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In the past decade or so, scholars have opened new vistas for studying gender and sexuality in Orientalist writings—European representations of Islam, Arabic, the “East” and the like—and feminist criticism has been particularly successful in adjusting our understanding. Travel writing, scholarly research, novels, and the formation of literary canons about the ‘East’ have more recently been examined for their normative assumptions about sexuality.

Contemporary discussions on mysticism, philology, and religion in Oriental studies tend to be rooted in the philological and religious studies traditions, as an internal discussion among experts in the field. Afsaneh Najmabadi and others have called for a “re-reading” of mystical litera-

ture that would include a more critical analysis of gender and modern definitions of homo- and heterosexuality.¹

My current research investigates how the study of sexuality mediates our understanding of Oriental studies, an academic discipline that has been tainted by accusations of uncompromising racism and blind service to imperial culture. Using sexuality as a category of analysis, I show how Iranian and European contributions to this field of knowledge were often divergent from this nefarious intention. While not denying the deleterious effects of European writings about their Oriental others, further analysis reveals a more complex set of interests related to sexuality than has been earlier depicted.



Louis Massignon

In one of my dissertation chapters, I demonstrate how the great French luminary, Louis Massignon (1883–1962), achieved “liberation” from his sexual anxieties through Islamic mysticism (*irfan* or Sufism). Massignon’s pioneering work on mysticism, for which Edward Said reserved some rare accolades in his book *Orientalism*, came about in part as a result of Massignon’s tormented sexuality. Up until now, scholars have approached the issue of sexuality in Massignon’s writings as a side issue, and some writers have avoided the subject altogether despite its vital implications for the study of Orientalism. Most biographers of Massignon have assumed that a radical shift in his thinking on mysticism occurred at the moment of his conversion to Catholicism in 1908, neglecting to demonstrate how sexuality was central to his conversion experience and influential in his later writings. Jacques Derrida, who provided considerable insight into Massignon’s ecumenical ideas of *hospitality* and *substitution*, only briefly mentioned the issue of homosexuality in his analysis. I address these concerns by showing how Massignon was a man in conflict with colonial models of masculinity and sexuality, and more importantly, how mystical literature was a vehicle for his self-liberation.

Turning to Iranian contributions to Oriental studies, I have continually asked myself the question: what is shaping modern views of mas-

culinity and sexuality in Persian writings during the interwar period? While many have identified a discourse on women as a determinant of modern Persian masculinity—masculinity’s alleged dyad—I have been struck by how *unimportant* this was in the publications under my review. Compared with the constitutional period in Iran (1905–1911) when the so-called “Woman’s Question” provoked debates on women’s status in society, many Persian journals dedicated to Oriental studies during the interwar period were concerned with representing and redefining masculinity—without reference to women.

In a series entitled “Great Men” in *Kaveh*, an Iranian studies journal based in Germany produced before and after WWI, the idea of Persian masculinity was shaped by a discourse on science. Productive masculinity was equated with heterosexual norms, and sexual practices in Iran were evaluated based on a set of principles mediated by post-Enlightenment thought. The condemnation of male homosexuality on the part of some, for example, was based on the idea that it was anathema to scientific development. Homosexuality, in turn, was associated with sloth, laziness, and inactivity: “[What could one expect of a young politician] who spends his time lying on a mattress, smoking opium, reciting poetry about *filthy and unnatural love*” (my emphasis) (*Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, 3) In

other words, when seen from the vantage point of *Kaveh*’s portrait of great men, the greatest offense of homosexuality was its correlation with a *poor work ethic*!

“A key component of ‘achieving modernity’ and ‘becoming civilized,’” Najmabadi wrote, “had become ‘eradication of unnatural love’ among men” (*Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, 163). “Heteronormalization,” which contemporary scholars have argued is the source of more rigid ideas on sexuality in Persian writings, was in fact an uneven, poorly articulated, and de-prioritized sermon aimed at removing the fetters of Iran’s premodern past. It would be a mistake, therefore, to conclude that there was a strong opposition to homosexuality *per se*, since what is mentioned about it during the two world wars is infrequent and non-conclusive.

The editors of *Kaveh* viewed homosexuality as a decadent lifestyle that impeded the cause of modernity. Far more vitriolic speech is reserved for the unscientific behavior of Muslim clergy (*mujtahids*). As one would expect of Iranian intellectuals who reconstituted post-Enlightenment thought, religious reform was believed to be the primary vehicle for modernization. Issues of sexuality and gender were also deployed in their critiques when cataloging the abuses of errant priests; however, their criticism is geared toward fighting despotic tendencies, the ad-

vancement of technology, and the freeing of the masses from premodern cultural practices. In sum, until the end of the interwar period same-sex *eros* was deemed undeserving of any serious consideration (or attack), and it was relatively tolerable (albeit discouraged) as a social practice.

Regrettably the few scholars who work on the history of modern Iranian sexuality favor a “shame-based” explanation for growing intolerance toward homosexuality in the twentieth century. Their main argument is that beginning in the nineteenth century Iranians “naturalized” heterosexual love after greater contact with Europe and European norms of sexuality. As a result of greater cultural exchange, they were ashamed by the prevalence of same-sex desire and homoeroticized bonding in Persian society, and early Iranian reformers adopted a new vision of Persian nationalism to respond to these pressures. If “Great Men” and other articles featured in *Kaveh* are any indication, however, scientific discourse trumped any innate “homophobia” among Iranians. One could argue that heterosexualization, furthermore, never took hold or was never fully realized (akin to “modernization,” in academic parlance, which is supposed to obliterate or replace what had existed before). Same-sex *eros* occupied a relatively insignificant place in public discourse, and whether this is a disavowal, a “shame,” or an otherwise taboo

subject today, it seems that interwar intellectuals did not find it particularly problematic when articulating the goals of modern society.

Both European and Iranian perspectives on sexuality in the early half of the twentieth century present new insights into the causes and consequences of Orientalist writings. I have been struck by how intellectuals like Massignon, and the editors of *Kaveh*, held remarkably open views toward sexuality and resisted colonial norms. These findings add complexity to debates on sexuality and gender between the two world wars. I hope to show that greater tolerance existed toward homosexuality in Persian writings than has been previously understood.

Notes

1. See Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3. Najmabadi’s main argument in this book is that before Persia’s growing contact with Europe, literary references to a male Beloved were frequent and unencumbered by modern notions of sexuality. Europeans of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries introduced colonial categories of masculinity and femininity, homosexuality and heterosexuality, which became part of an internal and indigenous process of *heteronormalization*. Her approach has been instrumental in surveying

how modern Iranian discourse gradually displaced homosexuality yet retained homoerotic tropes.

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