

Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran: The Life and Legacy of a Popular Female Artist

Kamran Talattof

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Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran represents a significant moment in artistic resurrection and re-vision. It examines the life and work of a discarded Iranian female popular artist known as Shahrzad (b. 1946). Through critical attention previously denied to Shahrzad, Talattof honors her creative contributions and, by extension, recognizes and honors artists like her who have been marginalized for the last several decades, their art labeled as “shameful” or “profane” due to their unacceptable sexual roles as dancers, singers, and actresses. Through the lens of her life and legacy, he argues that true modernity can never fully emerge without space for the discussion of sexuality – especially that of women.

The author takes a risk in offering critical analysis of this artist’s life and work, for Shahrzad is recognized neither in the canon, nor by the giants of committed literature in Iran, the dominant style when she was writing in the 1970s. While detailing and noting the significance of her accomplishments, he asks *why* she has not been so recognized and locates that question along a line of inquiry as regards Iran’s “missing” modernity. He asks why a nation with such a long tradition of the scientific and socio-cultural accomplishments seems suddenly stuck in a medieval mindset, selectively applying modernity in such a way that it serves only to fortify the establishment in its extreme policies – through such “modern” means as technology.

The result is what Talattof calls a “modernoid” Iran: one that is modern-like in certain ways but decidedly not in others. Finding other explanations for the country’s lagging modernity inadequate, he posits that true modernity is connected to a healthy acknowledgment of human (and especially female) sexuality, which is lacking in Iran. Although women’s bodies have become battlefields for sociopolitical and religious conflict (e.g., westernization and Islamization), this has not led to a deeper understanding and validation of those bodies; rather, and ironically, it has led to their further objectification.

The book’s first two chapters lay the foundation for an analysis of Shahrzad’s life and work, placing them in the context of twentieth-century Iranian history and its varied response to “foreign” ideas. Talattof describes western modernity as “a series of universal guidelines for social, cultural, political, and economic projects . . . that made a difference in Western societies...”

(p. 24). After writing that the core of modernity lies in its recognition of the individual in all aspects of life, he goes on to chronicle the failures of Iranian leaders, intellectuals, and centers of cultural production to do just that – particularly in the case of women and female sexuality. The whole history of sexual identity and sexual relations in Iran has been centered on male needs and satisfaction, Talattof argues. Moreover, it has been riddled with ignorance and taboos, even during such periods as the 1970s, when the “Film Farsi” trend in cinema was rife with cheap, artless nudity and “sexy” cabaret dance scenes designed to satisfy voyeurs while justifying itself by including moral condemnations of the very behavior that sold tickets. These films, along with women’s magazines and works by men claiming to be fighting for women’s right, all reinforced the same paradigms of male power and control.

The next three chapters explore Shahrzad’s life and works. Beginning with a painstaking reconstruction of her life through interviews, letters, and her own writings, Talattof describes how she “unveiled herself in three ways: in language, on the dance floor, and in the movies, an act that came head to head with the reality of a modernoid society” (p. 47). The artist survived a childhood filled with abuse and violence, multiple disastrous forced or temporary marriages, and constant condemnation for her career choices of dancing and acting. She is described as having a fascination for modern life, travel, and fashion. On a trip to Italy she fell in love with a Sicilian man whom she felt truly wanted her because of who she was, rather than because he needed to feel like a man. This encounter appears to be the closest approximation to “true love” that Shahrzad ever experienced, but she cut off their correspondence for fear of perceived scandal.

Eventually Shahrzad stopped dancing to save her character and gain recognition for her other talents and thoughts. She published three books, but did not gain the acceptance she so craved as a poet and writer; her “sinful” past weighed far too heavily on her reputation. Besides being used as a moral object lesson, her popular culture orientation caused Iran’s intellectual community to ignore her poetry, even more so because it did not align with the 1970s aesthetic of “committed literature.” After the 1979 revolution, she was arrested for her suspiciously lascivious activities (playing “sexy” roles in films) and spent years in jail and mental institutions. She later ended up sick and outcast on the streets of Tehran.

The account of Shahrzad’s world is brought to life through her own words taken from letters or interviews, portions of her writings, and enlightening notes on current events, all of which weave in threads of other female artists’ stories similar to her own. It does not idealize her life or work, but rather rec-

ognizes her as a complex, talented woman born in a society that squandered her talent. In the section on her writing, Talattof does not gloss over the flaws or weaknesses of her work, citing grammatical errors, incongruences, confusing shifts and leaps among narrative voices, incoherent metaphors, and abnormalities in meter or form. Nevertheless, he makes a clear case for her work's compelling nature, especially the originality of her poetic metaphors. To demonstrate that Shahrzad's story is not an isolated case, Talattof next catalogs a number of other significant female artists – singers, dancers, and film stars. Many became influential and memorable, such as the singer known as Googoosh, only to be silenced for a decade or more – sometimes until they escaped the country – after the Islamic revolution of 1979.

In the final chapter, the author returns to the core thesis that notions of sexuality are the determining factor for achieving “true” modernity – both as yet missing in Iran. While the argument's progression is logical and supported by a compelling body of evidence, many readers may not be totally convinced. The question remains problematic, considering the spectrum of definitions of modernity and the variety of phases a given society may undergo – which may not always occur in linear progression. Sexuality is clearly a major factor – and perhaps the most persistent – inhibiting Iran's modernity, but others have likewise played crucial roles at various points in time, among them the clash of ideologies in that historic moment of the 1970s. More than unassailably proving this point, however, Talattof's greater achievement may be treating Shahrzad's work and accomplishments, and those of her contemporaries, with the respect and seriousness they deserve.

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