhood as an ideal that Iranian women should emulate. This example explicitly demonstrates how European gender and sexual ideals were infused into Iranian discourse on gender reform.

*The Vices of Men* begins by responding to each chapter of *The Education of Women* before Astarabadi lists her own grievances about male hypocrisy. She doesn't reject moral reform outright but insists that it must apply equally to men. Addressing her "sisters in religion" she writes that women should fulfill these admonitions only if her husband is faithful, God fearing and kind. She continues:

"He should not ask her something that cannot be done, and he should not find fault and quibble with you. He should not be ruthless and cruel; he should also not be stubborn and always with his friends and a truant from home; he should not womanize and be loving boys or, like a spineless husband, divorce his wife without any reason."<sup>147</sup>

Here, she outlines some of her main grievances, highlighting the asymmetry in modern discourse's focus on women as the primary site of modernist critique. Notably, she identifies men's infidelity, and particularly male same-sex practices as a key concern, echoing broader modernist concerns that same-sex practices presented a threat to heterosexual companionate marriage.

Astarabadi challenges the anonymous author's invocation his knowledge of Europe to justify his position:

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<sup>147</sup> 159 Ibid p. 62.

“It is strange that this ignoramus, who considers himself one of those so-called westernized and civilized people and an imitator of European teachers, nevertheless clearly is not even half-civilized.”<sup>148</sup>

Astarabadi challenges his invocation, not because she views Europe unfavourably, but because she views the author as such:

“Unlike the people of Europe, this ill-mannered, faultfinding, unrefined author all the time seeks to humiliate women and tries to cover all their good qualities with imaginary and false failings. Curse be on you and your doings.”<sup>161</sup>

While challenging the anonymous author, she affirms Europe and European people as a reference point for civility but argues against deploying European moral authority to selectively discipline women.

Astarabadi’s text also engages with the broader discourse of Iranian decline:

“At this time, when evil characteristics have rendered Iranians worse than animals, most of those characteristics are present in men, and they have lost their good traits.”<sup>149</sup> In doing so, Astarabadi turns the tables on Iranian modernity’s persistent focus on women’s bodies, veiling and visibility as the signifier of Iranian decline, asserting that male vices- gambling, opium smoking, and general “debauchery” as the true site of decay. The weakness of the Iranian nation, in her view, lies not with women’s bodies but with men’s moral degeneration.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid p. 68. <sup>161</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid p. 67.

Astarabadi later returns her focus to men's same-sex practices which she believes to be the cause of men's neglect of their wives, illustrating a caricature of a husband who "madly

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squanders the property as if it were stolen money, on ridiculous expenditures such as alchemy, gambling, whoring, pederasty, and parties."<sup>150</sup> She invokes satirical anecdotes of male same-sex love affairs to expose the persistence of the "vice":

"By the girdle of Horr by the shrine of 'Ali, when I became entangled in love of Khavar, the mustachioed prostitute, my love was so strong that I was the talk of town. So much so that every scoundrel in the city and my friends had heard of me. Whatever I found, I spent on that mindless beloved to satisfy my unsatiated desires. That good-for-nothing eventually left me and became the beloved of 'Abbas Dash 'Ali."<sup>151</sup>

Her satirizing of the obsessive lover and mustachioed beloved reflects the reconfiguration of normative gender and sexual desire—practices that had once been revered were now abhorred. Male homoerotic bonds that were once upheld as ideal were now cause for embarrassment.

Together, *The Education of Women* and *The Vices of Men* demonstrate that Iran's heteronormalization was not simply born out of Iranian men's fascination with European women but rather was enforced to facilitate larger goals of the nationalist project such as companionate marriage, unveiling, women's education, and the delegitimization of homoerotic traditions that had come to be seen as "backward" and a hindrance to Iranian modernity. Thus, heteronormalization should not be understood as a shift in desires but rather a shift in their regulation. There is little evidence to suggest that Iranian men's desires were suddenly

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid p. 68.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid p. 103.

“heteronormalized”. On the contrary, texts such as *The Vices of Men* suggest that men’s same-sex desires continued to be prevalent— hence the need for their critique and control. In this way, the exchange between these two texts reveals modernity – as it pertained to gender and sexual

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norms – to be a process of reorganization and regulation that narrowed acceptable forms of intimacy along heteronormative lines.

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The discourse on gender and sexuality that emerges from nineteenth century Iranian-authored travelogues reveal more than wonder and fascination with European women and gender norms. Beneath the poetic descriptions of enchantment lay deeper anxieties about Iranian national strength, civilizational standing and internalized narratives of backwardness and decline. In the context of expanding European hegemony, political, and epistemological, Europe increasingly appeared as the definer of modernity and civilization, including in the realm of gender and sexuality.

The admiration of European heterosociality expressed in travelogues signaled more than erotic curiosity- it signaled a broader concern about a perceived need for reform in Iran. This led to a process of reconfiguring gender and sexual norms with European heterosociality and heteronormativity positioned as the model of modern gender and sexual norms. This necessitated a reconfiguration of both male and female gender roles in which women were encouraged to unveil, become educated and fulfill their role as wives and mothers of the nation while men were urged to redirect their erotic desires toward companionate heterosexual marriage. By the early twentieth century, homoerotic expression and same-sex practices were effectively

marginalized in favour of heterosexual companionate marriage. This transformation did not result in a simple shift in erotic preference nor the organic disappearance of same-sex desire but rather a reorganization of normative gender and sexual behaviours via a process of regulation and classification that upheld compulsory heterosexuality and marked all forms of same-sex desire as deviant. As a result, the culture of homoeroticism and homosociality that allowed same-sex desires an acceptable place in society to be expressed, disappeared from public space, relegating these desires to the margins of society and erasing their cultural significance from Iran's historical memory.

## Conclusion

*Where did the handsome beloved go?*

*I wonder, where did that tall, shapely cypress tree go?*

*He spread his light among us like a candle.*

*Where did he go? So strange, where did he go without me?*

*All day long my heart trembles like a leaf.*

*All alone at midnight, where did that beloved go?*

*Go to the road, and ask any passing traveler — That  
soul-stirring companion, where did he go?*

*Go to the garden, and ask the gardener —  
That tall, shapely rose stem, where did he go?<sup>152</sup>*

The erasure of Iran’s homoerotic past has served as fuel for harmful falsehoods used to justify the oppression of queer people in contemporary Iran. First, there is the myth that queerness is external to Iran, a Western import incompatible with Iranian society and values. Perhaps the most famous declaration of this idea came in then Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s 2007 address to New York’s Columbia University, in which he stated: “In Iran we don’t have homosexuals like in your country...In Iran we do not have this phenomenon”.<sup>153</sup> By locating queerness externally— specifically in the West— homophobic politicians have been able to mobilize broader concerns about “westoxification” to justify the marginalization of queer identities in Iran.

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<sup>152</sup> RUMI, Brad Gooch, and Maryam Mortaz. ""Where did the Handsome Beloved Go?"" *Poetry (Chicago)* 211, no. 2 (2017): 128-129.

<sup>153</sup> Opinion | “in Iran, we don’t have homosexuals like in your country. . . . in Iran, we do not have this phenomenon. I don’t know who’s told you that we have it.” - The Washington Post. Accessed March 4, 2026.

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At the same time, myths circulate in Western imaginaries that Iranian people are inherently homophobic and intolerant – a notion used to manufacture consent for violence under the guise of Western civilizational superiority. Where sexual fluidity had once been a marker of Iran’s backwardness, today it is the marginalization of queer bodies in Iran that empowers Western discourse to perpetuate images of Iran and Iranian people as uncivilized, as existing outside of modernity. In both cases, Iranian gender and sexual norms become a site of projection upon which Western ideas of progress can be defined against the Other. As Walaa Alqaisiya argues, these differences are mobilized by the West to further geopolitical aims: “Western interventions in the Middle East within the geopolitics of war on terror, democratisation and humanitarianism is a manifestation of the continued deployment of these differences to further colonial and neo-imperial interests in the region.”<sup>154</sup> Alqaisiya draws on the 2019 example of the Trump administration’s initiative to end the criminalization of homosexuality globally– an initiative that coincided with efforts to mobilize Western allies against the Iranian regime, citing “‘barbaric public executions’ and flogging to death of homosexuals.”<sup>168</sup> This example demonstrates how queer struggles are appropriated to serve Western interested. What is overlooked in such cases are the queer bodies at the centre of this debate, who are often made dangerously hypervisible without benefiting from this so-called advocacy.

Historiographically speaking, the inability or unwillingness of scholars to locate samesex desire and nonbinary gender expression in premodern Iran only enables these tendencies. Archival gaps are easily mistaken for historical absence, providing a discursive space for

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<sup>154</sup> Alqaisiya, Walaa. "Guest Editor's Introduction: Queerness with Middle East Studies: Mapping Out the Useful Intersections." *Middle East Critique* 29, no. 1 (2020): p. 4. <sup>168</sup> Ibid.

contemporary actors to portray same-sex desire as a modern invention as opposed to a longstanding, historically recognized aspect of Iranian social life. This creates a feedback loop in which historical erasure enables contemporary denial, and contemporary denial justifies further erasure.

These myths are not unique to Iran. They are pervasive throughout the SWANA (Southwest Asia North Africa) region, where queerness is routinely denied as foreign contamination, and that denial is highlighted by the West as evidence of cultural and civilizational deficiency.

This points to a need for historical recognition. Recovering Iran's homoerotic, preheteronormative past is a critical intervention into these contemporary myths perpetuated both from within Iran and from without. This thesis has endeavoured to untangle the roots of these mutually reinforcing myths by presenting an exploration of Iran's premodern culture of homoeroticism and the epistemological processes that led to its eventual disappearance from cultural memory. In doing so it challenges not only historical and historiographical erasure but also contemporary denial and Western appropriations of queer identity in Iran.

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