

**WOMEN OF THE WEST IMAGINED:  
PERSIAN OCCIDENTALISM, EURO-EROTICISM,  
AND MODERNITY**

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How can we understand the centrality of the veil in twentieth-century Iranian political discourse? In my forthcoming book, *Women of the West Imagined*, I provide an historical and conceptual framework. I investigate the formation and dissemination of competing perceptions of European women as both angels and vamps by Iranian voy(ag)eurs of the West. I focus on the deployment of gender and sex in the struggles for national hegemony by exploring the portrayal of Western women in contestations that defined Iranian modernity and cultural boundaries. I argue that the rejection and appropriation of various images of Western women prompted the formation of secular and Islamic scenarios of modernity; each scenario improvised an “authentic” body politic within the generative context of the Iranian nation-state. In a dual process of globalization and particularization, the competing secular and Islamic forces contingently articulated diverging patterns of self-renewal and chose differing strategies of local, national, and global resistance and collaboration. Mediated through divergent visages of Europe, these patterns shaped the modern notions of man, woman, body-politic, Iran, and Islam.

My use of the terms “Occidentalism and Euro-Eroticism is part of the conceptual apparatus for understanding the politics of East-West cultural encounters in the global age. This approach is grounded in a critique of the Eurocentric vision of modernization as Westernization. I explain the inadequacy of a paradigm that bifurcates the world into “the West and the rest” at a world historical conjuncture in the early nineteenth century when identities crisscrossed, communities hybridized, and both local and global networks of power interfaced. In the process of cultural looking Iranians returned the gaze; they, like their European counterparts, exoticized and eroticized the Other. In the process of cultural looking Iranians returned the gaze; they, like their European counterparts, exoticized and eroticized the Other. The interplay between knowing subjects from different cultures, who

gazed simultaneously at one another, foregrounded the transformation of modern identities. In the conjoined process of globalization and particularization, mimicry and mockery provided two divergent strategies of identification and dis-identification with Europe. Iranian identification with Europe served as a strategy for the subversion of the dominant Islamicate discourse and the construction of a new pattern of identity formation idealizing pre-Islamic history and culture. By mocking Europe, Islamists sought to preserve the existing religious order and to subvert strategies of de-Islamization and secularization. Both the secularist Europhilia and the Islamist Europhobia used the West as a point of reference; and both were actively involved in a creative reconstruction of alternative selves and modernities.

### **Europe as heaven on earth**

In exploring late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Persianate travelers' views of Europe and their impressions of European women and families, I found that pioneering travelers such as Mirza I'tisam al-Din, who visited England in 1765, described Europe as "heaven on Earth," and a "beauty cultivating land." The attraction to Europe as an aestheticized object served as a cover for the attraction to "angel-like," "fairy-countenanced," and "fairy-mannered" women of Europe. The appearance of unveiled women in public parks, playhouses, operas, dances, and masquerades impressed the Persian voy(ag)eurs who were unaccustomed to the public display of female beauty. Such physical proximity between women and men would have aroused instant public condemnation and moral indignation in a Muslim society. The male-female physical intimacy in public places differentiated the "land of heavenly ordinances" from actual Muslim societies where such a behavior was considered indecent and immoral. For Iranian visitors to Europe the only cultural equivalent to public display of male-female intimacy was the imaginary Muslim heaven. What for Persians was only imaginable in the promised heaven, was reported actually to exist on earth by travelers returning from Europe. Prince Riza Quli Mirza Qajar was conscious of the religious implication of reporting the mixing of men and women in Europe. Visiting England in 1836 he recalled a hadith (saying of Muhammad, the Messenger of Islam) proclaiming that "the world is a prison for a believer and a paradise for an unbeliever." In addition to their attraction to women, these male travelers were attracted to the patriarchal family structure in which European women, unlike Iranian women, were reported to be submissive to their husbands. The European family model was significant in the modernist projects for reshaping family and disciplining Iranian women .

### **Europe as Infideldom**

Europe was also constituted as a political, cultural, sartorial, and religious adversary in Iranian political discourse, especially in the writings of Mirza Fattah Garmrudi and Muhammad Karim Kirmani, who articulated a Europhobic discourse scapegoating European women as vamps. Mirza Fattah Garmrudi, who traveled to Europe in 1838, developed a distaste for European manners and characters and warned against closer contacts with them. Aware of the colonization of India, he argued that Europeans, if they had the opportunity,

would “damage the religion and the state and would destroy the Shari’ah traditions.” In *Shab Namah* (Night Report) Garmrudi identified Europe (Farangistan) as “infidel-dom” (Kufristan) and offered narratives of “obscene acts and indecent behaviors of this malevolent people.” His pornographic narratives of European women were the precursor to the emergence of a Europhobic discourse. Writing in 1856, Muhammad Karim Kirmani sought to protect Iran from European domination and the feminization of power by guarding Iranian women from the “new malady” of Europeanization. Kirmani believed that Iran was becoming infected with a “new malady” spread by “the pleasure-seeking individuals” who mimicked Europeans and refused “to abide by religious principles.” To preserve the Islamic social and gender orders and to maintain the moral and intellectual leadership of the society, Kirmani and his succeeding generation of ulama scapegoated the European woman (*zan-i Farangi*) by transforming her into a symbol of corruption, immorality, secularization, and deviation from the straight path of Islam. Erotic condemnation of European eroticism became so prevalent that one late nineteenth-century traveler reported that in Europe “virgin women are rare and womanizing is like eating bread and yogurt in Iran.” These stock views provided the clergy and their allies with necessary ammunition to attack the secular modernists who sought to dissociate Iran from Islam and to fashion a new pattern of self-identity that linked the achievements of modern Europe to the pre-Islamic Iranian heritage.

### **The Body Politic**

The concept of body politic refers to both conceptions of women’s bodies and the gendering of nationalist discourse. It is interesting to note the transformation of the metaphorical “vatan” (homeland) from a “home headed by the crowned-father,” to a perishing six-thousand-year-old mother. Later the mother-land (*mam-i vatan*) was rejuvenated by the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909 and transfigured into an attractive beloved/mother pursued by the transgressive Russians and British. A close reading of Persian newspapers between 1870 and 1911 shows that the nation-body as a widowed mother symbolically eliminated the father-Shah as the guardian of the nation; she also contributed to the emergence of popular sovereignty—the participation of “the nations’ children” (both male and female) in determining the future of the “mother-land.” Changing the gender of the national-home was crucial to the change in the meaning of *siyasat* from the infliction of physical pain on transgressive subjects to its modern definition as politics. The metaphorical familial relation of male and female citizens as national brothers and sisters also sanctioned the redrawing of the boundaries that separated the filiative home space (*andarun*) from the affiliative public male sphere (*birun*). The coming of Persian printing press and its conjoining of authorial voices of women as well as men made possible the formation of an androgynous imagined national sphere that sanctioned the mixing of “national sisters and brothers.” Islamists viewed this move as emulating Christian Europe and mocking Islam and the Holy Qur’an. The secularists responded that mixing of men and women was an ancient (*qadimi*) Iranian norm appropriated by modern Europeans.

In the decades following the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909, veiled and unveiled women became the symbols of contesting Islamic and secular corporeal, sartorial,

political, historical and sexual visions of Iran. On the one hand, the veiled women provided the organizing element of an Islamic sartorial and body politic. Islamists viewed the education of women in “modern” schools as a Christian missionary conversion project. Likewise, they viewed the unveiling of women as de-Islamization of Iran and as demasculinization of Muslim men. Unveiling women was discursively linked to dishonoring (*bi ghayrati*) men. For the secularist, on the other hand, unveiling woman marked the beginning of the modern era and a disciplined and sanitized body politic. They equated the unveiling of women with the awakening and enlightening of the nation. According to one late eighteenth century traveler, the self-disciplined woman did not need the veil that covered the unrestrained bodies of undisciplined women.

Islamist and secularist contestations over the unveiling and educating of women were linked to two competing scenarios of Iranian modernity and self-identity. In both discourses women’s dress was a symbol for the integrity, independence, and progress of the nation. The contesting discourses constructed around the veil had as their subtexts two conflicting visages of Europe. One viewed Europe as “cultured” (*ba farhang*) and the other as “infidelity” (*kufristan*). One was grounded in a positive notion of freedom (*azadi*) anchored to the memories of the French Revolution and called for the unveiling and disciplining of Iranian women. The other was grounded in a negative notion of freedom discursively connected to the presumed “indecent” and “vulgarity” of European women and sought to protect Iran from the malady of Europeanization.

#### **Secular modernism and Islamic counter-modernism**

Recent debates on gender, modernity, Islam, the veil, and authenticity, are better understood through historical analysis which situates the formation of identities and discourses in domestic and global interactions. My historical research also suggests that both secularists and Islamists have sought to define themselves in connection with modernity. For secularists, the selective remembrance of things pre-Islamic made possible the dissociation of Iran from Islam and the articulation of an “authentic” secular national identity and political discourse. This in turn prompted the deployment of Islam as the focal point of a counter-modernist cultural/political strategy. Despite the secularist depiction of the counter-modernist Islamic discourse as “reactionary” and “traditionalist,” its practitioners sought to fashion an Islamicate polity that responded to the challenges of the modern nation-states and the global regimes of power. Political maneuvers among these alternative forms of “Iranianess” foregrounded Iranian modernity as it was shaped by vacillations between secular and Islamic identities and body politics. In both secular and Islamic projects authentic “Iranian” or “Islamic” selves were products of local and global patterns of collaboration and resistance.