

Introduction

BURYING THE PAST: IRANIAN MODERNITY'S MARRIAGE TO REALISM

Constellations of meaning accrue around powerful cadavers.

—Jean Franco, *Rise and Fall of the Lettered City*

In the political and cultural upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Iranian intellectuals began to suspect that the fate of any modernist was premature death.¹ They were strengthened in this belief through the execution of early reformists at the court of Nāsser al-Dīn Shāh Qājār, such as Mīrzā Abū al-Qāsem Qā'em-maqām Farāhānī (d. 1835) and Mīrzā Taqī Khān (Amīr Kabīr; d. 1852); by the murder of poet and iconoclast Fātemeh Barāghānī (more commonly known as Tāhereh Qorrat al-'Ayn; d. 1852);² and through the mortal illness of young poet Parvīn E'tessāmī (d. 1940) and the suicide of Iran's premiere writer of fiction, Sādeq Hedāyat (d. 1951).³ Modernity, it seemed, could be deadly. To be on the wrong side of it at any given moment—and the right side was always changing—was to find oneself on the wrong side of fate.

What happened to these modernizing bodies after their deaths is sometimes as violent and as telling as the manner of the death itself. From Tāhereh, strangled in a garden and thrown into a well, to Hedāyat, who traveled to Paris in order to gas himself, Iran's modernity has been the graveyard of its advocates, making it a modernity preoccupied with where the bodies are buried.⁴ In her study of Latin-American literature during the Cold War, Jean Franco recounts the astonishing and curious travels of Argentinean First Lady Eva (Evita) Perón's corpse, which was stolen from its grave after her husband's fall from power. Subsequently, Evita's corpse traveled all over South America before making its way to Italy and being reinterred under the name María Maggi. Finally returned to Argentina in 1971, Evita now reposes in the Duarte family tomb in Bue-

nos Aires's Recoleta Necropolis (Franco, 121–22). “The dead,” Franco reminds us, “however deeply buried, can never be entirely discounted for they continue to act upon the living” (136).

In Iran, too, the movement of bodies over the past two centuries has assumed a hypercultural importance, and been a defining aspect of its modernity. Though no one knows for sure where Tāhereh finally rests, Hedāyat was interred in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, where, so far as we know, his corpse has presumably remained, having never been repatriated to Iran or otherwise relocated. For Iranian artists and authors, his grave is a place of literal and imaginative pilgrimage. Like Evita's tomb, Hedāyat's resting place is the site of “all kinds of ideal projects of nationhood”—perhaps more than the grave of any given political leader (Franco, 122).⁵ Yet, perhaps fittingly, it is not the bodies of Iran's cultural icons but the corpses of the Pahlavi monarchs, so reviled by most of Iran's intelligentsia as the enforcers of a brutal vision of modernity, that have suffered the least serene of fates. Upon the death in exile in 1943 of the recently deposed Reza Pahlavi, the “great father,” his body was initially not permitted burial in Iran, and was instead embalmed and kept at the al-Refāʿī Mosque in Cairo. After a suitable interval, his son and successor, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, ordered his father's corpse returned to Iran, purged of the embalming liquid, and reinterred in a mausoleum in Rayy, just outside of Tehran (and, ironically, the site where much of Hedāyat's *Būf-e kār* [The Blind Owl; 1937] takes place). After being driven out of Iran in 1979 by the revolutionary forces that deposed him, a cancer-riddled Mohammad Reza Pahlavi would wander the globe seeking refuge, finally coming to rest and die in Cairo under the protection of his friend Anwar Sadat. And so it came to be that Mohammad Reza, too, was interred at the al-Refāʿī Mosque after his death in 1980, in the company of Egypt's last king (and Mohammad Reza's former brother-in-law), Farūq. Shortly thereafter, Reza Pahlavi's mausoleum at Rayy would be torn down by revolutionary protesters to make way for the mausoleum of the revolution's leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, who is buried there now.

What to make of these troubled movements of Iranian bodies across time and space? And what relationship do these material bodies bear to the restive corpse of the beloved in Hedāyat's masterpiece, which is revived, dismembered, and persistently sentient in portions of part I—only to be rearticulated as the narrator's wife in part II, then killed again? Or the body of Yūsef, the hero-martyr of Sīmīn Dāneshvar's *Savāshūn* (1969), which is paraded through Shiraz before being abandoned at the side of the road? In Shahrnūsh Pārsīpūr's *Tābā va ma' nā-ye shab* (*Tābā and the Meaning of Night* [1989]), when the ghost of Setāreh, the girl who is raped, impregnated, and murdered, haunts the courtyard in which she has been buried, the reader acknowledges this event with a sense of uncanny recognition. The bodies of these beloveds trouble the narrative of Iranian fiction as surely as the Pahlavis continue to haunt and vex the imagination of modernity in Iran.

Franco reminds us that “the despotic modern state allows the past to lament in order to confirm that it was worse than the present” (127). In other words, this process of mourning the past is what allows the project of modernization to proceed. Recent historiography of Iran has begun to observe the way in which this project was deeply involved with disowning Iran's immediate past even as it preserved that past as a phantom in modernist discourses—especially the forms of love that the past had condoned.⁶ The Pahlavi state's vision of modernity—stolen, disfigured, and clumsily cobbled together—was enchained to a vision of heterosexual love and a heterosocial public sphere. In seeking to realize this ideal, it had to dismember and remake the beloved of the poetic tradition.⁷

The beloved of the Iranian lyrical tradition symbolizes, perhaps above any other literary trope, the ambiguity of love on which that tradition is founded. Overdetermined, the beloved evokes many ideas at once: the refuge of the garden; physical passion; a sacred ideal. The celebration of marriage and the ideal of the companionate wife in legal discourse and in fiction depended on the burial of this ambiguity in and of the past. In order to become consonant with modernity, the beloved of classical poetry would have to be translated into the wife of modern fictional realism. The state sought to do this through legal and political instruments like

the civil code; literature imagined this transition through fiction. The fate and fortune of the beloved in prose fiction make literal a process of social disfigurement.

Consequently, in the prose fiction of the twentieth century, dismemberment and marriage become structuring figures that are opposed and yet complementary in important ways: they are figures of separation and reunion that echo the fundamental notion of *farāgh o vasāl* (separation and [re]union) in classical Persian lyric poetry. Read in the context of the twentieth century and its dominant narratives of nation and modernity—as well as within the context of the two emerging genres on which this study focuses (civil law and prose fiction)—this becomes a story of destruction and renewal, of the will to simultaneously destroy and transcend the past. Yet agendas of reform are always beset by the ghosts of that which must be reformed, and the ways in which that object of reform has been (mis)recognized by the reformer. This repressed object is the love that is portrayed through the beloved of the classical tradition, and which modernity judges aberrant and other. In prose fiction, the dismemberment of this beloved is closely followed by an act of marriage.

I view marriage as a metaphor for the social and legal reforms of the period and as an actual site of reform itself. Well before the Civil Code (*qānūn-e madānī*) of 1928 and the Marriage Law (*qānūn rāj'eh beh ezdevāj*) of 1931, marriage had been a subject of much debate.⁸ As early as the nineteenth century, marriage was a topic of conversation among male reformist writers like Mīrzā Fath 'Alī Ākhūndzādeh (1812–78) and Mīrzā Āghā Khān Kermānī (ca. 1853–96), who argued not only for literary reform but at the same time, for the right of women to choose their husbands and to be educated in a manner comparable, if not equal, to their partners.⁹ Yet, as historian Afsaneh Najmabadi observes, the idea of companionate marriage did not take off until the beginning of the twentieth century, with the era of constitutionalism (ca. 1890–1921) (Najmabadi 2005, 156). Its eventual popularity is less a coincidence than a convergence of a number of goals shared by competing groups who were making their demands known in this period. Companionate marriage offered modernists and

reformists a way of discussing women's status and equal rights within existing discursive boundaries since the idea of defining women's rights in a marriage contract was already a highly codified and well-established area of Islamic legal discourse. For the newly centralized and rapidly growing state in the postconstitutional period, marriage suggested a specific type of gender relationship (heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive) that could be regulated by civil law, and could also provide a means to restructure the family, and to shift the focus from the extended kin and tribal networks that had prevailed in premodern Iran to the nuclear family that consisted of husband, wife, and children. As such, regulation of marriage permitted and even encouraged regulation of a variety of other issues related to personal status. Thus marriage was not only an increasingly important *metaphor* for relations between a feminized Iran and her citizens (i.e., Iran was the wife-mother, and her citizens loyal husbands), but also an important *site* upon which the new state could exert its influence.¹⁰ Marriage therefore became a platform—albeit a contested one—for discussing social reform.¹¹

Although civil law and prose fiction comprise two types of modernizing discourses that scholarship has long held far apart from one another in the context of modern Iran,¹² historians of twentieth-century Iran are beginning to see the dominant role that cultural documents (especially the press) have assumed in normalizing laws related to gender and personal status, and in turn the role that marriage plays in “modernizing” Iran.¹³ However, they have attended only in passing to literature's importance in this process.

Yet the imagination of legal reforms in literary texts and the emphasis on the idea of realism in the law was in fact part of a much longer dialogue between fictional and legal discourses—one that has been taking place since the inception of prose fiction in Iran. By focusing on marriage as the central metaphor through which both legal and literary texts read gender in twentieth-century Iran, I critically engage the ways in which these two discourses were joined. I do so by examining the recurrent foregrounding of marriage at five critical periods of gender-related legal

reform, and argue that marriage is a shared *topos* that demonstrates the extent to which these discourses are related.

The Pahlavis and the Narrative of Modernization

The lively activity of elite women during the constitutional period (ca. 1890–1921) and their role in helping to articulate and promote the goals of the revolution not only helped to achieve the Constitutional Revolution’s “success”—insofar as it was a success—but also to establish women’s newspapers and societies (*anjomans*) that helped to keep the attention of reformers and lawmakers on women and their role in the new, constitutional Iran. While difficult to characterize as a “movement” in the sense of a unified group or groups with specified objectives, the disparate parties and parts of this discourse did share some common interests and goals. When Reza Pahlavi seized the helm of Iran as monarch in 1925, he quickly understood the power and the threat of women’s rights and the actors involved in promoting it. Although he and his son-successor, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, would promulgate a narrative in which they not only initiated but consistently advanced the cause of women’s rights, historians have questioned that rosy view. It is more widely agreed that Reza Pahlavi moved to co-opt and control the incipient women’s rights movement, hoping to contain any power of dissent it possessed and to consolidate it under his control.¹⁴

An early aspect of the Pahlavi state’s co-optation of the women’s movement was the Mandatory Unveiling Act of 1936. Though narrativized in national(ist) discourse by the Pahlavis as their great gift to Iranian womanhood, the act was controversial from the point of view of both reformists and conservatives. Part of the Iranian Civil Code created at the behest of Reza Pahlavi in the 1920s, the act put a forceful interpretation on an issue which had been debated throughout the constitutional period and which had continued into the early national period. Camron Amin observes that the act was a controversial reading of the call to reform the veil that had been going on for almost a century: there was in fact no real agreement over what “unveiling” would look like, even among its proponents (C. Amin,

79). The Egyptian reformist Qasim Amin's *Tahrīr al-marā'* (The Liberation of Women; 1899) had been translated into Persian by E' tessām al-Molk in 1900 under the amended title *Tarbīyat-e nesvān* (The Education of Women) and Amin's ideas about the status of women and its relationship to modernity in Islamic countries found resonance among Iranian reformists.¹⁵ Yet Camron Amin points out that Qasim Amin and those who adopted his ideas concerning woman-related reforms were most likely in favor of the removal of the face veil, or *neqāb*, only, not of the total unveiling that Reza Shah's agents enforced in the wake of the act (C. Amin, 79).

While some lauded the state's creation of such laws, which were seen as engines that would modernize Iranian society, many perceived them as invasive and premature. In focusing on women's bodies as a signifier of modernity, this reform abruptly forced to the fore issues which had begun to enter the discourses of national and social reform as early as the nineteenth century: questions concerning women, their position in society, gender relations as governed by familial and marital conventions, and the relationship of these to modernity.¹⁶ Yet the answers offered by the codification into law of debated personal status reforms challenged the boundaries between public and private space that were so rigorously preserved in Iranian society, and forced issues of heterosociality and public heterosexuality in a culture that had long favored homosociality, rigid divisions of public and private space, and celebrated in its literary tradition (albeit ambiguously) male homoeroticism. Entailed in the enforcement of these particular sections of the code, therefore, was the question of what it meant to suddenly "see" women, both literally and metaphorically, in public space.¹⁷ Whereas such exposure would previously have been read as a violation of social and religious mores, this practice was now to be understood as progressive and positive. Whereas women had heretofore been members of the private realm of the home, and marked as such by the complementary practices of architectural separation of homes into interior (*andarūnī*) and exterior (*bīrūnī*) spaces, and of veiling (*hejāb*), the idea of "woman" was recalibrated by new laws like these and the social practices they stipulated.¹⁸

The laws that governed the literary imagination, too, were under reform. By 1921, when Reza Khan assumed power, the novel was no longer an innovative form in Iran, but neither was it fully assimilated and/or indigenized. In that same year, Mohammad Jamālzādeh (1892–1997)—often called the “father of Persian fiction”—expressed forceful ideas about the purposes and needs of an indigenous prose fiction, which he saw as inately connected to the project of nationalism insofar as it offered the potential to linguistically unify an ethnically and linguistically diverse Iranian nation under the banner of a purified Persian. In his oft-quoted introduction to the collection *Yekī būd o yekī nabūd* (Once upon a Time; 1921), Jamālzādeh suggests that learning—which is the key to civilization (*tamadon*) and progress (*taraqqī*)—can be clothed in the “gown of the story” (*lebās-e hekāyat*) and more specifically, “the gown of the novel” (*lebās-e romān*), in order to reach the common people.¹⁹ At the same time, its standardizing use of language would help ameliorate ethnic differences among the inhabitants of the homeland, or *vatan*, and acquaint Iranians with the habits and practices of their unseen and unknown fellow citizens.²⁰

Jamālzādeh, like the reformists of the nineteenth century, was convinced that language reform and genre reform went hand in hand. Though the state never weighed in formally on the conflict among new and old genres, many of the state’s new bureaucrats agreed with Jamālzādeh that the language of social and national discourse ought to be reformed, and their views would later be adopted by Reza Shah in his nationalization drive. In 1936, the shah created the Farhangestān, a language academy devoted to purging the Persian language of foreign loan words, especially Arabic loan words.²¹ The Farhangestān would continue to develop language purification work implemented in the 1920s to root out and replace Arabic vocabulary with Persian synonyms, many of which were neologisms. However, another method of word substitution came from combing earlier Persian texts, such as the eleventh-century epic poem *Shāhnāmeh* (Book of Kings), by Abū al-Qāsem Ferdawsī, for words of “pure” Persian.²²

Prior even to the institution of the Farhangestān and the formal bids to purge Persian of loan words, however, the vocabulary being used to discuss women and their national status was changing. Women had commonly been referred to both colloquially and in texts by words indicative of their status in society and in private life: *manzel* (house), *'ayāl* (burden), *sīyāh-bakht* (unlucky), *madkhūl* (that which is entered). In fact, to call a woman by her proper name was considered a gross violation of boundaries (M. R. Khosravī, 10). But in constitutional newspapers, there is evidence that this pattern had begun to change. Though women writing to the papers as readers continued to follow Iranian conventions of self-effacement in social discourse and to call themselves “this weak person” (*īn za'īfeh*), male authors writing about reforms for women used the more neutral *nesvān* (pl. of woman, Arabic) or *zanān* (pl. of woman, Persian) in place of the traditional, obfuscating synonyms they might have chosen.²³

The 1911 parliamentary debate over women's eligibility for suffrage offers additional evidence that language pertaining to women and their roles was changing. The representative who argued the case for women's electoral rights before the parliament, Hājī Vakīl al-Ru'āyā (Hājī Shaykh Taqī Īrānī), used language intended to elicit sympathy for women as the counterparts of men. Averring that women (*nesvān*) were also “God's creatures” (*makhluq-e khodāvand*), he asked, “based on what logical reasons [*dalā'el-e manteqī*] are we able to deprive [*mahrām kardan*] them [of the vote]?” (*Mozakarāt-e majles-e shūrā-ye mellī*; 1531). His sincere bid was gently rebuffed by another representative, Zokā' al-Molk (Mohammad 'Alī Forūghī), who asserted that the time was not right to discuss such a matter. Subsequently, the cleric Ayatollah Modārres, who was attending this session of the parliament particularly for the purpose of rebuffing Vakīl al-Ru'āyā's statement, told him explicitly that women had no right to vote under Islamic law. In fact, he went on, the entire discussion of such a proposition was so unnatural that it made his “body shake” (*Mozakarāt-e majles*).²⁴ Though this effectively quashed the debate in the parliament for several decades, it was not the final word on the subject: discussion of women's status and rights would continue to rage in the

newly constitutional society, especially in the press.²⁵ Importantly, the words used to describe women were the relatively uninflected *zanān* and *nesvān* (the Persian and Arabic nouns for *woman*, respectively) rather than any of the other, more colorful terms commonly applied to women in earlier texts.

The nonstarter of the parliamentary debate about women's rights notwithstanding, debate over gender in the public sphere continued. Many reformist writers of fiction and of the new political verse appearing in newspapers would also go on to become statesmen, demonstrating the extent to which writings on literature and reform were a continuous spectrum rather than discrete spheres or genres in which meaning was produced.²⁶ Among the ways in which this preoccupation revealed itself in fiction was through a fixation on heterosexual union and marriage. Whereas, historically, the beloved had been a gender-ambiguous figure in Persian poetry, the beloved of fiction was now coded as explicitly feminine; so, too, did the figured love become unambiguously romantic (against more complex significations of love in classical poetry), and had to lead toward marriage or be considered deviant. The creation of wives from the figure of the beloved entailed an examination of the appropriate role for women in society; wives created by such marriages had to be faithful helpmeets and loving mothers or else be considered abnormal.²⁷ Furthermore, the establishment of wives as "managers of the household" (*modabber-e manzel*) rather than the "house" (*manzel*) itself, entailed a rearrangement of the relationship between kin and nonkin members of that household. It went without saying that this ideal companionate wife had to be Persophone.²⁸