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PROSTITUTES, TEMPORARY WIVES, AND MOTREBS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SEX WORK IN IRANIAN FILM AND FICTION FROM THE CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION (1906-1911) TO THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION (1979)

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REVOLUTION (1979)**

A Dissertation Presented

by

MARYAM ZEHTABI SABETI MOQADDAM

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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Comparative Literature

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DEDICATION

For Dad

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ABSTRACT

**PROSTITUTES, TEMPORARY WIVES, AND *MOTREBS*: A COMPARATIVE
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This dissertation titled “Prostitutes, Temporary Wives, and *Motrebs*: A Comparative Study of Sex Work in Iranian Film and Fiction from Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) to the Islamic Revolution (1979)” brings together the web of images and narratives in sociocultural and historical texts and films that create and maintain the identity of sex workers as articles of mass consumption and sustain dominant practices and policies. By studying how these women, their body, and their sexuality are perceived, shown, and regulated in art and literature—which are ciphers of the society at large—my research exposes the tightly knit relationship between patriarchy, capitalism, and morality, sheds light on the ideological formations of gender and sexuality, problematizes the facile demarcations of illegitimate and legitimate avenues of sexual gratification, and destabilizes the official Islamic discourse on the issue. The first chapter discusses liberal and radical feminist discourses on sex work and creates the broader framework for my arguments regarding Iran. Chapter two focuses on

the birth of the prostitute as a prominent literary trope in Iranian fiction and explains the sociocultural and political factors contributing to it. Drawing on works such as *The Sexual Contract* (1988) by Carole Pateman and *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (2008) by Sheila Jeffreys which blur the boundaries between servile marriage and prostitution, my third chapter contends that temporary marriage is a form of sex work endemic to Iran as it embodies the patriarchal ideal of the unchecked recourse of men to women's sexuality sanctioned by law and religion. Chapter four examines sex workers' self-perception as expressed in non-fiction and documentary works from the second Pahlavi Era (1941-1979). Finally, chapter five analyzes the voyeuristic representations of female sex workers and *Motrebs* (entertainers) in Iranian commercial cinema which reenact the worn-out Madonna/whore dichotomy that seeks to polarize women as either asexual and chaste or sexually active and monstrous.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

So, if she has been called a woman of the town, a tart, a bawd, a wanton, a bawdy-basket, a bird-of-the-game, a bit of stuff, a buttered bun, a cockatrice, a cock-chafer, a cow, a crack, a cunt, a daughter of Eve, a gay girl, a gobble-prick, a high-flyer, a high-roller, a hussy, a hurry-whore, a jill, a jude, a judy, a jug, laced mutton, lift-skirt, light o' love, merry legs, minx, moll, moon-lighter, morsel, mount, mutton-broker, nestcock, night-bird, night-piece, night-walker, nymph of darkness, nymph of the pavement, petticoat pick-up, piece, pillow-mate, pinch-prick, pole-climber, prance, quail, quiet mouse, or even Queen—it is not surprising.¹

She has been judged, stigmatized, criminalized, pathologized, and marginalized, but also sought after, idolized, and revered. She has been regarded as both a victim and a conqueror, commodified body and entrepreneur. She has been characterized as a pest, as “a supreme type of vice”,² but also “the most efficient guardian of virtue”³ and a “human sacrifice on the altar of monogamy”.⁴ She is a paradox—shrouded in myths—constructed, conceived, and theorized in a myriad different ways throughout history due to the varying legal definitions of her profession and numerous permutations it undergoes

¹ Erica Jong quoted in Anita L. Morse, “Pandor’s Box: An Essay Review of American Law and Literature on Prostitution,” *Pornography, Sex Work, and Hate Speech* (Garland Publishing, 1997), 99.

² Quoted in Paul MacHugh, *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform* (Rutledge, 2013), 17.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (Penguin Classics, 1973), 88

to contravene the laws.⁵ It's no wonder, therefore, that finding a unanimous discourse on prostitutes and prostitution is such an onerous undertaking.

To the patristics, any promiscuous woman—regardless of whether or not she received payment for her sexual activities—was a prostitute.⁶ Paul Lacroix, in *Histoire de la Prostitution* (1851–1854), defined as prostitute any woman who had intercourse out of wedlock.⁷ George Ryley Scott, writing in early 20th century, posited that any individual who engaged in sexual activities, including same sex intercourse, with various persons with anticipation of receiving some sort of material or personal satisfaction was a prostitute.⁸ For the purpose of this dissertation, however, a definition used by The Network of Sex Work Projects and endorsed by many sex workers' organizations will be used:

Negotiation and performance of sexual services for remuneration

- with or without intervention by a third party (any managers, madams, pimps, businessowners, and colleagues making referrals)
- where those services are advertised or generally recognized as available from a specific location

⁵ For example, in Japan where overt prostitution is prohibited by the local law, the forms prostitution takes are fascinating. Assisted dating or soaping, both of which entail transactional sexual activity, are decriminalized although both can end in intercourse.

⁶ Nils Johan Ringdal, *Love for Sale: A World History of Prostitution*, Translated by Richard Daly (Grove Press, 2004), 68-9.

⁷ Quoted in George R. Scott, *History of Prostitution: From Antiquity to Present Day* (Routledge, 2005), 3.

⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

- where the price of services reflects the pressures of supply and demand.⁹

As problematic as defining prostitution is determining the etiology of prostitutes' entanglement in this occupation. Extensive research has been done in the past two centuries to address this concern. Many authorities on sex writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presumed that women joined the rank of prostitutes because their pathological nature or psychological abnormalities predisposed them to prostitution and criminal activity. As common were the thinkers who ascribed prostitution to economic factors. Alexandre *Parent du Châtelet* (1790-1836), identified lack of employment and insufficient wages as the main culprits in forcing women into prostitution so did Arthur Sherwell (1863-1942) as is neatly encapsulated in his axiomatic formulation that "morals fluctuate with trade".¹⁰ Similar is Scott, in his groundbreaking tolerationist study published in 1936, who posited that men's innate inclination to polygyny was the main root and cause of prostitution that preyed on the economic vulnerability of impoverished women.¹¹ To Friedrich Engels, "money, class divisions and social disequilibrium" gave rise to this phenomenon which, he contended, could only be done away with once a true communist society was achieved.¹² To Khalid Kishtani, in *The Prostitute in Progressive Literature* (1982), prostitution was part and parcel of

⁹ Melissa Hope, Ditmore, editor, "Introduction," *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*, vol. 1, (Greenwood Press, 2006), xxvi.

¹⁰ Scott, 21.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 18.

¹² Nils Johan Ringdal, 28

civilization, private property, the unequal status of women, the unbalanced distribution of wealth, and illegitimacy of free love.¹³ More recent is the work of Nils Johan Ringdal who, in *Love for Sale: A World History of Prostitution* (2004), explains that prostitution “flourishes most extensively in evolutionary intermediary phases of history, during which a country or region is marked by a rapid upsurge in the population, urbanization, migration, and economic transformation” as was the case with “the emerging Roman Empire, Western Europe in the 1800s, the Wild West era of the United States, Japan in the 1700s, and Southeast Asia Today”.¹⁴

1.2. The Iranian Context

In Iran, for centuries, prostitution was a lucrative source of income not only for local governors who levied taxes on brothels, but also for inspectors of public morality who, in exchange for a bribe, would turn a blind eye to the prostitutes’ activities. Occasionally, however, harsh punishment was meted out on these women to allay the fears and protestations of the more conservative factions of the society. These measures, however, were hardly the norm and were usually intermittent as the financial gain of prostitution for the authorities significantly outweighed the inconvenience. The arrival of Islam on the scene in the seventh century did not result in a meaningful shift regarding the perceptions, attitudes, and approaches to prostitution. As forced labor and economic necessity were at the roots of prostitution in most cases, abolishing prostitution or

¹³ Khalid Kishtani, *The Prostitute in Progressive Literature* (Allison & Busby, 1982), 16-17.

¹⁴ Ringdal, 32.

curtailing it was contingent upon addressing these underlying causes. These steps, however, were rarely taken and as a result, prostitution persisted and thrived up until the Qajar era (1794-1925) in which more stringent laws were enacted to abate prostitution. Eventually, prostitutes were driven to the outskirts of the city and localized in red-light districts such as *Shar-i-Naw*, the main venue for “vice” in Tehran, which was razed to the ground upon the victory of the Islamic Revolution of 1979.¹⁵

Due to the dearth of sociohistorical sources on prostitution and the lack of writings by prostitutes themselves up until mid-twentieth century in Iran (Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian's influential *On Prostitution in the City of Tehran* would not appear until 1970), it became the purview of literary writers to shed light on the life and working conditions of prostitutes. In the previous centuries prostitutes cropped up only sporadically in literary texts, but with the dawn of the twentieth century and as a result of the consequential and exceptional socio-political developments of the time, a remarkable number of Iranian literary writers and filmmakers turned their attention to bringing the plight of prostitutes to light to lay bare the causes as well as consequences of prostitution for both individual prostitutes and the society at large. These written and visual texts, in addition to ethnographic studies undertaken during this period – are the main sources I employ in my dissertation research for unearthing and interpreting the historical and contemporary meaning and significance of prostitution in Iran.

¹⁵ Willem Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (Mage Publishers, 2008).

1.3. The Scope and Methodology of the Dissertation

To date, few works have comprehensively examined the stratifications of female sex work in Iran and the approaches to it across historical periods as a marker of the broader tangled legal, social, and moral attitudes toward female sexuality. Without an adequate analysis of the cultural, religious, political, and social ramifications of female sex work, the significance of inspecting, controlling, and regulating these particular women's bodies is diminished, ultimately contributing to and perpetuating their societal marginalization, peripheralization, and exclusion. My dissertation has as its goal to remedy this gap by tracing the history of modern sexuality in Iran in the twentieth century through the story of its heterogeneous sex workers. I delimited this project to the period of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911 up to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 which brought an end to the era of modernization and Westernization in Iran as it was during this period when the clash of traditions with modernity gave rise to the unprecedented appearance of prostitute characters in novels. Missing from my dissertation is the voice of women writers who have tackled the question of prostitution in their artistic and literary creations. The most well-known examples that come to mind are "Kanizu" by Moniru Ravanipur, *Women without Men* written by Shahnush Parsipur and directed by Shirin Neshat, and "The End and the City" by Mahin Bahrami. These works were published/released after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and are thus beyond the scope of my dissertation and a topic for my future research.

This dissertation examines representations of Iranian prostitutes across different historical periods in literary and non-literary texts and films that reinforce their identity as articles of mass consumption. The research draws its arguments from a wide range of sociological, historical, theoretical, artistic, and literary texts to map out the milieu

against which these representations were conceived. As such, the trajectory of this dissertation does not entail close-reading of texts in order to evaluate their artistic merit. Instead, this study aspires to be a sociohistorical analysis of literary and artistic phenomena, an intersection of ethnography and literature/film if you will, to answer questions such as why certain forms, characters, themes, plotlines, motifs, etc. with regards to prostitution emerged at a particular moment in the history of Iran. The main objective of this dissertation, therefore, is not to investigate whether the portrayals of the prostitute in literature and film corresponds with an external truth; rather, it focuses on what these portrayals reveal about the culture and society they emanated from. By doing so, it aims to uncover the cultural, political, religious, socio-economic, and historical logics that undergirded these literary and filmic elements and discourses.

1.4. Chapter Summaries

In the first chapter, I trace the origins of modern discourses on prostitution in the West to the 19th century with special focus on the case of France, whose policies regarding the regulation of prostitution was copied by other countries, and Britain—a country that had the most cases of venereal disease in Europe and whose capital had almost as many prostitutes as Paris.¹⁶ Doing so allows me to expose the ideological construction of the prostitute as a legal, moral, and medical threat to the well-being of double-standard societies. By closely studying the scientific discourse that came to prevail in the second half of the nineteenth century, I elucidate how this discourse pathologized the prostitute body and, therefore, legitimized the policies and practices

¹⁶ Ringdal, 263.

subjugating prostitutes and controlling their bodies. This discourse, moreover, hegemonized women to the standards and norms of acceptable and decent behavior and punished those who deviated from them. Thus, surveilling, penalizing, and disciplining women's "deviant" sexuality was given both scientific justification and legal grounds. By singling women out to bear the burden of the blame for prostitution while turning a blind eye to men's share of responsibility, regulationist discourse of this time betrays the double standard which plagued not only the two countries discussed in this chapter, but all countries, including Iran, that implemented similar regulationist mechanisms. In the second half of the chapter, I explore the burgeoning of feminist discourses on prostitution and the abolitionist/regulationist dichotomy which resurfaced in the last decades of the twentieth century in liberal and radical feminist discourses on sex work. In this section, I define the terminology and feminist methodology that will be later used in other chapters.

In the second chapter, I lay bare the Iranian practices and policies regarding prostitution in the early twentieth century and compare them with the international ones and explain why, despite the dearth of socio-historical accounts about prostitution, a great many fiction writers of this time dedicated their works to this subject. To do so, I explain the sociocultural and political factors that contributed to the birth of the prostitute character as a prominent literary trope in Iranian fiction and examine the first Persian urban social novel in which this tradition became established. The ideological and structural changes that were induced by the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) changed the fabric of the Iranian society to such an extent that socio-political and cultural issues such as despotism, corruption, superstition, illiteracy, constraining traditions, and ignorance were broached in literature with an urgency and immediacy unprecedented in

the history of the country. To root out these societal ills, writers of this time turned their attention to prostitutes and depicted them as the foremost victims of these afflictions. Fundamental to appreciating the significance of this choice is understanding the concept of honor in the Iranian context which is contingent upon women's chastity. Therefore, the story of an unchaste woman was primarily meant to caution its readers as to the perils of the underdevelopment of the country and served as provocations and exhortations to ordinary people to awaken and change their society. *The Horrible Tehran* (1924) by Mushfiq Kazimi allows me to tease out the permutations of the prostitute character at this time and investigate the nature of the writers' displeasure with the traditions they so vehemently criticize.

In the third chapter, I attend to the religious ramifications of the prostitute character. Drawing on works such as *The Sexual Contract* (1988) by Carole Pateman and *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (2008) by Sheila Jeffreys which blur the boundaries between servile marriage and prostitution, this chapter contends that temporary marriage is a form of sex work endemic to Iran as it embodies the patriarchal ideal of the unchecked recourse of men to women's sexuality sanctioned by law and religion. The financial remuneration temporary wives receive as a result of their union, the brief duration of their marriage contract which is sometimes drafted to expire in a matter of hours, the inferior status of temporary wives and the stigma attached to their marriage further bolster the commonalities between temporary marriage and prostitution. This chapter overviews the literature of the mid-twentieth century Iran with a view to unearth the common threads that run through the thoughts and sentiments expressed by prominent writers regarding temporary marriage and subsumes the

arguments into three main categories: the redefinition of temporary marriage, the role of religious personalities in perpetuation of the practice, and the common fate of prostitutes and temporary wives who are scapegoated and penalized to allay the anxieties of the society regarding undisciplined female sexuality. The works of Sadeq Hedayat, Sadeq Chubak, Muhammad-Ali Jamalzadeh, and Ebrahim Golestan provide the backbone of this chapter.

In the fourth chapter, I examine prostitutes' self-perception as expressed in non-fiction and documentary works from the second Pahlavi Era (1941-1979). To do so, I first provide an account of the socio-political reforms of this time with special attention to the discursive shifts that disrupted the traditional configurations of female sexuality and whether or not they had an impact on perceptions of and approaches to prostitution both on an individual and institutional level. As the mechanism of choice by the Pahlavi regime to deal with prostitution was its regulation—i.e. localizing prostitution within a red-light district called *Shahr-i Naw* not only for the easy access of the male clients but also for facilitating the supervision of prostitutes both medically and legally—regulatory bodies such as the police and health services are scrutinized in this chapter along with the prostitutes' own accounts of life in the district. *Shahr-i Naw* (1957) By Mahmud Zand Muqaddam, *On Prostitution in the City of Tehran* (1970) by Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian, and *Women's Quarter* (1966) by Kamran Shirdel lend themselves to a sociological study of prostitution extremely well and will be used as the main case studies from which I glean a non-fictional portrayal of prostitution to compare with the representations of prostitutes in film and literature of this time.

Finally, in the fifth chapter, I analyze the voyeuristic representations of female sex workers and *Motrebs* (entertainers) in Iranian commercial cinema which reenact the worn-out Madonna/whore dichotomy that seeks to polarize women as either asexual and chaste or sexually active and monstrous. The obsessive fascination that film makers of the second half of the century until the Islamic Revolution of 1979 display toward the image of the prostitute supplanted the fixation of literary writers with this figure earlier in the century. Although a number of commercial movies made at this time revolved around the fictional stories of prostitutes in *Shahr-i Naw*, the great majority of them represented prostitute characters in the guise of singers, dancers, and entertainers whose services were offered in bars, nightclubs, and cafes. The arguments in this chapter are subsumed under two main categories: on the one hand, drawing upon the development of early music discourse in Islam, I shed light on the historical construction of *Motrebs* as transgressors and explain why women working as such were automatically construed and treated as prostitutes; On the other hand, considering the popularity and ubiquity of foreign films, in particular American productions, in Iran at the time in question, I elucidate the similarities between Iranian and International cinema in representing prostitutes to determine how the Iranian discourse on the subject diverged from its foreign counterparts.

CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE MODERN PROSTITUTE

1.1 Introduction

In 1970, Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian, the head of the Higher Institute of Social Services in Iran, published the first sociological study of prostitution in the country entitled *On Prostitution in the City of Tehran*. She and her group of researchers undertook this study out of the conviction that “the most efficient way to fight social maladies is the study of their root causes and developments . . . using only a scientific method”.¹⁷ Prior to the publication of this book, there had been no systematic endeavor to lay bare the economic, psychological, and social factors causing prostitution in Iran nor had there been any trace of a unified discourse on prostitution explicated, rationalized, or vindicated in the form of a book or treatise. In countries such as France and Britain, on the other hand, the scientific study of prostitution began in the nineteenth century with the proliferation of empirical and statistical research methodologies and led to advancing legal and medical mechanisms to regulate prostitution.

The regulation of prostitution in Iran in the twentieth century was modeled on these mechanisms and had a lot in common with the regulationism enacted in these countries in the nineteenth century. In order to understand how the scientific method of inquiry shaped our understanding of prostitution and what its consequences were for prostitutes, it is thus indispensable to revisit the nineteenth century and the origins of the modern discourses on prostitution. This chapter offers a detailed discussion on the

¹⁷ Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian, *Piramun-i ruspigari dar shahr-i Tehran* (On Prostitution in the city of Tehran), (Tehran, 1970).

evolution of discourses on prostitution since the nineteenth century. It provides a comparative framework for the dissertation as a whole which aims to identify salient origins of the convergences and divergences of Iran's approach to prostitution compared to other European countries and to tease out the idiosyncrasies and particularities of the Iranian context.

1.2 Modern Discourses on Prostitution

The moral climate of the nineteenth century in Britain and France urgently necessitated first identifying and then rectifying what was construed to be female sexual deviancies. As the century progressed, an overwhelming body of literature proliferated concerning different categories of alleged perversions. A shift is visible as the discourse on prostitution becomes increasingly scientific over the course of the century and moves away from the primarily religious and moral character of its early days.

The reason behind such a dramatic boom in the study of sexuality can be attributed to the socioeconomic and political developments of the time. Prostitution was a “highly visible symbol of social dislocation attendant upon the new industrial era”,¹⁸ “a symbol of urban illness”¹⁹ caused by massive expansion and modernization in England and the Revolution in France. According to Vern and Bonnie Bullough, it was the “great sin of great cities” that seemed to be “alive with lust”.²⁰

¹⁸ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge University Press, 1980), 32.

¹⁹ Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and Prostitution: A Social History* (Prometheus Books, 1987), 197.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Marked by industrial capitalism and its concomitant urbanization and growth in the middle classes, the nineteenth century witnessed the bourgeoning of bourgeois discourses that advocated conservatism, a strict separation between the private and the supposedly immoral public sphere, and codification of gender norms. Prostitutes, on the other hand, posed a threat to the dominant male order with their singular capability to flaunt the private in public, to mingle pleasure with business, and to transgress social boundaries:

Who are those fair creatures, neither chaperons nor chaperoned: those somebodies whom nobody knows, who elbow our wives and daughters in the parks and promenades and rendez-vous of fashion? Who are those painted, dressy women flaunting along the streets and boldly accosting the passersby? Who those miserable creatures, ill-fed, ill-clothed, uncared for, from whose misery the eye recoils, cowering under dark arches and among bye-lanes?²¹

It wasn't only their occasional incursion into respectable society, but the possibility of their reintegration into it, that was viewed as a threat:

A good number of former prostitutes reenter the world, they surround us, they come into our homes, our households; we are constantly exposed to the chance of confiding our dearest interest to them, and consequently, we have major reasons to watch this population and not to abandon it as many people advise; to seek to diminish its vices and its faults and, in this

²¹ William Acton, *Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (John Churchill and Sons, 1857), viii.

manner, to alleviate, as much as possible, the evil they could do to those with whom they would later find themselves in contact.²²

Offending Victorian sensibilities and disrupting the masculine order, prostitutes were identified as a threat to the health and morality of society. The construction of British bourgeois identity, for example, demanded the production of a category of what would be deemed an “un-British”,²³ common, popular, and lowly Other. As Grube aptly notes, “in utilitarian terms, the respect and dignity of a few had to be sacrificed to buttress the self-belief of many”.²⁴ So, the prostitute became “an historical construction”,²⁵ in Michel Foucault’s terms, working as the “negative identity of the bourgeois”, an “outcast”, a “marginalized social-sexual” identity, and a medically, legally, and morally distinct entity.²⁶ As she became a new anthropological figure and a legitimate object of scientific inquiry in the latter half of the nineteenth century, her body turned into a new discursive domain.

According to Alain Corbin, “in no other area do we see more clearly, how at their birth the social sciences were bound up with the authorities’ concern with

²² Quoted in Shanon Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Indiana University Press, 1994), 49.

²³ Denis Grube, *At the Margins of Victorian Britain: Politics, Immorality and Britishness in the Nineteenth Century* (I.B.Tauris, 2013).

²⁴ *Ibid*, 110.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Translated by Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978).

²⁶ Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting*, 43.

supervision and punishment”.²⁷ Equipped with a new method of social investigation—i.e. scientific analysis characterized by empirical and statistical research, social anthropology, phrenology, and physiognomy—the state could now accumulate data on the character and environment of prostitutes to identify the reasons for their alleged perversions, define and draw the boundaries of sexual activity, and ameliorate the great evil they caused.

As Foucault has forcefully argued, “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations”.²⁸ It follows that the authoritative scientific discourse of the time was not only a means of knowledge production about prostitution but also a way of ensuring social control, conformity, and compliance. By outlining gender norms and sexual identity and identifying transgressive conduct, the discursive literature on prostitution helped implement mechanisms to subjugate prostitutes, control their bodies, and abolish their so-called deviant proclivities.

Factual and fictional texts of nineteenth century France and England are replete with narratives of fallen women. A plethora of diarists, poets, novelists, journalists, medical and police staff chose to tackle this great social “evil”. Their narratives not only documented and gave expression to social reality but also helped shape it. The social and sexual ideology of the Victorian era manifested itself in its literature, and this in turn impacted social practices, attitudes, and even prostitutes’ self-perception. The moral, medical, and legal texts of the time constructed the modern prostitute’s body as either “a

²⁷ Corbin, *Women for Hire*, 271-102.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, Translated by Alan Sheriden (Vintage Books, 1995), 27.

ruined, destroyed, victimized body or a destroying body, a disease that spreads and rots the body politics”.²⁹ By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, feminist discourses began to emerge that tried to combat these earlier masculine prescriptions regulating the female body. In the following sections, I elaborate on the most important of these discourses and their role in changing the parameters of societal debates on prostitution.

1.3. Prostitute as a New Medical Entity

Napoleon once said, “prostitutes are a necessity. Without them, men would attack respectable women in the streets”.³⁰ This “hydraulic model of masculine sexuality”³¹—either a man is given a prostitute to quench his lust or he will plague respectable society committing all sorts of unspeakable horrors—has reverberated many times in history and found its most axiomatic expression in Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century: “Prostitution in the cities is like the toilets of the palaces. Take them away and the palaces will be destroyed by the stench and putrefaction”.³² To avoid this gruesome end, prostitution became a necessary evil because “what is more base, empty of worth, and full of vileness than harlots? Let them be with matrons and you will produce

²⁹ Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting*, 44-45.

³⁰ Quoted in, Bullough and Bullough, 188.

³¹ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 6.

³² Nils Johan Ringdal, *Love for Sale: A World History of Prostitution*, Translated by Richard Daly (Grove Press, 2004), 153.

contamination and disgrace” or “take away harlots from human society and you will have tainted everything with lust”.³³

To contain this contamination, drastic measures were taken. Prostitutes either had to be reformed—through marriage or in Magdalene homes—or segregated in red light districts. They were to distinguish themselves from respectable townswomen by wearing distinctive clothing: striped hood in London, bells on their gloves in Florence, yellow scarves in Vienna, white cords in Toulouse, green sash in Augsburg, white cloaks in Parma, black ones in Milan and so on.³⁴

With few exceptions, the overarching metaphor of the polluting whore dominates prostitutes’ portraits in literature. This chaotic female wreaking havoc on the life of unknowing victims is perhaps most memorably represented in the character of Zola’s *Nana*,

A fly of the colour of the sun, which had flown from out some filth. A fly that gathered death on the carrion left by the roadside, and that, buzzing and dancing, and emitting a sparkle of precious stones, poisoned men by merely touching them in their palaces which it entered by the windows.³⁵

The imagery of contamination, contagion, and infection appears once more in the nineteenth century but this time in a scientific book, *De la prostitution dans la ville de*

³³ Quoted in Scott, 17.

³⁴ Ringdal, 147.

³⁵ Emile Zola, *Nana*, Translated by Burton Rascoe (Knopf, 1922), 184.

Paris (1836), by “the engineer of abjection”,³⁶ Alexandre Parent-Duchatelet, a renowned medical hygienist, who—as a member of the Paris *Conseil général de salubrité*—was entrusted to study prostitutes. Parent undertook this eight-year investigation as a result of the renewed interest in the study of venereal disease, as it was once more sweeping through Europe due to the mass mobilization of troops in the Napoleonic wars at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and its horrors and complexities were becoming increasingly exposed by the medical science of the day.³⁷

Parent’s study of prostitution was preceded by his meticulous survey of the sewers of Paris.³⁸ To him, prostitution was a cesspool of another kind:

Prostitutes are as inevitable in a metropolis as sewers, cesspits, and rubbish tips; the civil authority should treat the one as it does the other – its duty is to supervise them, to reduce the dangers inherent in them as far as possible, and to this end to hide them and relegate them to the darkest corners; in short, render their presence as inconspicuous as possible.³⁹

³⁶ Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill-Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 8.

³⁷ The first outbreak of syphilis had occurred in the 1495 during a French invasion of Italy. It soon spread all over Europe and consequently, in the 1500s, the popularity of prostitutes took a hard hit; as they became increasingly associated with syphilis more punitive laws came to haunt their lives. In almost half a century, most brothels were forcibly closed down.

³⁸ Alexandre Parent-Duchatelet, *Prostitution in Paris, Considered Morally, Politically, and Medically: Prepared for Philanthropists and Legislators from Statistical Documents* (Brainard, 1845), 7.

³⁹ Quoted in Maggie O’Neil, *Prostitution and Feminism: Toward a Politics of Feeling*, (Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 64.

As the chief apologist for practices and policies of *Le bureau des moeurs*, Parent was a devout advocate of *reglementation*—i.e. supervision of brothels, compulsory medical examinations, registration of prostitutes, licensing certain houses such as *maisons de tolerance* or *maison close*. As the most pre-eminent authority on prostitution, he lent his prestige to vindicating the policies of the prefecture⁴⁰ that placed prostitutes outside the law and subjected them to compulsory inscription and involuntary examination. Although he was cognizant of the fact that the constant police and medical supervision deprived prostitutes of their personal liberties, Parent believed that administrative regulation was the only way to protect the sanctity of married life and check the spread of venereal diseases.

Through personal observation, interviews with prostitutes and madams, professional testimony, archival research, and data analysis, Parent tried to conduct a dispassionate survey of his subjects and apply scientific methods to studying them. His unwavering love for precision and uncompromising search for facts made him despise the stereotypical and sentimental views of prostitutes. It was to debunk such misconceptions that he wrote *De la prostitution*. By gathering data on the number of registered prostitutes in a twenty-year period, he discredited the widely circulated and highly exaggerated estimates concerning the number of prostitutes in Paris. He then embarked on his investigation of the age, origin, education, and occupation of both the prostitute and her family to determine the family background and history of prostitutes.

⁴⁰ Jill Harsin, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton University Press, 1985), 102.

In another chapter, he tried to identify the main traits of prostitutes' personality and concluded that they were restless, raucous, impulsive, emotional, but—most important of all—idle. It is this “idleness, nonchalance, and laziness”—“the desire of procuring pleasure without labor”—along with their love of clothes and finery that Parent considers “the determining cause of their prostitution.”⁴¹ Somewhere else in the book, however, Parent recognizes another contributing factor:

Of all the causes of prostitution, particularly in Paris, and probably in the other large cities, there is none more active than a want of employment and the misery attendant on low wages. How much is paid to seamstresses, milliners, and generally all those dependent on their needle? Compare the amounts received by the most skillful with that of those who have but moderate talents, and it will be seen that the latter can barely procure the necessaries of life. Compare their wages with that of their dishonor and it is not strange that so many become corrupt.⁴²

So, is it idleness or economic reasons paired with lack of education and skills that push prostitutes into their ignoble profession? In other words, are prostitutes guilty of their inclinations or victims of their penury? Parent seems to first suggest the former and then alter his position to the latter. Regardless of his ultimate view on these issues, it is Parent's recognition of the wretchedness and misery of these working-class women, or in Jill Harsin's words, “his proletarianization of prostitutes”,⁴³ that constitutes one of his

⁴¹ Parent, 61

⁴² Ibid, 102-104.

⁴³ Harsin, 103.

main contributions to the study of prostitution in the nineteenth century, along with his willingness to challenge the alleged physiological pathologies that made prostitutes susceptible to downfall. By examining prostitutes' sexual organs, Parent found out that they suffered from no anomalies or supposed enlargements as a result of repeated intercourse. He came to the "shocking" conclusion that there were no physiological differences between a respectable woman and a prostitute. Later, however, he undermined his own findings by averring that the latter's genitals are prone to abscesses and labia tumors and need regulatory examinations to be kept disease-free.⁴⁴ He then went on to distinguish between "normal" women and prostitutes on grounds of the latter's predisposition to obesity, harshness of voice, and lesbianism.

Parent's ambiguous position on the causes of prostitution and somatic differences between prostitutes and ordinary women shows the extent to which his quest for knowledge was overshadowed by the conventional views of his time. Later writers, unfortunately, turned some of Parent's ambivalent conclusions into dogma:

Parent-Duchâtelet's portrait of the prostitute was repeated so often in the literature of prostitution and inspired so many novelists that, in addition to distorting the vision of later researchers . . . it determined to some extent the behavior of prostitutes themselves.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Parent, 89.

⁴⁵ Corbin, *Women for Hire*, 82.

As other countries had no similar access to the wealth of information that the French police had collected on the subject, they copied the French model and by 1870 almost all of Europe had adopted registration and medical inspection of prostitutes.

1.3. Prostitute as A New Moral Concern

Prostitutes were an integral part of modern urban life, congregating on the streets, in brothels, pubs, theatres, and opera houses. They were so common and popular that to Gustave Flaubert, “something [was] lacking in a man who [had] never awoken in a nameless bed, who [had] not seen asleep on his pillow a head that he [would] not see again”.⁴⁶ It was their increasingly conspicuous public presence as well as their repeated appearance in moral, legal, and scientific literature, that furnished nineteenth century writers and artists with the perfect symbol for modern times, as Ringdal suggests, “professional prostitute[s] of the nineteenth century developed the urban expression before anyone else”.⁴⁷

In France *demimondaines* became inspirations for a plethora of literary and artistic creations. Many based their fictional writings on real life prostitutes. Blanche d’Antigny was Zola’s model for *Nana* (1880), Alphonisine Sabatier for Baudelaire’s poems from the 1850s and 1860s, Marie Duplessis for Alexander Dumas fils’ *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848) Giuseppe Verdi’s opera *La traviata* (1853), and Delphine Couturier for Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Quoted in Bernheimer, 134.

⁴⁷ Ringdal, 246.

⁴⁸ Burlough and Burlough, 210.

Honore de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Eugene Sue, Paul Alexis, Alphonse Daudet, Edmond and Jules Goncourt, Guy de Maupassant, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Paul Verlaine, and Alfred de Musset are among the most distinguished writers who immortalized prostitutes in their writings. In art too, courtesans and prostitutes left their traces behind in the paintings of Eduard Manet and Auguste Renoir, Toulouse-Lautrec, Edgar Degas, Paul Cezanne, Anatole Very, Gustave Courbet, Jean Louis Fourain, Eugene Girard, and Henri Gervex, Eva Gonzales, Auguste Renoir, and Edouard-Theophile Blanchard.⁴⁹

In England, a country that “had more venereal disease than any other country”⁵⁰ and whose capital “could compete with Paris in terms of numbers of prostitutes”,⁵¹ these figures were depicted in periodical press, newspapers, and the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, George Gissing, Thomas Hardy, and a host of other writers.⁵²

It is this unprecedented visibility that moralists of the time took issue with.⁵³ They were appalled by the disorder and nuisance that prostitutes caused and held them

⁴⁹ Ringdal, 247-251.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 263.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² See George Watt, *Fallen Women in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (London: Routledge, 2016) and Tom Winniffrith, *Fallen Women in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (St. Martin's Press, 1994).

⁵³ According to Walkowitz the moral crusaders included “congregational ministers, temperance and moral reformers, and evangelical physicians”, 33.

accountable for “the dissolution of domestic ties”, “the sacrifice of family peace”, and “the cold desolation of homes”.⁵⁴

No poor youth can take so much as a step in the city at night without encountering overtures . . . From his boyhood days onwards, step by step, he becomes exposed to formidable temptations from the city’s women, such that his whole life becomes a continuous struggle against all this sin.⁵⁵

By waylaying and pursuing respectable citizens, these ‘sirens’ not only led men astray but also corrupted the morals of the youth. To prevent such offences, evangelical writers of the Victorian England upheld the merit of a marriage based on friendship and love and a puritanical, patriarchal family structure in which the head of the family could ensure the moral health of his dependents. They condemned the marriage of convenience prevalent among the aristocracy and held the couple’s lack of mutual affection responsible for men’s debauchery and resorting to fallen women.⁵⁶

Encouraged by Parent’s scientific study of prostitution, many Victorian moralists turned their hand to empirical methods to examine the “moral statistics” of the people and in this way, in Walkowitz’s words, used social science as “applied Christianity”.⁵⁷ By doing so they reaffirmed their biases and conventional cultural convictions. Although

⁵⁴ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and London Poor: A Cyclopaedia of the Conditions and Earnings of Those That Will Work, Those that Cannot Work and Those That Will Not Work* (Griffin, Bohn, and Company, 1861), 330.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Ringdal, 264.

⁵⁶ See Walkowitz, 6-7, and Ringdal, 265.

⁵⁷ Walkowitz, 38.

they acknowledged economic causes and seduction and initiation of poor girls into prostitution by men of the upper echelon of the British society, they nevertheless believed that the inferior morality of the lower classes and their depraved proclivities were to blame for women's downfall.

Given the structure of British society with its deep chasms between classes and genders, the moralists not only did little to challenge the perception of sexual license as a male prerogative, but they actively tried to vindicate it. Referring to the late age of marriage among men, they contended it was impossible for them to practice abstinence for the whole length of their bachelor life.⁵⁸ As respectable women were not to have intercourse before marriage, and masturbation was diagnosed as detrimental to health,⁵⁹ men's only recourse was to prostitutes. By perpetuating this double standard, they reluctantly conceded it was impossible to eliminate prostitution. But while men's sexual transgressions were deemed as inevitable and permissible, women's were to be regulated and dealt with by the authorities: "[Prostitution] is an evil therefore which must be endured while human passions exist: but it is at the same time an evil which may not only be lessened, but rendered less noxious and dangerous to the peace and good order of society".⁶⁰ To them, like their patristic predecessors, prostitution was a "safety valve" that "enable[d] the social body to excrete the excess of seminal fluid".⁶¹

⁵⁸ Bullough, 199.

⁵⁹ William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life: Considered in Their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations*, 3rd Edition (Churchill, 1862).

⁶⁰ Patrick Colquhoun, *Treatise on the Police of the Metropolis* (Bye and Law, 1806), 344.

⁶¹ Alain Corbin, "Commercial Sexuality in Nineteenth Century France: A System of Images and Regulations," in *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in*

One avid advocate of the statutory regulation of prostitution was the venereologist William Acton who wrote *Prostitution considered in its moral, social, and sanitary aspects, in London and other large cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils* (1857) “to show that concentrated effort, sanctioned by authority, can alone stay the ravages of a contagious and deadly disorder, and that only by methodical and combined action, and by gradual and almost imperceptible stages can any moral cure be effected”.⁶² While Acton “regard[ed] prostitution as an inevitable attendant upon civilized, and especially closely-packed, population”,⁶³ by legislating and regulating the body of the prostitute, he proposed, one could “enable her to pass through this stage of her existence with as little permanent injury to herself and as little mischief to society as possible”.⁶⁴ Acton maintained that the majority of prostitutes chose this occupation as a transitory stage in their lives after which they seamlessly merge with the respectable poor. To assist these women in their future roles as wives and mothers, it was necessary for the state to try to reform them and cure them of their immoral propensities.

To Acton, what facilitated prostitutes’ reintegration into working class society was their exceptional stamina and good health. Acton challenged the widely-held stereotype that women’s health rapidly deteriorates once they become prostitutes:

the Nineteenth Century edited by Gallagher, Catherine and Thomas Walter Laqueur (University of California Press, 1986), 211.

⁶² Acton, *The Functions and Disorders*, ix.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, x.

notwithstanding all their excesses and exposure to so many causes of disease, their health resists all attacks better than that of the ordinary run of women who have children and lead orderly lives. They have (as someone has remarked) iron bodies, which enable them with impunity to meet trials such as would prove fatal to others."⁶⁵

Like Parent before him, Acton chipped away at the idea that the prostitute body was diseased and rotting from the inside. Their similarities, though, do not end here. Acton also entertained an ambivalent view of the causes of prostitution. He divided the causes into two groups, Primary—"comprising mainly the natural instinct, the sinful nature, to which may be added idleness, vanity, and love of pleasure"—and Secondary—i.e. mainly economic and environmental factors.⁶⁶ While the former paints prostitutes as agents of corruption through their own "absolutely ineradicable" inclinations,⁶⁷ the latter showed them as deserving of compassion and charity. Acton's solution to this dilemma was to first recognize these causes and then try to prevent prostitution, or ameliorate its consequences through regulation.

By underlining the temporary nature of prostitution, the eventual reintegration of prostitutes into the society, and their good health despite the sexual and physical abuses they were subject to, Acton made the sexual exploitation of women seem less harmful.⁶⁸ Although pro-regulatory moralist commentators like Acton emphasized the necessity of

⁶⁵ Ibid, 39.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 167.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 177.

⁶⁸ Walkowitz, 48.

pity and sympathy for the plight of the “lost daughters of shame and misery”,⁶⁹ what they did in the long run was to oppress open prostitution, drive it out of sight, pave the way for legal repression of prostitution, and further bolster the already existing discursive stereotypes.

1.4. Prostitute as A New Legal Category

As a result of the raging debate on prostitution, the British parliament finally stepped in and ratified a series of statutes in a five-year period to fight venereal diseases and regulate prostitution first in naval and military towns and later in London and other civil districts. What expedited this legislative action was the growing concern with prostitution as a national threat since the incidents of venereal diseases in the British troops outnumbered any other country in Europe.⁷⁰ Rather than admit that the spread of these diseases could be caused by British soldiers’ homoerotic relationships, the War Office and the Admiralty saw it as a direct consequence of their soldiers’ and sailors’ recourse to common prostitutes. As Vern and Bonnie Bullough explain,

It was standard custom in the British navy in the 19th century to invite prostitutes on board ship as soon as one reached port. In fact, in some of the English port towns, the launch captains carried boatloads of women to meet the incoming ships and were paid for their efforts by the sailors who took the prostitutes off their hands.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid, 301.

⁷⁰ Ringdal, 263.

⁷¹ Bullough, 194

The government passed the first Contagious Disease Act in 1864 and gave control of prostitutes in eleven naval and garrison districts to the Admiralty and War Offices. Plainclothes police were consigned to identify and detain any woman under the suspicion of prostitution and submit them to medical examination. They mostly acted based on their own judgment or the information provided by informers or prostitutes' own admission. With the passage of the second CD Act in 1866, the legislators expanded the scope and techniques of regulatory enforcement. This time prostitutes in twelve military and naval stations were placed under the jurisdiction of the superintendent of police who could bring any prostitute before a judge who in turn was empowered to subject the prostitute to periodical examinations for a year. Although women could also go for examinations voluntarily, they would be detained for six months in a locked hospital for treatment in case they were diagnosed with a venereal disease. Even after being discharged from the hospital, prostitutes were not shielded from the watchful eyes of the law; they could still be imprisoned for soliciting if found uncured. Through the last CD Act of 1869, six more districts were added and the period of detention was increased to nine months.

What the CD Acts did was to institutionalize already existing stereotypes about prostitutes' deviant and dangerous sexuality. "In the name of middle-class respectability", the standards of proper behavior had been raised and "the previously tolerated public behaviors of this group, which also included beggars and vagrants and drunks, began to be redefined as unacceptable".⁷² The Acts legitimized this civic concern and gave the police, the medical profession, and the moral instigators the stamp of the law to

⁷² Catherine Lee, *Policing Prostitution, 1856-1886: Deviance, Surveillance, and Morality* (Routledge, 2016), 171.

“discipline” prostitutes. It bestowed upon them “a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application”,⁷³ to set the norms of acceptable and decent behavior, and “reform” via punitive measures those who deviated from them.

Although the Acts “created prostitution as a distinct legal category”, no longer “regulated by the 1824 Vagrancy Act” in which “prostitutes were considered one among other groups of social outcasts who disturbed the public order”,⁷⁴ they were still part and parcel of a deep-seated fear and insecurity in the face of the working-class poor in general who occupied the “nether regions” of society and were considered morally inferior to the upper classes.⁷⁵ In the words of Walkowitz, they betray “another important ideological component of the regulations position—a new enthusiasm for state intervention into the lives of the unrespectable poor.”⁷⁶

Since the regulatory police circulated in poorer neighborhoods, they invariably “classed almost any poor woman as a prostitute”.⁷⁷ In a society in which respectability has everything to do with class and status, poor women could never be respectable and thus were subject to all form of vulgar propositions and bestial treatment.⁷⁸ That royal

⁷³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage Books, 1995), 215.

⁷⁴ Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting*, 56.

⁷⁵ Walkowitz, 6.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 6.

⁷⁷ Bullough and Bullough, 200.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*.

mistresses and courtesans or “fashionable impures” were exempt from police harassment and surveillance testifies to this unfortunate fact.

Although with the enforcement of the Acts the number of prostitutes and incidence of venereal disease plummeted,⁷⁹ to religious and moralist crusaders, the administrative regulation of prostitution by medical and juridical authorities was synonymous with legally endorsing immorality. To them, it was better to “uproot a noxious weed than to pluck off its poisonous berries”.⁸⁰ To put an end to prostitution, the prostitutes should be punished, imprisoned, and reformed. To erect their puritanical utopia, adherents of this morality movement also added pornography, masturbation, birth control, homosexuality, extra-marital sex, alcoholism, and gambling to their crusade.

Mixed with these moral causes, more beneficial and practical ones also shaped the controversy surrounding the Acts. The abuses of the police and medical staff of their authority over mostly working-class women deemed to be prostitutes gave rise to a vigorous outcry for better treatment of women and resentment of a socially and economically iniquitous practice. With the abolitionist movement gaining international momentum, the British Acts were repealed in March 1886 as a consequence of which syphilis spread at unprecedented rates in the late 1890s.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ringdal, 273.

⁸⁰ Mayhew, xvi.

⁸¹ Ringdal, 273.

1.5. Prostitute as A New Feminist Question

What had enraged many people during the period of the Acts' enforcement was the implication that prostitutes were being given permission by the State to practice their profession, that their lifestyle was legitimated by the Acts. This interpretation was partly caused by one of the clauses of the second Act which granted registered prostitutes a certificate of health provided that medical inspectors find them infection-free. Many certified prostitutes believed they could now solicit clients openly, charge more for their services, and remain unscathed by the police because they were now "Queen's Women".⁸² Disappointed by their moral turpitude, Josephine Butler "one of history's most energetic, persistent, and famous opponents of prostitution",⁸³ complained, "they walk in silks and satins and assume an arrogant manner. When warned of the sin in which they are living by one of the National Association agents, they answer: 'Oh, it's quite different now. We don't need to be ashamed'".⁸⁴

Butler's objection to prostitution was nevertheless varied. Alongside her criticism of the prostitutes for their moral turpitude, she and the association she chaired, the Ladies' National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (LNA), also denounced the Acts for generating class and gender discrimination by reinforcing sexual double standards through subjecting only poor women to inhuman examinations and unconstitutional detainment. While syphilitic customers could roam freely in public and infect their sexual partners—whether prostitutes or their wives—prostitutes were

⁸² Lee, 248.

⁸³ Ringdal, 259.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 249.

prosecuted for contracting venereal diseases; whereas men could harass women on the streets with impunity, women were punished for solicitation in public. She, like other feminists of the second half of the nineteenth century, tried to prove that “male sexual urge was a social and not a biological phenomenon”.⁸⁵ They inveighed against penalizing women and condoning men for what was a mutual vice, supplied because there was a demand for it. They indicted the Acts for legitimizing the current social ideology which considered sexual women as *abnormal*, conduits of sin, and agents of corruption while attributing men’s sexual misconduct to their *natural* instincts.

While the wish to repeal the Acts was supported by a broad coalition of individuals and was “based on a wide range of moral, libertarian and egalitarian objections”,⁸⁶ Butler and her association were among the most vocal and added a distinct feminist edge to the debate for repeal. Like their regulationist opponents, they borrowed the language of social science and empirical investigations to refute their adversaries’ policies. One of their main objections to regulation was the abuse with which the police handled their unrestricted authority over women in poor neighborhoods. They could arrest anyone on suspicion of prostitution without a shred of evidence. Any woman walking alone at night was fair game. If they suspected a single woman of recurrent gentlemanly visits, they could bring her in. They also made illiterate women sign documents stating they were prostitutes, or children who had no idea what the word even

⁸⁵ Sheila Jeffreys, "Wome and Sexuality," in *Women's History: Britain, 1850-1945: An Introduction*. Edited by June Purvis (Routledge, 1997), 165.

⁸⁶ Lee, 25.

meant. Through intimidation and blackmailing, they availed themselves of disease-free prostitutes' services.⁸⁷

The medical inspectors were no better. The average time they spent with their prostitute charges was three to five minutes which raised doubt regarding the thoroughness of their examinations.⁸⁸ Moreover, the speculum they used to probe the women was itself a medium of contagion due to lack of sanitation.⁸⁹ Their violent treatment of suspected prostitutes and the humiliation these women were subjected to was such a major concern that "the medical examination was compared to a rape".⁹⁰ Many prostitutes said that they felt the doctor was almost "taking revenge" on them,⁹¹ and described the tests as "unnatural", "voyeuristic", "brutal".⁹²

Even the rationale for internal examination seemed flawed to these women abolitionists. They held doctors responsible for the conception of legislative measures against prostitution due to their defense of men's biological urges while blaming women for diseases. Doctors were complicit in scapegoating prostitutes to justify masculine perversions. Butler often cited a case of seventy British Navy sailors who had contracted sexual diseases without having contact with a woman for close to a year. Rather than

⁸⁷ Bullough and Bullough, 196.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ringdal, 280.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Walkowitz, 124.

admit they had infected each other, they, with the help of a doctor, accused a prostitute of doing so.⁹³

As many LNA activists had joined the repeal cause from various antislavery groups, they tinted their arguments with the abolitionist vocabulary they had acquired from this previous endeavor. Butler, for example, maintained prostitutes were entangled in a “white slave trade” with brothel keepers, pimps, and clients profiting from their misery; “They insisted that men were responsible for prostitution and that the way to end such abuse of women was to curb the demand for prostitutes by enjoining chastity upon men, rather than by punishing those who provided the supply”.⁹⁴ She called for the law to target those who benefited from vice, not the prostitutes who were victims of adverse economic conditions, and who “embrace the career, the avenues to which stand ever wide open, yawning like the gates of hell, when all other doors are closed”.⁹⁵

One of the main missions of LNA was rescue work to liberate “the world’s daughters” and prepare them for their primary function, motherhood, “the most sacred state in the world”.⁹⁶ By weaving together a class-conscious, gender egalitarian, and evangelical rhetoric, Butler formed coalitions with religious organizations, working men’s organizations, and “social purity” movements to change the perception of the prostitute from immoral to exploited and redeemable. One of their main contributions to feminism was making prostitution an issue relevant to all women:

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Sheila Jeffreys, "Women and Sexuality," 165.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Lee, 37.

⁹⁶ Ringdal, 260.

They treated prostitution as the end result of the artificial constraints placed on women's social and economic activity: inadequate wages and restrictions on their industrial employment forced women on to the streets, where they took up the "best paid industry"—prostitution. Prostitution also served as a paradigm for the female condition; it established the archetypal relationship between men and women, repeated in perhaps a more veiled and subtle manner within the confines of genteel society.⁹⁷

Butler and the LNA did not break completely with the traditional gender roles of Victorian society. They “fully acknowledge[ed] the social value of wifehood and motherhood” but at the same time understood that these roles “did not entirely establish nor exhaust the limits of female identity”.⁹⁸ According to Walkowitz they “gave political expression to a supportive female subculture in the mid-Victorian period”⁹⁹ and placed prostitution within a broader framework of demands for women’s emancipation. In their publications, such as *Women's Work and Women's Culture, A Letter to the Mothers of England*, they advocated for suffrage, raising the age of sexual consent, higher education and employment for women, and “the diffusion of the ‘home influence’ in the general society”.¹⁰⁰

The LNA made substantial contributions to the feminist cause in the second half of the nineteenth century through their attempts at structuring public discourse on

⁹⁷ Walkowitz, 122.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 121.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 109.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 113.

prostitution, though they lacked the power to implement the changes they asked for despite their own privileged status in society as members of the (upper) middle class with links to powerful political men. And notwithstanding the great compassion they felt for fallen women, many of them were punitive toward them and appalled by those who didn't want to quit their profession.¹⁰¹ Many abolitionist movements sprouted from these late nineteenth century efforts to repeal the discriminatory laws regulating prostitution. In alliance with moral/Christian campaigns, they were instrumental in making prostitution and white slave trade, a.k.a. trafficking, an international concern.

1.6. The Continuation of the Abolitionist-Versus-Regulationist Discourse in the Twentieth Century

By the early twentieth century, “most European states and the USA had done away with regulation, shutting down the *maisons closes*, the brothels of the time, so the state no longer was an accomplice to ‘vice’”.¹⁰² Trafficking of women and children became a subject of discussion in the League of Nations which passed several conventions condemning and combating traffic in women and children culminating in the 1933 convention that “criminalized ‘procurement’ for prostitution even if this occurred with the consent of the woman”.¹⁰³ This shift informed the policies adopted by most

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Joyce Outshoorn, "Introduction: Prostitution, Women's Movement and Democratic Politics" in *The Politics of Prostitution: Women's Movements, Democratic States and the Globalisation of Sex Commerce*, Edited by Joyce Outshoorn (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

states with regards to prostitution and human trafficking. But what placed prostitution at the top of the political agenda, according to Outshoorn, was “the increase in international tourism and migration, growing affluence and important changes in the sexual mores in the West since the mid-1970s, and the emergence of AIDS in the mid-1980s” that once more identified women as vectors of contagion and disease.¹⁰⁴ Public agitation over street prostitution, the ongoing war on drugs, and the increased visibility of foreign prostitutes were all contributing factors in bringing prostitution once again to the attention of the state.¹⁰⁵

While feminists’ attitudes toward commercial sex in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were, in Jefferey’s words, almost “homogeneous” in demanding eradication of the practice, the last decades of the twentieth century witnessed an increasing polarization.¹⁰⁶ The abolitionist ideology—still present in the contemporary feminist discourse on and approach to prostitution—became only one of two major contending feminist voices on the subject.

Most forcefully encapsulated in the philosophy of radical feminists since the 1960s, the neo-abolitionist view considers prostituted women as victims of pimps and “managers” and seeks to uproot prostitution by criminalizing and penalizing both the Johns and various third parties who benefit from it. They, very much like their foremothers, refute the idea that prostitution is a true “choice”, or a legitimate “job”, and

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 8.

¹⁰⁵ Roger Matthews, *Prostitution, Politics and Policy* (Routledge-Cavendish, 2008), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Idea of Prostitution* (Spinifex Print, 1997), 1.

emphasize rescue work and rehabilitation, maintaining that sex workers would leave their job if presented with alternatives.

To them, prostitution is not inevitable as many would want us to believe. It is a patriarchal solution to the problem of masculine urges disguised as natural/biological rather than constructed in cultures where men are socialized to objectify, dehumanize, commodify, and fetishize women and use them for their own purposes. According to this view, prostitution reflects the hierarchical structures of sex, race, and class that are deeply rooted in society at large and that capitalize on values, beliefs, and practices that are highly oppressive to women. It naturalizes the marginalization, degradation, subordination, and harassment of women and reinforces unequal gender relations perpetuated by patriarchal hegemony—the same set of relations feminists have been trying to challenge and subvert throughout history:

The general display of women's bodies and sexual parts, either in representations or as live bodies, is central to the sex industry and continually reminds men—and women—that men exercise the law of male sex-right, that they have patriarchal right of access to women's bodies . . . the sex act itself provides acknowledgment of patriarchal right. When women's bodies are on sale as commodities in the capitalist market, . . . the law of male sex-right is publicly affirmed, and men gain public acknowledgment as women's sexual masters—that is what is wrong with prostitution.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford University Press, 1988), 46.

Saying prostitution is unavoidable and unchangeable, provides the industry with “a convenient underpinning to normalize prostitution . . . and to continue the violation of women in prostitution worldwide”.¹⁰⁸

The idea of victimization is central to the abolitionist discourse on prostitution. Neo-abolitionists argue that many women decide to become prostitutes because they are already victimized and sexually abused at home. They have a history of parental neglect, drug abuse, homelessness, etc. which makes them more susceptible to being targeted by pimps.¹⁰⁹ This victimization intensifies as they turn to prostitution and becomes a form of sexual violence perpetrated on their body and psyche comparable in its effects to the trauma experienced by victims of pedophilia, rape, slavery, and torture.¹¹⁰ Prostitutes are more likely to be beaten, raped, and even murdered by their clients or haters, leading neo-abolitionists to conclude that, “clearly violence is the norm for women in prostitution”:¹¹¹

Selling sex places those who do so at greater risk of violence, of exploitation, of poverty and of criminalisation. Rape, kidnapping, brutality, exploitation and other forms of violence have long since been

¹⁰⁸ Janice Raymond, *Not A Choice, Not A Job* (University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 3.

¹⁰⁹ See Raymond, Pateman, Sheila Jeffreys, *The Idea of Prostitution*; Melissa Farley, “Prostitution is Sexual Violence,” *Psychiatric Times* (2004). <http://www.psychiatrictimes.com/sexual-offenses/content/article/10168/48311>; Joe Phoenix, *Making Sense of Prostitution* (Palgrave, 2001); and Kathleen Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*, (NYU Press, 1995).

¹¹⁰ See Farley, Jeffreys’ *Idea of Prostitution*, and Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (Arrow Books, 1987).

¹¹¹ Melissa Farley, “Prostitution is Sexual Violence”. *Psychiatric Times*, Oct 1, 2004, available at <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/sexual-offenses/prostitution-sexual-violence> (accessed on 16 April 2017).

part of the landscape of prostitution—with streetworking women experiencing some of the most extreme instances. Like women’s entrance into prostitution, such risks are structured by wider gendered relationships, especially the widespread social acceptance of male violence against women and ideologies of femininity that construct sex workers as bad women, as disposable women and women beyond the pale. In this way, it is possible to characterise involvement in prostitution as both a form of gendered survivalism and a form of gendered victimisation.¹¹²

The nemeses of the neo-abolitionists are the pro-prostitution liberal, neo-liberal, and libertarian feminists who argue that working in the sex industry is a legitimate economic activity for women who are left with few other choices. They suggest that prostitution is a contractual relationship and “like all service occupations, . . . involves the sale of a range of skills and services on the market and that, morality aside, providing sexual services is really no different from selling one’s intellect, skills or other attributes”.¹¹³ They further contend that prostitution per se is not a violation of women’s human rights. What violates the human rights and civil liberties of prostitutes is the “blatantly discriminatory, random, and corrupt use (or non-use) of the law” against them.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Joe Phoenix, "Frameworks of Understanding" in *Regulating Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Policy Reform in the UK*, Edited by Joe Phoenix (The Policy Press, 2009) 5.

¹¹³ Roger Matthews, *Prostitution, Politics and Policy* (Routledge-Cavendish, 2008), 34.

¹¹⁴ Alexander, Priscilla. "Feminism, Sex Work and Human Rights" in *Whores and Other Feminists*, Edited by Jill Nagle (Routledge, 1997), 92.

What pro-sex work activists are after is the normalization and decriminalization of sexual services so that their practitioners are subject to the same protective laws and regulations as people engaged in other forms of labor. Unfortunately, they maintain, prostitutes are defined as “outside the common law”, and, as inhabitants of the edges of the society, they are exposed to more occupational hazards due to the murky environment they are forced to hide in not only because of the stigma attached to their work, but also to elude law enforcement agents. Priscilla Alexander suggests that, “If prostitution were an above-ground occupation, and if immigrant sex workers could obtain work permits on the same basis as other immigrant workers, then it would be easier to change the context within which prostitution takes place”.¹¹⁵ She argues, in the name of “whores” and pro-sex work feminists,¹¹⁶ that laws should be reformed to protect prostitutes from occupational and health hazards and to accommodate their right to form unions.

Alexander recapitulates their agenda as follows:

Prostitute activists are adamant about distinguishing forced from voluntary prostitution or, as the first World Whores Congress put it, “adult prostitution resulting from individual decision”. Adult prostitutes are concerned about adolescents and children turning to sex work to survive or being pressured to do so by parents and brokers. Prostitutes who work for third parties want limits on the proportion of income managers take, since they, *like other workers*, are often exploited, paid far too little and denied adequate benefits. Prostitutes want clean and safe places to work

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 91.

¹¹⁶ The name of the book Alexander’s article is found in. pp. 83-97.

with the absolute right to refuse to engage in unsafe sex practices. All these demands could be addressed through occupational safety and health regulations and child labor laws.¹¹⁷

In response to people saying prostitution reenacts the same types of inequalities feminists have been trying to challenge, many pro-sex work feminists argue that sex-work can be empowering to women, that it can transform patriarchal gender relations by fostering a sense of confidence in women's power and control over their own bodies: "Sex workers can acquire professional expertise, business savvy, proficiency at customer relations, valuable interpersonal skills, and ways of taking control of a situation".¹¹⁸ Chapkis and Nagle see it as an area of agency for women, a "liberatory terrain for women"¹¹⁹ where they constantly "engage in acts of negotiation, resistance and subversion that belie their designation as passive objects";¹²⁰ Nagle even claims that "Many of the sex workers . . . use the opportunities for dialogue with clients in their work environments to educate men about women's bodies, women's desires, and issues of boundaries and consent".¹²¹ It is in this vein that Wendy Chapkis describes the prostitute as "a potent symbolic challenge to confining notions of proper womanhood, and

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 93.

¹¹⁸ Ronald Weitzer, *Legalizing Prostitution: From Illicit Vice to Lawful Business* (New York University Press, 2012), 7.

¹¹⁹ Wendy Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labour* (Cassell, 1997), 1.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 20.

¹²¹ Nagle, 7.

conventional sexuality”,¹²² and Camille Paglia calls her the “ultimate liberated woman, who lives on the edge and whose sexuality belongs to no one.”¹²³

Neo-abolitionists, on the other hand, see pro-prostitution activists, or sex work apologists, as complicit in victimizing women, perpetuating their sexual slavery, and benefiting pimps and sex traffickers who have become major capitalists and entrepreneurs in the modern world. They uncompromisingly oppose both legal and decriminalized prostitution because

in legalized prostitution, the state assumes the role of pimp, collecting taxes and regulating the practice of prostitution. Decriminalized prostitution is a radical removal of any and all laws regarding prostitution (including laws against pimping, pandering, purchasing, and procuring) so that the buying and selling of people in prostitution is considered the legal equivalent of buying candy.¹²⁴

Neo-abolitionists relentlessly call for reversing the language of sex industry promoted by liberal feminists in which prostitution is characterized as “labor” or “sex work”. They oppose the idea that deciding to become a prostitute is a woman’s right or that prostitution is part of the service industry, or a form of productive labor. They claim using neutral words such as these disguises the racism and sexism inherent in the business, downplays the psychological and physical harm women are exposed to in prostitution, makes their economic exploitation invisible, and turns “the predatory,

¹²² Ibid, 30.

¹²³ Camille Paglia, *Vamps and Trams: New Essays* (Vintage Books, 1994), 58-59.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 129.

pedophilic purchase of a human being by a john [into] a banal business transaction”.¹²⁵ They pay particular attention to the experiences of survivors who have been violated and traumatized as prostitutes and ask that all prostitution be recognized as sexual exploitation and a violation of women’s human rights, otherwise, they warn, women will remain in harm’s way. They insist decriminalizing prostitution will strip sex industry masterminds of legal accountability and make it very difficult to prosecute their sexual exploitations. Furthermore, as it is prostitution that creates the demand for trafficking in women and children, “the sex industry in its totality must be confronted”:¹²⁶

There is a further tension that runs through the liberal model. Since involvement in prostitution is seen as the exercise of ‘free choice’ by a rational actor this has implications for notions of responsibility and culpability. Since these rational actors are held to be fully aware that they are engaging in an occupation which involves illegalities, social stigmatization and marginalization there can be little or no defense against the sanctions that they receive as a result of engaging in these activities. At the same time, there is little justification for welfare provision or social support. Moreover, there seems little point in developing ‘exiting’ programs and the like since just as these women have exercised ‘free choice’ when entering prostitution so they can be expected to exercise the

¹²⁵ Ibid, 103.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 134. See also Janice Raymond, “Ten reasons for not legalizing prostitution and a legal prostitution” in *Prostitution, Trafficking and Traumatic Stress*, Edited by Melissa Farley (Haworth Press, 2003): 315-332.

same 'free choice' in making decisions on whether or not to continue in prostitution.¹²⁷

As the above quotation reveals, neo-abolitionist feminists are adamantly against the idea that the decision of most prostitutes to enter and remain in their profession represents a "free choice". Borrowing from Chapkis, Matthews states that people who subscribe to the ideology of "free choice"

tend to see the prostitute as a rational actor operating in an open and roughly equal market society. Liberals depict the women concerned as self-directed decision-makers who are attracted to prostitution because either it fits with their lifestyle . . . or because they enjoy engaging in 'erotic labour'.¹²⁸

But to radicals such as Dworkin, prostitution, like rape, "negate[s] self-determination and choice for women".¹²⁹ It is more of "a strategy of survival", a "choiceless choice", or "compliance to the only options available".¹³⁰ "Paying someone to have sex with you when your motivation is to get enough money to survive, or to buy the next bag of groceries or drugs, is not voluntary intercourse. It's a transaction based on her disadvantages and his power of purchase".¹³¹

¹²⁷ Matthews, 32.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 29.

¹²⁹ Dworkin, 181.

¹³⁰ Raymond, *Not A Choice, Not A Job*, 20.

¹³¹ Ibid.

According to this view, women who become prostitutes do not do it out of ‘free choice’; rather, they are “chosen” for the industry. There are global forces such as “sex discrimination, race discrimination, poverty, abandonment, debilitating sexual and verbal abuse, poor education or no education, and a job that does not pay a living wage”¹³² that choose you for prostitution. Furthermore, not being coerced into prostitution, does not mean that they remain in it out of their own volition. Many won’t leave because they are either afraid of or dependent on their pimps. As in any other abusive relationship, there are numerous reasons why women stay. Many develop coping mechanisms by downplaying the trauma, denying it, or rationalizing it by assuming they deserve it, asked for it, or chose it. It is easier for victims to hide behind the idea of choice than to accept that they are being humiliated, degraded, and used.¹³³ Unfortunately, many of them find solace in the idea that they are being paid for the sexual abuse that had already been done to them as kids and teenagers at home.¹³⁴

The neo-abolitionists’ emphasis on prostitutes’ victimhood and their rejection of the notion of “voluntary prostitution” has met with strong disapproval. Specifically, they are accused of sensationalism, a lack of pragmatism, and creating moral panic. By decidedly leaving out the accounts of women, and those of male and transgender prostitutes, whose experiences do not match their agenda the neo-abolitionists are criticized for not speaking for all prostitutes in the field. Furthermore, as Levy and

¹³² Farley, “Prostitution, Trafficking, and Cultural Amnesia,” 102.

¹³³ See Jeffrey, *The Idea of Prostitution*; Raymond, *Not A Choice, Not A Job*; Farley, “Prostitution, Trafficking, and Cultural Amnesia”.

¹³⁴ Farley, “Prostitution, Trafficking, and Cultural Amnesia,” 103.

Jakobsson contend, their “model [is] used to justify legislation that is, ironically, applied to maintain patriarchal control and to displace women perceived to be deviant and disruptive to normative hegemonic masculinity”.¹³⁵

Sex workers themselves are divided on the issue and have formed various campaigns and organizations supporting either end of the free/forced spectrum. WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt) vehemently opposes the idea that women’s involvement in prostitution is a result of their own free will or choice and advocate for the eradication of the practice. On the other hand, there are multiple sex worker right organizations and movements across the world which seek the decriminalization of voluntary adult prostitution, regulation of their profession in accordance with business laws, safeguarding of the prostitutes’ civil and human rights, abolishing discriminatory practices, and de-stigmatization of prostitution as a legitimate line of business as is neatly encapsulated in the World Charter for Prostitutes’ Rights drafted in 1985 and subsequently in the Sex Workers’ Manifesto (1997), the Declaration of the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (2005), as well as the mission statement of organizations such as The International Union of Sex Workers, to name only a few.

1.7. Conclusion

With the advent of the social sciences in the early decades of the nineteenth century, an obsession with categorization emerged not only with regard to the application of a “scientific method” in the study of human subjects but also the identification and

¹³⁵ Jay Levy and Pye Jakobsson, “Abolitionist Feminism as Patriarchal Control: Swedish Understandings of Prostitution and Trafficking,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 37. 2 (June 2013): 338.

eradication of what was perceived to be deviant and abnormal. Backed by the state, these new sciences had the power to shape the social and sexual ideology of their time. To this end, social anthropology, phrenology, and physiognomy, to name a few, employed empirical and statistical research to generate the distinct category “prostitute”. In this way, the prostitute, no longer merely a vagrant or a nuisance, became a legal, moral, and medical entity whose body and character could be scrutinized to determine how to contain her contagion. Ultimately, Statutory *reglementation* was deemed to be *the* solution. It was implemented with exceptional rigor for a few decades before a new voice emerged. This time, a feminine one.

Feminists of the second half of the nineteenth century, employing the same or similar methods, attacked administrative regulations as an encroachment on the rights and liberties of not only prostitutes but all women, in particular women of working classes. They indicted the double standard prevalent in their society that penalized women and condoned men for engaging in illicit sexual activity. They demanded the abolition of prostitution by providing other employment choices for prostitutes and also criminalizing pimps and clients who took advantage of women’s vulnerabilities. These voices—in all their variants—are still present in abolitionist feminist discourse on prostitution.

Although not all feminists subscribe to the ideology of either regulationists or abolitionists, this dichotomy continues to inform the writings of feminists of different stripes as well as the policies adopted by many countries. Germany, Australia, and New Zealand are among the states where the sex industry is decriminalized. On the other hand, Sweden and Norway have launched campaigns to eliminate prostitution by criminalizing customers. In the United States, the abolitionists still influence policies and practices. In

Iran, regulation of prostitution was the most popular stance before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. In the next four chapters, I will elaborate on how prostitution was perceived in different eras of Persian history and how prostitutes were treated in reality as well as in fiction.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIRTH OF A CHARACTER: THE POLITICS OF THE RISE OF THE PROSTITUTE IN THE LITERATURE OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY (1906-1925) AND THE FIRST PAHLAVI ERA (1925-1941)

2.1. Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, international discourses on prostitution was dominated by abolitionist sentiments seeking the repeal of laws regulating prostitution. Feminists' attitudes toward commercial sex in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were, in Jeffrey's words, almost "homogeneous" in demanding the eradication of the practice.¹³⁶ In Iran, although the practice was regulated and taxed, we have no evidence of a contemporaneous debate dominating the public discourse on the subject. As a matter of fact, analytical and descriptive accounts of prostitution in Iran aimed at shedding light on its underlying causes and how best to remedy them have only come into being in the recent decades.¹³⁷ Unfortunately, even recent books tracing the origin of modern sexuality and feminism in Iran to the early decades of the twentieth century rarely broach the subject of prostitution or analyze it in depth. Furthermore, the descriptive accounts we have of the time in question decidedly leave out lower-class women's stories, in particular, those of the prostitutes.

¹³⁶ Jeffreys, *The Idea of Prostitution*, 1.

¹³⁷ The first ever study of the prostitutes in Iran was undertaken by Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian (also known as the mother of social work in Iran) in 1969.

In light of this absence of writings by prostitutes and dearth of socio-historical material about them around the turn of the twentieth century, it is striking that a great many literary writers at the time chose to dwell on the subject. In this chapter, I will therefore scrutinize the literature of the time to shed light on how and why the idea of the “fallen woman” came to occupy the imagination of the early decades of twentieth century Iran. In what follows, I will first briefly review the very few sources that tackle the question of prostitution in Iran, delineate the political and cultural circumstances within which the prostitute became a literary trope, and examine the first social novel of the century within which this tradition became established.

2.2. Historical Background

2.2.1. Women around the Turn of the Twentieth Century in Iran

“The most miserable and disadvantaged people in Iran are women . . . these wretched creatures . . . are still deprived of access to knowledge and know nothing in this world but how to work in narrow kitchens, sweep floors, and wash clothes” reads a journal near the turn of the twentieth century in Istanbul.¹³⁸ The sentiments expressed in the above excerpt are echoed in the writing of Bibi Khanum Astarabadi (1852– 1920), one of the very few women who commented on gender relations at the time.¹³⁹ “Behind

¹³⁸ Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1901-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism* (Columbia University Press, 1995), 202.

¹³⁹ Up until the twentieth century, it was the prerogative of only a few privileged women of the aristocracy and ruling classes to try their hand at writing. And even those were obliged to cloak their writing in an impersonal tone of a genderless speaker who made no references to love and womanhood and did not presume to opine on social and political issues of her day. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that women and their writings

the closed doors at home, prohibited from everything in life, education, training and social life, women are regarded as mindless, like infants; they are confined to the burdens of household work and childbearing and are considered the slaves and servants of their husbands”.¹⁴⁰ Taj al-Saltanih , a Qajar princess pleads with European women to

در وقتی که شما غرق سعادت و شرافت، از حقوق خود دفاع میکنید و فاتحانه به مقصود موفق شده اید، یک نظری به قطعه ی آسیا افکنده و تفحص کنید در خانه هایی . . . تمام منفذ این خانه منحصر به یک درب است، و آنها توسط یک دربان محفوظ است. در زیر یک زنجیر اسارت و فشار غیر قابل محکومیت، اغلیی سرو دست شکسته، بعضی ها رنگ پریده، برخی گرسنه [و] برهنه، قسمتی در تمام شبانروز منتظر و گریه کننده.

once you have succeeded in defending and safeguarding your rights, immersed in your happiness and dignity, cast a glance towards Asia, toward houses . . . where the only outlet to the outside world is a door guarded by a gatekeeper. In these houses, women, bound in chains of captivity and under insurmountable pressure, some with broken bones, some pale and sallow, some hungry [and] naked, spend most of their days crying.¹⁴¹

were such late-comers to the Persian literary scene: the first poetic speaker who can be discerned as female was introduced to Persian literature in 1955 with the publication of Forough Farukhzad’s first collection of poems; the publication of the first autobiography by a woman happened in the mid-1950’s; the first novel by an Iranian woman, *Savashun* by Simin Daneshvar, appeared in 1963; and the first biography on the life of a literary figure—that of Forough Farukhzad—was published in 1987.

¹⁴⁰ Quoted in Hamideh Sedighi, *Women and Politics in Iran, Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 25.

¹⁴¹ Mansoureh Etehadieh and Cyrus Sadvandian, *Memoirs of Taj al-Saltanah* (Tarikh-i Iran, 1982), 99. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Women's plight at the time was due to their absolute subordination to a religious patriarchal system in which "the pleasure of God" was synonymous "with the pleasure of the husband and His wrath with the wrath of the husband".¹⁴² In this culture, women were expected to be "absolutely bound in obedience to men—no questions asked—and obey whatever he says and deem his orders as mandatory"; Moreover, "if, for example, he takes her hand and places it in fire, she should consider the fire as if it were an orchard or a garden. Disobedience is not allowed for a heartbeat".¹⁴³ Written by an anonymous writer in the late 19th century, the above words from a manual called *Disciplining Women* neatly sum up the views of the time.

Called *zaiife*—the weak—and deemed as men's *namous*—honor—women were confined in their seclusion to the gender segregated *andarouni*—inner quarters—of their houses and emphatically excluded from the public domain—men's world. Defined in terms of their reproductive and domestic functions in the household, they were barred from venturing into the outside world for reasons other than visiting family or going to the public bathhouses—in which case, they had to traverse sex segregated streets fully veiled, with men on the other side of the street.¹⁴⁴ Upper-middle-class women were categorically shielded from the outside world and not allowed under any circumstances to take on paid work. Their voice was "considered part of her 'Owrat [pudenda] and subject to strict concealment" and their silence "legitimized, spiritualized, fetishized, and

¹⁴² Hasan Javadi, "Women in Persian Literature: An Exploratory Study" in *Women and the Family in Iran*, Edited by Asghar Fathi (E. J. Brill: 1985): 27-59, 56.

¹⁴³ *Ta'dib Al-Nisvan*. PDF file. N.p.

¹⁴⁴ Sedighi, 25.

idealized”.¹⁴⁵ Lacking access to education until the twentieth century, being kept invisible and immobile in a predominantly patriarchal family, being veiled and maligned as the source of evil in a religious community, *proper* women were those whom unrelated men never saw nor heard. It follows that the only women men saw regularly on the streets were women belonging to the lower-strata of the society—those who had something to sell.

2.2.2. Prostitutes in the late 19th and Early 20th Century Iran

In *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century* (1997) and *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* (2007), Parvin Paidar and Hamideh Sedghi briefly describe the life of lower-class women around the time of the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911). They enumerate the jobs of these women as maids, seamstresses, vendors at the bazaars, fortune tellers, carpet weavers, domestic laborers, laundrymaids, matchmakers, spinners, weavers, nannies, midwives, healers, preachers, dancers, singers, public bath attendants, mortuary workers, and prostitutes. Prostitution was widespread, so were temporary and child marriages. Girls as young as nine were sold or given in temporary marriages. According to Paidar, poverty was to blame for “creating an army of urban beggars and prostitutes and prompted many families to send their womenfolk to work”.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words* (Syracuse University Press, 1992), 203.

¹⁴⁶ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 41.

Willem Floor in *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (2008) attributes the main causes of prostitution in the period in question to poverty and the lack of well-paying jobs for women. As men could not afford to marry, women had few other sources of subsistence, and because the authorities found prostitution a good source of income—as prostitutes were made to pay high taxes—this phenomenon rapidly grew.¹⁴⁷ The census of 1922 revealed that out of the 240,000 inhabitants of Tehran, five percent of them were prostitutes.¹⁴⁸ Although from time to time prostitutes were driven out of cities by authorities, arrested, and publicly shamed, these measures were mostly taken to appease the ‘ulama or the conservatives.¹⁴⁹ The surge of village women to Tehran in 1912 was a major contributing factor to the increase in the number of prostitutes in the city. As a census in 1922 showed, almost ninety percent of prostitutes in Tehran came from villages.¹⁵⁰ Floor explains that many women were sold to brothels by their husbands or parents,¹⁵¹ or made to work there to supplement the family’s income, and many resorted to it because they were divorced and had no means of survival.

Janet Afary in *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (2009) adds another category to the rank of common prostitutes. An “impoverished temporary wife” whose “price tumbled in

¹⁴⁷ Willem Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (Mage Publishers, 2008), 240.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

a series of temporary marriages” was also highly susceptible to becoming a prostitute.¹⁵² Unlike her upper-class counterparts, who enjoyed a degree of financial stability, these women “eked out a living on the streets alongside discarded slave concubines, dancers, and musicians.¹⁵³ So economic hardship, triggered by a variety of reasons ranging from the death of an immediate family member to the unemployment of men in the household, was the most prominent reason for making women prostitute their bodies.

According to Sa‘id Madani in *A Study of Social Ills: Prostitution* (2013), the Qajar era (1785-1925) prostitutes can be divided into two main groups. They were either vagrants or worked for pimps under the title of “pupils”.¹⁵⁴ They could be identified by their green, red, or yellow dresses, velvet shoes, and conspicuous makeup. Their visibility in public offended the sensibility and morality of the society and

From time to time, at the instigation of the ‘ulama, the authorities embarked on moral crusades against the unfortunate prostitutes and called for their expulsion. These events reasserted the moral authority of the ‘ulama and provided a form of carnival-like for the public.¹⁵⁵

Prostitutes were eventually deported to a red-light district in 1919. Zal Muhammad Khan, who had allegedly prostituted many women of the royal harem,¹⁵⁶ was

¹⁵² Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 65.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Saeid Madani, *Barrisi-i asib-ha-i ijtimai-i ruspigari dar Iran (A Study of Social Ills in Iran: Prostitution)* (Yadavaran, 2013), 57.

¹⁵⁵ Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 65.

¹⁵⁶ Madani.

entrusted with gathering all prostitutes in a district called the Citadel—also called the New City—which soon became the most important and prosperous red-light district in Iran.¹⁵⁷ But this was not the first attempt to concentrate prostitutes in red-light districts. In 1914, the first police chief of the country, Conte de Monte Forte, a Swedish citizen, ordered all prostitutes to be restricted to work in *Chal-i Saylabi* to stop spreading prostitution and avoid the public disturbance they caused for the respectable society.¹⁵⁸ The resettlement that happened in 1919 is even more significant than this initial effort to gather all prostitutes in one neighborhood. According to Hasan I‘zam Qudsi (1890-1977), a contemporaneous diarist, by relocating the prostitutes from a neighborhood inside the city (*Chal-i Saylabi*) to a district outside the gates of the city (the Citadel, a.k.a. the New City), the authorities had ulterior motives beyond expelling the contagion caused by these women or pacifying the clerics. As the Citadel was also the location for army barracks, many soldiers were hassling respectable women on the streets.¹⁵⁹ By moving all the prostitutes to where army campgrounds were located, and later medicalizing and regulating their work, the army, like its 19th century counterpart in England, was after ensuring safe sexual services for their troops. In his journals, which span decades, I‘zam does not concern himself with the underlying reasons for prostitution nor does he comment on how to eradicate this alleged malaise.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 57.

¹⁵⁸ Murtiza Sayfi Tafrushi, *Pulis-i Khafi-i Iran, Mururi bar Rukhdadha-i Siasi va Tarikhchih-i Shahr bani (1299-1320) (Secret Police in Iran: A Study of Political Events and History of Law Enforcement in Iran, 1921-1942)*, (Ghughnus, 1988).

¹⁵⁹ Hasan I‘zam Qudsi, *Khatirat-i man ya rushan shudan-i tarikh-i sad salih (My Diaries: or One Hundred Years of Persian History)*, (Karang: 1963), 203.

Writing for *Alam-i nisvan* (Women's World) in 1928, Mihrtaj Rakhshan, a teacher, pleaded with her readers to help reform and rescue contrite prostitutes. She vehemently argued that many of the fallen women had been deceived and forced into working in the brothels and, fearing their fathers' and brothers' wrath, would never return to their homes. Therefore, she proposed, it was incumbent upon the state to create a rehabilitation center—which she called the House of Hope—for these girls. To keep them from falling into their previous wayward life, she asked the potential investors to set up small businesses for these women. For example, she argued they could be provided with a limited number of sewing machines which they could use to make money.¹⁶⁰

Rakhshan's radical propositions were taken up once more in the second Congress of Eastern Women in 1932 in Tehran. Following her presentation, the delegates came up with a number of resolutions regarding prostitution. They asked for the prohibition of secret prostitution, i.e. prostitution in venues other than brothels, and the banishing of open prostitution to the suburban areas.¹⁶¹ The official policy of the Pahlavi regime (1925-1979) was also to regulate prostitution and drive it out of the public eye into a safe place outside the bounds of the city.

Prostitutes, whether they practiced their profession in public or in secret, were outcasts. According to Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian, or the “mother of social work” in Iran, even saying their name or profession before respectable society was seen as the height of indecency and indiscretion. It was “so bad that our servants would not have

¹⁶⁰ Ghulamreza Salami and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Nehzat-i zanan-i sharq (Congress of Eastern Women)*, (Shiraz, 2010), 311.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 148-150.

spoken of it in the hearing of a pious woman like my mother".¹⁶² To become a prostitute was the worst possible destiny a woman could meet. In a society where men were the guardians of the family and did all in their power to keep their women in the private quarters of their houses, to become a public woman was an unpardonable and unmentionable offence.

The few dignitaries, politicians, intellectuals, and women activists who commented on the subject usually did so indirectly. They passingly mention prostitution and speculate about its roots and remedies in their overarching debate over the issue of social ills and woman's abjection in general. Before the twentieth century, the topic of edifying social, political, and cultural decay had never been discussed with such vehemence and in such an organized way, and it was particularly unheard of to speak of modernizing women. However, the major changes that occurred in the first decade of the century - namely, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911, the first bourgeois democratic revolution of the developing countries,¹⁶³ - changed the fabric of Iranian society so thoroughly that it brought the issue of the cultural underdevelopment to the fore, with women bearing the brunt of this backwardness, and prostitutes being the most wretched of all women. In the next section, I present a very brief history of the political climate of the time in order both to shed light on the reasons for the perception of the

¹⁶² Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian, *Daughter of Persia: A Woman's Journey from Her Father's Harem Through the Islamic Revolution* (Broadway Books, 2006), 78.

¹⁶³ Abdolhadi Hairi, *Tashayu va mashrutiat dar Iran (Shiism and Constitutionalism in Iran)*, (Amir Kabir, 2002), 39.

country as backward and to explain why there was a sudden interest in the status of women in society as well as an unprecedented surge in commentary regarding prostitutes.

2.2.3. The Political Climate of the Early Decades of the Twentieth Century

Ebrahim Beig, the eponymous protagonist of a fictional travelogue, on his trip to Iran, the motherland, at the behest of his dying father, describes the country as follows:

در اثنای این مسافرت که قسمت قلیلی از ممالک ایران را دیدم دلم خون شد. همه جا ملک
پریشان، ملت پریشان، تجارت پریشان، خیال پریشان، عقاید پریشان، شهر پریشان، شهریار
پریشان، خدای را این چه پریشانیست؟

In the course of my trip in which I visited a few parts of Iran, I was devastated to find the whole land in distress, people in distress, the economy in distress, minds in distress, thoughts in distress, cities in distress, the king in distress. For Heaven's sake! What ails this country?¹⁶⁴

Written in 1903, *Ebrahim Beig's Travelogue or The Blight of Fanaticism* was one of the scores of books that criticized the Qajar Era's (1785 to 1925) traditional mode of living and thinking for lagging far behind the "civilized", "enlightened", and industrialized world. With each sojourn abroad and the expanded interaction with the outside world, people became increasingly conscious of the country's socio-economic and cultural "backwardness".¹⁶⁵ To top it all, the political and economic encroachment of

¹⁶⁴ Zeinulabedin Maraghehi, *Siahatnameye Ebrahim Beig ya balaye ta'asob (Ebrahim Beig's Travelogue or The Blight of Fanaticism)*, PDF file.

¹⁶⁵ According to Hassan Mir-Abidini, *Sad sal dastan nivisi dar Iran (A hundred Years of Fiction-Writing in Iran)*, (Tundar, 1990), "the encounter with Europe is the main cultural issue of the time. On the one hand, it helped incite the intellectuals to stir up the

European powers, and the Qajars' inability to deal with that threat, outraged people and incited them to desperately call for an ideological and structural transformation of the society.

According to Kasravi, a renowned Iranian historian, "during the Qajar rule, Iran became immensely incapacitated and its grandeur, status, and reputation gravely declined and the main reason for it was that, whereas other countries had progressed, Iran had stagnated".¹⁶⁶ Malkum Khan, a contemporary dignitary and intellectual, attributes the reasons for Iran's stagnation at the time to its "political despotism and cultural insularity".¹⁶⁷ Corruption and tyranny reigned supreme in the country. There were no codified laws, no central army, no just or organized judicial system, no tax or customs departments. The Shahs, the so called *Zel Allah* or the shadows of God on earth, were draconian and unaccountable to anyone, their authority absolute. Instead of alleviating the sufferings of people who were perpetually grappling with famine, poverty, disease, inflation, political instability, unemployment, and injustice, the monarchs busied themselves with conferring state lands on the courtiers, bestowing hereditary pensions on those close to the crown, and going on extravagant trips to Europe funded by exorbitant foreign loans, ridiculous concessions, and humiliating treaties that enraged the already disgruntled 'ulama, propertied middle-classes, and intelligentsia.

reformation in political and social arena, and on the other hand, it resulted in deprecating the Iranian national heritage." P. 18.

¹⁶⁶ Ahmad Kasravi, *History of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran*, (Sida-i Muasir, 2001).

¹⁶⁷ Ervand Abrahamian, "The Causes of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (Aug., 1979), 398.

To help the country on its path to progress, the state implemented certain mechanisms. Abbas Mirza (1789-1833), Naser al-Din Shah Qajar's viceroy, established publication houses, published newspapers, commissioned translations, dispatched students abroad on state scholarships to learn the newest science and technology, and Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Kabir (1807-1852), the premier, established Dar-al-Funun, the first institution of modern education in Iran to train upper-class youth in medicine, engineering, military science, geology, etc. These institutions were meant to train a new class of professionals who would help Iran on its way to modernization and bolster the power of the central government. However, by familiarizing the youth with secular and western revolutionary ideas such as fraternity, equality, liberty, and democracy they inadvertently created a new revolutionary class who ultimately undermined their despotic dynasty by engendering an ideological revolution toward the end of the nineteenth century. To the modern intelligentsia, human progress was only attainable through breaking free from

the three chains of royal despotism, clerical dogmatism, and foreign imperialism. They viewed the first as the political enemy of liberty, equality, and the pursuit of social progress; the second as the ideological opponent of rational-scientific knowledge . . . and the third as the economic exploiter of weak states, such as their own.¹⁶⁸

With a sociopolitical revolution fermenting in the country, the introduction of modern ideas such as liberty, equality, secularism, patriotism, nationalism, constitutionalism, and liberalism through the establishment of publication houses,

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 395.

educational institutions, and modern intellectuals familiar with European political thought undermined traditional autocracy by underscoring the importance of the reduction of royal authority through a constitution, the right to state representation via a consultative assembly, the establishment of secular laws and modern institutions, and the cessation of imperialist domination of the country by Russia and Britain.

For the burgeoning bourgeois class, the state-sponsored mechanisms were hardly sufficient to revive the country's languishing cultural, economic, and social scene. They put the blame on the ruling class and its obsolete political, economic, and social practices and aspired to rectify the broken system through the institution of a parliament. Out of this socio-political and cultural awakening rose the Constitutional Revolution of the late 19th century. After multiple strikes and demonstrations at different sanctuaries and finally at the British legation, a royal proclamation was issued by Muzafar al-Din Shah on August 9, 1906 that allowed for the convening of a national consultative body, called *Majlis*.

2.2.4. Feminine Consciousness

It was in this intellectual climate that, for the first time, a women's movement emerged under the direct influence of anti-imperialism and the contemporaneous nationalism which established a constitution calling for "equality for all citizens in law".¹⁶⁹ From its earliest days, the Constitutional Revolution was aided by myriad groups of women who had organized themselves in semi-secret societies and channeled their

¹⁶⁹ Ali Akbar Mahdi, "The Iranian Women's Movement: A Century Long Struggle," *The Muslim World*, vol. 24 (October 2004), 428.

indignation with the Qajar's autocracy and corrupt rule into supporting the nationalist cause. A great many women, particularly from the upper echelons of society, took an active stand in the current issues of the day. They not only lent their moral support to the constitutionalists, but also "organized street riots, participated in some fights, joined underground activities against foreign forces".¹⁷⁰ Among their most important contributions to the Revolution was the boycott of foreign imported textiles and their pledge for supporting national products. They also mobilized to help create a national bank to alleviate the shortage of capital by donating their jewelry, household articles, hard-earned money, and inheritance to participate in this auspicious occasion.¹⁷¹

Women's most urgent demand from their fellow constitutionalists was the facilitation of education for women given that only three out of a thousand at the time were in fact receiving an education.¹⁷² As early as 1838, a girls' school had opened in Iran but the negative perception of the parents and the conservative 'ulama's injunctions regarding the immoral and irreligious nature of girls' education had barred their popularity.¹⁷³ On the very day of the royal proclamation granting the permission for the convening of the Majlis, a petition was circulated among the delegates to recognize women's right to education and social participation.¹⁷⁴ Women argued that men should not dread educated women as they would make more intelligent companions for their

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Afary, *Constitutional Revolution*.

¹⁷² Paidar, 41.

¹⁷³ Afary, *Constitutional Revolution*, 182.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 181.

husbands and better mothers for their children, preparing them to take on advanced roles in the society. They concluded it was the lack of education for women that hindered progress in the country. But to their dismay, women were reminded that such undertakings were male prerogatives and that they should content themselves with the “raising of children, home economies, preserving honor, and other such sciences that dealt with the issue of morality and means of livelihood of the family”.¹⁷⁵

Disillusioned with the Majlis and its unwillingness and inability to change their situation, women established and funded not only girls’ schools but also women’s health clinics and other institutions with no help from the authorities. They employed women teachers, gave discounts to poor families to encourage them to sign up their daughters, and whenever they could, called out the delegates for their inaction and lack of moral fiber to fulfil their promises to the nation.¹⁷⁶

Women’s debates around education came into being out of national exigencies; they were aimed at educating a more nationalistic class of women who prioritized their homeland over their maternal instincts. It was also at this moment in the history of Iran that the first Iranian women’s journals started to be published, propagating social improvement in the status of women by voicing their concerns regarding childcare, hygiene, marriage, literacy, pregnancy, marital relations and, in particular, what Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet calls “patriotic motherhood”, i.e. “mothers dedicated to the family who also identified with the ideals of the nation, whether in promoting national goods or in

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 181.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

spreading the sentiment of love of homeland”.¹⁷⁷ It was this notion of patriotic motherhood, with its prioritization of the nation state over natural instinct, that paved the way for the politicization of domesticity to fit the state’s interests and priorities. To train such mothers, literacy and education were of the utmost importance. In the meantime, the ‘ulama, the conservative faction of the Majlis, issued a *fatwa*¹⁷⁸ stating that these (elementary) schools were promoters of prostitution and contrary to Islam,¹⁷⁹ as a result of which female teachers and students were physically and verbally assaulted on their way to school.¹⁸⁰

By the second parliamentary period (1910-1912), women had become even more outspoken and vocal in demanding changes to their status in society. They were actively writing for newspapers, giving lectures to their fellow women, and distributing night letters. They were questioning gender relationships and denouncing their society’s patriarchal traditions such as polygyny, loveless arranged marriages, seclusion, domestic violence, and easy male divorce. As Najmabadi observes, “by the 1910s, and in women's journals, the language of parity openly broke out of the bounds and bondage of male

¹⁷⁷ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, “Patriotic Womanhood: The Culture of Feminism in Modern Iran, 1900-1941,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1 (May, 2005), 32.

¹⁷⁸ A religious ruling given by an Islamic authority.

¹⁷⁹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, (University of California Press, 2005), 200.

¹⁸⁰ Afary, *Constitutional Revolution*.

protection and began to speak of equality”.¹⁸¹ As they couldn’t challenge the *Shari‘a*¹⁸², they appealed to men to stop using these measures against women, arguing that their wives would be ideal companions for them once they were educated.¹⁸³

One major groundbreaking demand that women were espousing at the time was that of unveiling. A number of progressive intellectuals, constitutionalists, poets, satirists, and journalists gave their support to their cause, as did Taj al-Saltānih, a Qajar princess. Citing her own loveless arranged marriage at the age of thirteen, she held the veil responsible for the lack of love and compatibility in families. Since women and men could not see one another before marriage, they had no way of confirming whether or not their spouse was to their liking. As a result, after the wedding, husbands would spend all their time with his mistresses ignoring their own wives whom they only married to better their economic and social position. In her opinion, the veil was also responsible for “the ruin of the country, immorality, wickedness, and stalling the country’s progress”:

در مملکتی که دوثلث او بیکار در خانه بمانند، البته یک ثلث دیگرش تا میتواند باید اسباب
آسایش و خورد [و] خوراک [و] پوشاک دوثلث دیگر را فراهم کنند. ناچار، به امورات مملکتی
و تریبی وطن نمیتوان پرداخت. حال، اگر این دوثلث معنا با یکدیگر مشغول کار بودند، البته
دوبرابر بهتر مملکت ترقی کرده، صاحب ثروت میشدند.

In a country in which two third of the population stay home with no jobs and the other one third has to grind away to provide for the food and clothes of the two third, it is obvious that one can’t think of state affairs

¹⁸¹ Najmabadi, “Zanhā-yi Millat,” 70.

¹⁸² Islamic canonical law.

¹⁸³ Afary, *Constitutional Revolution*, 198.

and country's advancement. But if this two third also started working with the rest, of course the country will make twice as much progress and they also will be rich.¹⁸⁴

To Taj al-Saltānih, the veil was also a major culprit in women resorting to prostitution. She believed that if women were unveiled, they could engage in other forms of productive activity in the society and make their living through respectable choices. Her remarks regarding the connection between the veil, lack of social mobility, unemployment, and prostitution expressed a common sentiment of the time: "*hijab* causes poverty in the country. [For] Women are deprived of all business" and have no choice but to resort to prostitution.¹⁸⁵ The reason behind so much antagonism toward *hijab* was its status as the most potent cultural symbol of Islam in Iran.¹⁸⁶ Its compulsoriness ensured the invisibility of women in society by necessitating them to refrain from all contact with unrelated men.¹⁸⁷ Therefore, educating girls by male teachers as well as works that brought women in contact with men were extremely suspect.

To remedy this situation, many advocated unveiling and some supported education for women. Lack of education was counted as one of the main causes of

¹⁸⁴ Etehadieh and Sadvandian, *Memoirs of Tāj al-Saltānah*, 101.

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in Afary, *Constitutional Revolution*, 5.

¹⁸⁶ In none of the canonical texts of Islam is there mention of *Hijab* or the veil. It is a later addition to the religion and its compulsoriness is open to interpretation as is evident in the practice of many Muslims who choose not to wear the veil.

¹⁸⁷ It is essential to remember that we are here referring to the interpretation of *hijab* by people living around the turn of the twentieth century in Iran. Its meaning and significance have undergone a great deal of change since the time in question.

prostitution. Upon the death of their menfolk, illiterate, destitute women had no other options but to become prostitutes or beggars. Amin al-Saltanih, an advocate of moderates in the *Majlis* believed women's education, "was necessary because it enabled women experiencing hardship to earn an honest living instead of turning to prostitution".¹⁸⁸ Rushanak Nawardust, the female writer of a journal for women, also explains that the majority of prostitutes were poor women who had fallen on hard times because of economic reasons and a lack of family or relatives to care for them. Like Taj al-Saltanih, she argued that a lack of independent employment for women was to blame for prostitution.¹⁸⁹

Education, unveiling, and employment were broached for the first time by elite women. In their efforts, women were backed by a number of progressive intellectuals who felt sympathetic to women's plight and endeavored to secure women's right. A number of liberal-minded constitutionalists raised the subject in their writings. In 1911, when reviewing election laws, one delegate even proposed women suffrage which was met by derision and resentment. Women's suffrage was not to be achieved until years later in 1963. Their right to education and social participation was finally recognized in the reign of Reza Shah who officially banned veiling in 1936.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Paidar, 65.

¹⁸⁹ Kahsani-Sabet, 35.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 42.

2.3. Literature of the Time

2.3.1. Rise of New Forms

The intellectuals who lent their reputation and authority to the advancement of women's cause turned their attention to creating a more responsible form of media in which the issues of the day could be more adequately addressed. It is during this time that new forms of literature emerged within which it was possible to talk about women's abjection in society in general and the wretched status of prostitutes in particular. Before this time, women's portrayal in the classical literature was almost homogeneously misogynistic. In his scholarly study of the status and social condition of women reflected in Persian folktales, literary works, and theological treatises, Hasan Javadi delineates the misogyny with which classical poets and satirists treated women in their works. Similar to the practice of the courtly poets in the West, Iranian poets made an exception for their imaginary or actual "beloved" to whose coyness and coquetry they dedicated many poems. Women in general, on the other hand, were ridiculed and castigated for their lustfulness, infidelity, fickleness, gullibility, shrewishness, guile, duplicity, among other unfavorable qualities attributed to them. These "traditional and medieval attitudes" persisted in Persian literature until the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁹¹ In what follows I will briefly discuss how and why they changed.

The gradual formation of the middle classes and the expanded contact with Europe through the translation of European literature, the establishment of European-style schools in the country, study abroad, and the adaptation of Western printing

¹⁹¹ Javadi, 46.

mechanisms, ushered in a revolutionary and modern era pushing for constitutional rights and the rule of the law along with a great deal of national soul-searching and self-doubt regarding the traditional values of the Iranian society. This clash of pre-existing forms of a crumbling world with newly introduced paradigms crystalized in the approach to the status and function of literature in society. The intellectuals and literary writers of the opposition envisioned a socio-political role for literature in which it would be first and foremost critical of autocracy, administrative corruption, superstition, constraining traditions, ignorance, illiteracy, and all forms of dogmatism, and would reflect and report more on the problems of contemporary society and the lives of ordinary people. In other words, to tackle the new socio-political milieu of the country, they called for a democratic literature to awaken the masses and precipitate ideological and structural reforms.¹⁹²

By all accounts, the constitutional literature of the early decades of the twentieth century fulfilled its promise to incite the masses and mobilize them toward the cause. This national resurgence and the sweeping revolutionary developments that accompanied it necessitated a fresh mode of expressing revolutionary and novel ideas. New concepts and epoch-making ideas were being publicized for the first time in intellectual circles and the ornate, convoluted, bombastic, detached, and unrealistic courtly literature of the past could no longer express the immediacy of the writers' situation and the urgency of their messages. The classical subjects, forms, and diction now seemed obsolete and out of touch with the reality of contemporary history.

¹⁹² Hassan Mir-Abidini, *Sad sal dastan nivisi dar Iran (A hundred Years of Fiction-Writing in Iran)*, (Tundar, 1990), 18.

Current issues concerning the motherland became the new staple for literary creations. The new literature of the age reflected the subversive and rebellious atmosphere of the time. It was aimed at destabilizing hierarchies, restructuring the political scene, and undermining the status quo. Consequently, the new genres that came into being were much affected by the revolutionary zeitgeist of the time; they were unconventional and unprecedented.

With the advent of the revolutionary era and free press, writers were “no longer writing as the shah’s literary entourage”,¹⁹³ and didn’t have to appeal to a select group of noble patrons but could now reach for the semi-literate readership. This shift in audience was the result of the change in attitude toward the value of individuals in the Iranian society. According to Mir-Abidini, the increase in literacy and the growing contact with Europe, especially through the translation of European literary works, accounts for the change of approach toward a focus on the life of individuals.¹⁹⁴ The establishment of the printing press in the nineteenth century was instrumental in implementing this change. With the help of lithography and movable type, an increasing number of people had access to writings—hence the rise in the publication of newspapers, periodicals, and journals whose self-proclaimed goal was to market to people from all walks of life. The printing press also facilitated the publication of translated works which introduced new forms, genres, and worldviews into the Iranian literary scene. These new modes of writing helped strip the written language of its unnecessary pomp and ceremony and

¹⁹³ Sorour Soroudi, “Poet and Revolution: The Impact of Iran's Constitutional Revolution on the Social and Literary Outlook of the Poets of the Time: Part I.” *Iranian Studies*, vol. 12, no. ½ (Winter - Spring, 1979), 4.

¹⁹⁴ Mir-Abidini, 17-27.

made it simpler, realistic, and colloquial like the language spoken by ordinary people, now the audience of literary endeavors.

2.3.2. The Rise of the Modern Novel

The modern novel that arose in Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was the culmination of these developments in Persian Literature.¹⁹⁵ With the middle classes now vying with the gentry for a new socio-political status, bourgeois values came to prevail in the society and the novel became the perfect form to encapsulate this paradigm change. As the attitude toward the world and literature changed, new characters and formerly tabooed subjects filled the pages of these new books.

With the dissolution of the old paradigms and the rise of the bourgeois class and their new value system, social novels that depicted political and administrative corruption, ignorance, and the misery of the common people became prevalent. As Azhand points out, social novels¹⁹⁶ from the very beginning had an anti-aristocratic inclination and voiced the concerns and hopes of ordinary people. “In fact, the warps and wefts of the social novel are woven by social criticism and the seeds of social reform and

¹⁹⁵ Christophe Balay, *Paydayish-i ruman-i Farsi (The Emergence of Persian Novel)*, Translated by Mahvash Qadimi and Nasrin Dokht Khattat (Muin, 2007), 12.

¹⁹⁶ These novels are grouped under the umbrella term *social* novel. They are different from social realist novels.

improvement were disseminated through them. This kind of novel had a significant share in the growth of the modern Iranian society”.¹⁹⁷

What all of these novels have in common is an astute criticism of the social decay particularly evident in the new administrative and political system that supplanted the old monarchical structure. The disillusionment which followed the failure of the Constitutional Revolution is a common thread in all of these new novels. The new “democratic” institutions which came into being, the new parliaments, the bureaucratic organizations, hardly “improve[d] the economy or . . . address[ed] the numerous social issues raised in the revolution”.¹⁹⁸ The suspension of the *Majlis* in 1911 and its prior impotence to improve the lot of the people who had fought for it understandably led to the disillusionment of the revolutionaries and constitutionalist sympathizers. During the eleven years after the suspension of the second *Majlis*, twenty governments assumed power.¹⁹⁹ In the first decade after the revolution thirty-six cabinets came to power, each disinterested or incapable of improving the situation.²⁰⁰ In other words, as Bakhtiar, the fictional character of *The Wretched Life of the Peasant* (1927) points out, people soon

¹⁹⁷ Yaghub Azhand, *Tajadud-i adabi dar duri-i mashrutih (Literary Revival in the Constitutional Period)* (Institute for research and Promotion of the Humanities, 2005), 460.

¹⁹⁸ *ibid*, 314.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰⁰ Maskub, 6.

realized that “Constitutionalism was a word that meant nothing. The curtain had lifted and all that had changed was the costumes of the actors”.²⁰¹

2.3.3. The Rise of a New Character: The Prostitute

With these social novels, women for the first time became the center of attention in literature. They were no longer portrayed as the same generalized types that women had regularly been in the classical literature of the past. They were now fully fleshed individuals with different personalities and histories. The novel became the most efficient form to portray this shift in women’s place in literature. The early social novels chose women’s stories as the best representatives of the social, cultural, and moral decrepitude of their time. By giving women individual voices, these novels strived to make the personal pain suffered by women felt by the whole society.²⁰² In them, one finds women portrayed as victims of the socio-economic conditions and patriarchal values of their society. Caught in an endless mire of inhuman traditions such as unwanted arranged marriages, polygamous relationships, and easy male divorces, women were suppressed within their families and in the society at large. Their plight was seen as the direct result of an oppressive system that valued superstition, illiteracy, and religious dogmatism in half of its population.

Immensely influenced by French romantic writers such as Hugo and Dumas, the majority of social novelists chose to write about prostitutes to shed light on the plight of

²⁰¹ Quoted in Mir-Abidini, 63.

²⁰² Shahrokh Maskub, *Dastane adabiat va sargozashte ejtema (The Story of Literature and the History of the Society)*, (Tehran: Foroozane Rooz, 1994), 127.

women in the society. The brothel became the backdrop of all the squalor in Iran at the time of their publication, including the corruption of the system and the inhumanity of its traditions, and prostitution became a versatile trope that captured all the nuances of being a woman of that time. Furthermore, as the economic state of the country had deteriorated as a result of WWI, marriage was no longer a luxury that young men could afford. With love still a taboo subject and women safely tucked away in their quarters, the expression of romantic sentiments emerged in men's relationship with prostitutes.²⁰³

Prostitutes populated the pages of a great many novels in late Qajar and the first Pahlavi eras (1925-1941). Abbas Khalili's *The Wretched Life* (1924), *Revenge* (1925), and *The Secrets of the Night* (1926), all describe the lives of prostitutes who, like Dumas' *Madame Camelia*, suffer from consumption. Rabi Ansari's *Human Evils*, or *The Murderer of the Twentieth Century* (1929), tells the story of two girls kidnapped from their hometown and sold to a brothel, ending with their deaths by suicide and syphilis. Jahangir Jalili's *I Also Cried* (1933) tells the story of a girl losing her virginity and ending up in a brothel and Muhammad Mas'ud's *Nocturnal Pleasures* (1932) explores the brothels of Tehran's red district.

According to Maskub, these novels have not been the focus of literary study because their form and idea is "incomplete" and their language "raw". They are not "trans-historical", "universal", and "artistic" but belong very much to the time and place of their conception. Their value is sociological and historical because "they belong to an epoch-making turning point in the contemporary history of Iran. Traces of these changes are best found in these works and they, for their socio-historical values, merit

²⁰³ Mir-Abidini, 54.

attention”.²⁰⁴ These fictional accounts prove invaluable in providing information regarding the perception of prostitutes among the ordinary people as well as the literati. Sociological material for the study of prostitution in urban and rural areas in nineteenth and early twentieth century Iran remains scarce and no historical account directly dealing with this topic has yet been written either by prostitutes or about them.

Another important reason for the sudden interest in prostitutes was their increased number and concomitant visibility on the cityscape. On the one hand, WWI plagued Iran by making the country a scene of imperialist occupation as well as a fertile breeding ground for tribal bloodshed, poverty, famine, and contagious diseases. On the other, with the massive expansion of Tehran, a large number of villagers migrated to the city and, given the limited employment opportunities for women, many girls found themselves in the unfortunate circumstances that resulted in their prostitution. Tehran, “an overgrown version of the remote, disease-ridden village it had been in the eighteenth century”, had very little to offer these people.²⁰⁵ Sattareh Farman-Farma’ian in her autobiography describes the city as follows:

By the 1930s, when I was growing up, it had nearly a quarter of a million people—this in a land of tiny villages of forty or a hundred families, and with a population so thinly scattered that a city of thirty thousand was like a metropolis. Yet despite its size, most of Tehran was still a sprawling mud-brick town of mazy, crooked streets too narrow for any traffic but wagons, mules, and camels. In the alleys, children splashed and played in

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 2.

²⁰⁵ Farman-Farma’ian, *Daughter of Persia*, 52-53.

the deep running gutters or *jubes* which served the common people equally as wash troughs, toilets, and drinking fountains. . . . The stench of urine and excrement was ever present.²⁰⁶

It is within this dismal milieu that prostitutes make their first appearance in novels. With very few exceptions, most of the prostitutes depicted in the novels of the early decades of the twentieth century are helpless women who became prostitutes out of economic necessity. Many of them lost their virginity to a seducer or were raped and, forever tainted by losing their ‘honor’, could not return to the respectable society. There are a few others who were abducted and forced into working in brothels.

Although a popular figure among writers, prostitutes were rarely depicted solely to shed light on their own lives and circumstances. Instead, they were deployed to shock the audience into seeing the utter depravity of the time; i.e., a time when *zanan*—women—the protected possession of men, were driven to prostitution. Afsane Najmabadi in “Zanhā-yi Millat: Women or Wives of the Nation?” meticulously dissects the homonymic ambiguity of the term *zan* and its dual meaning wife/woman. She explains that in many texts of the Constitutional period this ambiguity was present. So, one’s woman and wife were not only synonymous but also, to take this idea to its logical conclusion, the women of the nation were the figurative wives of the nation as well. Grouping them in the same category as underage children, the religious-legal discourse of the time “redefined women as the weak victims of autocracy in need of the protective custody of a just constitution and of manly citizens”;²⁰⁷ in other words, the protection of

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Najmabadi, “Zanhā-yi Millat, ” 56.

women—a.k.a. the wives of the nation—was incumbent on every upstanding citizen. By depicting the life of a prostitute, the novels of this period appealed to these manly citizens to rectify their society in which the moral, social, political, and administrative decay was besmirching this figurative woman/wife’s virtue.

As Asad Sayf astutely points out, “in a patriarchal culture, the measure of the society’s corruption is a woman’s body. . . . In the patriarchal literature of Iran, it is only through dragging a female character to the brothels that a man can see his society’s decadence as reflected in the mirror of her body”.²⁰⁸ Understandably, the stories of the prostitutes served as not only descriptive accounts of the abject state of women but also as cautionary tales warning people of what would happen if the situation is not amended. By playing upon people’s fear of public women—a woman lost to male guardianship and religion—the writers in question drew people’s attention to the underlying causes of prostitution and sought their amelioration.

2.4. Case Study: *Tehran-i makhawf*²⁰⁹ (1924) by Murtiza Mushfiq Kazimi

Belonging to a new class of intellectuals, well-educated and nationalist, the writers in question dedicated themselves to the progressive agenda of the Revolution by scrupulously shedding light on the various societal malaise which needed to be remedied. Murtiza Mushfiq Kazimi, one of the writers at the vanguard of social novels in Iran, describes his reasons for writing *Tehran-i makhawf* (1924) as wishing to address “the turbulent and chaotic state of the country” in which newspapers were “abusive and

²⁰⁸ Sayf, 10

²⁰⁹ The title translates as “the Horrible Tehran.”

unprincipled”, laws “unnatural”, marriages “ill-considered”, and statesmen either puppets of the foreign powers or arrogant conservatives who “wouldn’t take the tiniest steps toward bettering the country”. “The social abjection of women”, Kazimi insists, “the spread of prostitution and drugs and immorality and inertia, . . . , poverty, and economic recession” were also among the underlying reasons why he felt obliged to write the book.²¹⁰

Kazimi was born in 1901 in Iran and educated in Europe. Upon his return to the country, he became a member of The Young Iran Association. The members of this association were all educated and nationalist Iranian youth who had taken a pledge to dedicate themselves to the advancement of the country, in which women’s liberation loomed very large. With the collapse of the old world, these intellectuals came to the aid of the new regime which they deemed to be capable of safeguarding the independence and dignity of their country through its nationalistic ideology and powerful military. Kazimi and many of his associates held high profile positions in Reza Shah’s administration.

Tehran-i makhawf tells two parallel stories; the heartbreaking tale of two star-crossed lovers, and the story of a prostitute. Coming from a poor family, Farrokh is in love with his cousin Mahin whose father has made a name and fortune for himself in politics, albeit through bribery and illegal activities. To advance himself further, i.e. to become first a delegate and then a minister, the father decides to give Mahin in marriage to a debauched prince and *Majlis* delegate despite her ardent protestations. But the lovers elope before he can arrange the wedding and spend one night together before they are

²¹⁰ Azhand, 465.

found and returned to Tehran. When Mahin's pregnancy becomes obvious she is sent to a remote corner of Tehran where she dies in childbirth, while Farrokh is sent into exile as a result of her father's schemes.

But more important for my purposes in this dissertation is the parallel story of the prostitute, Iffat who Farrokh chances upon in the meantime in exile. Iffat's story is told alongside her brothel inmates' in a series of chapters called *The Ailing District* where music and singing is always heard, the police patrol the area, houses are marked by lanterns, and women express their availability by sitting next to their doors and, upon hearing the footsteps of pedestrians, signaling them to enter.²¹¹

With unprecedented precision, Kazimi describes these women's appearance, behavior, mannerisms, and background as well as their customers, their working conditions, the brothel location, their grievances, and their reasons for becoming prostitutes in the first place. In these chapters, Kazimi's narrator shifts from third person omniscient to first person. As a result, each one of the prostitutes is given her own voice and the space to tell her heart-rending life story without the mediation of a third person narrator. This, in itself, is a great accomplishment for the character of the prostitute. The story of the brothel inmates unravels in one utterly squalid house of this district depicting women on whose "faces you could see traces of the poverty and adversity" that they had been subjected to.²¹² With small variations, these prostitutes reappear in later novels

²¹¹ Mushfiq Kazimi, *Tehran-i makhawf (The Horrible Tehran)*, (Omid-i Farda, 2010), 46.

²¹² Ibid. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

influenced by *Tehran-i makhawf* attesting to the fact that Kazimi established a tradition and provided the prototypes other novelists drew upon.

The first, Ashraf, is a poor butcher's daughter who describes herself as "jealous and spoilt".²¹³ Very much like Tess of D'Urberville, she falls asleep in the wrong place. Upon waking up, Ashraf finds herself in a luxurious house with a nobleman who claims to want to give her shelter for the night. As she is only twelve, her seduction does not require much time or hard work. Getting her drunk, he sleeps with her without Ashraf even realizing that she has had sex when she wakes up in the morning. He gives her some money and dismisses her. When her family finds out, they can only think of one solution to the disrepute the rape of their daughter would bring them: getting the rapist to marry their daughter even if it is only for a temporary period. But the police chief they report this to throws cold water on their plans: "stupid woman! Do you understand what you are saying? How is it possible for him to marry the daughter of a butcher even temporarily?"²¹⁴ Instead, their silence is bought for a pittance they later have to pay to a young man to marry their daughter. But Ashraf can no longer bring herself to be poor. Her ordinary life pales in comparison with the luxury she has experienced for a night. As her aunt is a brothel keeper, she gives in to becoming a prostitute hoping she will get entry to an aristocratic life she so passionately yearns for. But instead, she recounts, "Now I have been living here for three years and so far, I have fallen severely ill a couple

²¹³ Ibid, 50.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 51-2.

of times and with the bills my aunt has forged, I owe her 60 *tuman* and I don't think I can ever pay her off".²¹⁵

The next story is told by Aqdas. The daughter of a poor draper, she, as a young girl, was deceived into marrying an old man. She was told the groom was a young tobacco merchant but as it was not customary for the wife to see her husband before the wedding, she found herself married to an old man with a pockmarked face. Soon, she was to learn that "Haji Aqa was a true Muslim and other than me, his permanent wife, he had two other permanent wives and two temporary ones".²¹⁶ Heart-broken by her misfortune and her husband's infidelity, she falls prey to the first man who stalks her and contracts gonorrhoea as a result of which her husband divorces her. She ends up in the brothel as she had no family and no means of subsistence other than her body. Just like Ashraf, Aqdas cannot leave the brothel because she now owes a large sum to the brothel keeper.

Iffat's story is different from the previous ones. She is an upper-class girl whose husband forces her into sleeping with his bosses so that he can get promotions. Once there are no higher positions he can aim for, he disposes of her and silences her by threatening to expose her. He shows her a letter and claims that he has written to her parents about her extramarital affairs and that they have disowned her. As she is illiterate, she has no way of ascertaining the truth. He divorces her when she has fallen ill and delirious and leaves her destitute with no means to fend for herself. In Iffat's case, the stigma of divorce is a potent factor in making her believe that she will no longer be welcome in her parents' house.

²¹⁵ Ibid, 53.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 55.

Akhtar's story is considerably shorter. She was brought up in a brothel as an orphan. Her father had warned her mother that he would divorce her if she gave birth to a girl, so she abandons her daughter Akhtar at birth telling the father the baby was stillborn. Growing up in a brothel, prostitution came to her as the only and most obvious option.

As is clear from the plotline, the novel depicts a corrupt society that preys upon women. Every one of these girls ends up in the brothel as a result of a multiplicity of misogynous societal and cultural practices. Through narrating their life stories, Kazimi brings to light the many injustices that are committed against women. Ashraf typifies impoverished women whose plight is the result of economic factors. Aqdas is a victim of medieval marriage practices which deprive women of the right to see their husbands before marriage while allowing men to marry multiple women on a permanent and temporary basis. Akhtar's story lays bare the patriarchal culture within which a stigma is attached to the birth of a girl. Iffat's misery, explained in more detail in the book, is not just the result of her mismatched marriage but also the consequence of her illiteracy, lack of employment, and the widespread ignorance that plagues the women of her family. Despite being quite affluent, Iffat and her mother are characterized as simple, ignorant, illiterate and dogmatic who "believed firmly in superstition above all else".²¹⁷

In this dystopian society, men think primarily about money and the position their marriages can afford them. As they can spend their time unabashedly with their mistresses outside the confines of their homes with the implicit sanction of the society, marriage to them is merely a guarantor of convenience. This is best depicted in the avaricious characters of Mahin's father who is willing to sacrifice the happiness of his

²¹⁷ Ibid, 138.

only child for his own worldly gains, and her fiancé who only thinks of multiplying his wealth with Mahin's father's riches in order to expand his opportunities for debauchery. Women, in this story, are not completely blameless either. From Mahin's mother, who forces her into an arranged marriage, to the wicked brothel keeper, who gets women to pay off their debts through working for her, they are shown to be complicit in perpetuating women's misery.

The book pits Mahin, an educated girl, against the plethora of ignorant and illiterate women who are incapable of rational thought and spend their days trapped by superstition and a religious dogma whose main proponent is blind obedience to the patriarch in the family. In other words, Mahin epitomizes a Constitutional woman with the aspirations of a modern, independent woman while the women in the rest of the story represent the traditional, patriarchal, pre-Constitutional ideal of women. From the very first pages of the novel, Mahin is shown to resist the patriarchal power and authority. She had "read more than people around her and knew more about the secrets of life. So, she could not, like her ignorant and uneducated sisters, look at the world and its events superficially and interpret everything as fate".²¹⁸ When her father forbids her to read any more books, thinking they were corrupting her morals and enticing her to live a different life, Mahin defies her father in the strongest terms and asks him to never repeat that request again. Regarding the arranged marriage, Mahin makes her wishes known to her father every time he broaches the subject. Mahin is aware of the seriousness of what she is doing and "how she wanted to stand against her father's arrogance and obstinacy. By eloping with her lover, she wanted to make her father see that, even at the expense of her

²¹⁸ Ibid, 32.

reputation, she wouldn't accept a husband she didn't even like. . .".²¹⁹ Although in the end she does not get to marry the boy she loves, and she literally dies in the process, she does not give up without putting up a fight. On her deathbed, she admonishes her father saying,

پدر، شما بی اندازه به من صدمه زدید، شما بسیار به من آزار و اذیت رساندید. پدر، شما مرا از آغوش تنها کسی که دوست داشتم و احساس وجودش در نزدیک من مرا دل خوش میداشت و صدای دلنوازش روحم را به بهترین وجه نوازش می داد جدا ساختید و از همه بدتر خواستید مرا با زور در آغوش دیگری بیندازید که او را هیچ نمی شناختم و کمترین علاقه ای به او نداشتم ... پدر، من میدانم که می میرم و ازین بیماری جان سالم بدر نخواهم برد، ولی قول بدهید دیگر با این طفل چون من رفتار نکنید.

Dad, you've hurt me beyond words. You have abused me a great deal.

Dad, you took me out of the arms of the only man I love, the guy whose presence warmed my heart, whose beautiful voice caressed my soul.

Worst of all, you wanted to throw me into the arms of a man I neither

knew nor loved in the least . . . Dad, I know I will perish and not survive

this sickness but promise me you won't treat my child like you have

treated me.²²⁰

Other than Mahin, almost all the female characters in the book are described as ignorant and illiterate. Mahin's mother is introduced in the first few pages of the book as someone, because of her illiteracy and ignorance, whose "thoughts could not go beyond

²¹⁹ Ibid, 151.

²²⁰ Ibid, 304.

the confines of her home”.²²¹ Like so many other women in the novel, she is superstitious and attributes all the events of her life to supernatural interventions. Her maid is another example of the many “illiterate and ignorant” women who populate the pages of this novel. Rationalizing why her husband divorced her, she claims to have seen a woman cast a spell on her husband who soon grew cold toward her and in the end divorced her. Mahin’s mother listens to this story enthusiastically and never doubts the veracity of the maid’s account or her interpretation of it. Mahin, in the meantime, “could not help smiling and feeling sorry in her heart for their ignorance”.²²² Ignorance, fostered by superstition, illiteracy, seclusion, and blind obedience, runs through the whole society and is what links a wealthy woman like Mahin’s mother to her impoverished maid.

It is significant that in Kazimi’s portrayal of prostitutes, there is nothing inherently wrong with the women; their downfall is characterized as a direct result of illiteracy and ignorance. They are not sick or any more lascivious than ordinary people. It is just the unfavorable circumstances that are to blame for their plight. Reforming the society, the novel suggests, would mean eradicating the causes of their prostitution. Kazimi suggests that had these women been educated they wouldn’t have been preyed upon so easily.²²³ Iffat, the only upper-class prostitute of the story and the only child of a reputable family is, of course, also uneducated and she comes to a similar conclusion as the author; “Of course, it is obvious how ignorant and naïve a girl who spends all her

²²¹ Ibid, 22.

²²² Ibid, 117.

²²³ Ibid, 98.

time playing instead of getting educated will remain”.²²⁴ “The only thing I understood and knew”, she goes on, “was to obey my mom and dad’s orders, a thing my wet-nurse always reminded me of”.²²⁵

The absolute power that her parents, in particular her father, and husband have over her are reiterated many times in the novel. Witnessing Iffat’s resistance to sleeping with her husband’s new boss, he retorts,

حالا می فهمم چقدر خبط کرده ام که از روز اول با ملایمت و احترام نسبت به شما رفتار کردم
در صورتی که می بایستی مثل سایر شوهران ایرانی هر کاری را لازم می دانستم جبراً گردن
شما می گذاشتم و به شما می فهماندم که شوهر انسان تا چه حد اختیار زنش را دارد!

now I understand I made a mistake to have treated you with respect and kindness in the first place whereas I should have done what all other Iranian husbands do and forced you into doing what I thought was necessary and made you understand the extent of a husband’s sovereignty over his wife.²²⁶

Although many men in this novel make statements like this, the women also instill this thought into young girls’ minds. When Iffat is first offended by her husband’s behavior and decides to leave the room, her wet-nurse whispers in her ears, “where are you going? Don’t you know a man is the owner and sovereign over his wife and can do as he pleases?”²²⁷

²²⁴ Ibid, 58.

²²⁵ Ibid, 59.

²²⁶ Ibid, 67.

²²⁷ Ibid, 60.

Uneducated and weak, Iffat is no match for Mahin. In the face of all the injustice and suffering she goes through, her only response is to feel helpless and cry:

در کشوری که زنان حق ندارند نسبت به شوهر آینده و همسر یک عمر خود اظهار عقیده نمایند، در محیطی که شوهران هرطور میل داشته باشند می توانند با زن خود رفتار کنند، در جایی که زن ها مانند اسباب و اثاثیه محسوب شده و در صورت کهنه شدن و فرسودگی ممکن است به آسانی آن را عوض نمود، در مملکتی که مرد می تواند کوچک ترین عیب زن را بگوید و ایراد بگیرد، ولی بیچاره زن حتی حق اعتراض به کثافت مرد هم ندارد، من چه میتوانستم بکنم....

In a country in which women are deprived of the right to express their opinion regarding their future husband and their partner for life, in a place where men do as they please with their wives, where women are like house furnishings and upon becoming old might easily be changed, in a country where men can complain of the most trivial of his wife's shortcomings but the wife cannot even object to his filthiness, what could I do²²⁸

Kazimi emphatically underscores the necessity of education for women, a view which all of the villains of the novel object to. A case in point is F-Saltanih, Mahin's father, who forbids her from reading books and attributes her daughters' headstrong behavior to sending her to one of the new schools for girls.²²⁹

Other than Farrokh, all of the main male characters in the novel are depicted as villains. They are corrupt and are constantly involved in one intrigue or another. As the

²²⁸ Ibid, 68.

²²⁹ Ibid, 31.

political scene is chaotic and mismanagement rife, men are shown to achieve their positions through bribery, illegal dealings, and nepotism. Merit is not considered a prerequisite to attain a job in the administration, nor is education or patriotism. F-Saltanah, Mahin's father is "besotted with money and captivated by position and status", he is shown to not stop at anything.²³⁰ He thinks of "the love for one's homeland or fellow human beings as empty words and [doesn't] use them other than for his personal gain".²³¹ Even family to him, is a means to achieve economic and political status:

دختر جان! امروز غالب مردم از اولاد و خویشاوندان خود استفاده می کنند و آنها را مثل نردبام
برای نیل به مقامات عالی به کار می برند؛ مخصوصاً در مملکت ما که بستگی و ارتباط
بهترین وسیله ی ترقی است؛ مثلاً اگر من باجناب رئیس الوزرا بودم، حتماً حالا وزیر و یا اقلاً
معاونت یکی از وزارتخانه ها را داشتم.

Dear girl! Most people these days use their kids and relatives as ladders to reach high positions! Especially in our country where relations and connection are the best way to make progress. Say, if I was the brother-in-law of the prime minister, I would have definitely been a minister by now .

...²³²

F-Saltanah is not the only corrupt official in the book. Consulting a prince on how to secure the votes he needs to be elected to the *Majlis*, and what to do in case he loses, he is told,

²³⁰ Ibid, 21.

²³¹ Ibid, 87.

²³² Ibid, 34.

یعنی ممکن است صندوق آرا را عوض کنیم و یا به وسیله ی سوزاندن صندوق، مدتی انتخابات را به عقب بیندازیم و در این بین مخالفین را موافق بسازیم اما خوشبختانه تصور نمیکنم هیچ یک از این کارها لزوم پیدا کند، زیرا رعایای دهات بنده به قدری بی سواد و بی اطلاعند که از وکالت مجلس چیزی سرشان نمیشود، دیگر چه برسد به این که در اطراف شخصیت کاندیداها و خوبی و بدی داوطلبان اظهار نظر کنند.

We can change the ballot box, or burn it to postpone the election and, in the meantime, talk people into voting for you. But fortunately, I don't think any of these measures would be necessary as my peasants are extremely illiterate and ignorant and know nothing about *Majlis* representation, let alone consider the character and fitness of the candidates for their jobs.²³³

The speaker of the last statement happens to be the father of Mahin's fiancé. Like the father, the son is a depraved libertine, a drunk, and a womanizer. As his father's money is soon to run out, he is in search of new ways to gain money without having to work for it. He soon learns that marriage is his best option to

... با یک تیر نه تنها دو نشانه بلکه سه نشانه را بزنم؛ یعنی هم آتش شهوت خود را با پری رویی تسکین میدهم و هم با مال و مکننتش از وجود پری رویان دیگر کیف ببرم و چون بر سر پدرم که به واسطه ی ولخرجی های زیاد در این اواخر خیلی بی پول و تنگدست شده، منت خواهم گذاشت .

... [k]ill three birds—rather than two—with one stone. I mean I quench the flames of my passion with a beauty, use her money and possessions to

²³³ Ibid, 147.

enjoy other beauties, and also make my father feel indebted to me because he has become penniless recently as a result of his extravagance.²³⁴

By portraying a society in which almost everyone is a rogue and scoundrel, Kazimi emphasizes the necessity of change. The Tehran he outlines in the novel suffers from the indifferent attitude of the aristocracy and the middle classes toward its growth and development. He holds their lack of patriotism as a major reason for the medieval backwardness of the country as they uphold obsolete traditions and values and care more for their personal gains than their fellow countrymen's life. Kazimi believes it is only through adhering to the ideals of the Constitutional Revolution that Iranian society can be saved. The characters Farukh and Mahin embody his ideals, and the case of Mahin is even more radical since, as a woman, she pays the price of liberation with her own life, living by the motto of the time, "Ya marg ya tajaddud (either death or modernity)".

2.5. Conclusion

As the twentieth century dawned, an ideological and socio-economic revolution was fermenting in Iran. The newly conscious bourgeoisie united with the 'ulama and the intelligentsia against a common enemy—the autocratic Qajar regime. The people were disgruntled by multiple military defeats from Russia and Britain, various ignominious treaties that resulted in economic and territorial concessions, and the country's unsuccessful venture into international trade that made Iran a principal consumer of European mass-produced merchandise and drove many local enterprises to bankruptcy. The inability of the central government to implement mechanisms to remedy the situation

²³⁴ Ibid, 42.

reinforced the alienation of the bourgeoisie. At the same time, expanded contact with the west through the establishment of European-style educational institutions and publication houses as well as the translation of western literature introduced the intelligentsia to modern ideas such as liberty, equality, secularism, constitutionalism, etc. Through the formation of secret societies, grassroots councils, and political opposition parties as well as publication and dissemination of oppositional newspapers and leaflets locally and in the diaspora, the intelligentsia hastened an already impending revolution. The idea of a house of justice or a constitutional mode of administration had already been introduced in these societies and materialized in 1906 through the establishment of the consultative body called the *Majlis*.

These subversive and revolutionary developments necessitated the conception of a new role for literature. The revolutionary literature of the Constitutional period set out to reflect in both its form and content a new socio-political awareness and usher in structural and ideological reform of the society through awakening the masses. The language, themes, characters, and genres of the past seemed obsolete and inconsequential in a contemporary turbulent atmosphere that required fresh modes of expression to represent and reflect upon the shortcomings of Iranian society. Despotism, administrative corruption, superstition, constraining traditions, ignorance, illiteracy, and all forms of dogmatism came under attack as the reasons behind the country's underdevelopment.

The audience for literature also underwent a great shift from a focus on aristocratic patrons to the middle classes. The medium most apropos to educate these people and encourage them to reform society was the social novel, written in the language of the people about the concrete details of ordinary lives, devoid of

generalization and abstraction or the bombast and pomp of classical poetry. By shedding light on the lives of the middle classes, the writers of these social novels underscored the disparity between Iran and the modern world, and thus opened their readers to their country's problems.

Prostitutes came to populate literature at this time for two main reasons. Firstly, the most effective means to drive home the necessity of change for ordinary people was to show them that their *namous*—honor—was being jeopardized. Secondly, as a result of economic hardship, famine, war and general turmoil in the country and the migration of villagers whose villages had been pillaged, ruined, or stricken particularly severely by the upheaval, the number of prostitutes as well as their visibility had significantly soared.

Mushfiq Kazimi's *Tehran-i makhawf* (1924) was the first novel to tackle the question of prostitutes in Iran. It established a number of prototypical prostitute characters which were explored in subsequent social novels of the period. Almost all of these novels portray women as victims of the patriarchal values of the society as well as the adverse socio-economic condition. The reason for each woman's prostitution represented the traditions that needed to be changed. Women's illiteracy, superstition, unwanted arranged marriages, polygamous relationships, religious dogmatism, and easy male divorces were a few of the topics that came under attack as reasons for why women were such easy targets for pimps. The representation of prostitutes would reach its most complex and subtle form, however, in the masterpieces of Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951), Muhammad-Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997), Sadeq Chubak (1916-1998), and Ebrahim Golestan (b. 1922) in the second Pahlavi era (1941-1979). The nuance and complexity

with which these writers treat their prostitute characters is discussed in length in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

THE RELIGIOUS RAMIFICATIONS OF THE PROSTITUTE CHARACTER IN THE LITERATURE OF THE SECOND PAHLAVI ERA (1941-1979)

3.1. Background

Sheila Jeffreys in *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (2008) explores the intersection of marriage and prostitution. Drawing upon Carol Pateman and her own previous writings, Jeffreys contends that all patriarchal marriages contain elements of prostitution as they are “founded upon the male sex right” and the unchecked recourse of a husband to the wife’s sexuality.²³⁵ The resemblance between marriage and prostitution becomes even more remarkable in the case of “servile marriages” where women are, for economic reasons, made to pledge their sexual and reproductive body as well as domestic labor to a man.²³⁶ According to Jeffreys, child marriages, forced/arranged marriages, as well as temporary marriages belong to this category and are akin to prostitution as they allow sexual access to a woman as a result of an economic transaction.

The transactional and contractual nature of arranged marriages has come under attack by other feminists including Muslim feminists writing about women in Islam. Nawal al Saadawi, in particular, is an outspoken critic of this practice which is predicated on the notion that women are the property of the menfolk in their family. Upon marriage,

²³⁵ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (Routledge, 2008), 41.

²³⁶ *Ibid*, 39.

they merely change hands and become the property of their husbands. In *Woman at Point Zero* (1975), Saadawi depicts the predicament of women trapped in such transactions.

Twentieth century Persian literature abounds with short stories and novels that address different forms of servile marriage sanctioned in Shi‘i *Fiqh*,²³⁷ problematize the Islamic discourse on the issue, and liken traditional Islamic marriage to prostitution. In the course of this chapter, I will be looking at marriage and prostitution through the lens of orthodox Islam and Persian literary works which lend themselves strikingly well to Jeffrey’s analogy between prostitution and marriage.

In what follows, I will first consider the status of women in Islamic *sunnah*²³⁸ and discuss both licit and illicit forms available to women for expressing their sexuality, scrutinizing the Qur‘an and the Islamic tradition closely for clues to their views on the subject. I will then shed light on the conception of prostitution and the role Islamic jurists play vis-a-vis prostitutes in the works of Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951), Muhammad-Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997), Sadeq Chubak (1916-1998), and Ebrahim Golestan (b. 1922), some of the most prominent and avant-garde Iranian writers of the twentieth century who are credited with modernizing Persian literature.

Although the works discussed in the last chapter were revolutionary in their own times for their language, characterization, and themes, they belonged to the infancy of fiction-writing in Iran and are immature in terms of the form and techniques used by their writers. The short stories and novels analyzed in the current chapter are remarkably different from those in the previous one as they are marked by bold formal, stylistic, and

²³⁷ Laws derived from Islamic sources.

²³⁸ Traditional social and legal customs and laws of the Islamic community.

technical experimentations. The bulk of the works I discuss in this chapter belong to the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) while a few predate this era and were written in the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1925-1941).

In a departure from the last chapter, in which I discussed the discontent with a variety of traditional and misogynistic societal and cultural practices as some of the factors that contributed to the popularity of the prostitute character in modern Persian literature, this chapter is devoted to investigating the extremely contentious relationship between marriage and prostitution in Islam, best represented in the form of temporary marriage or *sigheh*. My focus in this chapter on temporary marriage and its similarities with prostitution from the perspective of Iranian writers in the first and second Pahlavi eras, however, should not be taken to imply that all writers at the time exclusively talked about prostitution from this standpoint. Writers such as Ahmad Mahmoud, Bahman Farasi, Jamal Mir Sadeqi, Simin Daneshvar, Frydun Tunkabuni, Reza Danishvar, and Gholam Hossein Sa'edi featured prostitute characters (and not temporary wives) in their works.

3.2. Prostitutes in Sacred Texts

Prostitutes are frequently mentioned in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. Among the most noted ones are Rahab, who helped Joshua in his siege of Jericho,²³⁹ Esther, who was given as consort to the king of Persia, Delilah, who emasculated Samson by extracting his secrets out of him,²⁴⁰ and the two women whose dispute over a child

²³⁹ Joshua 2:1; Joshua 6:17 Joshua 6:22 Joshua 6:25.

²⁴⁰ Judges 16:1.

was famously arbitrated by Solomon.²⁴¹ Prostitutes were tolerated as long as they did not descend from the tribe they were serving so as not to bring shame to their fathers or brothers.²⁴² They were free from the restrictions that married women were subject to, but had lost their respectable status in society by choosing prostitution as their profession. Priests were banned from marrying them or prostituting their daughters and punishment for the daughter of a priest who became a prostitute was death by fire.²⁴³

The Old Testament fire and fury toward prostitutes dwindles in the Christian tradition, partly due to the existence of Mary Magdalene.²⁴⁴ As the second significant female figure of the New Testament after the Virgin Mary,²⁴⁵ she is mentioned multiple times in the Bible.²⁴⁶ She was the one who discovered Jesus's tomb empty, the first to witness his resurrection, and was consigned by Jesus to proclaim his rising to the others. Mary Magdalene was Jesus's most dedicated female disciple but, according to many accounts, also a former prostitute.²⁴⁷ It is in her name that many prostitutes would later seek forgiveness from the church and join the rank of saints by not only giving up their vocation but also dedicating their life to the Lord. St Mary the Harlot, Pelagia, Afra,

²⁴¹ Kings 3:16.

²⁴² Bullough and Bullough, 31.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 62, Ringdal, 103.

²⁴⁵ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (Columbia University Press, 2008), 397.

²⁴⁶ Matthew 27:56, 61; 28:1; Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1-19; Luke 8:2; 24:10; John 19:25; 20:1-18.

²⁴⁷ Bullough and Bullough, Ringdal.

Thais, Digna, Eunomia, Eutopia are among the many ex-prostitutes that, through confession and repentance, were absolved of their sins.²⁴⁸

The Qur'an, on the other hand, is reticent on the issue of prostitution. There are no *direct* references to any prostitutes in the Book; the profession is mentioned only once in an injunction against *involuntary* prostitution:

وَلَيْسَتَّعَفِّبِ الَّذِينَ لَا يَجِدُونَ نِكَاحًا حَتَّى يُعْنِيَهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَالَّذِينَ يَبْتَغُونَ الْكِتَابَ مِمَّا مَلَكَتْ
أَيْمَانُكُمْ فَكَاتِبُوهُمْ إِنْ عَلِمْتُمْ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا وَآتُوهُمْ مِنْ مَالِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي آتَاكُمْ وَلَا تُكْرَهُوا فَتَيْنِكُمْ عَلَى
الْبِعَاءِ إِنْ أَرَدْنَ تَحَصُّنًا لِنَبْتَلُنَّوَا عَرَضَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَمَنْ يُكْرِهُنَّ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ مِنْ بَعْدِ إِكْرَاهِهِنَّ غَفُورٌ
رَّحِيمٌ .

But let them who find not [the means for] marriage abstain [from sexual relations] until Allah enriches them from His bounty. And those who seek a contract [for eventual emancipation] from among whom your right hands possess - then make a contract with them if you know there is within them goodness and give them from the wealth of Allah which He has given you. *And do not compel your slave girls to prostitution, if they desire chastity* (Italics mine), to seek [thereby] the temporary interests of worldly life. And if someone should compel them, then indeed, Allah is [to them], after their compulsion, Forgiving and Merciful.²⁴⁹

But God does not seem to be as forgiving and merciful to women who, for other reasons, choose this profession or have sex out of wedlock. In *Surat al-Nisa*, the fourth chapter of

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ *The Qur'an* Al-Nur [24:33], The translations of the Qur'anic verses in this paper are all from *Saheeh International Translation* (2011) regarded as one of the most accurate translations of the Qur'an.

the Book, the penalty for any such women found guilty based on the testimony of four male witnesses is confinement until death:

وَالَّتِي يَأْتِيَنَّ الْفَاحِشَةَ مِنْ نِسَائِكُمْ فَاسْتَشْهَدُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ أَرْبَعَةً مِنْكُمْ فَإِنْ شَهِدُوا فَأَمْسِكُوهُنَّ فِي الْبُيُوتِ
حَتَّى يَتَوَفَّيَهُنَّ الْمَوْتُ أَوْ يَجْعَلَ اللَّهُ لَهُنَّ سَبِيلًا.

Those who commit unlawful sexual intercourse of your women - bring against them four [witnesses] from among you. And if they testify, confine the guilty women to houses until death takes them or Allah ordains for them [another] way.²⁵⁰

Unless there are four witnesses to their unlawful act, however, these women will not be punished and those slandering them can face grave consequence:

وَالَّذِينَ يَرْمُونَ الْمُحْصَنَاتِ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَأْتُوا بِأَرْبَعَةِ شُهَدَاءَ فَاجْلِدُوهُمْ ثَمَانِينَ جَلْدَةً وَلَا تَقْبَلُوا لَهُمْ شَهَادَةً أَبَدًا
وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ ۖ . إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ وَأَصْلَحُوا فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ.

Those who accuse honourable women (of unchastity) but do not produce four witnesses, flog them with eighty lashes, and do not admit their testimony ever after. They are indeed transgressors, except those of them that repent thereafter and mend their behaviour. For surely Allah is Most Forgiving, Ever Compassionate.²⁵¹

The few verses cited above are the most notable examples of the Qur'anic attitude toward unlawful sex, including adultery and prostitution. The *ahadith*,²⁵² too, display a hostility toward women who are proven to be prostitutes:

²⁵⁰ *The Qur'an*, Al-Nisa [4:15].

²⁵¹ *The Qur'an*, Al-Nur [24:4-5].

²⁵² Sayings by prophet Muhammad and his companions. It is important to remember that determining the authenticity of *ahadith* is problematic as the credibility of their purveyors

There is no prostitution in Islam. If anyone practiced prostitution in pre-Islamic times, the child will be attributed to the master (of the slave-woman). He who claims his child without a valid marriage or ownership will neither inherit nor be inherited.²⁵³

To further bolster the prohibition of this practice in Islam, the prophet Muhammad is quoted to have proclaimed the earnings of a prostitute ritually unclean and impure along with “the price of a dog . . . and the earnings of a soothsayer”.²⁵⁴

One of the most problematic aspects of these Qur’anic verses and the *ahadith*, based on a modern reading, is the stipulation of a harsh penalty for prostitutes while overlooking the role or the punishment of the clients. Another controversial feature is the nonnegotiable requirement for four witnesses none of whom can be women. The disparity between the lower status of the women—evident in the lesser worth of their testimony in court—and that of men—whose word determines the fate of a woman for life—is symptomatic of the ontological views the Qur’an espouses regarding gender roles. In order to appreciate what prostitution, as an illicit form of sexual relations, is in Islam, what forms it takes, and who its practitioners are, it is crucial to first understand

can be questioned. As these sayings attributed to the prophet and his companions were collected two centuries after the Prophet’s death, a great many disputed hadith ended up being part of the Islamic repertoire. Furthermore, if a patriarchal *hadith* proves to be authentic, we can still ascribe it to the ephemeral aspects of religion conditioned by the exigencies of the specific historical conditions of the time.

²⁵³ Sunan Abu Dawood Vol. 2, Book of Marriage (Kitab Al-Nikah), Hadith 2150 retrieved from <https://muflihun.com/abudawood/12/2150>

²⁵⁴ Sahih al-Bukhari Vol. 3, Book of Sales and Trade, Hadith 432, retrieved from <https://muflihun.com/bukhari/34/432>

gender norms and roles in Islam as well as the different legal recourses men and women have to sexual intercourse according to the orthodox jurisprudence.

When speaking of orthodox Islam here and throughout the dissertation, I refer to how it has been interpreted for centuries by male jurists. It is important to note that, in recent years, religious reformists and Islamic feminists have offered a more gender-egalitarian interpretation of Islam. Islamic feminists, for instance, have challenged the supremacy of patriarchal hermeneutics (which they believe to be highly subjective and selective), and persistently pursued the deconstruction of the sacred heritage and the sacred knowledge in order to excavate a “woman-friendly version of history” to create a more egalitarian Islamic society. To do so, Islamic feminists reread the Islamic past to expose the fragilities of the collective memory of Islam which, by “abrogation, elision, and even erasure”, has belittled the role of women and, instead, reproduced the “patriarchal interpretive methodologies” as eternally normative and legal.²⁵⁵

3.2.1. Islam on Gender Roles

The orthodox jurisprudence—“as the whole process of intellectual activity which ascertains and discovers the terms of the divine will and transforms them into a system of legally enforceable rights and duties”²⁵⁶—forms the overarching source of knowledge production and power relations in Islamic societies. In the words of Rawand Osman, to

²⁵⁵ Hibba Abugideiri, “Revisiting the Islamist Past, Deconstructing Male Authority: The Project of Islamic Feminism,” in *Religion & Literature* 42. 1/2 (spring-summer 2010), 135.

²⁵⁶ Coulson in Tizro, *Domestic Violence in Iran: Women, Marriage and Islam*, (Routledge, 2012), 23.

believing Muslims, Islam “is not only a source of spirituality but also that of social norms, a source which engages with one's entire way of life”²⁵⁷ because “being Muslim is a civil matter, a national identity, a passport, a family code of laws, a code of public rights”.²⁵⁸ As a socio-political system which subjects both the public and private spheres of one’s life to its homogenizing, all-encompassing rules, Islam affects every aspect of an individual’s life. For the purpose of this chapter, I will be delimiting my thesis to how Islam shapes the gender-consciousness of an individual and determines the proper avenues of gender relations.

In *Domestic Violence in Iran: Women, Marriage and Islam* (2012), Zahra Tizro explains how Islamic jurisprudence goes beyond the scope of the law through its “image-making function” which “shapes, molds, and directs at the preconscious level as much as conscious level” the personality of a Muslim.²⁵⁹ Many of the images regarding the roles, status, and function of women still prevalent in Islamic societies can be traced to the Qur’an and the time of its revelation. One of the most controversial verses of this kind is the verse of creation in the *Surat al-Nisa*, already mentioned above:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا
وَبَنَاتًا ۗ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ الَّذِي تَسَاءَلُونَ بِهِ وَالْأَرْحَامَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلَيْكُمْ رَقِيبًا.

O mankind, fear your Lord (*ya ayyuha al-nas ittaqu rabbakum*), who created you from one soul (*al-ladhi khalaqakum min nafsin wahida*), and

²⁵⁷ Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur’an and Sunna: Examining the Major Sources of Imami Shi’i Islam*, Edited by Andrew J. Newman (Routledge, 2015), 2.

²⁵⁸ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Translated by Mary Lakeland (Persus Book Publishing, 1991), 21.

²⁵⁹ Tizro, 28.

created from it its mate (*wa khalaqa minha zawjaha*), and dispersed from both of them many men and women (*wa baththa minhuma rijalan kathiran wa nisa'an*). And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another (*wa-ttaqu-llaha-lladhi tasa'aluna bihi*), and the wombs (*wa'-l-arham*). Indeed Allah is ever, over you, an Observer (*inna-llaha kana 'alaykum raqiba*).²⁶⁰

In a linguistic exegesis of the present verse, there are certain terms which prove to be problematic and need further clarification. The first one is “*nafs*” which can be defined as “the soul”, “the spirit”, or as Fazlur Rahman argues, “self, or person”.²⁶¹ Whether we take it to mean soul, spirit, or self, it is essential to remember that the Qur'an does not assign any genders to it. That God created men and women of the “*nafs wahida*” (one/single soul/spirit) is repeated multiple times in its numerous chapters:

وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَنْشَأَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ فَمُسْتَقَرٌّ وَمُسْتَوْدَعٌ قَدْ فَصَّلْنَا الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَفْقَهُونَ.

And it is He who produced you from one soul and [gave you] a place of dwelling and of storage. We have detailed the signs for a people who understand.²⁶²

or

هُوَ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَجَعَلَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا لِيَسْكُنَ إِلَيْهَا فَلَمَّا تَغَشَّهَا حَمَلَتْ حَمْلًا خَفِيًّا فَمَرَّتْ بِهِ فَلَمَّا أَتَقَلَّتْ دَعَا اللَّهَ رَبَّهُمَا لَئِنْ آتَيْنَا صَالِحًا لَنُكَوِّنَنَّ مِنَ الشُّكْرِينَ.

²⁶⁰ *The Qur'an*, Al-Nisa [4:1].

²⁶¹ Quoted in Asma Barlas, *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (University of Texas Press, 2002), 133.

²⁶² *The Qur'an*, Al-An'am [6:98].

It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her.²⁶³

One could fairly easily conclude that God is espousing the ontological similarity of men and women—hence their equality— in the opening verse of *Surat al-Nisa*. However, there is a particle, “*min*”, which complicates the meaning of this seemingly straightforward verse. “*Min*” can be taken to mean “either a part of a whole (*tabid*) or part of a kind (*jins*)”.²⁶⁴ So God either created Eve *from* Adam or she was created *of his kind*. While Islamic feminists and reformists opt for the latter and use intra-textual evidence from other verses of the Qur‘an where “*min*” was used to denote “of one’s kind”,²⁶⁵ traditional exegetes, on the other hand, are more inclined to accept the orthodox narrative of the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib. What makes it difficult for the feminists to refute this interpretation is the existence of a number of authenticated *ahadith* by the Prophet and his family that clearly give credence to this tradition: “woman is a similitude of a crooked rib; if you keep it as it is you will benefit (and in another version ‘you will take pleasure in it’), and if you strengthen it you will break it”,²⁶⁶ or “God created Adam from water and clay, and the son of Adam’s zeal is for water and clay. He created Eve

²⁶³ *The Qur‘an*, Al-‘Araf [7:189].

²⁶⁴ Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur‘an and Sunna*, 20.

²⁶⁵ See *The Qur‘an*, At-Tawba [9:128]: “There has certainly come to you a Messenger from among yourselves (*min anfusikum*)”.

²⁶⁶ Quoted in Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur‘an and Sunna*, 27.

yourselves. And fear Allah and know that you will meet Him. And give good tidings to the believers.²⁶⁹

Furthermore, the existence of irrefutable misogynistic *ahadith*, further solidifies the conception of women's degraded status in Islam:

O multitude of people, indeed women are deficient in faith . . . deficient in fortune . . . and deficient in intellect. As for their deficiency in faith, it is in their refraining from prayer and fasting during their menstruation, as for their deficiency in fortune, it is in their share of inheritance being half of the men's share, and as for their deficiency in intellect, it is in the statement of two women witnesses being equivalent to the statement of one man. Therefore, guard yourselves from evil women and be cautious of the good ones among them. Do not obey them in good deeds so that they do not get greedy for your obedience in bad deeds.²⁷⁰

Or

Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity.²⁷¹

Or

I do not leave after me any cause of trouble more fatal to man than woman.²⁷²

²⁶⁹ *The Qur'an*, Al-Baqara [2:223].

²⁷⁰ The words of Ali ibn Abi Talib, prophet's son-in-law, and the first Imam of the Shiite. Quoted in Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur'an and Sunna*, 157.

²⁷¹ A *hadith* by the prophet of Islam. Quoted in Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, 49.

²⁷² *Ibid*, 79.

In her groundbreaking *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*,²⁷³ Leila Ahmed investigates the historical roots of the injustice and misogyny which has come to be the inseparable property of legal discourses, social institutions, and individual practices of Islamic societies. By tracking the misogyny to the pre-Islamic eras of the Middle East and the Mediterranean—where Zarathustrianism, Christianity, and Judaism were prevalent, she indicates that the inequity prevalent in Islam was already present at the time of the Muslim conquest. So—by recognizing the divinity of biblical narratives which justified misogynistic attitudes and practices—Islam embraced “seamlessly the already-developed scriptural misogyny into the socio-religious universe it too would inscribe”.²⁷⁴

Even in Arabia where Islam was first conceived, there existed degrading prejudices against women which Islam selectively sanctioned. While it banned infanticide, allowed divorce, private property ownership by women, inheritance, and control of their income without the intervention of male guardians, Islam endorsed “the preeminence given to paternity and the vesting in the male of proprietary rights to female sexuality and its issues,”²⁷⁵ which became the defining principles of the society it established. Regardless of where the roots of the misogynistic attitudes of Islam lay, their application in the life of women warranted their treatment as inferior and subordinate to men.

²⁷³ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale University Press, 1992).

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 36.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 45.

3.2.2. Islam on Licit Avenues of Sexual Relations

In the most optimistic reading of the above verses and *ahadith*, men and women are regarded as equal but different; i.e., subject to different regulations and rights. This difference has translated into men becoming literally the “head” of the family where the faculty of reason and rationality lies and women becoming stereotyped as emotional and incapable of rational thought. As Adele Ferdows aptly puts it, this means “women are devoid of wisdom” and “incapable of self-protection”.²⁷⁶ This can also mean that women, because of their alleged deficiency in morality and reason, can threaten the moral well-being of society and need the guiding hands of a man to keep them in check. Because of these differences, women are better suited to stay at home and tend to nursing and rearing children, while men, by virtue of their superior physical and intellectual capabilities, can provide for the family. These alleged differences together with traditional notions of manly and womanly conduct necessitate women’s seclusion; otherwise, they pose a threat to the moral well-being of the family and the society at large:

It is in the interest of the family that the wife should seek the permission of the husband whenever she wants to go out of the house. Sometimes it is possible that it would not be in the interest of the family if she visits her own relatives—or even her own mother. In such circumstances the husband can prevent the wife from such harmful visits.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ Adele K. Ferdows, “The Status and Rights of Women in Ithna” in *Women and the Family in Iran*, Ed. Ashghar Fathi, (E. J. Brill, 1985), 17.

²⁷⁷ Mutahari, Quoted in Hasan Javadi, “Women in Persian Literature: An Exploratory Study” in *Women and the Family in Iran*, Edited by Ashghar Fathi, (E. J. Brill, 1985), 42.

The absolute subservience that Murtiza Mutahari, the late Ideologue of the Islamic Republic, enjoins in the above quotation, however, seems to run against the Qur'anic interpretation of marriage as a source of comfort for not only the husband but the wife as well:

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً ۗ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ.

And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought.²⁷⁸

The non-discriminating attitude expressed here is hardly reflected in the laws and commandments regulating an Islamic marriage. For example, many exegetes consider marriage to be a commercial exchange; i.e. a commercial transaction between the man and the woman for the exclusive use and ownership of a woman's sexual organ. Shaykh Khalil, one of the most prominent Maliki jurists, goes so far as to suggest that, "When a woman marries, she sells a part of her person. In the market one buys merchandise, in marriage the husband buys genital arum mulieris [vagina].²⁷⁹ This controversial interpretation is supported by the fact that women receive multiple forms of remuneration after the consummation of the marriage. They receive *mahriyah*, or brideprice, which is a form of financial arrangement stipulated before marriage. According to Tizro, it is "something valuable or money which a man pays to his bride at the time of marriage in

²⁷⁸ *The Qur'an*, Ar-Rum [30:21].

²⁷⁹ Quoted in Tizro, 32.

exchange for exclusive access to the wife's sexual services".²⁸⁰ More interestingly, after marriage, women become entitled to *nafaqih*, or maintenance, only so far as they remain accessible for matrimonial intercourse,²⁸¹ and any refusal on their part to obey their husband's sexual desires would disentitle them from receiving *nafaqeh*. According to Khomeini, the former supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran,

A permanent wife must not leave the house without her husband's permission, and must obey, *taslim*, herself for whatever pleasure he wants. . . . In this case her maintenance is incumbent upon her husband. If she does not obey him, she is a sinner, *gunahkar*, and has no right of clothing, housing, or sleeping.²⁸²

Tamkin or obedience to her husband's sexual demands is the condition upon which a woman qualifies for *nafaqih*. This form of obligatory *tamkin* in exchange for money means a woman's absolute subordination to her husband, as her unconditional accessibility for sex would legally and morally restrict her mobility. Furthermore, the fact that Islam allows a man to take four permanent wives means a man has the power and authority to limit the mobility of multiple women and demand their obedience in exchange for their maintenance.

Polygyny is one of the most controversial and murky aspects of the Islamic *Shari'a*. Ferdows argues that by allowing polygyny, Islam sought the abolishment of the matrilineal structure of the pre-Islamic Arabia in which women were allowed to take

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 39.

²⁸¹ Ibid, 40.

²⁸² Haeri, quoted in Tizro, 41.

several husbands.²⁸³ By granting men the license to take on four permanent wives, Islam was also providing for the women who might have lost their husbands at the time of early Islamic wars. Both Shi'is and Sunnis cite the following verse in *Surat al-Nisa* in which the Book explicitly authorizes polygyny provided that men can treat all their wives justly/equally:

وَإِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تُقْسِطُوا فِي الْيَتَامَىٰ فَانكِحُوا مَا طَابَ لَكُمْ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ مَن تَلْتُمْنَ وَرُبْعَ مَهْرٍ إِنْ خِفْتُمْ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا فَوَاحِشَةً أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا.

And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice].²⁸⁴

It is important to note that this verse comes from the same chapter in which the controversial verse of creation was also found. The juxtaposition of these verses make it difficult to maintain the theory that, according to the Qur'an, men and women are created equal. To complicate the situation even more, there is another contentious verse in this chapter whose interpretation differs widely between Shi'is and Sunnis:

وَالْمُحْصَنَاتُ مِنَ النِّسَاءِ إِلَّا مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ كِتَابَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَأُجَلَ لَكُمْ مِمَّا وَّرَاءَ ذَٰلِكُمْ أَنْ تَبْتَغُوا بِأَمْوَالِكُمْ مُحْصِنِينَ غَيْرَ مُسَافِحِينَ ۚ فَمَا اسْتَمْتَعْتُمْ بِهِ مِنْهُنَّ فَآتُوهُنَّ أُجُورَهُنَّ فَرِيضَةً ۚ وَلَا جُنَاحَ عَلَيْكُمْ فِيمَا تَرَاضَيْتُمْ بِهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ الْفَرِيضَةِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا.

²⁸³ Ferdows, 5.

²⁸⁴ *The Qur'an*, Al-Nisaa [4:24].

And [also prohibited to you are all] married women except those your right hands possess. [This is] the decree of Allah upon you. And lawful to you are [all others] beyond these, [provided] that you seek them [in marriage] with [gifts from] your property, desiring chastity, not unlawful sexual intercourse. So for whatever you enjoy [of marriage] from them, give them their due compensation as an obligation. And there is no blame upon you for what you mutually agree to beyond the obligation. Indeed, Allah is ever Knowing and Wise.

This verse has been interpreted to endorse temporary marriage or *mut‘a* (literally pleasure and enjoyment). The idea of *mut‘a* has its roots in pre-Islamic Arabia. It was widely practiced at the time of Muhammad and was not banned by him.²⁸⁵ The main characteristic of *mut‘a* is its contractual nature. Negotiated between the husband and the wife before marriage, *mut‘a* stipulates a certain amount of brideprice paid to the bride in exchange for her sexual services for a duration of time—from minutes to years—mutually agreed upon by the two parties. After the expiration of the contract, the man can decide to part ways, tie the knot permanently, or renew the contract. Should the temporary wife decide to marry another after the termination of her contract, she will have to observe ‘idda, or a waiting period.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ Guity Neshat, “Marriage in Qajar Period” in *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic* (University of Illinois Press, 2004), 50; Ferdows, 22.

²⁸⁶ Tizro.

Following the practice of their second Caliph (579-644), Sunnis reject *mut 'a* on the grounds that it is very similar to prostitution.²⁸⁷ On the other hand, Shi'is consider it as a "God-ordained practice which is the logical and desirable way to prevent adultery and fornication and to achieve sexual enjoyment, which Islam regards as a positive instinct to be fulfilled and satisfied",²⁸⁸ citing sayings such as

We used to participate in the holy battles led by Allah's Apostle and we had nothing (no wives) with us. So we said, "Shall we get ourselves castrated?" He forbade us that and then allowed us to marry women with a temporary contract and recited to us: -- 'O you who believe! Make not unlawful the good things which Allah has made lawful for you, but commit no transgression.²⁸⁹

The emphasis on the voluntary nature of the temporary marriage seems to be misplaced here as the economic conditions which contribute to women's consent to *mut 'a* are hardly any different from those that force many women into prostitution. Furthermore, the expiration date on the contract between the two parties as well as the limited remuneration of the women after the couple part ways makes any distinction between *mut 'a* and prostitution very difficult to support. Moreover, compared to permanent

²⁸⁷ Ibid. Equally problematic, but this time to the Shi'is, are *misyar* and *urfi* forms of marriage practiced by the Sunnis. In *urfi* marriage, despite the presence of witnesses, the marriage is not registered officially through the authorities and in *misyar* marriage, women renounce some of the rights, such as *nafaqih*, they might have otherwise had in a permanent *nikah* marriage.

²⁸⁸ Ferdows, 22.

²⁸⁹ Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 6, Book of Prophetic Commentary on the Qur'an, Hadith 139, retrieved from <https://muflihun.com/bukhari/60/139>.

wives', the social standing of temporary wives is highly precarious. This is mainly due to the fact that *mut' a* almost exclusively attends to the "sexual enjoyment, particularly of the man, as opposed to the creation of a family and procreation" which are the objectives of a permanent marriage.²⁹⁰

According to Yaghoobi, most temporary wives "suffer from vulnerability and as they age, their desirability declines" which means they will be less competitive in a market that specifically caters to men's sexual desires.²⁹¹ The expiration date on the contract between the two parties, the lack of remuneration for the woman after the couple part ways, as well as the stigma attached to her marital union ensure that the social status of a temporary wife is hardly comparable to the permanent wife. According to Ferdows, she is, in fact, more on par with slave concubines:

She is not counted among the four wives; she is not entitled to inheritance from her husband; she does not receive alimony payment after the contract is terminated even if she is pregnant at the time; she may refuse sex with her husband if such a right is stipulated in the initial contract . . . her 'idda is half the period prescribed for permanent wives and is the same as that of a slave concubine.²⁹²

The inferior standing of a temporary wife translates to her disposability within a marriage as men can have numerous temporary wives simultaneously, as well as her economic

²⁹⁰ Claudia Yaghoobi, "Mapping Out Socio-Cultural Decadence on the Female Body: Sadeq Chubak's *Gowhar in Sange-e Sabur*," in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2018), 210-211.

²⁹¹ *Ibid*, 210.

²⁹² Neshat, 23.

vulnerability after the expiration of her contract. With few other employment options for women, it is hardly surprising that many engage in consecutive *mut 'a* marriages as the means to earn a living.

Temporary marriage or *mut 'a* was very popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the Qajar dynasty. Since the Revolution of 1979, as Neshat asserts, the regime has endeavored to once again popularize it, pushing back against the Pahlavis in the previous dynasties who disapproved of the practice.²⁹³ As a result, *Mut 'a* marriage has reemerged as the subject of much discussion among intellectuals in the country who particularly find fault with the temporary, precarious, underprivileged, and inferior status it bestows upon women. They view *mut 'a* as a state-sanctioned form of prostitution upon which Shi'i Islam has put its seal of approval. In what follows, I will therefore be considering the status not only of prostitution but also *mut 'a*—called *sigheh* in Iran—in the twentieth century. I will delimit my investigation to the fictional works of intellectuals who conflate temporary wives and prostitutes into one category and explain the reasons for the popularity of this comparison.

3.3. The Relationship Between Islam and Prostitution in Persian Literature

The main writers/intellectuals I will be focusing on are Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951), Muhammad-Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997), Sadeq Chubak (1916-1998), and Ebrahim Golestan (b. 1922). In general, their views of the relationship of Islam and prostitution fall into three main categories. First, they contend that Islamic laws are among the main causes of prostitution as these patriarchal laws, by sanctioning polygyny,

²⁹³ Ibid, 49.

marriage of under-age girls, unilateral divorce for men, and limiting the education and employment of women, create a subdued class of women who are subject to the caprice of men, leaving them no other means of subsistence or employment other than prostitution when they fall upon hard times or the male members of their household die. Second, they argue that Muslim clerics, through the institution of *sigheh* or *mut'a*, facilitate the fall of impoverished women into temporary marriages in the same way that pimps and brothel owners prey upon and groom destitute and underprivileged women for prostitution. Third, they suggest that these same clerics, in the face of public outcry against the immorality and depravity within Iranian society, scapegoat these women and penalize them for what they themselves have endorsed, enjoyed, and regulated.

I also consider the following questions: Why did these writers emphasize the role of Islam and the Muslim clergy in sustaining, rather than eradicating, prostitution? Why did the leading intellectuals of the time hold Islam and the clergy responsible not only for the plight of women but for the misfortune of the Iranian people and the lack of progress in Iran? Why did they rail against Islam with an ardor unprecedented in the history of the country? In order to address these questions, I will first consider the manifestations of the general antipathy toward religion in the history of Persian literature.

شیخی به زنی فاحشه گفتا مستی
هر لحظه به دام دگری پا بستی
گفت شیخا هر آنچه گویی هستم
آیا تو چنان که می نمایی هستی

“You are drunk”, said a Sheikh to a prostitute

“you are ensnaring people constantly.”

“I am who you say I am, O Sheikh!” said she

“Are you who you pretend to be?”²⁹⁴

Omar Khayyam (1048 –1131) in the above poem draws upon a well-established tradition in Persian Sufi poetry to admonish hypocritical clergy for their duplicity and sanctimoniousness. Hafiz (1350-1390), another well-known poet, made numerous observations regarding the deviousness of this class:

واعظان کاین جلوه در محراب و منبر می‌کنند
چون به خلوت می‌روند آن کار دیگر می‌کنند
مشکلی دارم ز دانشمند مجلس باز پرس
توبه فرمایان چرا خود توبه کمتر می‌کنند
گوییا باور نمی‌دارند روز داوری
کاین همه قلب و دغل در کار داور می‌کنند
یارب این نودولتان را با خر خودشان نشان
کاین همه ناز از غلام ترک و استر می‌کنند

On the pulpit, preachers, goodness display

Yet in private, they have a different way.

I have a question to ask of the learned in our midst

Why Confession-Priests, their own repentance delay.

Perhaps they don't believe in Judgement Day

They deceive, and to appease God, they pray.

²⁹⁴ *Taraniha-i Khayyam*, Edited by Sadeq Hedayat (Tadbir, n.d), 85.

May these New Masters, God, find their stay
And from slaves and mules not turn away.²⁹⁵

As telling as Hafiz's verse is, Khayyam's short poem has, for the purpose of this dissertation, the added value of engaging a prostitute in a conversation with a sheikh, her staunchest critic. Pitting the prostitute against the sheikh, he depicts an unconventional power dynamic between a self-avowed sinful prostitute and a self-righteous, dissembling sheikh who is berated by the former and whose shame is publicized through the poem. The choice of the prostitute as the agent of this confrontation is hardly accidental. Taking into account that the prostitute is traditionally marginalized and maligned as a contaminating force and dealt with as a threat to the respectable society, her retort in Khayyam's poem takes on greater significance—she is given voice to point out that she is morally superior to the sheikh.

Writers and intellectuals in twentieth century Iran capitalized on this tradition of sheikh-shaming and used it in their fight to eradicate the dogmatic and irrational aspects of Iranian life by criticizing both the Islamic beliefs and the clerics that were antithetical to progress and the modernization of the country. During the Constitutional Revolution, one of the chief targets of criticism was the hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness of the Muslim clergy. The reason for this fervent enmity toward the clerics was twofold. On the one hand, they were held responsible for sustaining Iran's underdevelopment by clinging ardently to the time-worn religious dogmas of the time of the Revelation to indoctrinate the nation. On the other hand, their persistent intervention in politics and rebuff of the

²⁹⁵ Hafiz, "Ghazal 199," translated by Shahriar Shahriari, available at <https://www.hafizonlove.com/divan/04/199.htm> (accessed on 12 February 2019).

attempts of the democrats to introduce revolutionary and secular laws into the parliament infuriated this new class of intellectuals who sought the modernization (and westernization) of the country.

Writing in 1915, Mirza Habib Isfahani in his adaptation of *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* by James Morier,²⁹⁶ a satirical and cynical take on the incorrigible and flagrant misuse of power in Iran, holds Islam responsible for playing a colossal role in curbing the progress of Iran in modern times. Hajji baba, the protagonist of the book, describes the ignorance of the monarchs, their aversion to communicate with the outside world, in particular, their rejection of the forms of civilization and progress of non-Muslim countries. According to Isfahani, the isolationist and separatist attitude of Iranian monarchs was due to their delusion of grandeur and superiority as the followers of God's last and best religion,²⁹⁷ hence, their abhorrence of the *kuffar*'s²⁹⁸ mode of life or advancements, even in medicine. In *Hajji Baba*, it is always the clerics who fuel this isolationist and self-aggrandizing outlook by decrying the life of Westerners as well as literally and figuratively assailing religious minorities in the country.

²⁹⁶ Mirza Habib Isfahani, Translator, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* by James Morier (Tehran: Haghghat Publication, 1973). Mirza Habib's "translation" is hailed as one of the timeless masterpieces of Persian literature partly because it is not a faithful or literal translation. Instead, it is a rewriting of James Morier's story with numerous omissions and additions. And according to Ghulam Huseyn Yusifi in *Yaddasht-ha* (Notes), Mirza Habib turned a story considered to be orientalist/imperialist into an anti-imperialist one.

²⁹⁷ *The Qur'an*, Ali'Imran [3:19], "Indeed, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam"; and [3:85], "And whoever desires other than Islam as religion - never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers".

²⁹⁸ The plural of *kafir* meaning "unbeliever".

An astute and outspoken satirist of the time, Iraj Mirza also expresses his disapproval of the ubiquitous and unwelcome influence of the clergy in many of his poems. Writing in the 1930s, he neatly summarizes the prevalent sentiments of Iranian intellectuals toward the clerics in his humorous but caustic poem 'Arif Namih. In it, he complains to God for creating the mullas and by so-doing sealing the fate of the country with misfortune and misery. Likening Iran to paradise, he chastises God for unleashing the clerics, i.e. the serpents, upon it. Holding the clergy responsible for the fall of Iran from glory, he pleads with God to banish them from Iran:

خدایا تا به کی ساکت نشینم
من این ها جمله از چشم تو بینم
همه ذرات عالم منتظر توست
تمام حقه ها زیر سر توست
چرا پا توی کفش ما گذاری؟
چرا دست از سر ما بر نداری؟
به دست توست وسع و تنگ دستی
تو عزت بخشی و ذلت فرستی
تو این آخوند و ملا آفریدی
تو توی چرت ما مردم دویدی
خداوندا مگر بی کار بودی
که خلق مار در بستان نمودی؟
چرا هر جا که دابی زشت دیدی
برای ما مسلمانان گزیدی
میان مسیو و آقا چه فرقت

که او در ساحل این در دجله غرقست

به شرع احمدی پیرایه بس نیست؟

زمان رفتن این خار و خس نیست؟!

Lord, how long should I keep my peace?

I blame only you for all of this!

Every particle in the world is at your bidding

Every trick is up your sleeve!

Why do you stick your nose in our life?

Why don't you just leave?

It's you who lifts us up and makes us fall

It's you who distributes wealth and need!

You created these mullahs and clerics

You jumped us all in our sleep!

Didn't you have anything better to do?

Than create the serpent in the field?

Why do you send it to us Muslims,

Whenever you see an ugly fiend?

What is the difference between Monsieur and *aqa*

That one is saved and one in Tigris deep?

How long should they distort Muhammad's religion?

How long should we these thorns and thistles keep?²⁹⁹

²⁹⁹ Iraj Mirza, *Arif Namih*, retrieved from <http://files.tarikhema.org/pdf/sher/Divan-Iraj-Mirza.pdf>

In the last two lines, Mirza alludes to how the clerics allegedly distort the teachings of Islam for their own profit. In order to maintain the status quo and remain the religious, social, and political leaders of the society, according to the literary works in discussion, they keep people ignorant, uneducated, and credulous so that they cannot question the rationale behind their irrational, patriarchal, uncharitable religious decrees or outdated customs and traditions but merely follow them blindly. A case in point is how, in almost all the books dealing with the subject, mullahs are shown to be speaking in unintelligible Arabic verses to people who have no knowledge of Arabic,³⁰⁰ in order to ensure their dominance and authority over people.

The revival of this sheikh-shaming tradition in the twentieth century owes its vigor and popularity to the resurgence of nationalistic sentiments in Iran which resulted in a boom in historical novels and patriotic poems and treatises that visibly depicted the nation's fervent desire for a hero and a stability that was deemed lacking. Rummaging the history of ancient Persia before the Arab conquest in the seventh century which to these writers was the starting point of Iran's decline, they tried to locate the true identity of the Iranian people in a distant glorious past. Mortified by the decline in the course of their country's history, they invoked the grandeur of the ancient Persian empire, trying to regain the national pride lost in their encounter with the West. They fashioned their

³⁰⁰ See Muhammad-Ali Jamalzade's "Farsi shikar ast"(Persian is Sugar), Muhammad Mas'ud's *Tafrihat-i Shab (Nocturnal Pleasure)*, Mirza Habib Isfahani's *Sarguzasht-i Haji Baba-i Esfahani (The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan)*.

novels after Alexandre Dumas and Sir Walter Scott whose books were widely translated and applauded in the country.³⁰¹

The common thread connecting these nationalistic writers and novels to each other is their anti-Arab and anti-Islamic sentiments. In the wider society, this translated into Reza Shah's official ban on veiling, a potent Islamic symbol, in 1936.³⁰² Although historical novels soon went out of fashion and the urgency with which their writers criticized Islam waned in later years, the awareness of the cost that the Iranian people, especially women, were paying for the upkeep of certain time-worn laws and regulations of Islam in their society, as well as the clash between modernity and Islam, continued to inform much of the literature produced in this period.

Taken together, three common threads appeared in these literary works. First, Islam was construed as the main cause of Iran's cultural underdevelopment, sweeping away the accomplishments of the triumphant monarchies of the time before the Arab conquest; second, the clergy were admonished for perpetuating superstitions and checking the country's progress; and third, religious followers were targeted for their gullibility and ignorance in blindly following the Islamic mandates of the time of the Revelation. Islamic laws, the clergy, and individual adherents to both were blamed for the descent of women into prostitution by keeping them unemployed and uneducated and by sanctioning the practice of *sigheh* while reviling and punishing prostitutes who were

³⁰¹ Abdulali Dastghaib, *Kalbud shikafi-i ruman-i Farsi (Dissecting Persian Novel)*, (Suri-i Mihr, 2012), 37.

³⁰² Reza Shah celebrated the occasion by proclaiming "My sisters and daughters, now that you have entered society. . . know that your duty is to work for homeland".

viewed by these writers as victims of a system upheld by the clerics and their followers. Each of these threads is unpacked below through a reading of fictional works.

3.4. Mullahs as Agents of Corruption: Sadeq Hedayat on the Spiritual Bankruptcy of the Society

The above-mentioned three-fold criticism is best delineated in the works of Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951), one of the founding fathers of modern story-writing in Iran, whose works, according to Michael Hillmann, provided “an indigenous model” on which later writers based their novels and stories.³⁰³ Hedayat’s novel *The Blind Owl* (1937) is still recognized and celebrated as the “most famous and thought-provoking Persian novel” of all time.³⁰⁴

Hedayat was deeply influenced by the nationalist zeitgeist of the time and challenged Iran’s social, political, literary, and religious order in his fiction and satirical works which were aimed at ridiculing and subverting the status-quo. He described the current state of the society as “a latrine (*kala*), a stinking, abominable, filthy, stifling cemetery”³⁰⁵ and scrupulously took aim at the insalubrious and sordid aspects of Iranian life—crystallized in outdated customs and superstitions. Hedayat’s works are informed by

³⁰³ Michael Graig Hillmann, "HEDAYAT, SADEQ ii. Themes, Plots, And Techniques in Hedayat’s Fiction," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2012, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hedayat-sadeq-ii> (accessed on 12 February 2019).

³⁰⁴ Hossein Payande, *Gushudan-i roman (Opening the Novel)*, (Murvarid, 2014), 17.

³⁰⁵ Homa Katouzian, "HEDAYAT, SADEQ i. Life and Work," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2012, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hedayat-sadeq-i> (accessed on 12 February 2019).

an unprecedented “candid realism”³⁰⁶ which displays itself in his themes, characterization, and accurate reproduction of the plain and colloquial language spoken by the lower classes, especially women.

Hedayat sets the tone for his prolific career in his very first short story called “Zindih bih gur”³⁰⁷ in 1930. The antiheroic protagonist, who likens himself to a caged animal, feels trapped in the material world. Walls cannot contain his restless soul, nor can his mundane body. Sadomasochistic, in a dysfunctional relationship, alienated and misunderstood, he seeks to take his own life. The protagonists Hedayat portrays in his later works are, in a similar vein, misfits, animals, and freaks who are unable to understand or conform to the traditional value systems of society and continually mull over death, the absurdity of life, suicide, betrayal, and corruption, echoing the writer’s own obsessions which led to his suicide in Paris in 1951.

In *Tup Murvari*³⁰⁸ (1947), a satirical novel poking fun at the “primitive”, impoverished, and superstition-ridden lives of Iranian people, Hedayat complains,

ما که عادت نداشتیم دخترانمان را زنده بگور بکنیم ... ما برای خودمان تمدن و ثروت و آزادی و آبادی داشتیم و فقر را فخر نمی دانستیم، همه اینها را از ما گرفتند و بجایش فقر و پریشانی و مرده پرست یو گریه و گدایی و تأسف و اطاعت از خدای غدار و قهار و آداب کونشویی و خلا رفتن برایمان آوردند، همه چیزشان آمیخته با کثافت و پستی و سودپرستی و بی ذوقی و مرگ و بدبختی است.

³⁰⁶ Mir-Abidini, 218.

³⁰⁷ The title translates as “buried alive”.

³⁰⁸ The Pearl Canon.

... تازه مسلمان دو آتشفشان کسی است که به امید لذت‌های موهوم شهوانی و شکم پرستی آن دنیا با فقر و فلاکت و بدبختی عمر را به سر ببرد و وسایل عیش و نوش نمایندگان مذهبش را فراهم بیاورد.

... بدیهی است که این مذهب دشمن بشریت است.

We were not the ones who used to bury their daughters alive. We used to be civilized, affluent, free, and prosperous. We did not take any pride in indigence. They (the Arab conquerors) took all of this from us and instead brought us poverty, remorse, necrolatry, tears, mendacity, sorrow, obedience of a cruel and ruthless God, and the etiquettes of toiletry! Everything they have is tinted with filth, degradation, profiteering, mediocrity, death, and misery.

... Now a pious Muslim is one who, in hope of fulfilling his gluttonous and salacious desires in the next world, spends his days in poverty, squalor, misery while the leaders of his religion wallow in luxury. The dead reign supreme and the living have to follow the vile laws of a thousand years ago, something even the basest animals don't do.

... It's obvious that this religion is the enemy of the human race³⁰⁹

Although not all writers of the time characterized Islam as 'the enemy of the human race', the majority of them, nonetheless, took aim at Islam, the clergy, and the religious. One of the main objections these intellectuals raised to the mullahs was how they had monetized spirituality and morality. They particularly criticized them for their lack of genuine concern for the people whose moral guidance they were responsible for.

³⁰⁹ Sadeq Hedayat, *Tup murvari (The Morvari Canon)*, (np, 1947), 19-21.

To the mullahs, as Hedayat and his contemporaries saw it, religion was a trade and what they sold, in return for worldly goods, was Heaven and Absolution. In *Marqad-i Aqa* (1921)³¹⁰ by Nima Youshij, the father of modern Persian poetry, we see the greediness and deceptiveness of the mullahs in the way they trick people into believing a tree is a saint so that they can keep all the sacrifices and offerings these credulous pilgrims make to it. In “Talab-i amurzish”³¹¹ (1932) by Sadeq Hedayat, we see how profitable this business is when the mullahs take half of the stolen money from the thieves under the pretense of cleansing the rest so the thieves can use the money without any compunction.

... آمدم به کربلا آن را تطهیر بکنم. همین امروز آن را بخشیدم به یکی از علما، هزار تومانش را به من حلال کرد. دو ساعت بیشتر طول نکشید، حالا این پول از شیر مادر به من حلال تر است.

. . . I came to Karbala to cleanse the money. Just today, I gave it to one of the ulama, he absolved one thousand *tuman* of it and made it *halal* for me. It didn't take more than two hours! Now this money is more permissible to me than was my mom's milk.³¹²

Many of Hedayat's stories, especially “Talab-i amurzish”, revolve around the idea that the mullahs have robbed the idea of pilgrimage of its redemptive implications by making it yet another opportunity to make money off of simple people. This mercenary attitude to religion and redemption has been so firmly instilled in the minds of the

³¹⁰ The Saint's Shrine.

³¹¹ Seeking Absolution.

³¹² Sadeq Hedayat, “Talab-i amurzish” in *Si qatrih khun (Three Drops of Blood)*, (Amir Kabir, 1962), 88.

religious that they are frequently taken advantage of by charlatans and frauds, mullahs or not. One of the most illuminating examples of this happens in *Alawiyih khanum*³¹³ (1943) a story that takes a cynical view of religious practices and religious people and offers an unrivaled encyclopedia of Persian curses and vulgarities. In the story, Alawiyih khanum, a prostitute, is on a pilgrimage to Mashhad, the shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Imam of the Shi'is. On the trip, she makes money for her and her companions through orchestrating a *pardih khani*.³¹⁴ Although this is a very popular and touching form of story-telling, it has the disadvantage of providing an opportunity to gauge the extent of people's spirituality through the tears they are willing to shed and the amount of money they are ready to spend on such an occasion: "whoever hands over the first coin, . . . God will give him a hundred in this world and thousands in the next . . ." ³¹⁵ In one part of the story, Alawiyih complains that "the end time is upon us! People have grown so remiss in their faith. Only three *zar* and seven *shahi*?"³¹⁶ referring to the paltry amount of money she had made that day.

As is evident from the excerpts, these stories portray the mullahs and religious devotees in a very negative light. Rather than commenting on issues of right and wrong, their teachings create a society based on irrationality and superstition - one that puts its faith in supernatural beings, talismans, charms, incantations, sacrifices, and pilgrimages

³¹³ Madame Alawiyih.

³¹⁴ Recitation and performance of religious events, especially of Imam Hossein, the second Imam of the Shi'ites, as painted on a screen.

³¹⁵ Hedayat, "Alawiyih khanum", 12.

³¹⁶ Ibid, 14.

in order to better its lot and redeem itself from so-called sins. As women were mostly illiterate and barred from actively participating in society, it is hardly surprising that most of the gullible characters in these tales are female. In the above stories, they are presented as impressionable and susceptible to manipulation. In “Talab-i amurzish”, we come across one such character. After having confessed to killing her co-wife and her three babies, she believes that by going on a pilgrimage to Karbala, the shrine of the third Imam of the Shi‘is, she will be delivered from her sins:

مگر پای منبر نشیندی. زوار همانوقت که نیت میکند و راه میافتند اگر گناهایش باندازه برگ
درخت هم باشد ، طیب و طاهر می شود.

Haven’t you heard at the pulpit? Pilgrims, the minute they decide to go on a pilgrimage, even if their sins are as much as the leaves on a tree, are clean and pure.³¹⁷

Through creating a barrage of gullible, irrational, and superstitious characters, Hedayat poignantly depicts a society deprived of ethical and human values, underscoring the perils, as well as the absurdity, of unconditional religious obedience. The fact that he consistently chooses to show the mullahs and religious zealots as predatory, rapacious, and untrustworthy and portrays the worst-case scenarios of the negative influence they wield in society shows the depth of his antagonism towards how religious corruption leads to the abuse of people by those in a position of power.

³¹⁷ Hedayat, “Talab-i amurzish”, 88.

3.5. Mullahs as Conduits of Sin: Muhammad-Ali Jamalzadeh on the Innocence of the Prostitute

Muhammad-Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997) was an Iranian intellectual, novelist, translator, autobiographer, and essayist who was best known as a pioneer in modern short story writing. His first short story “Farsi shikar ast (Persian is Sweet)” (1915) was a literary feat that ushered in a new medium, genre, and language to Persian literature; it “laid the foundation of modern prose”, and “set the direction for the first generation of fiction writers in Iran”.³¹⁸ Its prose made a clean break from the florid and convoluted language previously found in Persian literature and instead utilized simple words, structures, idioms, expressions, and sayings in everyday speech. The narrator, who reappears in his later stories, takes on the persona of a young man who has recently arrived home from an unknown location abroad. His observations regarding the lives, mannerisms, and demeanor of his fellow countrymen are extremely entertaining and enlightening.

Although Jamalzadeh was educated abroad and spent the majority of his life in Europe, he wrote extensively for and about Iran. In many of his works, Jamalzadeh pits tradition and modernity against one another to show the urgent need for the modernization of the country and at the same time underlines the importance of retaining Iranian identity. He calls upon his fellow writers to explore the richness and exuberance

³¹⁸ Hassan Kamshad and Nahid Mozaffari, “JAMALZADEH, MUHAMMAD-ALI ii. Work,” *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2012, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/jamalzadeh-ii> (accessed on 12 February 2019).

of Persian language instead of resorting to Arabic, French, or English loan words, hence the title of his first story, “Persian is Sweet”.

His story “Sheikh va Fahishih”³¹⁹ comes from the collection *Sahra-i Mahshar* (1947)³²⁰ and is a satirical fantasy which displays Jamalzadeh’s characteristic humor and language and encapsulates the suspicious attitude of the literati toward the clergy. It is the Day of Judgement and the dead are resurrected before the divine scales upon which their worldly deeds are to be measured. The righteous will be sent to Paradise while the wicked will be consigned to the blazing fires of Hell. In the middle of the bedlam, a prostitute by the name of Ma‘sumih presents her case against a mullah to God for judgment. She is an unhappy woman, with “gloomy eyes” and “mournful voice, whose every gesture and move points to an abundance of pain and suffering”.³²¹ The cleric, on the other hand, has a long history of religious abuse and at one point in his life, excommunicated a well-known Persian poet, Ummar Khayam, for heresy and forbid his burial at a Muslim cemetery. Quite fittingly, in the story, the above-mentioned poem by Khayyam is engraved on Ma‘sumih’s tombstone.

Unlike the corpulent, self-righteous, and hypocritical cleric whose mere speech resembles “the opening up of a pregnant scorpion upon which words like little scorpions pour forth”, Ma‘sumih (meaning innocent) is a shy girl who introduces herself as “a disgraced and illiterate non-entity” who fears she wouldn’t be able to communicate her

³¹⁹ The Sheikh and the Prostitute.

³²⁰ Plain of Resurrection.

³²¹ Muhammad-Ali Jamalzadeh, *Sheikh va Fahishih (The Sheikh and the Prostitute)*, (Navid, 1987), 6.

grievances articulately.³²² God, to the surprise of the *jinn*, humans, and angels looks at her kindly and invites her to tell her story.

Despite her protestations and initial humility, Ma‘sumih proves to be an eloquent and persuasive representative not only for the fallen class but also for women in general. In her defense for having become a prostitute, Ma‘sumih cites financial and economic reasons due to the loss of her mother to a disease and her father to being kidnapped by bandits. At the age of eighteen, with no family or friends, no shelter or food, and unable to find work, Ma‘sumih finds herself an easy prey to the lusts of men. One of her customers was the mullah she is now seeking justice against. Leading a double life, flaunting his piety in public and quenching his concupiscence in private, the cleric was not only Ma‘sumih’s customer but also introduced her to drink and caused her death by assaulting her on the street in an attempt to show his disgust for her profession in front of other people. Furthermore, he forbids Ma‘sumih to have a proper Muslim burial. In the end, God sends him to hell and her to paradise.

The story, though very simple, has many passages in which the writer displays his deep understanding of the human psyche, in particular women’s. Ma‘sumih not only admonishes the cleric and licentious men who preyed on her, but also reproaches God for having treated women unjustly:

بارالها، ما زنها مگر بچه های صبیغه ای خلقت هستیم. مگر دختر چه گناهی کرده که وقتی زن
آبستن میشود مدام دعا میکند که خدایا دختر نباشد. برای چه ما زنها باید هر ماه باج ناتوانی خود
را بصورت مقداری از خون خودمان نثار طبیعت غدار کنیم. آمدیم و راستی عقلمان کوتاه و
گیسمان دراز باشد، تازه تقصیر با کیست. میگویند اهل مکر و خدعه ایم. اگر مکار بودیم

³²² Ibid, 10.

اینطور دلیل نمیشدیم. هنوز عروسکیم که عروس میشویم و هنوز دهانمان بوی شیر میدهد که باید بچه شیر بدهیم. کدام حیوانی است که نه ماه تمام آبستن باشد و کدام جانوری است که بچه اش را یکسال و دو سال شیر بدهد هنوز نفس تازه نکرده ایم که دوباره باید از سر بگیریم . خداوندا، العیاذبالله، اگر مزه ی زن بودن را می چشیدی، یا اصلا زن خلق نمیکردی یا طوری خلق می کردی که سزاوار عدالت و رحمانیت تو باشد.

Dear God! Are we women your children from a temporary marriage? How has a girl offended you that every pregnant woman continually prays for her child not to be a girl? Why are we paying a ransom for our weakness to the capricious Nature every month in the form of monthly bleedings? Let's say our intelligence is really defective and our hair really long, whose fault is that? We are described as cunning and deceptive. Were we any of that, we wouldn't be so wretched. We are still dolls (little brides) when we have to ourselves become brides and our mouth still smells of our mother's milk when we should nurse a baby. Which animal has to carry a baby for nine month and nurse them for a year or two? . . . and then before we can catch a breath, we have to start all over again.

Dear Lord, had you experienced being a woman, I seek refuge in Allah for saying that, you either would not have created them at all or would have created them in a way more fitting to your kindness and justice.³²³

Ma'sumih' s admonishment of God for creating men and women unequally, enumerates the many wrongs that were being committed against women at the time the story was written. It is interesting how she compares women to children born in a

³²³ Ibid, 34-35.

temporary marriage attesting to the lower status to which temporary wives and their children were relegated. Ma‘sumih questions the notion of divine justice and undermines women’s prescribed role in society and by doing so becomes an unlikely champion of women’s rights and an outspoken critic of religious abuse.

3.6. “A Cesspool of Another Kind”:³²⁴ Sadeq Chubak on the Equivalence of Temporary Marriage and Prostitution

One of the most reviled examples of religious abuse which recurs in the works of this period is temporary marriage. Iranian intellectuals vehemently lament this practice and fiercely inveigh against it in their works. An early example of this polemic happens in *The Adventures of Haji Baba* (1915) where we come across a number of women who, in search for a better life, fall prey to the mullahs who, in return for a sum, marry them off to clients for a night or two. In other words, in search for women to sleep with, men would seek out mullahs who would act as brokers and point them in the direction of women who were willing to be their temporary wives for a few hours, a night, or more. To one’s amazement, the mullahs in the novel had even established a house in which they lodged all these women, for the easy access of the clients.³²⁵ The similarities between this legal organization and a brothel can hardly be missed.

³²⁴ Harking back to the first chapter and Alexander Parent-Duchatelet’s Description of prostitution as “a cesspool of another kind”.

³²⁵ Mirza Habib, 530-38.

Indisputably, one of the best-known stories of this kind is *Sang-i sabur*³²⁶ (1966) by Sadeq Chubak who is considered *the* writer of the lower strata of the society despite coming from an affluent background. Chubak devoted his whole literary career, comprised of numerous short stories, two novels, and multiple plays, to exclusively exposing the life of the unfortunate, ostracized, marginalized, and unwanted people in Iranian society. Known for his bold experimentation with technique and language, Chubak realistically represented the life of social outcasts such as morgue-workers, opium addicts, prostitutes, and vagrants, accurately reproducing the language spoken by them. Full of obscenities, colloquial utterances, and idioms, Chubak reconstructed the local color of Southern Iran, and, in Ghanoonparvar's terms, "was able to accomplish for Persian what Mark Twain had achieved earlier in recording rural American speech".³²⁷ His realistic sketches reproduce slices of life without the intrusion of his own authorial presence.

Among the most remarkable aspects of Chubak's career was his commitment to acknowledge and give voice to women's sexual urges and needs - a revolutionary and unprecedented act in Persian literature. He wrote about the suppressed sexual instincts of the lower-middle classes and shed light on the life of malnourished, neglected, and ailing children as the true victims of sexual perversion, poverty, and obsolete traditions. Pedophilia, child marriage, prostitution, and sexual exploitation feature in almost all of his works, as does *sigheh*.

³²⁶ The Patience Stone.

³²⁷ Mohammad Reza Ghanoonparvar, "CHUBAK, SADEQ," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2012, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/chubak-sadeq> (accessed on 12 February 2019).

In his magnum opus *Sang-i sabur* (1966), a novel written in a series of soliloquies by multiple characters, Chubak lays bare the plight and eventual death of a child bride who turns into a prostitute through *sigheh*. Gawhar, the main character around whose absence the whole story revolves, is murdered for spreading immorality and disease, despite being anything but immoral. Chubak arouses the readers' sympathy for Gawhar by portraying her as an innocent young girl who has fallen victim to the backward laws and traditions of her country. At about twelve years of age, when "I still loved my dolls more than anything",³²⁸ she is forced to marry an old man who already has three other permanent wives and at whose house her mother was a laundress. At her marriage bed, she almost bled to death. At her husband's house, cohabiting with three older wives, she is the target of much feud and rivalry. After the birth of her child, she is almost stoned to death based on an accusation of infidelity merely because her newborn had a nosebleed in the shrine of Shah Chiragh and, according to the other pilgrims, that was the Imam's way of decrying her; "The Imam wanted to show his power and performed a miracle. He wouldn't let a bastard get close to his tomb".³²⁹

Divorced by her husband, unfit to find employment, and saddled with an infant and invalid maid, Gawhar has no other means of subsistence other than providing for them by entering into temporary marriages. In the story Gawhar never sleeps with anyone, other than Ahmad Aqa, without first contracting a *sigheh* because she is a devout Muslim and genuinely believes she is not prostituting herself. Chubak, however, does not shy away from putting temporary wives and prostitutes into the same category in the

³²⁸ Ibid, 36.

³²⁹ Ibid, 114.

novel. Multiple characters in the story unequivocally denounce the practice of *sigheh* as Islamic prostitution despite the protestations of Sheikh Mahmud Hakkak, a mullah, who claims God Himself has ordained the practice.

امام صادق علیه السلام مرویست که حضرت امیرالمومنین علیه اسلام فرمود افضل شفاعت شفاعت بین دوفرد است در نکاح تا خدا جمع کند بین دو نفر و از امام کاظم علیها السلام مرویست که فرموده سه نفر در ظل عرش خدا میباشند روز قیامت که هیچ پناهندهای نیست مگر سایه او کسی که برادر مسلمان خود را تزویج نماید یا خدمت او نماید یا سر او را ببوشاند و از رسول خدا صلی الله علیه و آله روایت است کسی که در تزویج بین دو نفر مومن کاری کند که میان آنها جمع شود خدا تزویج نماید بر او هزار زن از حورالعین که هر زنی در قصری از درو یاقوت و به هر قدمی که گذاشته و به هر کلمه ای که در این عمل تکلم نموده ثواب عبادت یکسال که شبها را به قیام و روزها را به صیام مواظبت نموده باو دهند.

Imam Sadigh quotes Imam Ali (The Commander of the Faithful) that the best form of intercession is in facilitating people's marriage, It is quoted from the Prophet of God (Peace be upon Him) that whoever expedites the marriage of two believers, God will marry him to a thousand *hur al-`iyn*. Each one of these women will have her own gem-filled palace. Every step you take and every word you speak in favor of this marriage, will be equal in the eyes of God to a whole year of worship—days spent in fasting and nights in prayers.³³⁰

³³⁰ Sadeq Chubak, *Sang-i sabur*, retrieved from www.files.tarikhema.org/pdf/adab/Sang_saboor.pdf, 125.

Sheikh Mahmud does not merely officiate temporary marriages, he earns his living by approaching men who are on a pilgrimage to Shah Chiragh³³¹ and offers the services of Gowhar, the protagonist of the story and a young *sigheh-ee* woman.³³² To Sheikh Mahmud, “Women are made for men’s enjoyment. Just like a beheaded sheep whose meat you eat, women are also made for one’s enjoyment”.³³³ This dehumanizing and misogynistic attitude toward women, is not exclusive to Sheikh Mahmood. Most men and even women in the novel agree with him. Bilqis, one of the main characters of the story, believes that “whoever enters a *sigheh* with a Muslim man goes to Heaven”³³⁴ and it is her ultimate wish to contract a *sigheh*.

Ahmad Aqa, on the other hand, is the only character who voices his opposition to this practice by characterizing a temporary wife as “a woman drowning *in the cesspool of religious laws* (italics mine)”³³⁵ and underlining the similarities between *sigheh* and prostitution, “how is a *sigheh-ee* woman different from a whore? She sleeps with a different man each day to make a living for her and her kid”.³³⁶ Chastising Sheikh Mahmud for his role in authorizing *sigheh*, he asks how “with a few Arabic sentences”³³⁷ he can make this practice religiously acceptable. Ahmad Aqa even goes further in

³³¹ The resting place of the sons of the seventh Imam of the Shi‘ites.

³³² Chubak, 133.

³³³ Ibid, 124.

³³⁴ Ibid, 15.

³³⁵ Ibid, 46.

³³⁶ Ibid, 125.

³³⁷ Ibid, 123.

accusing the Sheikh of exploiting women by calling him a “pimp” because “you profit from throwing this wretched woman under a different jackass each night”.³³⁸ Ahmad Aqa, just like the narrator of Hedayat’s *Tup Murvari*, blames Islam and the Arab conquest for the descent of the country into ignorance. Reminding Bilqis of her worth, he says,

بیچاره بدبخت تو همونی که وختی تو عربسون بدنیا میومدی زنده زنده خاکت میکردن چونکه
زن ارزش یه شتر گر هم نداشته. حالا کار نداریم که همون سال و زمونه تو این مملکت
پادشاهش پوران دخت و آزرمیدخت بودن و کسی دخترش رو زنده زنده چال نمیکرده.

Had you been born in Saudi Arabia, they would have buried you alive.

Because, to them, you were not even worth a bald camel. Not mentioning that at the very same time in this country, Puran Dukht and Azarmidukht were ruling the kingdom.³³⁹

But does Ahmad Aqa, who is so proud of his self-professed enlightened worldview and his ancestors’ culture and so critical of Islam, do anything to save Gawhar from the aforementioned cesspool? According to Claudia Yaghoobi, the answer is a resounding no as he does not want to marry a woman who has been defiled by so many other men before him; “Ahmad Aqa looks like those clients of *sigheh*-prostitute women who demand long-term, free-of-charge sexual relationships with no strings attached” attesting to “the imbalance of power between Gowhar and Ahmad Aqa, which results in Ahmad Aqa’s ability to withhold privileges, namely those of a formal marriage.”³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Ibid, 125.

³³⁹ Ibid, 188. Puran Dukht and Azarmidukht were queens of Persia in ancient times.

³⁴⁰ Yaghoobi, 221.

Another character in the story who concurs with Ahmad Aqa regarding the equivalence of prostitution and temporary marriage is Sayf al-Qalam, the antagonist of the story who kills ten people, prostitutes and *sigheh-ee* women alike, in order to rid the country of “the poor and the whore”.³⁴¹ A twenty-six-year-old Indian expatriate, Sayf al-Qalam, who is called “a descendent of the prophet”,³⁴² deems himself God’s agent on earth,³⁴³ describes himself as “a Muslim” who has “taken up sword for Islam”, and is “proud not to have missed a day of prayers or fasting”.³⁴⁴ He believes “a prostitute is the enemy of Islam as she spreads syphilis and gonorrhoea among Muslims”.³⁴⁵ However, in his crusade against poverty and whoredom, he mainly kills women who enter *sigheh*, as they are more numerous and accessible. Interestingly, he also kills Sheikh Mahmood because “His sin was procuring women and spreading venereal diseases. He was just like Madame Laqa,”³⁴⁶

خانم لقا برای من زن میآورد تومانی سه قرآن میگرفت. شیخ محمود هم این زن را برایم آورد و همین قدرها گرفت و گفت کارش همین است. من دشمن سوزاک و کوفتم. صیغه و فاحشه با هم فرقی ندارد.

She brought women for me and charged thirty percent. Sheikh Mahmood brought me this woman and charged a similar amount and said that was

³⁴¹ Ibid, 27.

³⁴² Ibid, 204.

³⁴³ Ibid, 174.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 213.

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 195.

³⁴⁶ Ibid, 214.

his line of work. I am the enemy of gonorrhoea and syphilis. Women who enter *sigheh* or prostitution are all the same to me.³⁴⁷

Ahmad Aqa laments Gawhar's unfortunate circumstances by saying "She is like the pitcher for the latrine. She is there so that anyone who needs to go, can fill her with water and take her to the cesspit and after they are done, leave her there".³⁴⁸

Remembering Hedayat's characterization of the whole country as a "latrine", one can see the large-scale and widespread exploitation of prostitutes in the country. To Ahmad Aqa, Allah is to blame for Gawhar's tribulations:

از وختی که دس چپ و راس خودش رو شناخته درون خودش دیوی دیده که چار چشمی
میپاییدهاش و او مثل گداها چشمش بدس او بوده که برای گناه نبوده ببخشش. دیوی که ظالمانه
شکنجه میده و گوشت تن آدم رو تو آتش چسبناک جهنم جزغاله میکنه. اگر دلتش خواست
میبخشه و میآمرزه. اما برای آمریزدن مزد میخواد. مزدش گریه و چسناله و زنجوره و سینه
زنی و زنجیر زنی و کتل و تعزیه . . . او دشمن خنده و شادی و پایکوبیه.

Ever since she could tell her right hand from the left, she found a monster within herself who unremittingly observed everything she did. Like beggars, she watched Him to bestow forgiveness on her for the sins she did not even commit. A monster who ruthlessly tortures and scorches your flesh in the sticky blazes of His hell. If He pleases, He can forgive and absolve you. But for this, He demands something in return: whimpering,

³⁴⁷ Ibid, 213.

³⁴⁸ Ibid, 4.

moaning, bawling, chest-beating, self-flagellation, Taziyih, He is the enemy of laughter, joy, and merrymaking.³⁴⁹

The God that Chubak portrays in *Sang-i sabur* is merciless and uncaring. Through his teachings, he has created a society in which poverty is widespread, superstition reigns supreme, and immorality is the order of the day. This dark and uncharitable force is the direct opposite of the God in *Sheikh va Fahishih* by Jamalzadeh. But the characters listing their grievances against both have one thing in common: they sincerely believe God is the one responsible for their predicaments. Understandably, for Ma‘sumih and Ahmad Aqa there is no distinction between God’s message and the way it has been interpreted and solidified into Islamic decrees.³⁵⁰ They both have internalized the image of a God that has set discriminatory and misogynistic laws, attesting to how religious teachings of the time dominated people’s life and the words of religious leaders were taken as the words of God.

³⁴⁹ Ibid, 46.

³⁵⁰ Shari‘a and Fiqh are two of the most pivotal pillars of Islam. While Shari‘a is considered to be the “transcendental ideal” of God’s will or the “spirit” of the Qur‘anic revelations, Fiqh is the process of human attempt to understand and derive legal tenets from the sources of Islamic jurisprudence, i.e. the Qur‘an, Hadith and Sunna. Shari‘a mandates (considered divine and infallible) are the result of Fiqh, juristic speculation and extrapolation (considered human and fallible). Therefore, Islamic laws and regulations, as in any other religion, were subject to the interpretation by exegetes who not just uncovered but added a lot of patriarchal messages to this religion.

3.7. A Brothel of Another Kind: Ebrahim Golestan on the Hapless Conversion of a Prostitute to a Temporary Wife

A later writer who masterfully delineates the depravity of certain religious practices and the prurience ascribed to the clerics is Ebrahim Golestan, an award-winning writer, translator, and filmmaker best-known for his modernist style influenced by Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner whose works he translated into Persian. Golestan's works are renowned for their unique narrative techniques, non-linear structure, poetic prose, and profusion of literary devices. In his stories which are usually circular, the writer tries to shatter the illusion of stability and certainty for his characters and readers alike. Golestan's stories take a pivotal moment in the life of the protagonists and through flashbacks, reveries, and dreams lay bare the psyche of the individual who is usually tormented by self-doubt and fear of the unpredictable and haunted by unanswered questions. Golestan's characters are defeated, ineffectual, and defeatist, representing the psychological struggles of the modern individual living in uncertain times.

"Safar-i 'Ismat" (1966) is one of Golestan's best short stories and exhibits many of his famous techniques. It owes its compelling force to his memorable use of poetic language, multiple layers of irony, circular plot structure, and surprise ending. The character 'Ismat, whose name means chastity, is a time-worn prostitute who leaves her life in the brothel behind to seek refuge in the shrine of a saint she feels has beckoned her. Inconsolable and repentant, 'Ismat falls on her knees in recognition of the sanctity of the shrine and seeks to wash her sins in her tears. However, not knowing the etiquette of repentance according to Islamic laws, she merely sits by the gate and bitterly weeps.

Soon, she is approached by a *seyed*³⁵¹ “with thick unibrows, ruddy cheeks, black beard, and velvet eyes”, looking down at her with “dignity and mercy”.³⁵² He then sets out to read a prayer for her from his rose-water scented prayer book.³⁵³ Feeling heartened and protected by the apparent spirituality of the place and the *seyed*, ‘Ismat relishes in thinking that her past is now behind her.

شب های خانه رفت، و بوی عرق پرید، و آن لکه ی خون وحشتناک در انتهای درد دیگر
نمانده بود. مستی نمانده بود و دل آشوب رفته بود. مردی از نفس میرفت؛ مردی که سنگین
بود؛ مردی که بوی پهن میداد....

Those nights at the house were over. The smell of sweat was gone. That terrible blood stain at the end of the pain disappeared. There was no drunkenness, no anxiety. The man who was out of breath, the man who was heavy, the man who smelled like dung³⁵⁴

But this state of jubilation doesn’t last long as she is informed by the *seyed* that in order to be forgiven, she needs to do more than just verbally repent. He reminds her of her debt to the saint as he was the one who changed the course of her life and broke the shackles of her bondage by beckoning her to the shrine. He exhorts her to acknowledge and honor her obligation, saying “You are indebted to him. It is incumbent on you. You have to pay your debt”.³⁵⁵

³⁵¹ An honorary title given to the descendants of prophet Muhammad.

³⁵² Ebrahim Golestan, “Safar-i Ismat”, 72-73.

³⁵³ Rosewater is associated with sanctitude as it is mainly used in shrines.

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 73-74.

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 77.

آدایش رو خودم بهت تعلیم میدم ... اینجا زائرین میان. یه چند روز، یه روز یا دو روز، چند روز، مجاور میشن ... حاجت دارن. محتاج دوخت و دوز و پرستارین. پس انداز میکنی، خرجت در میاد. دلت گرفت میائی حرم. هم کاسبی س هم ثواب و زیارت.

I will teach you the formalities. . . . many pilgrims come here. They stay for a couple of days in the proximity of the shrine. . . . They have urges. They need someone to mend their clothes, to nurse them. You'll make a living and even save some money. When you feel sad, you can come to the shrine. It will be business, a good deed, and pilgrimage, all in one.³⁵⁶

What the *seyed* is referring to is for 'Ismat to marry the pilgrims on a temporary basis. The business side of it is the brideprice she will receive in return for the *sigheh*, and the "good deed" is the euphemism used to refer to the gratification of the urges and needs of the pilgrims on their *holy* pursuit. He counts among her prospective customers "pilgrims, seminarians, you know, the pious!"³⁵⁷ and goes on to invite her to stay with him; "my house, my humble abode, is right around the corner, under the saint's aegis. There are a few other Muslim sisters there too".³⁵⁸ Thinking she will bring the chapter of her homelessness to an end, 'Ismat consents to go with him.

By invoking 'Ismat's indebtedness to the saint for her freedom from the brothel, the *seyed's* words and actions are reminiscent of pimps, brothel owners, and sex traffickers who keep their subjects from leaving prostitution by reminding them of the financial debt they owe them. The irony in this situation is that, for these women to be

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid, 78.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

free from prostitution, they have to prostitute themselves for lengthy periods of time to ultimately pay their debts. For 'Ismat, this translates into leaving the brothel to enter yet another form of bondage and service very similar to the previous one.

Golestan's story is very short. In the span of a few pages he quickly brings the story full circle and 'Ismat to where she started, in a brothel of another kind. This story has been praised for its use of language, characterization, imagery, and element of surprise. In describing the *seyed*, Golestan invokes several visual, auditory, and olfactory symbols associated with sanctitude and spirituality to reassure 'Ismat and the readers that they are in the presence of a truly devout Muslim. In one of the most memorable passages of the story, the *seyed* reminds 'Ismat to cover her hair with her *chador*³⁵⁹ which had slipped away in her state of oblivion and crying while, at the same time, procuring her for service to the pilgrims. By instructing her to cover her hair and body from the eyes of a non-*mahram*, the *seyed* maintains his façade of religiosity. It is only when he lays bare his schemes for 'Ismat that the readers are jolted back to the reality and realize that neither the pilgrimage nor the saint have the power to save 'Ismat.

These episodes remind the reader of some of Iraj Mirza's famous lines in *'Arif Namih* regarding the mis-placed, disproportionate emphasis placed on superficial aspects of religion, especially veiling. He playfully recounts a fictional anecdote in which the narrator persuades a strange woman that having intercourse with him is permissible as long as she holds firmly to her headscarf.

حجاب زن که نادان شد چنین است

زن مستوره ی محجوبه این است

³⁵⁹ A cloth that women in Iran wear which covers them from head to toes.

به کس دادن همانا وقع نگذاشت
که با رو گیری الفت بیشتر داشت

The veiling of a stupid woman is such,
A veiled woman is such,
She doesn't mind the fornication,
As observing the veil matters to her much.³⁶⁰

Just like in Golestan's story, the narrator of Mirza's *'Arif Namih* takes advantage of a naïve woman by keeping her mind occupied with religious trivialities. Whether or not 'Ismat herself plays a role in her unfortunate circumstances is open to debate. One can condemn her for agreeing to yet again become a pawn in the hands of men who take advantage of her wretched status, or vindicate her actions by addressing her poverty, homelessness, or distress. What is certain is that through his position as a religious authority, the *seyed* played a decisive role in 'Ismat's hapless return to prostitution.

3.8. Conclusion

In the course of this chapter, I investigated the prevalent attitude of some of the most prominent writers of modern story-writing in Iran regarding the role that Islam and the clergy played in the persistence and durability of prostitution in twentieth century Iran. To do so, I first clarified the commandments of Islam regarding licit and illicit forms of sexuality to shed light on the origins of the unfavorable portrayal of Islam in the works of the writers, Hedayat, Chubak, Golestan, and Jamalzadeh who all explore the status of prostitutes in their seminal works. Hedayat laid the groundwork for writing

³⁶⁰ Iraj Mirza, 13.

about this topic by illustrating how Islamic legal discourses, social institutions, and individual practices encouraged ignorance amongst the Iranian people with a particular focus on the abuses of power and authority of the clergy. The stories of Chubak and Golestan shed light on the affinity of *sigheh* and prostitution and how both are rooted in the same religious rationale. Finally, both Chubak and Jamalzadeh show the vulnerability of prostitutes and any women who enter temporary marriages by shedding light on the ambivalent societal attitudes toward both women that, on the one hand, allow them to exist, consider them indispensable, and benefit from their services, while at the same time relegate them to the margins of the society on account of their alleged immorality.

CHAPTER 4
PROSTITUTES AND SOCIO-POLITICAL REFORMS OF THE SECOND
PAHLAVI ERA (1941-1979)

4.1. Introduction

Twelve days before the official victory of the Revolution of 1979, demonstrators torched the red-light district in Tehran, known as *Shahr-i Naw*, and killed a number of prostitutes in the process. In solidarity with the demonstrators, the fire department refused to extinguish the fire.³⁶¹ While this incident was met by approbation by the more conservative factions of the society burning with a radical revolutionary fervor, there were eye-witnesses who, appalled by the incident, tried to intervene on behalf of the prostitutes. This event has been dismissed by some as having transpired spontaneously, while others blamed it on the Pahlavi “regime’s mercenaries” who had “manipulated our innocent and naïve Muslim brothers” into alighting the district and coopted them in a smear campaign against the Revolution.³⁶²

That the revolutionaries believed, in order to usher in a new era, it was essential to purge the country of its un-Islamic and allegedly sinful history through setting its prostitutes on fire is striking, as is the mixed reaction to this sordid affair. The intense hostility toward *Shahr-i Naw* was not merely a result of its being a commercial district

³⁶¹ Saeed Bashirtash and Ebrahim Nabavi, “30 years ago today, Shahr-i Naw burned and prostitutes died,” (28 January 2009) retrieved from http://www.zamaaneh.com/revolution/2009/01/post_218.html

³⁶²“When Shahr-i Naw burned and the notice sent from Ayyatollah Taleghani,”(10 February 2015). Retrieved from <http://shafaqna.com/persian/proposal/item/106026> --وقتی شهر نو- آتش گرفت و- اطلاعیه ای- که- از- منزل- آیت- الله- طالقانی- صادر شد

for gambling and prostitution. Rather, it was the symbolic significance of *Shahr-i Naw* as an emblem of the corruption and decadence of the Pahlavi regime, labelled by the devout as “the spreader of prostitution” and “the corrupter of women and family”,³⁶³ that sealed its fate. In order to purge the country of all the manifestations of the previous regime, *Shahr-i Naw* had to be wiped off the map of Iran.³⁶⁴

Shahr-i Naw was the most visible and renowned locus for prostitution in the Pahlavi era but the women working there were hardly unrivaled. Depending on the location of their work, prostitutes at the time were divided into five main groups.³⁶⁵ While the majority of them were concentrated in *Shahr-i Naw*, some others chose streetwalking as it granted them more freedom from the police and health officials. Some younger and more educated prostitutes chose to live in more salubrious parts of the city and made appointments with their clients through procurers or over the phone. On the other hand, the most underprivileged ones lived and worked in an extremely impoverished neighborhood in shanties known as the Holes. And finally, a great number of prostitutes worked at bars and night clubs as dancers, singers, actresses, and waitresses.

³⁶³ Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 217.

³⁶⁴ This eventually took place in the mid-eighties.

³⁶⁵ Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian, *Piraman-i ruspigari dar shahr-i Tehran* (On Prostitution in the city of Tehran), (Tehran, 1970).

With varying frequency, all of these classes of prostitutes were represented in art and literature at the time, with the last group dominating the cinematic stage so conspicuously that hardly any movies were made in which they did not make an appearance (see next chapter). There was even, for the first time in the history of the country, sociological research conducted on the issue. Therefore, we have an unparalleled wealth of information regarding the life and profession of contemporary women engaging in sex-work, compared with their predecessors. Drawing upon these sources, in this chapter, I wish to weave together the web of narratives and images dominating the discourse on prostitution in the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) and shed light on the perceived connection between the spread of prostitution and the second Pahlavi era. In order to do so, I will first delineate the socio-political climate of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) and its entanglement in the woman question and then review the contemporary research on prostitution.

4.2. Socio-Political Reforms in the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979)

In Taj al-Saltanih's (1883-1936) memoirs, discussed in length in the second chapter, the writer complains of her husband's numerous heterosexual liaisons as well as his long-term affair with a male musician.³⁶⁶ She blames her husband's infidelity on the customary practice of arranged marriage without ensuring the compatibility of the partners. She was one of the first women who called for the unveiling, education, and employment of women, as well as compassionate marriages which allowed men and

³⁶⁶ Taj al-Saltanih. *Khatirat-i Taj al-Saltanih* (Taj al-Saltanih's memoirs), ed. Mansureh Ettehadieh and Cyrus Sa'duniyan (Tarikh-I Iran, 1982).

women to court one another before tying the knot.³⁶⁷ Although the intellectuals of the constitutional period lent their support to many of her demands, it wasn't until the reign of Reza Shah (1925-1941) that they were finally set into motion. When Reza Shah established the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, he was determined to usher Iran into a modern era. To do so, along with the military, economic, and political system, the sexual mores of the time would have to undergo dramatic change. Before his reign, due to the absence of women from the public sphere, pederasty, male prostitution, and homoerotic relationships between men of similar ages permeated the exclusively male public arena.³⁶⁸ It was common for men of means to keep a boy as an apprentice or servant and use him as a boy concubine.³⁶⁹ Reza Shah saw this tradition as a token of Iran's underdevelopment and was determined to abolish it. By establishing public schools for girls, raising the age of marriage, and compulsory unveiling, he intended to not only introduce and integrate women into society, but also substitute heterosexuality for homoeroticism. Prior to this, marriages were arranged, and people could get married at an early age - nine for girls and fifteen for boys - before even having caught a glimpse of one another. But now girls could roam the streets unveiled on their way to school and men could form a romantic bond with their potential wives. This helped somewhat

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ For more information on this subject refer to Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Duke University Press, 2014); Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (University of California Press, 2005); Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁶⁹ Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 160.

alleviate one of the grievances of the intellectuals of the Constitutional movement regarding the lack of compassion in marriage and the ease with which men divorced their wives because of the lack of affection between the parties.

Reza Shah, believed that “women’s integration into social life” was “the hallmark of modernity and essential for progress in the country”.³⁷⁰ According to Paidar, Reza Shah’s trip to Turkey where he witnessed the social reforms Mustafa Kamal Atatürk (1923-1938) had launched in that country was a decisive moment impacting the future of Iranian women. In Turkey,

Women were participating in education and employment in an unprecedented fashion, a ban was proposed on women's veiling but it did not result in legal sanctions, and women were also participating in local elections and granted the right to elect and be elected in 1934, and the Turkish Civil Code abolished polygamy and granted women divorce rights in 1926.³⁷¹

Although Reza Shah adopted some of these reforms, such as unveiling and compulsory education for girls, he stopped short at changing fundamental laws regarding unilateral male divorce, polygyny, temporary marriage, and custody of children. These reform measures, nonetheless, created social anxiety and a crisis of identity among the devout who couldn’t reconcile these changes with the traditional structure of family and

³⁷⁰ Paidar, 70.

³⁷¹ Ibid, 104.

society.³⁷² A case in point is Reza Shah's decree banning the veil for respectable women but forcing it on prostitutes.³⁷³ Women found themselves in a moral impasse in which they would be deemed as prostitutes if they donned the veil, and improper—according to the dictates of their religion and culture—if they didn't. Women who found unveiling too sacrilegious and scandalous chose to avoid leaving their homes altogether and men looked at unveiled women with disdain. These top-down, undemocratic initiatives succeeded in modernizing women's appearance, but did not help people gravitate towards a more gender-egalitarian state of mind or change the cultural perceptions or expectations of women which still considered them as secondary citizens and subordinate to men.

When in 1941 Reza Shah was forced to abdicate the throne by the British and Russians, who were displeased with his affinity for Germany, much jubilation ensued by the more conservative citizens. "Last Night", a short story by Islam Kazimiyih, captures this elation as follows: "you see? I told you the foundation of injustice and oppression will crumble. The curse of the people who had to expose their honor[women] bare-headed in public finished him off".³⁷⁴

Mohammad Reza Shah who followed on the heels of his father, however, did not abandon his modernizing programs. Although the veil made a comeback to the life of the old middle-classes, it was now a modern, loose-fitting, colorful *chador* that did not cover women's faces. Only clerical and merchant families as well as the extremely devout

³⁷² Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 157.

³⁷³ *Ibid*, 156.

³⁷⁴ Islam Kazimiyih, "Shab-i akhar" (The Last Night) in *ghissiha-i kuchih-i dilbikhah* (The Stories of the Pleasant Alley), (Rose, 1968), 111.

chose to cover their faces as well.³⁷⁵ Bolstered by large revenues from oil and the support of the United States, the shah embarked on an extensive plan for secularization, industrialization, and modernization of the country. The main components of this plan were

Land reforms, sale of government lands to finance land reform; profit-sharing for workers in private sector enterprises; nationalization of forests and pastures; a national literacy corps, which soon included women... a health corps; a reconstruction and development corps; a series of urban and rural reconstruction projects aimed at building public baths, schools, and libraries, and installing water pumps; free and compulsory education for all children; and women's suffrage.³⁷⁶

These reforms which were inaugurated in 1963 became known as the White Revolution. However, among the secular left and Islamist critics of the regime, they were construed as manifestations of *westoxification*, a term coined by Jalal Al-i Ahmad signifying blind acceptance of all Western norms, values, and beliefs as superior to the authentic and indigenous Iranian identity.³⁷⁷

Strict censorship, the banning of all political parties other than the state-endorsed Resurgence Party, the ousting of the nationalist and popular prime minister Mosadeq with the help of the CIA and Britain were some of the developments at this time that led to

³⁷⁵ Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 188; Paidar, 120.

³⁷⁶ Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 203.

³⁷⁷ Jalal Al Ahmad. *Gharbzadigi* (Westoxification), (Mihir, 2006).

people's disillusionment with the regime and suspicion of all its prescriptions. Nonetheless, for women the progressive measures of the state translated into unprecedented social and legal reform allowing for their increased participation in society. In 1967, women were finally enfranchised and, after decades, family law reforms were introduced. The Family Protection Act (1967) improved the position of women within marriage by superseding the Islamic Shari'a: thus, the right to divorce, previously a husband's prerogative became subject to a family court decision; polygyny was outlawed and bigamy became conditional on the permission of the first wife or the court; the legal age of marriage increased from fifteen to eighteen for girls and from eighteen to twenty for boys.³⁷⁸ The Act also gave women greater custody rights compared with the times when fathers were the sole custodians of children. However modest in scope, these changes were met by harsh criticism from the clerics who saw the changes as running against the tenets of Islam and endangering people's faith. They protested vociferously against these changes as imperialist schemes undermining the supremacy of the Shari'a through granting women westernized rights which were not designated in the original hegemonic patriarchal interpretation of Islamic sources. Khomeini, went so far as to "publicly announce (while in exile) that divorce under the new laws was not religiously recognized, and thus divorced women who remarried would be committing bigamy, and their children would be regarded as bastards, unable to marry Muslims".³⁷⁹

³⁷⁸ Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 217.

³⁷⁹ Homa Hoodfar and Shadi Sadr, "Islamic Politics and Women's Quest for Gender Equality in Iran," *Third World Quarterly* 31:6 (2010), 888.

These reforms were a triumph for women's rights, empowering them in the eyes of the law if not those of the society and culture. As Afary explains, in a span of sixty years since the Constitutional Revolution, Iran had "became the world leader in the campaign for international women's rights".³⁸⁰ While women had to plead for their right to literacy and to attend primary school at the beginning of the century, they were now not only allowed to attend universities but held positions in higher education and even the Senate. While the emphasis in the reign of Reza Shah was on home economics as the only adequate subject for girls to study, now girls received an education which was almost on par with that of boys.³⁸¹

According to Parvin Paidar, despite the Pahlavi dynasty's wish to modernize Iran and improve women's status, their social policy and state legislations remained "piecemeal, conservative and firmly placed within male dominated social relations".³⁸² As a result, many women remained subjugated to and controlled by men because "the majority of the reforms did not go deep enough to fundamentally alter the patriarchal basis of the family and women's role in it."³⁸³ In general, these reforms had a limited scope and only touched upon the life of the (upper)middle classes and the more educated strata of the society. As Paidar argues in *Women and the Political Processes in Twentieth Century Iran*, these reforms had the opposite effect on the life of women in rural areas,

³⁸⁰ Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 212.

³⁸¹ Ibid, 190.

³⁸² Paidar, 159.

³⁸³ Ibid, 157.

where the most basic amenities such as piped water were lacking. Land reform, which was meant to put an end to the monopoly of arable land by landlords and nobles, and its concomitant mechanization of agriculture, caused mass migration of village men to urban areas for unskilled and menial jobs such as construction work and drove rural women away from their previous participation in agriculture business toward carpet weaving with long hours and extremely difficult work conditions, which entailed being confined to sultry cellars and being exploited by their employers.³⁸⁴

Even in urban areas, uneducated women were hardly modernized, liberated, secularized, or even participated in urban workforce. Az Simin Daneshvar beautifully points out in her short story “The History of the Alley”,³⁸⁵ in the patriarchal culture of mid-twentieth-century Iran, many uneducated and unhappy women still clung avidly to religion and superstition to better their lot, to stop their husbands from divorcing them, from falling in love with other women time and again, and from marrying their mistresses. Putting their faith in invisible powers and ghosts, these women wore amulets, cast spells on their husbands, used love potions, chanted incantations, put needles through effigies of their rivals to untie the knot in their tangled lives.

In the absence of independent women’s organizations, the majority of the reforms that impacted women’s status, role, and rights in the society, were initiated and negotiated by the Women’s Organization of Iran (WOI), established in 1966, and headed

³⁸⁴ Ibid, 161.

³⁸⁵ Simin Daneshvar, “Sarguzashtih kuchih” (The History of the Alley) in *Shahri chun bihisht* (A City Like Heaven) (Kharazmi, 1961.)

nominally by the Shah's twin sister. The fact that WOI was so closely tied to the state made feminism and the idea of women's liberation suspect by the critics of the regime. The left accused them of westernizing women and turning them into feckless consumers, while the Islamists accused them of corrupting women and weakening the sacred foundations of the family. This characterization of modern women was consolidated by the erotic portrayal of them in cinema, advertisements, and on television. Female doctors, lawyers, engineers, nurses, and teachers never found their way to commercial movies of this era.³⁸⁶ Instead, singers, dancers, waitresses, and prostitutes monopolized the screen leading the more devout to the conclusion that "liberated" women were morally loose and sexually accessible, adding fuel to the fire of their worst fear which was the corrosion of the foundations of male guardianship over women. This explains why the Islamists also torched multiple cinemas before the Revolution.³⁸⁷

With the increased presence and visibility of young, urban, educated, middle class women who forsook religious dress code as well as prescribed notions of propriety for a modern attire and worldview, allegations of impropriety and even prostitution soon were leveled against progressive women. A case in point is Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967), the most important Iranian female poet of the twentieth century. "Why are you wasting your time on that whore?" Sholeh Wolpe, the translator of Forough's poems was asked

³⁸⁶ Parviz Jahed, (24 December 2012). Retrieved from <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/51858>

³⁸⁷ Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (I. B. Tauris, 2006), 130.

by a relative as late as 2007.³⁸⁸ “Whoredom”, interestingly, was bestowed on Forough, as well as many other women of her generation, not as a result of her promiscuity or numerous affairs, but for her vehement rebellion against the constrictions of a patriarchal culture and society which saw women only as wives and mothers, as the objects of masculine love and hardly ever as a desiring subject. Forough was the paragon of a modern woman who challenged gender inequality, asked for more opportunities for women outside home, and broke free from the rigid molds of patriarchal gender norms.

She was not the first woman to be called a whore as a result of her defiance of patriarchal traditions. Every time women asked for more gender-egalitarian policies and an increased presence in the public sphere, essentially a man’s domain, they were denounced as prostitutes which rendered them unworthy of attention and respect. Earlier in the century, girls attending the newly established primary schools were assaulted on the street for promoting prostitution.³⁸⁹ And the unveiling of women led to a vehement uproar as it “ha[d] caused the ruin of female honor, the destruction of the family, and untold corruption and prostitution”.³⁹⁰ Later, when the issues of women’s suffrage and election were broached, Khomeini and like-minded individuals fiercely protested against such revolutionary measures saying “giving women the right to be elected will lead to prostitution”.³⁹¹

³⁸⁸ *Sin: Selected Poems of Forugh Farrokhzad*, Translated by Sholeh Wolpé (University of Arkansas Press, 2007), xi.

³⁸⁹ Afary, *Constitutional Revolution*.

³⁹⁰ Afary *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 192

³⁹¹ *Ibid*, 239.

As these examples clearly show, prostitution and slut-shaming became—and have remained—weaponized in the hands of the patriarchy to subjugate women and deny them the progress they were assiduously asking for. Therefore, women’s silence and subjugation became normalized and legitimized through the perpetuation of the “whore” stigma. By labeling women who acted differently from conventional stereotypes as “whores”, the religious patriarchal order in Iran ensured that they remained invisible and bound within the confines of a narrow definition of what a “proper” woman was or was not allowed to do, methodically using shame as an instrument of conformity.

4.3. Prostitution in *Shahr-i Naw*

Founded in 1881, the *Shahr-i Naw* district was located in the south of Tehran beyond the city walls. Later, with the expansion of the city and the destruction of the walls which marked the bounds of polite society, *Shahr-i Naw* became an integral part of the city. As the hub of “immorality” encroached upon the boundaries of respectability, it caused a tremendous stir among the dismayed residents who ardently protested to being forced to cohabit with their new neighbors.

According to Sa’id Madani, to check the spread of syphilis Reza Shah ordered all the streetwalkers and prostitutes working across the city to convene in *Shahr-i Naw*. He also razed the unsanitary and squalid shacks situated in the district and ordered their renovation. A charitable Parsi merchant resident of India by the name of Arbab Jamshid paid not only for the reconstruction of these houses, but also for the building of shops in which these women could earn a living rather than revert to prostitution. Ironically,

Madani suggests, all these measures to curb prostitution brought more business to the district which became known as *Shahr-i Naw* or the new city.³⁹²

Shahr-i Naw was a district of around 1,500,000 square feet consisting of two main neighborhoods, one in which the prostitutes lived and one in which they worked, a.k.a. the Citadel. In 1953, Ardeshir Zahedi, the Prime minister at the time, ordered a wall to be built around the Citadel to stop the recruitment of new prostitutes and to oversee the prostitutes already working there. Prostitution in *Shahr-i Naw* was tolerated and supervised by the police and its women were issued medical cards which, paradoxically, did not guarantee that they were actually free from sexually transmitted diseases.³⁹³ However, beyond its walls, prostitutes were still classified and persecuted as vagrants and detained for disrupting the social order.³⁹⁴

The first-hand information we have of *Shahr-i Naw* comes down to us thanks to the efforts of Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian who meticulously surveyed the district, Mahmud Zand Muqaddam who wrote a non-fiction book about the topic, and Kamran Shirdel who made a documentary about it. In what follows, I will outline the salient points made in each of these sources to shed light on the life of women sex workers as well as the dominant discourse on prostitution at this time.

³⁹² Saeed Madani, *Barrisi-i asib-ha-i ijtimai-i ruspigari dar Iran (A Study of Social Ills in Iran: Prostitution)*, (Yadavaran, 2013), 57-8.

³⁹³ Farman-Farma'ian, 207.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 207-210.

4.4. Case Study One: *Shahr-i Naw* (1957) By Mahmud Zand Muqaddam

In his insightful book, *Shahr-i Naw*, the sociologist Mahmud Zand Muqaddam scrupulously documents his observations regarding the atmosphere, location, inhabitants, and the clients of the red-light district. He creates an invaluable manual that details prostitutes' jargon, mannerisms, appearance, along with the state of their shacks, the streets they walked on, the shops, police station, health clinic they went to, and the forms of entertainment they both provided and enjoyed. Without superfluous commentary and in a self-effacing style, Muqaddam commits to paper all he witnesses from the moment he sets foot in the Citadel. The book has a very quick pace, it is disjointed and fragmentary, and employs short sentences and phrases as the writer painstakingly salvages for posterity the sights, sounds, and even the smells pervading the Citadel:

هنوز چند قدمی دور نشده ای از دروازه ی قلعه، بوها هجوم می آورند، بوی تند ادرار و لجن،
بوی سنگین زباله و تن های متعفن و زخمهای به چرک نشسته، استفراغ های چند شبانه روز
مانده، و ناگهان جلوی پایت، پیرزنی به زمین چسبیده، مثل سوسکی که لگدمال کرده باشند....

You are still within a few steps from the entrance of the Citadel, when the odors assail you. The pungent stench of slime and piss, the heavy smell of trash and putrid bodies, infectious wounds, days-old vomit, and suddenly in front of your feet, an old woman pasted to the ground like a crushed cockroach.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁵ Mahmud Zand Muqaddam, *Qal'ih* (Citadel), (Tehran, Maziar Publishing House, 1958), 6.

From the snippets of conversations Muqaddam records as they are taking place between prostitutes and clients, he not only gives voice to these women for the first time, but also methodically pieces together the various reasons behind prostitutes' entry into the Citadel: some have to pay for their addiction, some want to pay for their children's education so they will be better off than their mothers, and some have to work and pay off their debts to madams, pimps, or thugs who extort money out of them. Overhearing these conversations, what strikes the reader is the pervasive sense of entrapment and wretchedness experienced by these prostitutes who harbor hardly any hope for a brighter future, well aware of what will happen to them as they grow old:

سر بالا کنی، تصویرها، گله به گله، گله های پراکنده زن ها، جلوی درهای چهارطاق، چشم در راه و بزک کرده، پیراهن های رنگارنگ، گاهی بدون پوشش پشت، ... ران های خشکیده و پیکرهای لاغر بیشتر پنهان زیر دامن های چین دار و بازوهای فراخ، چشم ها ته چشمخانه، سپیدی تار و زردگون، پلک ها آماس کرده. بعضی پلک ها یکسره بدون مژه، لبه بسیاری پلک ها را بیماری جویده است و خورده است.

You look up and everywhere are scattered herds of women, in front of closed doors, expectant and wearing make-up and colorful dresses, some of the backless, . . . hiding haggard thighs and emaciated bodies under long, baggy skirts and large blouses. Hollow-eyed, grey-haired, and pasty, swollen eyelids—some without eyelashes and the edge of many gnawed away by disease.³⁹⁶

Or

³⁹⁶ Ibid, 7.

این گله های پراکنده زن های از کار افتاده هستند. از گیل های فاسدی که بیرون ریخته شده باشند از سبد، زیر دست و پا، زن هایی که بر و رویی دارند و نیمه شادابی و طراوتی، زیر سقف های دود گرفته، به کار مشغولند، بی دمی فرصت برای نفس تازه کردن، چه از سوئی، مشتریها، ژتون به دست پشت در اطاق ها، که مدام باز و بسته می شوند، و از سوئی فریاد آمرانه خانم رئیس ها، در حالی که بالاو پائین می روند در حیاط و ژتون می فروشند، مثل شلاق های فلزی زوزه کشان در فضا.

These scattered herds are debilitated women, overripe medlars thrown out of the basket, trampled under feet. [On the other hand,] Women who still have pretty faces, some youth and vigor, work under snotty ceilings, without enough time to catch their breath, as clients, tokens in hand, stand behind doors . . . as madams, rushing along the yard selling tokens, yell orders at them like the howling of metal whips in the air.³⁹⁷

The imagery of slave labor under harsh circumstances permeates this book, substantiating what the fictional works predating it had already described in length. What strikes the readers as most significant is the vividness of these images and the lucidity with which the writer lays bare the predicament of these women working incessantly in tiny rooms on filthy mattresses with clients who don't always treat them well.

One of the most unique parts of Muqaddam's book is the chapter on theatrical plays that were staged for the entertainment of the people who frequented the Citadel. Featuring the prostitutes, these plays were enacted in a so-called theatre with sixty seats set on muddy ground covered in trash. Aptly, as if to mirror the world off the stage, the

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

cardboard stage décor displayed a hunting scene in which a lion was digging its claws into the back of a deer. The staff of the theatre were all grotesque-looking: one was blind, one cross-eyed, and another was a giant as if to underline the fact that the Citadel beckoned all those whom society had discarded.

In the play recorded by Muqaddam in his book, the main actress and singer emerges on the stage in her plastic flip-flops with a dingy cloth wrapped around her waist in place of a skirt. The performance is divided into two main sections: one consists of a song and dance number ending with a poem recitation in homage to the homeland, the other the main play entitled *Honor's Revenge*. The play depicts what the inhabitants of the Citadel, who had written and directed it, considered what life was like in respectable society and their place, or lack thereof, within it. While previous fictional works probing life in the Citadel had been written by onlookers and outsiders, this play displayed the values, mores, and thought processes of the Citadel workers without any such filters.

The whole play revolves around a man's two daughters and their suitors. The father has no other wish than marrying them off as "in this day and age, having two unmarried daughters is nothing short of a catastrophe".³⁹⁸ When one of them marries, her marital bliss is short-lived as she, now pregnant, finds herself accused of having been a prostitute before marriage and is thrown out of her husband's house. Having no other means of subsistence, Zahra takes to begging on the streets and when she is propositioned by a man, she tells him she prefers begging to prostitution, which prompts him to kick her

³⁹⁸ Ibid, 41.

and she soon dies in childbirth. In the end, the husband realizes his mistake and kills the man who accused his wife of prostitution to restore his honor.

The fact that Zahra was so easily discardable, ejected both from her husband's house and the play itself, shows the lack of esteem in which women were held in the Citadel. Even the killing of Zahra's accuser/abuser does not redeem the play since it was not done to avenge her blood but, as the title shows, to reinstate her husband's honor which was lost as a result of his wife becoming the talk of the town. Moreover, the emphasis on the importance of marriage for girls as well as the preferability of any form of occupation over prostitution, even at a cost to a woman's life, clearly shows that even the prostitutes and male inhabitants of the Citadel did not consider prostitution an acceptable life choice.

In another chapter, Muqaddam reports on what he finds in the archives of a health clinic prostitutes regularly visited. The majority of the women whose files he catalogues seem to have come to the Citadel because of the death of their parents, husbands, or in case of divorce. Some came voluntarily, some were deceived by a third party under the pretense of domestic labor, some were sold to brothels, some were brought to *Shahr-i Naw* by their parents or husbands, some were born and bred there, and some had physical disabilities, the latter suggesting that disabled women were not fit for marriage nor any other form of work.

In the clinic, Muqaddam also interviews a doctor who tells us that 1,500 medical cards were in circulation for prostitutes at the time. The majority of the women who went to the clinic chose to do so after having failed to treat syphilis and gonorrhea successfully with homemade remedies. A significant number of pregnant prostitutes sought abortion.

Those who failed, abandoned their children or gave them up for adoption. Some kept their children but sent them away to live with someone else so the child wouldn't hear of their mother's profession.

Muqaddam also stops by the police station of the district where he records the legal grievances of prostitutes who complained that they were not protected by the law, nor were they taken seriously or respected by law enforcement officers. One prostitute explains how some clients take them to remote parts of the city where after raping, beating, and robbing them, they abandon them. When they report these incidents to the police, they are laughed at and thrown out. It is the prostitutes alone that the law holds responsible for soliciting, as is evident from the fact that when they are arrested for streetwalking, their clients are free to go.

Unlike the fictional works analyzed in this dissertation where it is always a male writer who speaks on behalf of the prostitutes, Muqaddam provides us with the rare opportunity of letting us hear the voice of prostitutes for the first time. He allows them to tell their own story without the mediation of an intrusive, albeit well-meaning, narrator. For this alone, this book merits to be among the most important documents on prostitution in this period.

4.5. Case Study Two: *On Prostitution in the City of Tehran* (1970) by Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian

As the head of the Higher Institute of Social Services, Sattareh Farman-Farma'ian, the mother of social work in Iran, presided over a group of researchers and social workers to conduct a comprehensive study of sex work in Tehran. Believing that “the most efficient way to fight social maladies is the study of their root causes and

developments . . . using only a scientific method”, Farman-Farma’ian and her group meticulously studied the economic, psychological, and social factors causing prostitution. Their study, which was published in 1970, gives us an unparalleled wealth of information about the education, family life, age, marital status, children, workplace, and health of the prostitutes along with the reasons they chose to continue selling their bodies. The main venue for collecting this data was *Shahr-i Naw* or the Citadel as well as the police stations where prostitutes were detained for soliciting.

Out of the 1548 prostitutes who were the subjects of the study the majority of them were found to have been born and bred in cities, allowing Framan Farma’ian to conclude that prostitution is an urban phenomenon. This finding discredited the previously-held notion that migration from villages was the main cause of prostitution.³⁹⁹ 32.6 was the average age for women working in the Citadel and 24.8 for streetwalkers, with the majority of them entering the profession between the ages of 16-25.⁴⁰⁰ The study also found that the majority of these prostitutes were illiterate, owed significant amounts of money, and were addicted to opium, alcohol, and heroin.

On average, *Shahr-i Naw* served 16,000 clients a day and some women had to work up to eighteen hours and sleep with more than ten men a day.⁴⁰¹ Most of these women were still practicing Muslims,⁴⁰² had no contact with the world beyond the walls

³⁹⁹ Farman-Farma’ian, 124.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid, 141.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 181.

⁴⁰² Ibid, 205.

of the Citadel,⁴⁰³ and did not know how to use contraceptives.⁴⁰⁴ They counted being deceived, sold, left without guardians, and ostracized by their family as the main reasons for their entry into sex work. Only 6.2% mentioned sexual fulfillment or love of money as their motivations. Most of these women were forced to continue prostitution to pay off their debts to prostitution ring-leaders or thugs who intimidated them and extorted money out them on a regular basis. Out of all these women, only 25% wanted to remain prostitutes,⁴⁰⁵ while the rest said they would give it up provided that they could find a different job or a better arrangement.

Similar to the personalities discussed in the first chapter, Farman-Farma'ian likened *Shahr-i Naw* to “a public lavatory in which contamination [was] appalling, infectious, and prone to spread”.⁴⁰⁶ She was an advocate of abolishing prostitution but, believing this was not a viable solution in the city of Tehran, proposed tolerating it, albeit providing means and measures to better the working condition of prostitutes, monitor their health, and rehabilitate them. She believed that the laws regarding prostitution were flawed and invited lawmakers to first clearly define what “prostitution” meant and then to focus their attention on guiding, educating, and rehabilitating prostitutes instead of persecuting and penalizing them. She also asked for the accountability of people who drove these women to prostitution in the first place as well as their clients before the

⁴⁰³ Ibid, 190.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid, 206.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, 202.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, 223.

law.⁴⁰⁷ Furthermore, she recommended the establishment of a social service center in the district with sufficient funds, personnel, and authority to keep prostitutes under observation, regularly collect and archive data about them, provide them with counseling and family planning services, refer them to health clinics for regular check-ups, and ultimately facilitate their rehabilitation.⁴⁰⁸

Farman-Farma'ian's proposals were ground-breaking and futuristic for a time when women in *Shahr-i Naw* were considered sub-human, denied even the most basic legal and social rights, unprotected by the laws which supervised their work, and subject to harsh treatments by "the parasites" who preyed upon them. Farman-Farma'ian and her group advocated for legal reform that recognized the rights of these women and extended the same respect, security, and benefits to them as were enjoyed by ordinary citizens.⁴⁰⁹

4.6. Case Study Three: *Women's Quarter* (1966) by Kamran Shirdel

Women's Quarter is a short documentary made by the twenty-five-year-old Kamran Shirdel who was commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and Arts in 1966 to make a series of films to promote the Women's Organization of Iran by celebrating the latter's achievements and persuading the audience to volunteer for their causes or make donations. However, upon visiting the slums and witnessing the plight of the people in them, Shirdel decided to follow a different agenda. On the surface, he would make films which were in keeping with the policy line, but surreptitiously, he would use the footage

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, 215.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, 216-18.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid, 215.

to tell a different story—a story he believed to be more truthful and representative of the life of people living on the margins of society. He made five such films which were banned and confiscated once Shirdel’s secret agenda became known to the Ministry, as the censorship codes strictly banned portrayal of poverty in films, “lest they brought the country into disrepute.”⁴¹⁰ *Women’s Quarter* is one of these movies which Shirdel could only edit and complete upon retrieving parts of his recordings after the Revolution of 1979. To make up for the loss, Shirdel used photos taken of the Citadel by Kaveh Golestan from 1975 to 1977 to edit his documentary.

Shirdel explains the reasons he chose to jeopardize his career and undermine the propaganda of the regime as

When I came to Iran, I was shocked by what I saw. It was in the winter. In the winter, poverty shows itself very well And I went to slums . . . and it was a black discovery, a sad discovery for me to see what was going on. Especially, as the Shah was going to incoronate [crown] himself as the emperor of Iran That’s the time when we exported 6.5 barrels of oil . . . [while on the streets] people were selling their blood [out of poverty].⁴¹¹

It is this disparity between the life of ordinary people and the official narrative of progress of the “Great Civilization”⁴¹² that Shirdel masterfully exhibits in documentaries

⁴¹⁰ Sadr, 73.

⁴¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPmrOiwMX1E>

⁴¹² The great civilization was the Shah’s motto projecting a progressive and prosperous image of Iran to the world.

such as *Women's Quarter*. The film's extraordinary impact lies in not only the heart-rending narratives of the prostitutes he interviews, but the careful juxtaposition of these life stories with the official propaganda which boasted of remarkable progress and improvement in the lives of the poor. Shirdel establishes this technique in the opening credits in which we see someone leafing through a magazine and catch glimpses of two disparate sets of headlines; one jubilant and light-hearted celebrating the wedding of the daughter of Mohammad Reza Shah and another tantalizing the audience with titles such as "my husband sold me for 1000 *tomans*", "how I was led astray", and "the life of debauched women of our city".

The movie opens in a classroom where women of varying ages seem to be attending a literacy class. A teacher's voice can be heard in the background as she dictates

شهر های بزرگ ایران دارای کارخانه ها و اداره ها و بیمارستان های بسیار است که مردم
شب و روز در آنها کار میکنند. هر ایرانی چه در شهر و چه در ده زحمت می کشند تا
زندگی بهتری برای خود و مردم فراهم آورند. همه ی ما در هر جای ایران که باشیم و هر
کاری که انجام دهیم در پیشرفت و آبادانی میهن خود شریک هستیم.

Big cities in Iran have many factories, offices, and hospitals in which people work day and night. Every Iranian, whether a city-dweller or a villager, toils to make a better life for themselves. Every one of us, no matter where we are and what we do, have a share in the progress and well-being of our country.

This self-congratulatory statement, however, is interspersed with the stories of women, who all on the brink of tears, explain how they came to be prostitutes. The stark reality of the life of these people vis-à-vis the official narrative of progress is deeply unsettling.

What strikes the viewers the most is the similarities between the stories of the prostitutes as if they were all telling their own version of the same story. With few exceptions, all the interviewees describe themselves as *badbakht* (wretched) and plead with the interviewer to rescue them. They explain that they were either sold to prostitution ringleaders at an early age or were brought to the Citadel by deception. They remain in the Citadel out of indigence, in order to pay off their debts to the brothel keepers, or to pay for their children's education. They swear they would give up prostitution if only other jobs were available and all are waiting to be rescued by a chivalrous man who would volunteer to marry them and take them away.

The first woman who tells her story sets the tone for the rest of the women who follow. She explains that she was lured to Tehran, and once there, she was taken to the Citadel. As a result of her debts to her pimp, she was unable to leave prostitution. However, she succeeded in running away to her family where she learned she was disowned and no longer welcome into the house. In the end, she returned to the Citadel as she had nowhere else to turn to. Although her voice is marked by sadness throughout the whole interview, it gains further pathos when she describes the episode with her family and having to return to the brothel voluntarily after having fled from it. This incident underlines the potency of the whore stigma and the importance of virginity for unmarried girls as the signifier of moral decency without which the honor of the whole family would be jeopardized.

The second woman's story has more unfortunate twists and turns. She was nine years old when her stepmother married her off to an old man with a wife and children. The husband's family starved her, took all her money and sent her to the streets begging. When she became a maid servant, the lady of the house sold her to a pimp. She changed hands multiple times until she ended up in the Citadel. Out of her earnings as a prostitute, she paid her husband to divorce her and chose, instead of living in his house, to settle in the Citadel. Her story ends on a relatively positive note as she found a man who was willing to marry and take care of her. He, however, had a hard time co-existing in the same house with her son.

The second story, just like the first one, underlines the cultural practices and perceptions which result in women's hapless circumstances. Child marriage, polygyny, and difficult female divorce lay the foundations for this woman's miserable circumstances. In the end, as if to buy her freedom from a slave-master, she has to bribe her husband into divorcing her, implying that marriage for her was a form of bondage. She prefers to live in a brothel rather than the suffocating cocoon the religious patriarchal society has weaved around her. The stories of these two prostitutes attest to the fact that prostitution, in many cases, is a "choiceless choice", as Janice Raymond fittingly describes.⁴¹³

The third woman is a peasant girl who was sold to the Citadel by a "respectable woman" and who now has to work for her children to get educated so that they "will not be as wretched as I". The fourth woman was lured into prostitution upon the death of her

⁴¹³ Janice Raymond, *Not A Choice, Not A Job* (University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 20.

parents and who now, to care for her children, works in the Citadel. She emphatically states that she would do any other job as the only thing keeping her in the Citadel is the concern over her daily bread. The fifth woman was sold to a prostitution ringleader when she was only six years old. She, however, ran away, but was forced to return to her job. She is now twenty-three years old and has given up addiction and signed up for school. Up to this point in the interview, she seems very confident and pleased with her accomplishments. But when she reaches the end of her story, she becomes subdued as she lays her future happiness in the hands of any man willing to marry her: “my classmates all found husbands and were rescued from this environment. I will also, God-willing, get rescued”. The sixth woman is also in debt and has children. Her main grievance, however, is against the police and the lack of legal support for prostitutes. She complains, “Whenever I go to the police station, they beat me, they whip me, they fine me”. She has hopes that Ashraf Pahlavi, the head of WOI, will somehow be able to save her as all “I wish for is to leave this misery behind”. The seventh woman pleads with the interviewer to help her. She says she was only a child when she was brought to the Citadel. Her family cheated her of a large sum of money and now she is in a lot of debt. The eighth woman had to abandon two of her children out of poverty. The ninth voice is that of a prostitute’s twelve-year-old daughter who describes her mother as “wretched” and entreats the interviewer to save her and her family as she is being harassed by men in the Citadel. The tenth woman warns that girls as young as nine are taken to the Citadel or sold on the streets: “It’s a shame, it’s a pity. We are ruined. They shouldn’t be”. The eleventh woman explains her reason for prostitution as sheer hunger. And the last woman, who has a happier ending, has given up prostitution and is an orange vendor on

the streets. Despite that, she still can't afford a mattress to sleep on or a rug for her floor and relies on handouts from charities to make ends meet.

That the happiest story belongs to a woman who can hardly afford to sleep in a bed paints a grim picture for the prostitutes whether they remain in this job or leave it behind. Despite all the publicity and reports of progress, the women interviewed in this documentary hardly have benefited from being part of a "Great Civilization" and can hardly substantiate the statement being dictated to them by their teacher, "God, we are grateful you created us".

In order to gain these prostitutes' trust, Shirdel only used an audio recorder, carefully hidden out of sight, so the prostitutes would comfortably confide in him rather than feel intimidated by the presence of a camera to give what they thought was the right answer to his questions. The exceptional black and white stills of Kaveh Golestan which accompany these voices add a new dimension to the documentary as they bring along a new perspective, a welcome polyphony, a story within a story, and freeze in time the expressions of these prostitutes posing for the camera in their unfortunate workplace.

One of the most extraordinary aspects of these photos, which works well with Shirdel's juxtaposition technique, is the attention shown to the photos covering the walls of the prostitutes' rooms. They are mainly posters and photos of famous singers and actors whose glamorous appearance stands in sharp contrast with the bleak expression on the prostitutes' faces and the griminess, shabbiness, and bareness of their environment. These posters, which are the sole ornaments brightening up these rooms, provide us with a window into the soul of these women who escape their immediate surroundings for fleeting moments only by their imagination and in their dreams.

Golestan described *Shahr-i Naw* in 1977 as “a waste ground or public toilet” where “a rotten stench flows through the streets, making it hard to breathe”.⁴¹⁴ But “the problems here are not petty ones such as the city council’s inefficiency in cleaning the streets; neither are they tearful stories of young girls losing their innocence. The real problems are syphilis, heroin addiction, violence and degradation”.⁴¹⁵ Almost twenty years after the publication of Muqaddam’s book and nearly a decade after Farman-Farma’ian’s survey, *Shahr-i Naw* seems to have remained unchanged. That the state took little interest in improving the working and living arrangements of prostitutes, despite the efforts of Shirdel, Muqaddam, and Farman-Farma’ian, reveals its attitude toward sex work. Nominally illegal yet allowed in the Citadel, deemed necessary yet scandalous and degrading, accessible yet hidden from sight, prostitution was not a priority to the Pahlavi regime. It preferred to take Shirdel’s film away from him and conceal it from the public rather than deal with the issues raised in the documentary.

4.7. Conclusion

In the course of this chapter, I investigated the official policy of the Pahlavi regime regarding the regulation of prostitution and how it affected the life and work condition of the prostitutes. Based on the non-fictional accounts of the time, the priority of the regime was to drive prostitution out of sight and banish it to the margins of the society. Prostitution, however, did not remain within the walls of the Citadel and some

⁴¹⁴ <http://payvand.com/blog/blog/2010/12/10/photos-tehrans-brothel-district-shahr-e-no-1975-77-by-kaveh-golestan/>

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

women did venture out in search of better financial remuneration. Either way, they were afforded very little legal and social rights. Based on Shirdel, Muqaddam, and Farman-Farma'ian's research, the majority of the women who engaged in prostitution were forced to do so out of economic necessity and believed their only ticket out of prostitution was a man who would stoop low enough to marry them. Harking back to the liberal/radical dichotomy, which was discussed in the first chapter, it is very difficult to maintain that the economic independence, i.e. basic survival, that these women experienced as a result of engaging in prostitution proved empowering to them. On the contrary, prostitution was found to be as a psychological burden for its practitioners as it clashed with their religious beliefs and the socio-cultural values of their society. They would swap this "independence" in a heartbeat for a family life and dependence on a man who would take care of them. As will be discussed in the next chapter, this yearning and search for a savior became a fixture in the films that depicted prostitutes in the second Pahlavi era.

CHAPTER 5

NEGOTIATING MODERNITY THROUGH THE PROSTITUTE CHARACTER IN THE POPULAR CULTURE OF THE SECOND PAHLAVI ERA (1941-1979)

5.1. Introduction

In *Notes from the Bustling City* (1969), Firydun Tunkabuni, a well-known Iranian leftist writer and activist, denounced the commercial movies, books, and songs of the time as manifestations of the “unoriginality” which he believed was the “biggest crime against humanity committed by the bourgeoisie”.⁴¹⁶ The bourgeois artist, he contended, “neither has the ability nor the will to revolt against their society or change it”.⁴¹⁷ To clarify his point, he drew upon both Iranian and Western examples which, to him, encapsulated the unoriginal, superficial, repetitive, and uncritical art he bemoaned. Among Tunkabuni’s prime examples was *Go Naked into the World* (1961), a successful Hollywood movie that was then playing in Iranian cinemas as *Berahne va sargardan* (naked and distraught). Directed by Ranald MacDougall, this well-made movie had become an instant hit in Iran and people flocked in large numbers to cinemas to watch it. Very similar to the Iranian movies produced at the time, and arguably a great influence on a number of them, *Go Naked into the World* featured the exploits of a prostitute character. This topic, however, was far from being scandalous or outrageous to the sensibilities of Iranian spectators as they were, by then, well-accustomed to the

⁴¹⁶ Firydun Tunkabuni, *Yaddashtha-i shahr-i shulugh* (Notes from the Bustling City), (Pishgam publication, 1969), 228.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid*, 232.

representations of prostitutes and risqué subjects on the screen both in national cinematic productions and foreign films. In fact, according to Hamid Naficy in *Social History of Iranian Cinema*, in 1978, a year before the Revolution, out of “Tehran’s 120 movie houses, 67 were showing ‘seksi’ or ‘sexploitation’ movies most from Italy and the United States”.⁴¹⁸

With the far-reaching popularity and ubiquity of foreign movies, it is hardly surprising that the Iranian film industry was profoundly influenced not only by their stylistic elements and narrative techniques but also, understandably, by their content which was superimposed, with varying degrees of success, into the national cinema, much to the dismay of local film critics who dismissed these attempts as tasteless “imitations” which ran against native values and beliefs.⁴¹⁹ Writing in 1953, Hushang Kavusi coined the term “Film-Farsi” as a pejorative designation for Iranian commercial movies to denote that “the only indicator of these films’ Iranianness was the Persian language used in its dialogues; other aspects of the film were believed to be imitations of international Grade B and C films”.⁴²⁰

These popular movies transported their audiences to a world of bars and night clubs and populated the screen with enticing images of dancers, singers, actresses, showgirls, and prostitutes with such an immensity that hardly any movies were made at the time in which these characters did not play at least a minor role. This fascination with

⁴¹⁸ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: The Industrializing Years (1941-1978)*, Vol 2, (Duke UP, 2011), 429.

⁴¹⁹ Golbarg Rekabtalaei, *Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History* (Cambridge UP, 2018), 228.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid*, 197.

the sexually *wayward* woman, however, was not unique to Iranian cinema. Melanie Bell in *Femininity in the Frame: Women and 1950s British Popular Cinema* (2010) brings to light the enchantment of British and French cinemas with the female prostitute.

According to her,

The centrality of the prostitute figure in Italian cinema was even more noticeable and by 1960 the prostitute dominated the Italian imagination and media following a combination of contentious legislative changes and changing social mores regarding sexuality which gave rise to new configurations of cinematic prostitute.⁴²¹

Although popular, Iranian movies of this time with central prostitute characters are often renounced as low art and rarely analyzed in depth in studies of Iranian cinema as they have little artistic and intellectual value. However, for the purpose of this dissertation, they provide a wealth of information regarding the meaning and significance of prostitution in popular culture. In what follows, I will investigate the representation of sex workers in the commercial movies made in the second Pahlavi Dynasty to account for the popularity of the prostitute character in cinema and shed light on what these representations revealed about popular attitudes toward female sexuality. To provide a comparative framework for my analysis of the Iranian cases and determine the extent to which these representations conform to or diverge from their Western counterparts, I will first delineate the history of the picturing of the prostitute in world cinema.

⁴²¹ Melanie Bell. *Femininity in the Frame: Women and 1950s British Popular Cinema* (I.B.Tauris, 2010), 132.

5.2. Prostitution in World Cinema

5.2.1. Early Attempts (1896-1920)

Russell Campbell in *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in Cinema* (2006) traces the appearance of prostitute characters on the screen to 1896 when Charles Aumont, a French theater entrepreneur, used Lumiere's cinematograph to film a singer-prostitute while touring Russia.⁴²² "The potential for a reciprocal aphrodisiac effect was clearly grasped",⁴²³ Campbell explains, and soon movie theaters were erected in red-light districts allowing prostitutes to loiter freely on the premises, collapsing the boundaries between on-screen and off-screen voyeurism, intensifying the spectators' cinematic pleasure with an aura of sexual arousal. Therefore, he concludes, the emergence of prostitution on the screen was inevitable as it had already engulfed the cinematic apparatus.

The earliest movie featuring a prostitute character in the silent era appeared in 1897. Although the film is lost, descriptions of it remain that point to a comedic portrayal of the prostitute through notions such as mistaken identity, the criminality of her profession, the public disturbance her street-walking causes, and the triviality and frivolity of her run-ins with the law—features which would recur in later films as well.

Melodramatic representations of prostitutes were even more pervasive. Usually cast as fallen woman narratives, they would either relay the life of a village girl who strays from the path of chastity and becomes a prostitute in the big city due to the

⁴²² Russell Campbell, *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in Cinema* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 8.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

corrupting incitements of a city rogue who later becomes her pimp, or a mature woman who, as a result of “abandonment by a husband, loss of custody of a child, and desperate poverty” as well as “self-sacrifice for a loved one”, descends into prostitution.⁴²⁴ In variations of the first plotline, sometimes the girl is seduced, raped, kidnapped, or saddled with an illegitimate child, but in all versions she has no means of subsistence other than selling her sexual services. By the end of these films, whatever the cause of her unfortunate choice, the prostitute either atones for her sins and is rewarded with an upstanding man or, as was the case in most movies, commits suicide or meets her end through other violent measures. Either way, the image the audience is to leave the theater with is that of the prostitute abandoning her earlier promiscuous life.

Campbell asserts that the (in)voluntary transgression of the prostitute had to be checked by punitive measures in these films in order to remind the audience of the gravity and necessity of safeguarding the patriarchal order which kept women under control but out of harm’s way. Therefore, the virtue of a woman who “is cast adrift from the family and is forced, bereft of protection from father or husband, to fend for herself” is portrayed to be invariably imperiled.⁴²⁵ Thus, “in its address to female spectators, the story will . . . serve as a cautionary tale, illustrating what is in store for the woman who permits herself to stray from the path of virtue; for male audiences, the film may warn of the consequences of parental or marital failure”.⁴²⁶

⁴²⁴ Ibid, 12.

⁴²⁵ Ibid, 13.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

Although these films showed the downward spiral of the life of a fallen woman for moral and didactic purposes, they managed to smuggle in a degree of tantalizing ambiguity regarding the image of the transgressing woman who signified both good and evil, virtue and vice. This, Campbell observes, constituted the allure of the prostitute character for both male and female audiences of the time. The fallen woman narrative, however, went out of fashion as the century progressed and more work opportunities for women and the changing sexual mores of the time ensured that the loss of virginity before marriage did not automatically translate into notoriety, compulsory marriage, the birth of unwanted children, or as discussed earlier, into a woman's fall into prostitution.

Closely related to the fallen woman narrative was the white slave narrative which focused on a female protagonist who was kidnapped and imprisoned in a brothel and forced into surrendering her virtue—often prevented at the last minute by her fiancé. As the century wore on, however, these tales also gradually disappeared. Mary Ann Doane in *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (1991) argues that relatively few cinematic productions after the 1920s reflect the preoccupation with the figure of the prostitute displayed in art, literature, and theater of the second half of the nineteenth century—as discussed in the first chapter—when they were treated with “an almost obsessive fascination”.⁴²⁷ This, she alleges, is due to the “social function of the cinema and its deployment of bodies, which mobilizes some of the connotations of prostitution conceived on a figurative level”.⁴²⁸ In other words,

⁴²⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (Routledge, 1991), 262.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid*, 263.

One could plausibly argue that the prostitute in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries becomes a kind of meta-character—that is to say, she exemplifies or embodies what becomes *the* task of characterization in the twentieth century—particularly in the cinema—the humanization of the commodity. Perhaps this is why her literal representation in the cinema is unnecessary as such and the fascination with the figure of the prostitute declines in the twentieth century (in comparison with obsessions of the nineteenth). The process of characterization now endows the commodity with speech, with emotions, with a moral psychology which strives to give the lie to both alienation and commodification.⁴²⁹

Therefore, according to Doane, cinema could now use the mechanism of humanizing the commodity—which had crystalized in the figure of the prostitute in the previous century—without having to populate the screen with prostitute characters.

Whether one accepts Doane's teleological explanation of the representational decline of the prostitute, one cannot overlook the logistical problems that contributed to the reduced presence of prostitutes on the screen in parts of the twentieth century. In the United States, for example, the Hays Code which set moral guidelines for American movie productions from 1934 to 1968 banned the depiction of prostitution in films and by doing so banished from the screen the most important thematic ploy that was being used by directors up to that point when portraying divergent female sexuality in movies.

Notwithstanding their moralistic bent, white slave films were outlawed in 1916, an injunction that remained in place until the abrogation of the Hays Code in the early

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 265.

years of the 1960s. Prodded by the Legion of Decency and other moral crusaders, the censorship code in the United States, Britain, and a number of other Western countries, soon banned the portrayal of prostitution altogether. By doing so, the censors essentially swept prostitution under the rug by avoiding any mention of it in films, thus reinforcing the policy of tolerating prostitution as long as it was confined within the bounds of the red-light district and away from the *public eye*.

As Campbell aptly points out, prostitution was bound to be censored as the threat prostitutes caused to the patriarchal order could hardly be neutralized on the screen for a number of reasons: 1) her portrayal as a happy working girl would have been interpreted as an inducement to vice and her depiction as a miserable creature would have drawn attention to the social system that was responsible for her plight; 2) her excess sexuality was in direct contradiction to religious edicts calling for either shunning sex or curbing sexual desires within the family; 3) flaunting her freedom from sexual and moral constrictions of the time would have threatened the foundations of family by providing women with an alternative to family life; 4) her image as a laborer would have signified financial independence gained through sexual services; 5) her symbolic value as a sexually aggressive woman was frowned upon by guardians of moral decency; and 6) her story could lay bare “a corrupt male power structure profiting through the vice business in the exploitation and oppression of women” and expose it to criticism.⁴³⁰ Censorship of the prostitute on screen ensured she remained passive and tractable and did not expose the gendered social order to scrutiny.

⁴³⁰ Russell Campbell, “Prostitution and film Censorship in the USA,” *Screening the Past* Issue 2 (1997), 14-15.

In place of prostitutes, however, “singers, dancers, dress models, nightclub hostesses, chorus girls, ‘B-girls’, ‘party girls’, virtuous strippers” who “frequented bars, saloons, roadhouses, gambling dens” cropped up in films. These terms, in fact, were euphemisms for the word “prostitute” but as long as these women were not clearly referenced as such, they were tolerated in cinema.⁴³¹

5.2.2. Post-WWII Era

The representational value of prostitutes was once again rediscovered in the years following the Second World War. In order to understand why after a period of strict censorship prostitute characters were again conjured up on the screen, we need to take a closer look at the factors that changed the fabric of Western societies in particular, their outlook toward sexual activity.

Post-WWII era witnessed a burgeoning of public debate regarding gender roles, female sexuality, and women’s place within family and society. The publication of Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) in the United States and Mass Observation’s Little Kinsey Sex Survey (1949) in Britain, highlighted the questions of sexual pleasure, sexual orientation, extramarital sex, sadomasochism, venereal disease, and prostitution. William Masters and Virginia Johnson in the next decade focused their attention on female sexual responsiveness and by doing so subverted the long-standing myth that women have less need/capacity for sexual gratification.⁴³² At the same time, neo-Freudians like Herbert

⁴³¹ Ibid, 10.

⁴³² Vern Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and Prostitution: A Social History* (Prometheus Books, 1987), 298.

Marcuse and Norman O. Brown were advancing, in Carol Siegel's terms, "sexual revolutionary theory" in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *Life against Death* (1959).⁴³³ These pioneering studies—and many more—found their way into popular culture and gradually eroded the foundations of the double standards which maintained the inegalitarian status quo. By giving scientific validity to women's sexual desire, these studies eventually altered the sexual mores of their time, albeit not without creating a lot of anxiety, confusion, and resistance along the way.

In the years immediately following the war and in the 1950s, the correct outlet for these desires, however, was still deemed to be the "companionate" marriage.⁴³⁴ Prostitution, thus, still posed a threat to monogamous heterosexual marriage as the basis of the social order. One report, in particular, shows how agonizing and lengthy the process of detaching the prostitute figure from the popular perceptions of her pathological and psychological abnormalities were.

The Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, a.k.a. the Wolfenden Report, was presented to the Secretaries of State for the Home Department and for Scotland on August 12, 1957.⁴³⁵ The controversial report was revolutionary for its time as it postulated that "homosexuality does not, and cannot, come within the purview of the criminal law" as "law is not concerned with private morals or with ethical

⁴³³ Carol Siegel, *Sex Radical Cinema* (Indiana UP, 2015), 7.

⁴³⁴ Bell, 126.

⁴³⁵ "Report of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution," *British Medical Journal* vol. 2, no. 5045 (Sept 14, 1957), 639.

sanctions”.⁴³⁶ The committee’s postulations and recommendations regarding prostitution, however, were less iconoclastic as they sat quite well with the already-existing socio-sexual norms of the time arguing that

the law is plainly concerned with the outward conduct of citizens in so far as the conduct injuriously affects the rights of other citizens. Certain forms of conduct it has always been thought right to bring within the scope of the criminal law on account of the injury which they occasion to the public in general.⁴³⁷

Prostitution, thus, was still securely placed under the purview of the law as it affronted public decency. The committee recommended incrementally increasing fines and punishments for women soliciting in public but decided prostitutes who operated in private be exempt from penalties provided that they did not cause any offence to their neighbors. Much like in Iran, the issue at stake was the *public* display of indecency and the *free* mingling of the respectable society and prostitutes in public that needed to be banished from sight.

The committee considered as prostitutes “women whose psychological make-up is such that they choose this life because they find it in a style of living which is to them easier, freer, and more profitable than would be provided by any other occupation”.⁴³⁸ By pathologizing prostitutes, Wolfenden report once again—like many reports before it—

⁴³⁶ “Wolfenden Report,” *The British Journal of Venereal Diseases* vol. 33, no. 4 (1957), 205.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁸ “Report of the Departmental Committee,” 639.

isolated prostitutes as inherently devious with a greater predisposition to perversity. Socio-economic factors, therefore, were relegated to an inferior position called “precipitating” rather than “determining” factors.

In *Femininity in the Frame*, Bell argues that as a result of the dominance of Wolfenden Report in the popular consciousness of the British society, as well as “censorship relaxations” and overall “presence of sex in mainstream culture”,⁴³⁹ a number of movies tackled the question of prostitution in late 1950s in Britain and by doing so, on the one hand, capitalized on the anxieties that the British audiences had regarding the new perceptions of femininity and female sexuality, and on the other, reaffirmed their conservative conceptions regarding the place of marriage within society, female chastity, and abnormality of prostitutes.

Early post-war movies that featured a prostitute character, either in crime or social-realist genres, usually took their cue from the Wolfenden Report and portrayed prostitutes as girls who had been led astray by their psychopathology displayed in delinquent desire for worldly possessions and unruly avarice for material goods. In order to further distance prostitutes from respectable British womanhood, movies made at this time tended to “displace the figure and the criminal activity surrounding her” by casting foreign actresses as prostitutes and/or showing prostitutes to be of foreign origins.⁴⁴⁰ Othering the prostitute and constructing them as inherently, psychologically, culturally, racially, and ethically different from “proper” women reappears in later films.

⁴³⁹ Bell, 123.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid, 132.

Bell hypothesizes that the function of the prostitute narrative at this time was to serve as a cautionary tale warning the society of the dangers of getting in pre/non-marital sexual liaisons which could act as precipitating factors for the fall of women into prostitution. She uses the popular trope of “shop-soiling” to explain how women, who had lost their chastity before marriage, despite the discourses validating their sexual desires and surveys corroborating the commonality of their extra/pre-marital sexual activity, were considered soiled merchandise and their “price” tumbled down precipitously in the marriage market.⁴⁴¹ This contradiction captures the tension that existed between social reality, the scientific discourse, and the popular consciousness holding on to deeply-seated norms of femininity in the 1950s.

Perceptions of women’s sexuality underwent a profound shift in the mid-1960s and 1970s leading to a revolution in sexual attitudes and conducts. Traditional modes of sexual behavior became obsolete as contraceptive methods along with the legalization of abortion allowed women to participate in sexual activity out of wedlock without the fear of being encumbered with unwanted children. Furthermore, the stigma attached to pre-marital sex gradually waned as a growing number of people warmed to the idea that such sexual activity was not synonymous with the moral ruin of a girl and mutual sexual attraction was a prerequisite for lasting relationships. Carol Siegel emphasizes that feminists were instrumental in inducing these changes. Their tireless work to provide battered women with shelters as well as their recruitment of law enforcement on behalf of women contributed to reducing violence against them while their push for affirmative

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 136.

action hiring practices and pay equality ensured women could enjoy a degree of self-reliance and financial independence from men. This, in turn, meant greater freedom for women to choose their partners or remain in relationships based on pleasure, fulfillment, and attraction rather than financial need.⁴⁴²

In cinema, depiction of promiscuity became more prevalent with the sexual liberation underway. As a result, portrayal of prostitutes picked up speed especially in Hollywood. But did sexual liberation translate into more favorable depictions of prostitutes? In other words, was this increased cinematic visibility a herald of more nuanced characterizations of prostitutes?

As previously discussed, before the years of censorship, the fallen woman and white slave narrative types were the most common vehicles through which tales of prostitution unfolded. Despite their simplicity, these films betrayed the implacable tendency of their male directors to, on the one hand, titillate their audiences with their scandalous subjects, and on the other, make sure transgressive conducts were met with sufficient punishment. Doing so, they catered to male fantasies while simultaneously placating male anxieties. As the twentieth century advanced, these narrative types gave way to other, more complex, representations. They, however, remained bound within the confines of male fantasy as the majority of writers, directors, and producers behind these movies were men. That the majority of research conducted on cinematic characterization of prostitutes tends to pigeonhole them in archetypal categories underlines the fact that representation of prostitution across borders, with few exceptions which will be discussed

⁴⁴² Campbell, *Marked Women*, 7.

later, follow deeply rooted conventions. Most, according to Campbell, are dictated by the demands of male fantasy and patriarchal ideology. For example,

The Siren and Gold Diggers deal with men's fear of losing their power and their very identity to the seductive woman, while the Avenger, a nightmare of the male imagination, incarnates the threat of women taking retribution for all the oppression they have suffered at the hands of men. . . . The Gigolette embodies sexual freedom in a context of puritanical repression; the Happy Hooker is the liberated woman whose only mission in life is to make sure that the erotic enjoyment you gain from your encounter with her is as great as hers; the Adventuress invites you to join her on her journey of sexual experimentation. For the masochist, the Business Woman dominatrix holds out the promise of an orgy of debasement amid chains, spikes, whips, and leather. Less sexual in emphasis, the Comrade is a fellow margin-dweller or companion in struggle, the Nursemaid a mother figure who enfolds but never engulfs. On the darker side, the Baby Doll caters to incestuous wishes generated in the father-daughter relationship, the Captive is an attractive woman trapped in men's power, while the Junkie offers up an image of the sexual woman in ultimate degradation.⁴⁴³

Notwithstanding their nominal differences, what these man-made movies have in common is an unshakeable reticence regarding the background of the prostitute, the

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 27.

underlying social structures and systemic causes which contribute to her unfortunate circumstances, the psychological burden of practicing her profession, or the responsibility of the client in perpetuating the institution of prostitution. Instead they “displace all responsibility for it from the system as a whole, with its structured gender inequalities, and from men in general (and especially the clients) onto a certain criminal subculture (the pimps), or onto the prostitutes themselves”.⁴⁴⁴

For nonconformist, experimental, idiosyncratic, and nuanced representations of prostitution, one needs to look at the works of female/feminist filmmakers who, since the silent era, have waged a war against ideologically charged representation of prostitutes which are in compliance with male fantasies. Instead, they “deny the element of erotic enjoyment for the woman”, “delibidinize the sexual act and represent it as a burden, a dull and alienating routine”, “deglamorize” and “deromanticize” prostitution, and do away with “the fetishistic eroticism it so often displays in films by male directors”.⁴⁴⁵

This, however, depends on where on the spectrum between liberal and radical conceptions of prostitution these filmmakers stand. As explained in the first chapter, liberals posit that prostitution can be conceived as a legitimate line of business which can be empowering to women as a result of the independence it grants them. According to this line of reasoning, prostitution can be a voluntary choice on par with any other form of business contract in which one party sells their services. This way, prostitutes are considered entrepreneurs and prostitution should be called sex work. Conversely, as

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 29.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, 38.

radicals believe, prostitution is a patriarchal institution aimed at exploiting and oppressing women who have been chosen for prostitution as a result of the unequal gendered social structure which affords fewer economic opportunities to women. They, therefore, toil away as a cog in the patriarchal machine which is insensitive to the contributing factors to their current status in order to assure there is a perpetual supply of workers.

Feminist movies picturing prostitution along these lines were mostly made after the 1980s and were not shown in Iran. For the sake of comparison with my Iranian case studies, I have to forego the analysis of such feminist productions as the period under study in this dissertation only stretches to 1979. Instead, scrutinizing a movie which is more indicative of Hollywood's formulaic rendition of prostitution proves more useful as the attitude displayed toward sex work in it can be used as a point of reference and comparison for the Iranian movies which will be later discussed. In what follows, I take a closer look at *Go Naked into the World* (1961) by Ranald MacDougall mentioned briefly at the beginning of the chapter.

5.3. *Go Naked into the World* (1961) by Ranald MacDougall

As the film begins, Nick, an army officer, has returned home to San Francisco and is falling madly in love with a prostitute called Guilietta. As it progresses, we learn that Nick's father, a self-made, domineering millionaire, has also been among her numerous wealthy clients. The rest of the movie focuses on the intense rivalry between Guilietta and the father to reclaim Nick. Once Guilietta realizes that she cannot escape her checkered past and that being with Nick would mean exposing him to confrontations with

her former clients, she selflessly commits suicide allowing Nick to be seamlessly reintegrated in the realm of the father.

Nick's father is the patriarch par excellence who is feared and despised by all he comes into contact with. He abuses his wife, limits the freedom and mobility of his daughter, and dictates the terms of his son's future happiness in both his choice of marriage partner and profession, assuring by whatever means possible that they all remain obedient and under his constant supervision and control. Their evident dislike for the father and his tyrannical rule, however, does not translate into a tangible revolt by any of his family members. At one point, the wife and daughter decide to leave him but as soon as he admits his behavior is not entirely his fault because "I don't know how to beg. I never learned. Orders . . . that's all I know", they relent and stay. This could have been a turning point in the father's relationship with his family had he not ended the above statement with the preemptory order, "Don't leave me! Dammit! Don't you dare leave me". Even Nick who defies his father's wishes and persists in pursuing Guilietta and not following his father in his profession keeps going back to him for money, thus reducing his rebellion to the level of a juvenile tantrum rather than a fully-fledged plan for becoming independent.

The father is ever-present. There is hardly a moment in the movie that he is not in charge of the action or supervising it. His private detectives/eyes are everywhere, and he has connections in the police force and spies in places his son frequents. He can even trace Nick abroad. Towards the end of the movie, he reminds Guilietta that she cannot provide the wealth, repute, and glory Nick is destined for, thus pushing her toward her unfortunate demise. It is Guilietta who pays the price for the restoration of the patriarchal

order with her virtue and her life. In an attempt to drive Nick away, she flirts with men in a café and provocatively dances with them in Nick's presence. When he tries to stop her, he is arrested, and she is left alone with men who, excited by her earlier behavior, rape her. Immediately after this event, she commits suicide. And when Nick finds Guilietta's lifeless body on the beach, his ever-present father is there to comfort him and take him home where life goes on as unperturbed as the time before Guilietta ever arrived on the scene. Without having undergone any meaningful changes, the father reclaims his son and keeps his wife and daughter as well.

According to Campbell, *Go Naked into the World* was by no means unconventional in its depiction of the prostitute character but remarkably representative of the time of its production in which the promiscuity of the prostitutes was neutralized either through marriage or death.⁴⁴⁶ The latter, Campbell explains,

may serve to assuage male fears; for a time at least the anxieties that the female as sexual being provokes can be stilled. Commission of the act itself, however, may be displaced from the male protagonist onto a surrogate figure, such as a pimp or a serial killer, so that the murder may be simultaneously enjoyed and disavowed.⁴⁴⁷

Go Naked into the World takes this thread-bare scenario one step further by discarding the prostitute through an act committed by herself, thus presenting her unfortunate ending as the natural outcome of her promiscuity rather than the result of systematic and

⁴⁴⁶ Campbell, *Marked Women*, 27.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 6.

widespread bias and violence perpetrated against her. Nowhere in the movie are the factors that contributed to Guilietta's choice of prostitution as her profession elucidated nor are her clients, including Nick's father, held accountable for badgering her to her death. Even Nick does not feel the need to avenge her but returns to his father's arms as he is standing over her dead body, underscoring the triumph of the patriarchal order. The final scene of the movie shows Guilietta's body abandoned on the beach as Nick and his father literally turn their back on her and walk away, leaving the audience with the image of the ultimate loneliness of the prostitute whose body which was demanded by so many while alive is not claimed by anyone upon her death. Guilietta, a foreign prostitute bereft of the protection of her male family members, has failed in fending for herself and is punished for it.

5.4. Prostitutes in Iranian Cinema

Women prostitutes became indispensable and ubiquitous characters in Iranian movies in the second Pahlavi dynasty. Their fictional portrayals replaced the non-fictional accounts discussed in the last chapter and monopolized the cinematic stage as these did not violate the regime's codes of censorship. Prostitutes mainly emerged on the screen as singers and dancers, a.k.a. *motrebs*, who "scandalously" performed at night clubs and cafés in various stages of undress. The majority of them, however, were never explicitly dubbed "prostitutes" nor were they ever shown as engaging in sexual acts with clients. Rather, there seemed to be an implicit understanding between the filmmakers and the audience as to the true, unmentionable nature of these women's vocation.

The unambiguous correspondence between women's singing, dancing, and prostitution in the imagination of a Muslim/Iranian spectator is rooted in the centuries-old

recognition of a woman's voice as part of her *'awrat* or pudendum, which needs to be veiled, just like her body is. This unlikely equivalence has created a peculiar category of adultery called *zina al-udhuni* or aural adultery as distinct from *zina al-'ayni* or visual adultery.⁴⁴⁸ According to Houchang Chehabi,

A number of legal compendia went so far as to recommend that a woman distort her voice when talking to an unrelated man by putting a small pebble under her tongue, or suggested that when someone knocked on the door of a house in which there were no adult males or children, the woman of the house clap their hands instead of asking "who is it?".⁴⁴⁹

This explains why in a movie like *Mohalel* (1971), the female protagonist is shown talking to unrelated men with her index finger securely lodged in her cheek so as to distort her voice and by so-doing prevent them from hearing it in all its femininity, a privilege only *mahram* men can enjoy. Needless to say, women who actively sought to unveil their voices in the form of public performances were not only considered morally lax, dishonorable, and vulgar but also susceptible to and receptive of other immoral activities.

5.4.1. The Historical Construction of *Motrebs* as Transgressors

Despite these categorical injunctions against women's voices, there are no verses in the Quran in which women's singing or even music, in general, are mentioned. This

⁴⁴⁸ Houchang Chehabi, "Voices Unveiled: Women Singers" in *Iran in Iran and Beyond*, ed. Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron (Costa Mesa, California, 2000), 151.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

has been a source of great distress and disagreement for both the defenders and detractors of women’s singing. The absence of an authoritative injunction by the Qur’an has led to many speculations and strained over-readings of the verses which might be slightly related to hearing and, subsequently, music and dancing. One such verse which has been much abused by the opponents of music is verse 31: 6, in which Allah warns the believers against the snares of the “diverting talk”:

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَشْتَرِي لَهْوَ الْحَدِيثِ لِيُضِلَّ عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ وَيَتَّخِذَهَا هُزُوًا أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُّهِينٌ.

And of the people is he who buys the amusement of speech to mislead [others] from the way of Allah without knowledge and who takes it in ridicule. Those will have a humiliating punishment.⁴⁵⁰

The الحديث in this verse which has the ability to divert Muslims and mislead them from the path of righteousness is interpreted to be music. However, the ambiguity of the verse has made it difficult for even the most orthodox and puritanical critics of music to outlaw it merely based on this verse.

The lack of a definitive statement in the body of the holy text has led Muslims to make recourse to their next source of authority, i.e. *hadith and sunnah* or the corpus of sayings and deeds attributed to the Prophet Mohammad and his companions. However, this source has proven to be very controversial since the authenticity of many of these sayings which were collected two centuries after the prophet’s death has been disputed

⁴⁵⁰ *The Qur’an*, Yah-Sin [31:6].

and a great many of them are dismissed as fabricated.⁴⁵¹ The unreliability of the *hadith* has been yet another impediment in determining the attitude of the Prophet and his early followers toward music.

It is after the death of the Prophet that the early discourse on music and singing starts taking shape. Lisa Nielson in her illuminating study of the development of early music discourse in an Islamic context emphasizes the role of gender and sexual identity in the formation of this discourse. In “Gender and the Politics of Music in the Early Islamic Courts”, she postulates that “women formed the core of a professional musician class in the Ancient Near East and Egypt since at least 3,000 BCE”.⁴⁵² Considered as “musical as well as sexual commodities”,⁴⁵³ these concubine/musicians were mostly known as the singing girls or *qian*. The term ‘singing girl’⁴⁵⁴ could refer to “any woman musician, including women of noble or free birth, but eventually came to signify a special class of slave courtesans”.⁴⁵⁵ Purchased as children, they underwent extensive training not only in music, literature, and the Arabic language,⁴⁵⁶ but also in the art of seduction,

⁴⁵¹ Regula Qureishi, “Islam and Music” in *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*. Ed. Guy L. Beck. (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006), 91.

⁴⁵² Lisa Nielson, “Gender and the Politics of Music in the Early Islamic Courts”, *Early Music History* 31 (January 2012), 239.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid*, 241.

⁴⁵⁴ Refer to Shiloah, 148. Where the writer quotes the following hadith: “There are four upon whom Allah will not look on the day of resurrection, the sorceress, the wailing-woman, the singing-woman and the woman who is unfaithful to her husband.”

⁴⁵⁵ Nielson, 244.

⁴⁵⁶ Kristina Richardson, “Singing Slave Girls (Qiyān) of the ‘Abbasid Court in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries”. *Children in Slavery through the Ages*. (Athens : Ohio University Press, 2009), 109.

emotional manipulation, and sexual gratification. The following verse, 24:33, explains the Qur'anic attitude toward the commodification of the slave girls:

وَأَلْسِنَتُغْفِيفِ الَّذِينَ لَا يَجِدُونَ نِكَاحًا حَتَّى يُعْزِبَهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَ الَّذِينَ يَبْتَغُونَ الْكِتَابَ مِمَّا مَلَكَتْ
أَيْمَانُكُمْ فَكَاتِبُوهُمْ إِنْ عَلِمْتُمْ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا وَ ءَاتُوهُمْ مِنْ مَالِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي ءَاتَاكُمْ وَ لَا تُكْرَهُوا فَتْيَاتِكُمْ
عَلَى الْبِعَآءِ إِنْ أَرَدْنَ تَحَصُّنًا لِنَبْتَعُوهُنَّ عَرَضَ الْحَيَوةِ الدُّنْيَا وَ مَنْ يُكْرَهُهُنَّ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ مِنْ بَعْدِ إِكْرَاهِهِنَّ
غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ.

But let them who find not [the means for] marriage abstain [from sexual relations] until Allah enriches them from His bounty. And those who seek a contract [for eventual emancipation] from among whom your right hands possess—then make a contract with them if you know there is within them goodness and give them from the wealth of Allah which He has given you. And do not compel your slave girls to prostitution, if they desire chastity, to seek [thereby] the temporary interests of worldly life. And if someone should compel them, then indeed, Allah is [to them], after their compulsion, Forgiving and Merciful.⁴⁵⁷

In the Abbasid period (750-1258), the singing girls were renowned for their beauty and the sexual favors they performed for their masters in their wealthy households and also for the caliphs in their courts in Baghdad and Samara. According to Kristina Richardson, these girls occupied a liminal space between slaves and free people and even men and women which meant, on the one hand, they were never accepted as members of either group and could not expect the same respect conferred to free women and men. On

⁴⁵⁷*The Qur'an*, An-Nur [24:33].

the other hand, the sexual and moral freedom they had, as well as the dispensability of the veil for them, made their visibility, if only as commodities, possible in a masculine domain proscribed to respectable women. By currying favor with the caliphs and other aristocrats, these girls could become their favorite sexual partners and bear them illegitimate children, thus, become eligible for certain privileges which still fell short of a free woman's.⁴⁵⁸

Closely associated with the *qian* but different in their sexual and musical identity were the *mukannatun*, effeminates or the third-gendered musicians, including eunuchs, who were not necessarily hermaphrodites in the physical sense. That they possessed the traits of both genders and dressed as women distanced music further from the world of men and established it as an occupation for women and effeminates.

“The ancient associations of music with slave women, the culture of the pre-Islamic nomadic Arabs and the continued existence of cross-gendered individuals” which were commonly associated with “promiscuity, lewdness and drunkenness” explain why until the late seventh century, “free Arab men were socially prohibited from practicing the profession of music as it was considered unmanly and ignoble”.⁴⁵⁹ Even centuries after the demise of the singing girls, music is still decried by orthodoxy not only because of their erotic performances, but more importantly, because of their gender. Across much of the Middle East,

⁴⁵⁸ Richardson.

⁴⁵⁹ Lisa Nielson, 245.

social anxieties over music (and dance) are paralleled with anxieties concerning gender, particularly in relation to women. Thus, women and music both represent problematic areas and often share a positioning as discursive ‘other’. . . Thus, social controls on women often provide a touchstone for controls on music-making, and vice versa. Where the two coincide—women as musicians and dancers—one often finds the most contentious and tightly controlled arenas of social activity, at least in the public domain.⁴⁶⁰

The association of women with music was so egregious and offensive to the Islamic jurists that music in general became suspect as a source of metaphorical and literal intoxication leading Muslims astray from the path of righteousness and absolute submission to God. The first treatise condemning music, *نم الملاهي*, by Ibn Abil-Dunya (823-894),⁴⁶¹ is a puritanical diatribe concerning *malahi* as a derivative of *لهو* (pastime, diversion), and applies to all forms of entertainment and amusement, which brings “perdition” upon its “perpetrators”.⁴⁶² That musicians and the listeners of music are put into this category with ones who engage in “the interdiction of divination, games and gambling (backgammon and chess), as well as male and female sodomy”⁴⁶³ shows the

⁴⁶⁰ Lauden Nooshin, “Prelude: Power and the Play of Music”. *Music and the Play of Power in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia*, (Burlington : Ashgate, 2009), 3.

⁴⁶¹ Leonard Lewisohn, “The Sacred Music of Islam: Sama in the Persian Sufi Tradition”, *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 6(1997), 5.

⁴⁶² Amnon Shiloah, “Music and Religion in Islam”, 146.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

writer's firm belief in the illicit nature of music. Believing that آلات الطرب, musical instruments, are the devices of Satan for diverting the attention of the believers from thinking about their God and religion, Ibn Abil-Dunya forbids the use of clarinet, oud, and tanbur, all musical instruments associated with the singing girls, based on the multiple *ahadith* he quotes from the prophet and his apostles to support his arguments.⁴⁶⁴

This attitude toward music explains why in Iran, as late as the twentieth century, the sale of musical instruments was only done by the Jews and forbidden to Muslims.⁴⁶⁵ In general, in Iran too, music was closely associated with women dancers and musicians known as *motrebs*. Dancing girls, singers, and female musicians were a fundamental part of functions, weddings, and welcome parties thrown in honor of “the shah, a governor, foreign visitors and a victorious army”.⁴⁶⁶ These girls were hired to entertain the guests with their sweet voice, beauty, and witticism and often engaged in sexual intimacy with the attendees:

Dancers, therefore, were also referred to by less neutral terms such as *luli*, *luri* and *lavand*, all three of which connote that people who sing and beg in the streets are shameless, impudent, as well as conveying the notion of nice, delicate, and pretty, but to make sure that these albeit alluring aspects

⁴⁶⁴ Amnon Shiloah also quotes Yazid Ibn Valid (706–744), an Omayyad caliph, “avoid singing, for it decreases shame, and destroys manliness, and verily it takes the place of wine and does what drunkenness does. But if you must engage in it, keep the women and children away from it, for singing is the instigator of fornication”. (148)

⁴⁶⁵ Chehabi, 156.

⁴⁶⁶ Willem Floor, *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* (Mage Publishers, 2008), 222.

were but signals for entrapment of the unwary; the terms also meant gypsy, prostitute, and loose woman.⁴⁶⁷

More orthodox Muslim kings issued injunctions against these activities and tried to limit their scope.⁴⁶⁸ Nonetheless, public events were still marked by the colorful presence of these women. It was only in the Qajar era (1789-1925) that they were finally driven underground and were only present at the harem or private parties.⁴⁶⁹

Despite their popularity, *motrebs* never enjoyed a high social status nor were they considered reputable since “respectable members of society did not become professional musicians, who were therefore often recruited from among non-Muslims or members of nominally Muslim pariah groups”.⁴⁷⁰ Women musicians, dancers, and singers were hardly distinguished from prostitutes as

Although . . . mentioned as a separate group, in their behavior, comportment, clothing, and services rendered, they differed little if at all from prostitutes According to Chardin, only prostitutes and public women danced, and therefore, dancing was even more dishonorable and contrary to religious precept than singing and making music.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, 224.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Chehabi, 153.

⁴⁷¹ Floor, 220.

The stigma attached to this profession persisted in the Pahlavi dynasty despite the state's endorsement of music and singing for women.⁴⁷²

The fluidity of the entertainer/prostitute identity is embodied in the figure of a prostitute-turned-singer called Mahvash whose unique voice garnered her great fame and acclaim. At the peak of her popularity, she published a risqué pseudo-autobiography called the *Secrets of Sexual Fulfillment* (1957) for which she was later persecuted.⁴⁷³ Some of the more daring propositions in this book involve legalization and regulation of prostitution, normalization of sexual relations before marriage, and improvement of the living conditions of prostitutes.

5.4.2. Motrehs in Commercial Cinema

Commercial cinema in Iran made extensive use of song and dance routines. This began with the first sound film produced in the country in 1933. Inspired by Indian, Turkish, and Arabic musicals, these interludes, in the early days of their usage in cinema, were usually narratively irrelevant, unwarranted, and superfluous to the organic development of the plot.⁴⁷⁴ In order to incorporate these sequences more seamlessly into the narrative, singers and dancers became the new subjects of cinema. As “there are no women in bars that don't sell sex”,⁴⁷⁵ according to Farman-Farma'ian, prostitution became by proxy the most integral element of these movies, and “variations on the motif

⁴⁷² Chehabi, 158.

⁴⁷³ Naficy, 209.

⁴⁷⁴ Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (I. B. Tauris, 2006), 76.

⁴⁷⁵ Farman-Farma'ian, 15.

of prostitution were to be found in almost every commercial film from 1950 to 1978".⁴⁷⁶

Rather than mirroring the reality off the stage, the casting of women as prostitutes was financially expedient as it titillated the public and pandered to their whim for erotica.⁴⁷⁷

These characters usually

performed sexually suggestive numbers for a delighted diegetic, usually male-only, audience. A leering, voyeuristic, male-driven camera gaze filmed their performances, which either isolated their legs, breasts, and faces into fragmented fetish objects or tilted and panned across their scantily clad bodies as though caressing them by hand.⁴⁷⁸

Relying on the sensual appeal of the actresses, these movies presented a skewed vision of modernity by equating secularization and modernization with nudity and sexual laxity. These movies set two contrasting sets of values against one another: local identity, values, and traditions represented by chaste, *chador*-wearing mothers or housewives and Western mores epitomized in the figure of the entertainer/prostitute. These movies relied for their didactic message on the worn-out Madonna/whore dichotomy which polarized women into either asexual and chaste or sexually active and monstrous.⁴⁷⁹

Needless to say, these movies usually end with the reaffirmation of the Iranian codes of conduct, restoration of traditions, the prodigal return of the husband freed from

⁴⁷⁶ Sadr, 82.

⁴⁷⁷ Naficy, 241

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Afary, *Sexual Politics*, 198, 221–23.

the claws of the evil woman to his dutiful wife and family, or the transformation of the prostitute. In case the man decides to sacrifice his good name and family honor by marrying the disreputable woman, she is always taken to the shrine of a saint where she, wearing a *chador*, expiates for her sins and piously swears to give up her wayward life.

These movies had formulaic plots, repetitive themes, improbable actions, stereotypical characters, and a flimsy structure due to the poor quality, frugality, and hastiness of their production. Furthermore, according to Sadr, they exhausted the potential of the naked body to such an extent “that its powers of genuine arousal were dispersed into something approaching absurdity”.⁴⁸⁰ Nevertheless, movies with such themes and provocative names as *Prostitute*(1969), *Notorious* (1971), *Barmaid* (1970), *The Dancer of The City* (1970), and *Harlot* (1974) became all the rage and attracted a large audience, out of which the majority were lower class male youth.⁴⁸¹

In these movies, women who become singers and dancers are divided into two groups: they are either naïve, rural migrants who are deceived, abandoned, or exploited by the corrupt, lascivious, and debauched urban men or they themselves are urban vamps lurking in shadows to lure men away from their families. These women represented the clash of rural and urban ways of life, with the preference for the former, which was one of the main themes of the melodramas produced in this era. The village epitomized indigenous selfhood, untainted values, revered traditions which were being infiltrated and contaminated by the onslaught of modernity represented by corrupt, westernized, urban

⁴⁸⁰ Sadr, 51.

⁴⁸¹ Naficy, 167.

lifestyle. This explains why, at the end of many of these melodramas, it is only upon the return of the migrant to the beloved village to embrace their local identity that they can leave behind the chaos and decadence of modern life behind and restore order to their lives.

This celebration of traditional ways of life as preferable to modern ones indicates a disruption in the dominant and hegemonic discourse of secularization and modernity as essential factors in the advancement of Iran which was perpetuated ever since the Constitutional Revolution. At that time, the cultural rootlessness, identity crisis, and displacement that was brought about by Iran's unbridled westernization prompted many intellectuals to reverse their position on modernity and oppose the adaptation of modern (read Western) values at the expense of the country's "historical and cultural character".⁴⁸²

5.5. *The Dancer of the City* (1970) by Shapoor Gharib

The Dancer of the City, in many ways, is representative of the themes, forms, and narrative techniques prevalent in Iranian cinema in the second Pahlavi era. The movie features two of the most well-known Iranian actors, Naser Malek Motiee and Foroozan (née Parvin Kheirbakhsh), who performed in some of the highest-grossing films of this era. The movie recycles the threadbare story of an honorable man falling in love with a singer/dancer/prostitute despite the intense opposition of the society. The official press release announcement of the film reads:

⁴⁸² Jalal Al-i Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi* (westoxification), (Khorram Publications, 2006), 24.

«رقاصه» غمنامه زندگانی مرد میانسال و زحمتکش و پاک دلی است از بازماندگان نسل
لوطی ها و مردان واقعی اجتماع ما که در محیط خانه و زندگی خود هرگز رنگ شادی و نشاط
و در نگاه زتش میل و هوس به کام جوئی از شوهر نیست ...
و اگر مرد سرتاسر وجودش در نیاز به عشق ورزی با او میسوزد، شب هنگام تن سرد زن
آهسته در کنار او میخزد و به خواب میرود و همه ی تمایلات تند مردی که اکنون در آستانه ی
سالهای بلوغدوباره ی خویش استدر دل او تلنبار میشود .
... و چنین است که این مرد با همه ی عشقی که میتواندست به خانه خود داشته باشد بسوی تنها
«رقاصه شهر» که اندوه آوازها و غمگاهش او را از سایر زنان کافه ای جدا میکند کشیده
میشود و عشق مرده خود را از میان لجنزار دسیسه ها و خیانت ها و دورویی ها باز میابد .

The Dancer is the tragic story of a middle-aged, hard-working, innocent man, a descendant of *lutis*⁴⁸³ and real men of our society, whose home doesn't bring him any happiness and the eyes of his wife are devoid of any desire or passion for intimacy with her husband

While the man feels a burning desire for intimacy, his wife slowly drags her cold body to bed and falls asleep and all the yearnings of the man, who is now on the verge of a second adolescence, pile up in his heart And this is how this man, with all the love he could have given to his home, gravitates toward the only dancer in the city whose sad eyes and songs distinguish her from other women at the café and revives his dead passion amid the mires of betrayals, intrigues, and duplicities.⁴⁸⁴

⁴⁸³ Not to be confused with its Arabic homonym which means “sodomite”.

⁴⁸⁴ The poster was retrieved from <https://javanan56.com/13214/7006175/027.html>

This statement, which was meant to lure in the moviegoers, blatantly reveals the misogynistic attitude of the time toward women and their function in the family. The movie opens with Ghulam, the male protagonist of the story, coming home from work late at night. He hesitates before entering his house because all he can hear from behind the closed doors is his young children bickering and his wife, Ashraf, running after them in desperation, trying to resolve their disputes, and failing that, cursing and beating them as she reaches the end of her tether. Instead of showing any compassion for his wife's situation or offering any help in looking after the children and running the day-to-day affairs of the house, Ghulam, who is here lauded as "a real man", returns home each night expecting to find the house in order and his wife ready and willing to fulfill her conjugal duties. That she can be exhausted after dealing with her difficult children while being in charge of running the house single-handedly with all the cooking, cleaning, and washing involved, does not vindicate her in his eyes nor does it soften his resolve for intimacy. Therefore, Ghulam's estrangement from home is blamed on his wife's failure to appease her husband's urges and he is absolved of any role in the disintegration of his family.

A polar opposite, both in appearance and comportment to Ashraf, is Pari, the cabaret singer whom Ghulam falls in love with. She is sensual and beautiful but what emboldens her in the eyes of Ghulam is her sadness, her status as a victim who only succumbs to perform on the stage because she is forced into doing it. Ghulam, the true descendant of *lutis*—honorable, chivalrous, and a patron of the downtrodden—can be her knight in shining armor, fight her exploiters, free her from bondage and by so doing reaffirm his spurned virility and machismo.

The villains of the film, however, complicate this love story as they endeavor to keep Pari, the prized asset of the cabaret, in business. When Ghulam is sent to prison for having accidentally killed one of them in a fight, Pari breaches her contract and gives up performing altogether to honor her promise to Ghulam, for which the cabaret owner sends her to jail. Once she is in jail, he lies to her that Ghulam has been hanged for murder. Upon realizing that she no longer has the financial and emotional support of her lover, she relents and goes back to work. Upon his release from jail, Ghulam learns of Pari's return to her old job, and disillusioned with her, goes back to his wife.

Although she is called a "working girl" and "public woman" by the "respectable" characters of the film implying she is a prostitute, Pari describes herself as different from the other entertainers at the cabaret as she is not of easy virtue. The film actively pits her against Shamsi, her vulgar, forward, lustful co-worker who would willingly surrender her body to Ghulam. His preference for Pari, however, clearly indicates his view on the proper role of women in a relationship as passive objects of desire rather than bold pursuers of it. Although he feels free to fraternize and consort with disreputable women, he doesn't extend the same rights and liberty to women and even in a cabaret seeks out a woman who is modest, demure, and in compliance with his notions of feminine propriety. Furthermore, while he values honesty and integrity in a girl, he never reveals to Pari that he is married for the whole duration of the film.

The Dancer of the City is a voyeuristic and scopophilic feast for the male gaze. As the male protagonist of a movie with a male-majority audience, Ghulam evokes the audience's sympathy and becomes their surrogate on the screen, controlling the narrative and acting out the audience's desires. Ghulam, as the controller and bearer of the

audience's look, is obsessed with the erotic spectacle of Pari's body, and the audience, by identifying with him, become complicit in this deviant gaze. As Pari is literally on display performing on the stage, her diegetic audience, including Ghulam, and the spectators watching the movie merge into one and her fragmented body parts become the objects of their erotic gaze. The emphasis on isolating her legs, her bare stomach, her hips as she provocatively moves her body to the diegetic music, turns her into a fetish or an icon from which to derive sexual gratification. Speaking of visual pleasure in narrative cinema, Laura Mulvey explains the asymmetrical power dynamic that develops between the female and male protagonist as follows:

she becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone. By means of identification with him, through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too.⁴⁸⁵

As the property of a traditional man, Pari needs to undergo a profound transformation both spiritually and visually. Thus, she repents, gives up performing, and dons the *chador* in public to mask her sensuality and block the male gaze. However, while at home and in the presence of Ghulam, she retains and displays all her erotic and tantalizing qualities for the man who claims to be the sole rightful owner of her sexualized body. This explains why Ghulam stabs her upon his release from prison upon

⁴⁸⁵ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 840.

realizing that she is once more dancing at the cabaret. As soon as she becomes a public woman again and defies his claim on her body, she is dead to him. Although she survives this attack, she loses Ghulam who reunites with his wife, a woman who always remained his faithful property despite all his mistreatments.

Female entertainers were aware of their sexualized and objectified state and knew that their only marketable commodity in a hypocritical society that condemned their transgressions yet derived pleasure from them, was their beauty. Pari was the object of much rivalry because she was the most beautiful woman working at the cabaret and was reminded many times by her co-workers that she should capitalize on it since “now that we are beautiful they chase after us but when we get old, we will become like Shamsi whom even a dog won’t wag his tail for”. This knowledge comes to the aid of Ashraf, Ghulam’s wife, who realizes that in order to get her husband back, she needs to come up to his standards of femininity. At the end of the movie, she is a changed woman. She now wears make-up and passionately and willingly makes love to her husband. It is worth noting that while the sex scenes between Ghulam and Pari were elaborate and explicit, the ones between Ghulam and his wife are only hinted at, underscoring the fact that, as a public woman, Pari could be shared with the audience unlike Ashraf who is a respectable woman and Ghulam’s personal property. Hence, the movie offers the audience a facile solution to the problem of secularization and westernization of women: be modern and westernized in appearance in the privacy of your home only for the enjoyment of your husband but modest and self-effacing in public.

By reuniting Ghulam and Ashraf, the movie allayed the fears and anxiety the audience felt over the erosion of family values in it. Pari provided them with a fleeting

and welcome break from reality, gave them an outlet for their base instincts, and made them feel charitable and chivalrous to have aided a damsel in distress, but for them, she remained a disreputable woman who could not disentangle herself from her past. At the end of the movie when we see Pari watching the couple depart on their pilgrimage to mark a new chapter in their lives, one cannot help thinking that Pari lived up to her role as “human sacrifice on the altar of monogamy”.⁴⁸⁶

The discarding of the prostitute to restore order and maintain the status quo became a cliché ending in many movies of the period in question. Thus, in *Notorious* (1971), the prostitute whom the main character has fallen in love with is forcefully removed from the neighborhood so he can honor his family’s wish to marry his cousin; in *Tooti* (1977) the prostitute pregnant with the protagonist’s child is murdered; and in *Back and Dagger* (1977), the prostitute who lives with the protagonist for years, saves his life, and pays for his addiction, is left behind and never heard of again when the man reunites with his wife.

Although popular, these movies failed their (female) audiences in more ways than one. According to Shahla Lahiji,

The film industry arrived in Iran at a time when Iranian women, after a protracted period of inertia and silence, of almost total ignorance and backwardness were about to set off on a slow journey toward an

⁴⁸⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms* (London: Penguin Classics, 1973), 88.

awareness of the world, intended to shed the heavy load of antiquated tradition and custom in order to receive the social status they deserved.⁴⁸⁷

It, however, did not aid women in this journey. Movies such as *The Dancer of the City* were not only beset by artistic and narrative flaws but also displayed a glaring inattention to their social responsibility as a far-reaching and influential medium among the masses. They rarely analyzed the underlying reasons for women's fall into prostitution, nor challenged the structures of power and domination that cemented prostitutes/singers/dancers' marginalization, nor criticized the asymmetrical structure of parenting, the social organization of gender, or the unequal sexual division of labor. Instead, they passively accepted and transferred patriarchal values to spectators, deflected culpability for social injustice in general and misogyny and exploitation of prostitutes in particular to a few rotten apples such as pimps, and normalized women's powerlessness and surrender in their relationship with men at a time when women were fighting for their right to social presence and mobility.

5.6. Conclusion

A comparison of Iranian movies and western ones discussed in this chapter reveals the universality of the stereotypical and exploitative representation of prostitutes in cinema. As the love child of male fantasies and patriarchal ideology, the prostitute character in both Iranian and Western films was, on the one hand, sought after, idolized, and revered, while simultaneously judged, stigmatized, criminalized, pathologized,

⁴⁸⁷ Shahla Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979" in *The new Iranian cinema: politics, representation and identity* Edited by Richard Tapper (I.B. Tauris, 2002), 216.

marginalized, and doomed. Her unruly sexuality was either to be curbed and monopolized in marriage or she had to pay for it. Like its Iranian counterparts, *Go Naked into the World* and Western movies like it utilized the tantalizing potential of showing a prostitute character on screen but failed to critically address the underlying reasons for her prostitution, its effect on her mental and physical health, the unequal distribution of culpability and criminality between the prostitute and her client, and the broader legal, moral, socio-cultural, and historical factors that contributed to her marginality and the stigma attached to her profession. Their depiction of prostitutes was almost homogenous, decidedly excluding sex workers whose entry into the profession was out of a conscious choice, who found their financial and emotional independence satisfactory, or who were not in need of saving by men.

CONCLUSION

Emile Durkheim in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) and *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897) advances his theory of *anomie* as a social condition of normlessness which follows rapid periods of industrialization and economic change. The abrupt transformation of the standards and ethical values of a society can create a crisis of identity, an atmosphere of confusion, disorganization, uncertainty, rootlessness, and purposelessness as the norms that once glued the society together no longer hold resulting in the alienation of the individual from their society. In Iran, hasty Western-style modernization and the concomitant overnight industrialization of the society discussed in chapter four attempted to usher a profoundly traditional society into a technological modern age without laying the cultural foundations that would facilitate its seamless integration.⁴⁸⁸ One of the crises that presented itself during this time and significantly precipitated the advent of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was the status of women in society and the question of female sexuality.

Iran, however, was not alone in its anxious apprehension and anticipation of modern configurations of femininity.⁴⁸⁹ In the West, despite the gradual and incremental modernization of society over a number of decades, the post-WWII era witnessed a burgeoning of public debate regarding gender roles, female sexuality, and women's place within family and society. The figure of the prostitute presented an unrivalled site within

⁴⁸⁸ Masoud Mostafapoor and Seyyed Mahmoud Mir-Khalili. "Studying the Roots of Anomie in Iran before Islamic Revolution (With a Glance to France and USA)," *Journal of Applied Environmental and Biological Sciences* vol. 4, no. 12 (2004).

⁴⁸⁹ Bullough and Bullough, 300.

which these anxieties and new understandings of female sexuality could be negotiated for the pleasure of the audience, approaching the popularity and visibility it had once received in the literature and art works of the nineteenth century.

While prostitutes were sporadically and passingly mentioned in the literature preceding the eighteenth century, their literary exposure proliferated in that century and reached its peak in the nineteenth century.⁴⁹⁰ Their increased presence in literature and art was due to their intensified visibility in real life. With growing urbanization, industrialization, severe poverty, and the transition to a capitalist economy, women faced increasingly limited employment opportunities. While in the past, they had a choice between “nunnery, sorcery, and harlotry”,⁴⁹¹ in an industrialized Europe where families relied on wage labor,⁴⁹² putting their bodies on the marketplace of exchange was their “most logical career”.⁴⁹³ As prostitutes and the economic roots of venality gained unprecedented attention in the works of progressive writers and social reformists of this time, a barrage of representations of prostitutes from penurious backgrounds came to populate literature.

In Iran—as never before in the history of the country—prostitutes gained notorious visibility in twentieth century Persian literature and film. The fixation with the

⁴⁹⁰ Nancy McCombs, *Earth Spirit, Victim, or Whore? The Prostitute in German Literature 1880-1925* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 4.

⁴⁹¹ Kishtainy, 25.

⁴⁹² Laura Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce: Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Cornell University Press, 2006), 26.

⁴⁹³ Kishtainy, 46.

image of the prostitute created a wealth of literature beginning in 1924 with the first Persian urban social novel. Associating prostitution with economic corruption, political decay, and religious hypocrisy, Iranian male writers directed their attention toward representing the sexually wayward woman. Although the works of mediocre and sensationalist writers of the time abound in “formulaic plots” and “thinly disguised polemic”,⁴⁹⁴ the great fiction writers of twentieth century Iran portrayed the prostitute and her plight with exceptional complexity and psychological depth.

In her many fictional appearances, the prostitute has been taken to represent both the social reality and the fantasies of her mostly male creators. By scrutinizing her image, her inflationary popularity, and her unparalleled presence in Iranian film and fiction since the early twentieth century, this dissertation has sought to shed new light on how and why the “fallen woman” came to occupy the literary and artistic imagination of this time period and to unpack the meaning and significance of her representations in these works. To do so, I have weaved together the images and narratives in sociocultural and historical texts and films that created and maintained the identity of prostitutes and sustained dominant practices and policies over a period of almost eighty years. By studying how these women, their body, and their sexuality were perceived, shown, and regulated in art and literature—which are ciphers of the society at large—this dissertation has exposed the tightly knit relationship between patriarchy, capitalism, and morality, shed light on

⁴⁹⁴ Speaking of early attempts in the United States at portraying prostitutes in literature, Laura Hapke in *Girls Who Went Wrong: Prostitutes in American Fiction, 1885-1917* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1989), describes the novels as having “formulaic plots” and “thinly disguised polemic”. The description could hardly be more apt in the case of early Iranian social novels.

the ideological formations of gender and sexuality, questioned the facile demarcations of illegitimate and legitimate avenues of sexual gratification, and destabilized the official Islamic discourse on the issue.

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