

Birds and Cages: Reading Sex and the State in Janet Afary's *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*

New Politics: Volume XII, Number 4, Winter 2010
Review Subject: *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, Cambridge University Press, 2009
Review Author: Amy Littlefield

JANET AFARY IS HOPEFUL about the future of women's rights in Iran. And she identifies many reasons to be so, from secret individual acts of resistance by women against husbands, fathers, and dictators to collective feminist struggle and today's One Million Signatures Campaign for equal rights. But *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* also reveals the full force of the cultural and political systems that the Iranian movement for gender equality confronts. Stories such as that of the teenage homosexual couple executed and tortured in 2006 and the sixteen-year-old girl publicly hanged for having extramarital sex in 2004 have garnered international outrage against Iran. But the stories cannot exist out of context, and Afary meticulously unravels the hundreds of years of power and patriarchy that have molded today's Iranian sexual and political landscape.



Afary, an Iranian native and Duncan and Suzanne Mellichamp Professor of Global Religion and Modernity at University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), is a widely regarded historian who specializes on the rise of Islamism and theories of sexual politics. In particular, Afary's mastery of Foucault serves to center Iranian history in the context of larger questions about normative heterosexuality, modernity, and the family. In 2005, Afary, along with Kevin B. Anderson, co-authored *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*, exploring the Revolution's centrality to Foucault's work. Her 1996 book, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism*, detailed the rise of the women's movement in Iran.

To write *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, Afary extracted relevant passages from a wide range of texts, from pre-modern Persian poetry to harem memoirs to contemporary

women's magazines and underground activist texts. To each, she has applied a broader theoretical framework, all the while maintaining a focus on the details of Iranian life. Although the book constitutes a far-reaching survey of the history of sexuality and gender in the context of Iran's political and cultural changes, Afary avoids tedium with constant references to literature and personal anecdotes, at times even including the testimony of her own family members.

The book provides a firm foundation for the relatively new field of writing on Iranian women's experiences. It is a remarkably thorough analysis of Iranian culture and history, and is accessible for readers who have little grounding in either. With U.S. presidents and the media tending to fixate on Iran's "evilness," oversimplified notions of gender and sexuality have dominated U.S. discourse on Iran. And although shedding light on Western misconceptions was not Afary's central aim when she condensed several hundreds years of sexual history into one text, the deconstruction of stereotypes such as the passive, veiled Muslim woman is one important consequence of this exceptional work.

This last issue seems particularly prescient given the re-emergence in recent years of the imperialist United States cast as the liberator of the Middle Eastern woman who is oppressed by a "backward" political and religious regime. Afary confronts the conflation of Western imperialism with women's liberation, an issue that has plagued the Iranian women's movement since its inception:

For too long, Western imperialist powers, most recently the United States, have opportunistically used the issue of the rights of Middle Eastern women for their strategic interests and abandoned it just as opportunistically when it no longer fits their purposes. (372)

In Afary's analysis, Iranian feminism emerges as a movement in its own right, evolving alongside and yet distinct from Western feminism. Nor does Afary allow the reader to conclude that the conservative Islamist movement is a mere regressive effort by religious radicals. Islamism in modern Iran is revealed as a calculated response to deep-seated anxieties about shifting gender roles and the emergence of the financially and sexually empowered Iranian woman. As Afary stated in a phone interview, despite imperialist myths perpetrated by the West, Islamism is in fact a "very sophisticated, modern political movement that uses some traditional, cultural ideologies."

Efforts by the Islamist state to promote sexual education and birth control following a post-war population explosion in 1988 show the tremendous power of the government to achieve its ends. In a push to limit fertility, the state achieved almost universal sex education (which included a pleasure-focused component), birth control, and health care services. The success of the program also depended on the efforts of hundreds of thousands of women who leaped at the opportunity to promote birth control and health care, particularly in remote villages. What may have seemed like a feminist victory, however, was also a powerful example of state control over women's bodies.

Rather than conceding total victory to the state, Afary includes stories of individual women who resisted and survived against state-imposed power and control. From Forough Farrokhzad, a twentieth-century poet who wrote about women's daily experiences and described loveless marriage as a cage, to Mahvash, the cabaret singer who created a widely read erotic pamphlet in 1957 that celebrated the female orgasm, individual stories demonstrate how women stretched the bars that imprisoned them.

The example of Marziyeh Dabbagh provides a particularly fascinating picture of the complexities and contradictions of the rules that governed women's lives leading up to and following the 1979 Iranian Revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini. Dabbagh became Khomeini's bodyguard and a top military commander, even as Khomeini was condemning the ability of women to function in public: "She wore modest modern clothes, drove a car, traveled, socialized, and spent much time away from her family, all without feeling guilty, since Khomeini himself had sanctioned her activities" (259). Dabbagh achieved a kind of individualized equality based on her proximity to the misogynist state and her compliance with the wishes of Khomeini.

From particular strategies used by women, Afary moves to generalizations that instruct the way the West and East have struggled to define gender and sexuality in the transition to modernity and capitalism. For example, her reading of the Iranian leftists who considered women's rights subservient to and separate from the cause of anti-imperialism -- and thus supported the misogynist cleric Ayatollah Khomeini -- rings all too familiar for those knowledgeable about the U.S. labor movement. A clear message about the intersectionality of human rights, sexual rights, women's rights, and anti-imperialist liberation rings out from Afary's analysis.

Sexual Politics in Modern Iran documents the rise and fall of various efforts by leftist, feminist, and other social movements that have ultimately failed to bring about lasting change for Iranian women and homosexuals. But Afary, who maintains ties to activist communities in Iran, ends on a hopeful note regarding the Campaign for Equality, a contemporary feminist movement that has founded the One Million Signatures Campaign, a movement to circulate a petition (gaining one million signatures) and raise awareness through online newsletters and door-to-door efforts about women's legal rights in Iran. One of the major accomplishments of the Campaign that emerges in her analysis is its avoidance of a singularly Western brand of feminism. With the emergence of a distinctly Iranian feminism today, we can see the struggle for self-definition solidifying in Iran, even in a persistently imperialist climate:

The Campaign for Equality has broken new ground on several levels. Activists have moved beyond the sectarian and ideological divides that hampered the women's movement for much of the twentieth century. They have made common cause with women from many different social, religious, and ideological backgrounds, established a genuine two-way conversation that has broken with both elitism and populism, and formulated demands that appeal to women of all social classes. Soon they also reclaimed a number of national and religious rituals and festivals, giving them new feminist interpretations (Tohidi 2008). Most of all, they have tried to change not just the

law, but also the culture itself, and to articulate an independent feminist voice that demarcates 'the women's movement from both the native Islamist and Western imperialist patriarchies' (Tohidi 2006). (Afary 372)

In the struggle against U.S. imperialism and the misogyny and homophobia of the state in both Iran and the United States, achieving an understanding of all of these "evils" is critical. Reading *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* is a necessary first step. Signing the One Million Signatures petition may be a second.

Review author bio:

AMY LITTLEFIELD is a freelance reporter who lives in Amherst, Massachusetts and is a member of the editorial board of New Politics.

Source: <http://newpolitics.mayfirst.org/fromthearchives?nid=176>