

Prologue

In Iran, all things related to sex had a door, a closed one. Now we, this generation, are opening them one by one. Masturbation? Open it. Teenage sexual feelings? Open that door. Pregnancy outside of marriage? Open it. Now the youth are trying to figure out what to do with all these opening doors.

Khodi, male, age twenty-three

Over the past several decades, so it is said, a sexual revolution has occurred, and revolutionary hopes have been pinned to sexuality by many thinkers for whom it represents a potential realm of freedom, unsullied by the limits of present day civilization.¹

AS THE DOOR of the Iran Air jet plane opened, I could feel my heart beating anxiously. As I began to descend the staircase to the tarmac, a gust of wind from the plane's engine blew away my headscarf, leaving me to chase the tiny piece of silk down the runway while the other passengers gasped and scolded me. "Don't push!" yelled one woman, as I lunged to follow my headscarf and dropped all my baggage on the stairs. "What are you doing, sister?" yelled an angry man, attempting to avert his eyes from my now uncovered head. I finally caught my scarf and wrapped it tightly around my head and hair. In reality, it took only a minute to get my scarf back, but it seemed like an eternity.

It was the summer of 2000, three years after President Mohammad Khatami, Iran's first reformist Islamic president, was elected. It was also

my first trip to Iran. For more than two decades I had watched the events of the country my parents called home unfold from halfway across the world. As Iran endured a bloody revolution, a prolonged war with its neighbor, mass political executions, and major political protests, I pieced together a story from media reports, monthly phone calls to relatives I had never met, and accounts from my friends who had traveled there and came back with vivid stories about parties, love, and poetry readings, contrary to the images I had seen on television.

In the 1990s, following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the end of the Iran-Iraq war, many refugees and political exiles living in the Iranian diaspora began to return to Iran to visit or repatriate; their desire for reunification with the home country had increased due to political changes that occurred during the Rafsanjani and Khatami presidencies. Although the Iranian community in California, where I grew up, had become strong and vibrant, many of my parents' friends had dreams of returning to Iran, and thus began exploring this option by visiting there during those first few summers when Iran began experiencing an "opening up."² My family, tarnished by memories of violence and extremism, was still fearful about visiting; my father explicitly forbade my mother to take us should she decide to go herself. During the summer of 1998, however, many of my friends went to Iran with their parents, and came back with stories that caught my attention. Two of my friends were exposed to their first dating and sexual experiences while visiting Tehran that summer. They told stories of sexual experimentation and mating rituals that I had never thought would take place in my imagined Iran, which included only women clad in black chādors wailing and whipping themselves, and black-bearded men with heavy hearts and souls. When I had thought about relationships in Iran, I had foolishly thought that marriages were arranged, and that dating and sex before marriage were heavily regulated and limited, and I was reminded of Iranian films that featured arranged marriages and conjugal debt.

My friends' romantic tales of a change in sexual and social discourse caught me by surprise and sparked my interest. I was curious to understand how young Iranians in Iran interact with one another as well as with the regime, and thus I was determined to visit Iran soon. In May of 2000, having been encouraged to write feature stories on

the Iranian women's movement as a stringer for the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, I finally opened a door into the world I was so desperate to experience.

The night I stepped off the airplane in Tehran's Mehrabad International Airport is forever etched in my memory. Fearful that I might be caught without a headscarf again, this scene dominated my nightmares. For years to come I would dream that I had left the house in Tehran naked, without my proper Islamic dress, and was being chased by the infamous *komite* (the Iranian morality police). However, amid these nightmares and in my transition to being an Iranian American in Iran, I began to hear and feel the changes in sexual discourse that friends and informants³ described as a sexual or sociocultural revolution—*enghelāb-e-jensi* and *enghelāb-e-farhangi*, respectively. By the time I'd been in Tehran for a few months, I had experienced firsthand this sexual and social world in both the public and private spheres. I had begun to see the insatiable hunger for change, progress, cosmopolitanism, and modernity that many of my Tehrani friends linked to sex. As I listened to their stories, which were both romantic and pragmatic, I heard them speak of embodying rebellion and resistance, and I began to realize that these were important narratives about the project of modernity in Iran. I began to see the construction of a young Tehrani identity in a changing sociopolitical sphere, and started to see the push for social change that they were enacting and embodying.

Little did I know that night when I chased my headscarf down the runway that I would spend the next seven years regularly walking off planes at that airport. That summer was a turning point in my life. When I returned from Tehran I began my graduate studies, and decided to pursue a course of study that would enable me to further investigate the changing sexual and social culture of young Iranians. I maintained my contact with friends and informants I had met in 2000, and returned to Iran in the summer of 2002. In 2004 I officially embarked on the ethnographic fieldwork that forms the basis of this book, although I had been conducting informal fieldwork since 2000. In 2005 and 2007 I made my final data-collecting visits to Tehran and have since been in touch with my friends and informants there through regular phone calls and daily visits to Iran's blogosphere—the cyberspace that thousands of young

Iranians now inhabit through their daily Weblogs, or blogs. The tide is changing in Iran and the young people are increasingly facing new challenges—challenges that they are eager to accept.

When looking at a changing Iran it is important to focus on the majority of Iran's population—the restless urban youth—and the ways in which their self-defined and self-termed sexual revolution has caused a discourse shift and a change in the state apparatus of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Following are two anecdotes—one from the very early stages of my fieldwork in 2000 and one from my most recent field visit in the summer of 2007—that help to illustrate this shift.

July 2, 2000

I spent last night in my friend Diar's car, parked outside his parents' apartment. It wasn't comfortable, but I consider myself lucky. The evening had started out innocently, with Diar suggesting that we go visit a friend of ours, Mahmoud, who was hosting a scholar of the famous Iranian poet Hafēz. Mahmoud had promised a lengthy discussion of sexuality within Hafēz's poetry, but more importantly he said we would be talking about the sexual revolution, *enghelāb-e-jensi*, with which I was now so fascinated. A few other friends were meeting us there, and we were going to have a quiet evening, good food, and good wine that they had managed to purchase illegally from their alcohol dealer that afternoon. When we showed up, about fifteen young people were there, chatting and laughing and drinking wine, with British rock band Pink Floyd humming in the background. As we entered, I took off my Islamic clothing—a black headscarf, or *hejāb*, and matching black, loose-fitted *mānto*.⁶ Mahmoud brought me a glass of wine that smelled delicious. Just as I relaxed into a worn-out old couch near the window, there was a knock at the door. I didn't think anything of it and was about to take a nice long gulp of wine, but everyone else froze. "We aren't expecting anyone else, are we?" was all Diar managed to get out before the door was forcefully opened by members of the *komite*. Almost automatically, the women (myself included) grabbed the nearest headscarf and coat, threw out their glasses of wine, and headed for the windows. Diar and I were sitting close to a window, so he grabbed my hand and led me out to the balcony. "Jump," he said, "I'll be right behind you." "Jump?" I

asked incredulously, looking at the bushes below. “Just do it, before they come get us; I’ll be right behind you.” All I managed to hear before I jumped was members of the komite yelling at Mahmoud and breaking various belongings. Diar and I jumped and then ran top speed to his car. He started the engine and looked in the rearview mirror. “We’re being followed,” he said, motioning toward two uniformed men on motorbikes. “Get down, lay down under the backseat,” Diar commanded, and I obeyed. The komite continued to follow us, and when we got to a stoplight, they pulled up next to us and got off their motorbikes. They walked up to our car and one of them spat angrily on Diar’s face. Diar was silent. “What were you doing driving away from that apartment so fast?” they asked him. He remained silent; I could sense his fear. One of the officers reached over and slapped Diar in the face while the other began attempting to drag him out of the car. Other cars drove past us; their drivers saw the scene and the dire straits we were in but looked the other way and just continued driving. Just then Diar snapped out of his shock, pulled away from the officers and back into the car, and sped away, driving expertly down alleys and side streets until we eventually lost them. “Given the way this evening ended up unfolding, I don’t think I have it in me to take you home; it’s just too much tonight,” he said. “But you can’t sleep in my house because my mother’s aunt is visiting from Mashad; she is very religious and would *lovæ medan* [rat us out], so you’re going to have to sleep in the car, OK?” he said. Neither of us thought to use the logical option of calling a taxi for me, we were that distraught. I nodded silently at Diar’s request, suddenly aware that I had soaked myself in sweat and tears out of the fear that the evening’s events had inspired.

Seven years later. . . .

June 2, 2007

Last night I witnessed an event that assured me things have changed, and as if witnessing it wasn’t enough, it made the morning papers! The morning papers! Meaning that the Islamic Republic is openly admitting that something is going on, that the calm façade of the public secret is being broken. As we were driving home at about eleven o’clock

last night we saw a usual sight in Tehran's busy city streets: a traffic jam. But this one was different. People had abandoned their cars and were all running toward an intersection where there was a parked car. Ever curious, my friend Laleh and I got out of her car and started running toward the commotion. When we got there, the scene I saw inspired both hope and laughter. A woman was standing on top of the hood of her car, taking off her clothes. "You accuse me of the crime of bad *hejāb* just because it slid a few centimeters back; I'll *show* you bad *hejāb*!!" she screamed, taking off first her *hejāb* and *mānto* and then her shirt, bra, and belt. As the two *komite* officers who had tried to arrest her made their way to her car to grab her, other people ran out of their cars and attacked the officers. Thirty men outnumbered each *komite* member, with women standing on the sidelines cheering and yelling insults at the officers. Laleh and I took in the scene for a few minutes before heading back to our car. On our way home Laleh was very excited, so she began driving quickly and carelessly. In an attempt to speed past two more *komite* officers on motorcycles, she accidentally bumped into them and almost knocked the back officer off his bike. Instantly they used their sirens and pulled us over. "Shoot," I said, suddenly afraid of being caught. "You should have been more careful; I'm not in the mood to deal with the authorities right now." "Relax," she said, smiling as she looked at the officers in her rearview mirror. "These guys are young and cute; I bet all they're looking for is a date or to flirt with us for a bit," she said, pushing back her red *mānto* to reveal her thighs. I looked at her in shock. "What are you doing?!" I asked. "Don't worry, the season of *begir begir* [harassment] is over. That was last month; now we're back to doing what we want," she whispered. I had to remind myself that in recent years harassment apparently came only in seasons.

The officers came over and smiled at us. "Why did you hit me?" asked one of them playfully. "It was a love tap," said Laleh with a big grin while batting her eyelashes. I sat in silence, muted by confusion as Laleh continued to flirt with them. "How come your little friend is so quiet? Is she a mute?" asked the officer, nodding his head toward me. "No, she's just from the other side of the water (*un taraf-e āb*)," she explained to them as I shifted in my seat. In all my time doing

fieldwork, I always tried to conceal, especially from the komite, who would only harass me more for it, the fact that I was from the United States. “Oh, are you *khāreji* [an outsider]?” asked the officer. I looked at him and nodded, expecting a smart-aleck comment to ensue. Instead he just smiled at me and said, “Well, welcome, pretty lady. You ladies free for dinner?” The irony of a flirtatious morality policeman.

What had happened in these seven years? This is a major point of inquiry in this book. In the summer of 2000 I went to Iran to study urban young Iranians’ views about the government, the Iranian women’s movement, and changes that had taken place since the election of reformist president Khatami. What I ended up researching that summer, and for the next seven years, was the emerging young adult culture in Tehran. I described and analyzed the meaning and significance of young Tehranis’ changing sexual and social behavior in relation to Iran’s socio-political climate. As friends, relatives, and informants began to tell me about and show me the underground world of the self-defined sexual revolution taking place in Tehran and other urban centers throughout the country, the focus of my study became the intersection of sexuality and politics in postrevolutionary Iran and, what I am particularly interested in now, the resultant changes in public discourse that this intersection has caused. Young men and women alike from varying socioeconomic groups told me of their numerous premarital and extramarital partners, relationships that they had formed against the backdrop of a theocratic regime that exacted heavy punishment on those who violated laws against premarital and extramarital sex. Informants asked me for help and for information about reproductive health. Friends took me to elaborate parties inside and outside of Tehran. Runaway women with whom I spent many evenings told me about their sexual escapades. Music, dancing, alcohol, and premarital sex—all punishable offenses according to the Islamic Republic’s strict moral policies—were taking place in an almost hedonistic fashion in Tehran on a daily basis. Still other informants asked me to accompany them as they sought out illegal, black-market abortion procedures and potions.⁵ For seven years I followed the status and tone of this sexual revolution, paying close attention to the ways in which the state began to adjust, however clumsily, to its changing youth.

I watched women from both uptown and downtown⁶ walk the streets of Tehran wearing more and more makeup and dressing less and less Islamic in style. Shrinking and colorful headscarves replaced long, black, loose-fitting and conservative hejāb, and form-fitted overcoats replaced looser, more conservative mānto. All the while these women explained to me that what I was witnessing was a sexual and social revolution, intended to have political reverberations. What seemed to other people to be fashion choices or responses to peer pressure actually had an intellectual architecture (for some of the youth), and some of these choices of self-presentation had a political stance behind them. I realized then that it was important to look at the ways in which the sexual revolution enacted by the young people has brought about changes in the social, economic, and political spheres of Iran.

It is important to focus on the youth (aged fifteen to thirty) in Iran, not only because they make up the majority of the population and are the future of the country, but also because, as Roxanne Varzi notes, “they were the target of the Islamization project that hinged on the war; now they are supposed to be an index for the success of the Islamic Republic.”⁷ Specifically, the Islamic state sought to formulate ideological subjects through enforcement of proper “Islamic being,” hoping that “the ability to make people act out, to write and discipline bodies (through public laws, for example) is precisely what is said to make people believe.”⁸ The Islamic Republic relies on the performance of proper Islamic rituals to produce believing Islamic citizens, and thus continues to attempt to enforce such rituals of Islamic ideology as proper Islamic dress and comportment. In response, many young Tehranis are subverting those rituals in an attempt to reclaim them, as well as their own agency and citizenship, vis-à-vis the state. Many young adults argue that they are now using their bodies and their sexualities to speak out against what they view as a repressive regime. In other words, because the Islamist⁹ regime exercises much of its power through a fabric of morality (by legislating the body, comportment, and proper behavior), the young people indicate that in the absence of an option for overt dissent, regardless of how peaceful, they are attacking the regime by seeking to create a state of *fitna*, or moral chaos, to undermine the regime’s moral fabric. I argue that consequently a new

sexual culture is emerging among Iranian young adults that has captured the attention of the state.

Urban young adults, who compose almost two-thirds of Iran's population,¹⁰ are highly mobile, highly educated (84 percent of young Tehranis are currently enrolled in university or are university graduates; 65 percent of these graduates are women),¹¹ and underemployed (the unemployment rate among this age group is 35 percent).¹² Many are also highly dissatisfied with the current regime. Through in-depth research that looks at often-overlooked elements such as style,¹³ daily lives, sexual practices, and health and education infrastructure, it may be possible to illuminate the ways in which young people in Tehran interact with their social, political, and economic environment in order to express their dissatisfaction with their current situation. The demographic shift in favour of young people who are now educated (due to the Islamic Republic's free education policies) but underemployed and highly dissatisfied with the regime has combined with a lot of free time and exposure to other young adults who are dissatisfied with their environment.

This book aims to unpack and assess the sexual and social revolution that young Tehranis claim to be enacting. Throughout my time in Iran I heard hundreds of young people use the phrase *sexual revolution* in reference to changes taking place in Tehran. Key informants reminded me that wearing tight m̄antos and headscarves that revealed highlighted hair was often more than a fashion statement and more than being part of a global youth culture. They emphasized that changes in style were about codes and speaking to a regime that would hear only these signals. Their style and their attempts to embody a sexual revolution, they told me, were their ways of speaking back to the regime, to the morality police who had made them suffer for so long, and to other potential members of the quiet revolution.

I do not claim to provide here a comprehensive picture of youth culture in Iran. I recognize that it is impossible to make generalizations about the majority of a nation's population, especially given the ethnographic nature of the study as well as my small sample size. My goal instead is to explore the emergence of a new youth culture against the backdrop of a changing religious and political sphere. I want to assess

the changes in sexual and social thought and dialogue taking place among certain groups of young adults in Tehran, and simultaneously to understand the potential risk factors and health outcomes in which this shift in youth culture has resulted. I hope that by bringing the voices of my informants to the reader, using their own words, I can begin to understand and map out some of the changes taking place in Iran today from the perspective of the nation's youth.