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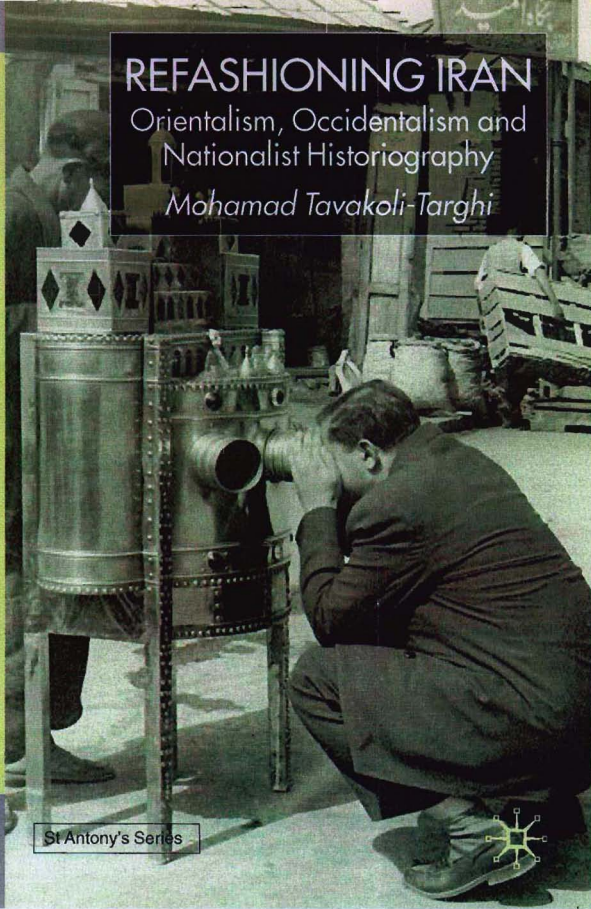
# REFASHIONING IRAN

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi

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Orientalism, Occidentalism and  
Nationalist Historiography

*Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi*



St Antony's Series



# Refashioning Iran

## **Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography**

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# Contents

<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Notes on Romanization and Dates</i>	xvi
1 Modernity, Heterotopia, and Homeless Texts	1
Modernity and heterotopia	1
Discursive affinities of nationalism and Orientalism	4
Homeless texts	8
Decolonizing historical imagination	15
2 Orientalism's Genesis Amnesia	18
A genealogy of Orientalism	18
The Columbus of Oriental studies	20
Jones and the affinity of languages	23
Intertextuality and postcolonial historiography	31
3 Persianate Europology	35
Perspectival knowledge	35
Persianate <i>voy(ag)eurs</i>	38
The anthropology of modern Europe	44
4 Imagining European Women	54
<i>Farangi</i> women	54
Comparing women	61
Libertine women	65
Narrative plots and the scapegoating of women	70
Seeing oneself being seen	74
5 Contested Memories	77
Narrative emplotment	77
Islamicating history	78
Recentering Iran	86
6 Crafting National Identity	96
Envisaging history	96
Restyling Persian	104
7 Patriotic and Matriotic Nationalism	113
<i>Vatan</i> -centered discourse	113



Nationalized subjectivity	116
National–public sphere	118
Maternal homeland ( <i>madar-i vatan</i> )	122
Matriotic sentiments	127
8 Postscript	135
<i>Notes</i>	144
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	187
<i>Index</i>	211

## 4

### Imagining European Women

#### *Farangi women*

The European woman (*zan-i Farangi*) was the locus of gaze and erotic fantasy for many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Persianate *voy(ag)eurs* of Europe. The travelers' recounting of their self-experience provided the material for the formation of competing discourses on women of Europe. With the political hegemony of Europe, a woman's body served as an important marker of identity and difference and as a terrain of cultural and political contestations. The eroticized depiction of European women by male travelers engendered a desire for that "heaven on earth" and its uninhibited and fairy-like residents who displayed their beauty and mingled with men. The attraction of Europe and European women figured into political contestations and conditioned the formation of new political discourses and identities. These contestations resulted in the valorization of the veil (*hijab*) as a visible marker of the self and the other. For Iranian modernists, viewing European women as educated and cultured, the veil became a symbol of backwardness. Its removal, in their view, was essential to the advancement of Iran and its dissociation from Arab-Islamic culture. For the counter-modernists who wanted to uphold the Islamic social and gender orders, the European woman became a scapegoat and a symbol of corruption, immorality, Westernization, and feminization of power. In the Iranian body politic the imagined European woman provided the subtext for political maneuvers over women's rights and appearance in the public space.

The early Persian travelers described Europe as "heaven on Earth" (*bihisht-i ru-yi zamin*), "the birth-place of beauty" (*zad bum-i husn*), and the "beauty cultivating land" (*mulk-i husn khiz*).<sup>1</sup> The attraction of Europe

masqueraded the attraction to "hourī-like" (*hurvash*), "fairy-countenanced" (*hur paykar*), and "fairy-mannered" (*firishtah khuy*) women of Europe.<sup>2</sup> Appearance of unveiled women in public parks, playhouses, operas, dances, and masquerades impressed the Persian *voy(ag)eurs* who were unaccustomed to the public display of female beauty. For them, the only cultural equivalent to the public display of male–female intimacy was the imaginary Muslim heaven. Unlike the Shari'ah-bound earthly society, the pious residents of heaven were to be rewarded with "the fair ones . . . whom neither man nor jinni will have touched before them."<sup>3</sup> Like many other Persianate travelers, Mirza I'tisam al-Din, who traveled to England in 1765, was attracted to the spectacle of male–female intimacy in public parks. Recalling the observed scenes of a public park near the Queen's Palace in London, for example, he wrote:

On Sunday, men, women, and youths, poor and rich, travelers and natives, resort here. This park enlivens the heart, and people overcome with sorrow, repairing thither, are entertained in a heavenly manner; and grieved hearts, from seeing that place of amusement, are gladdened against their will. On every side females with silver forms, resembling peacocks, walk about, and at every corner fairy-faced ravishers of hearts move with a thousand blandishments and coqueties; the plain of the earth become a paradise from the resplendent foreheads, and heaven (itself) hangs down its head for shame at seeing the beauty of the lovers. There lovers meet their fairy-resembling sweethearts: they attain their end without fear of the police or of rivals, and gallants obtain a sight of rosy cheeks without restraint. When I viewed this heavenly place, I involuntarily exclaimed:

If there is a paradise on earth,  
It is this, oh! It is this.  
(*Agar firdawsi bar ru-yi zamin ast*  
*hamin ast u hamin ast u hamin ast*).<sup>4</sup>

Like I'tisam al-Din, Mirza Abu al-Hasan Khan Ilchi, who had traveled to Europe in 1809–10, described Hyde Park and St James's Park in a remarkably similar fashion.

If a sorrowing soul traverses these heavenly fields, his head is crowned with flowers of joy, and looking on these saffron beds – luxurious as Kashmir's – he smiles despite himself. In the gardens and on the paths, beauteous women shine like the sun and rouse the envy of the stars, and the houris of paradise blush with shame to look

upon the rose-cheeked beauties of the earth below. In absolute amazement, I said to Sir Gore Ouseley:<sup>5</sup>

If there be paradise on earth

It is this, oh! it is this!<sup>6</sup>

The practice of male–female physical intimacy in public places differentiated Europe, “the land of heavenly ordinances” (*sarzamin-i bihišt ayin*),<sup>7</sup> from an actual Muslim society where such a behavior was thought to be indecent, a sign of moral and social disorder. By employing the familiar images of the Muslim heaven in their description of modern European norms of gender relations, the Persianate Riza Quli Mirza in *Safar Nama* made these norms respectable to their readers and audiences. What was only imaginable in the promised heaven was reported to exist on earth by travelers returning from Europe.

Conscious of the religious implication of reporting the mixing of men and women in Europe, Prince Riza Quli Mirza Qajar, who visited England in 1836 along with his brothers Taymur Quli and Najaf Quli, recalled a *Hadith* (saying of Muhammad, the Messenger of Islam) that “The world is a prison for a believer and a paradise for an unbeliever.” Elaborating on this saying, he assured himself that: “All conveniences that the Lord of the universe has promised to His special servants in the hereafter is available for their [European] view in this world. But the difference is that these intoxicates and pleasures are temporary and those [heavenly] conveniences are eternal.”<sup>8</sup> As perfect and desirable places beyond home, European lands displaced the heaven as sites of sexual fantasies and ideal sociopolitical imagination.

Persianate travelers often used the conventional symbols and metaphors of women from classical Persian poetry in describing Europeans. In these strategies of familiarization, European women were compared to literary and historical personalities such as Zubaydah, Asiyah, Zubba’, Gharah, ‘Azra, Vis, Sarah, Balqis, Salma, Zulaykha, Layli, and Shirin. Mirza Abu Talib, for instance, favourably compared Lady Palm with such fictional women characters and observed: “I am an impostor, if I had ever seen a woman like Lady Palm in Europe and Asia. While these great women [*mahbanuvan*] have been mentioned in ancient myths, I have never seen one [in real life].” In another poem dedicated to Miss Garden, he said he found in London the promised Muslim heaven: “while I have heard the description of the garden of paradise enough times, in London I have seen better than it many times.” He considered the women of London much more attractive than the imaginary fairies of paradise. In the same poem, while addressing the Muslim ascetics, he

stated, "In every street a hundred fairies appear in blandishment; for how long would you babble about the houris, it's enough!"

To you, the ascetic, merry be the houris!  
I am content with the face of Miss Garden  
With honey and apple, you deceive me like a child  
But I am content with the gem and apple of the chin.<sup>9</sup>

Mirza Abu Talib judged European women according to Persian aesthetic values. He viewed beauty and nature as synonymous and so compared female beauty to the moon, sun, flowers, trees, and animals. He appreciated natural beauty but considered cosmetic changes as deceptive. For example, narrating the differences between French and English women, he remarked:

Although the French women are tall, corpulent and rounder than the English, they are not comparable to the beauty and excellence of the English women. Because of their lack of simplicity, girlish shyness, grace and good behavior, [the French women] appear rather ugly.

He found the French women's hairstyles contrary to his standards of female beauty and equated them with those of "the base and whorish women of India." Unlike the idealized Muslim women, French women were viewed as "fast walkers, big talkers, fast chatters, loud-voiced, and quick responders." Mirza Abu Talib disapproved of the behavior of French women, and while in Paris, he "abandoned" voyeurism:

Although I am by nature amorous and easily affected at the sight of beauty, I have lost the desire for the profession of voyeurism that I had in London. Now, my heart desires a different profession. In the Palace Royal I encountered thousands of women day and night, but I was not at all impressed and none were attractive to me.<sup>10</sup>

Some Persian travelers were infatuated with the women that they met and their poems expressed their genuine sensual desire. For instance, Mirza Abu al-Hasan, in a party at the residence of Lady Buckinghamshire<sup>11</sup> (held on January 15, 1810), "noticed groups of sunny-faced girls and *houris*-like ladies chatting together, their beauty illuminated by the candlelight." On that night he talked to many women whose beauty dazzled him. He was talking to a "rare beauty" when "another fairy



creature" attracted him. That night he met a young lady, Miss Pole, who "inflamed" his heart. Inspired by this "girl of noble birth," who bashfully distanced herself from him after a short conversation, Mirza Abul Hasan recited this quatrain:

Like a cypress you proudly stand, but when did a cypress walk?  
 Like a rosebud your ruby lips, but when did a rosebud talk?  
 Like a hyacinth's blooms are the ringlets of your sweet hair;  
 but when were men's hearts enslaved by a hyacinth's stalk?<sup>12</sup>

Mirza was so infatuated with "Miss Pole" that he did not notice the presence of the Princess of Wales at that gathering.<sup>13</sup> The story of his love even circulated around the high circles of London. For example, the Queen is reported to have asked Sir Gore Ouseley, Ilchi's official *meh-mandar*: "I have heard that the Iranian Ambassador is so enamoured of a certain young lady that the affairs of Iran are far from his thoughts!"<sup>14</sup>

One day's *houris*, however, on other occasions were denigrated as witches. For example, writing about his observations at a party at the house of the Marquis of Douglas and his wife Susan Euphemia, Abu al-Hasan wrote that the Marquis "has recently married a lady whose flawless beauty makes other women look like witches. She has a matchless singing voice: the nightingale's song is like a crow's compared to hers!" Having met her for the first time, he wrote, "I lamented that – just on the eve of my departure – I should be ensnared by the curve of a straying lock":

It is not only I whom your ringlets ensnare,  
 There's a captive tied up by each lock of your hair.

Abu al-Hasan reported that one night he was so absorbed by "the beauty of that *houri*-faced girl" that he had no interest in eating and drinking.<sup>15</sup> In a Sufi-style poem, where Susan Euphemia was the beloved, he declared, "This 'I' is not 'I', if there is an 'I' it's you" (*in man nah manam, agar mani hast tu'i*).<sup>16</sup>

Infatuated with the unveiled feminine beauties witnessed in Europe, a few Persian travelers like Mirza Abu al-Hasan and Mirza Abu Talib uttered poems and statements similar to unorthodox utterances, *shathiyat*, of intoxicated Sufis. The classical Sufi poems were basically ambiguous, leaving unspecified the beloved and the nature of the love. Yet in the poetic utterances of *voyeugers*, occasionally heaven was compared with parks, European women with *houris*, and Islam was abandoned in favor

of physical love. It was no wonder that Riza Quli Mirza referred to some European women as "plunderers of heart and religion" and noted that thousands would abandon their religion like the Shaykh of San'an, a Muslim mystic who converted from Islam in order to unite with his Christian beloved.<sup>17</sup>

The pioneering Persian *voyageurs* were often invited to ballrooms, theaters, concerts, and masquerade parties during their European travels. They found the level of male-female intimacy at these gatherings to be radically different from public gatherings in India and Iran. The public dancing of unveiled women with men was shocking to travelers who were accustomed to seeing women veiled in public gatherings in the Islamic world. Within their own public space, the physical proximity of women and men was viewed as a sign of the disintegration of political and moral orders. The observed/imagined irregularities and differences of public women provided the loci for imagining the life and power of *Farangi* women.

As heterotopic spaces, radically different from actual spaces of everyday life, playhouses, operas, dances, and masquerades provided sites for alternative experiences in Europe. Mirza Abu Talib viewed the visit to playhouses as "sensual employment" (*mashghalah-i nafs*) and wrote a detailed description of a playhouse in Dublin, explaining the arrangement of the stage, seats, spectacles, and spectators. He even drew a detailed blueprint of the playhouse. He was often accompanied to playhouses by Miss Garden, whom he described as a "fanatic in religion and used to the habits of old London."<sup>18</sup> During his stay in England, Mirza Abu al-Hasan was also invited to many plays and operas. After attending the opera of *Sidagero* at the King's Theatre in December 1809, he remarked: "Dancers and sweet-voiced singers appeared one after the other to entertain us, acting and dancing like Greeks and Russians and Turks." He found pleasing the well-disciplined crowd at the theater: "It is amazing that although 5000 people may gather in the theater, they do not make a loud noise . . .".<sup>19</sup> On that night a historical ballet entitled *Pietro Il Grande*, by Signor Rossi, was performed. He commented that "the dancers imitated the Emperor and the Empress of Russia and the Pasha of Turkey and his wife and other Turks." Lord Radstock, in a letter, described Mirza Abu al-Hasan's reaction to the historical ballet:

He laughed heartily at the folly of bringing forward Peter the Great and his Empress as dancing to divert the throng. "What!" exclaimed he, "is it possible that a mighty monarch and his queen should expose themselves thus? how absurd! how out of nature! how perfectly

ridiculous." Were I to translate the look that followed these words it would be thus: "Surely a nation that can suffer so childish and preposterous an exhibition, and be pleased with it, can have little pretensions either to taste or judgement."

Radstock further reported that Mirza Abu al-Hasan had jokingly said, "When I get back to my own country, the King shall ask me, 'What did the English do to divert you?' I will answer, 'Sir, they brought before me your Majesty's great enemies, the Emperor and Empress of Russia, and made them dance for my amusement.'" Radstock added, "This he repeated with the highest glee, as if conscious of saying a witty thing."<sup>20</sup>

Mirza Abu al-Hasan also attended a few plays, including an improved version of *King Lear* at the Royal Opera House. "Walking around the theater," he noted that "my companions and I saw beautiful ladies, beautifully dressed, casting flirtatious glances from their boxes." He attended the performances of Angelica Catalan (1789–1849), the famous Italian soprano, saying that "her performance was superb and her talent was highly praised by those who attended the Opera regularly." Mirza was astonished by her salary: "a high ranking general is said to receive a salary of 1000 tomans a year, yet a female entertainer is paid 5000 tomans for three nights' work!" After seeing Mlle Angiolini's performance of the "Persian Wedding Dance," he wrote: "The Italian woman called Angiolini, who is a good dancer, performed a 'Persian Wedding Dance,' which bore no resemblance at all to the real thing. Such novelties are mounted to attract the money of the idle rich who are forever seeking new diversions."<sup>21</sup>

Most Persian travelers thought of theaters as respectable and entertaining places. But Mirza Fattah Garmrudi, who visited England in 1839, viewed them as "the gathering places of whores and adulteresses and rendezvous of well-experienced pimps." He took the intermission between performances to be an occasion for sex between the performers and their customers.<sup>22</sup> Such intentional misunderstanding played an important role in shaping the popular opinion about Europe and European-style theaters.

Masquerade parties were another site of attraction for Persian travelers. Mirza Abu Talib viewed masquerading as a way of "testing the limits of each other's cleverness." He identified "maximum freedom for a short period of time," as a benefit of masquerading. "Since the identities of individuals are not apparent," according to Mirza Abu Talib, "they can behave in any manner." He found the diversity of nations represented in the masquerades appealing and noted, "since the English have traveled



all over the world and are more familiar with the conditions of most other nations, London masquerades are perfect. In their masquerades Iranian, Indian, Arab, Turkuman, Hindu, Yogi, . . . and a hundred other types can be found. Some mimic to the extent that it affects their language and bodily movement."<sup>23</sup> The most attractive aspect of the masquerade for Mirza Abu Talib, who was called the "Persian Prince,"<sup>24</sup> was the masking of class distinctions so that "the nobility wear the clothing of the artisans and appear like barbers, flower-sellers, and bakers, imitating them so well that it is not possible to distinguish the original from the imitated/fake."<sup>25</sup> Among the memorable masquerades described by Mirza Abu al-Hasan was "a lady [Lady William Gordon] unknown to me, who was disguised as a priest, introduced herself to me: the English call such behaviour 'forward.'"<sup>26</sup> The accumulated reports of male-female interactions in ballrooms, theaters, and masquerades constituted "the woman of Europe" (*zan-i Farangi*) as the site of cultural gaze and as a fetishized marker deployed in the crafting of an extensive network of ethnic, religious, and political differences with Europe.

### Comparing women

Misogyny and ethnocentrism were the shared characteristics of both European and Persian narration of the Other. European fascination with the imagined women of harems, seraglios, and gynoeceum paralleled the Persianate view of Europe as an eroticized "heaven on earth" and European women as lascivious and licentious.<sup>27</sup> Both Persians and Europeans constituted the body of the "other" women as a site for sexual and political imagination. Traveling in Iran in 1812, James Morier explained that the residents of the Iranian city of Bushir showed a "feeling of great wonder" about women who accompanied the British delegation to Iran: "Above all things, that which excited their curiosity, was the circumstance of our ambassador having brought his *harem* with him; for although the Easterners look upon it as indecorous to make inquiries about each other's women, yet still we could observe how anxious they were to know something about ours." Morier, who had traveled to Iran a few years earlier, explained that this inquisitiveness was reciprocal:

Perhaps their curiosity about the women of Europe is quite as great as that of Europeans about those of Asia. I can state, in confirmation of the last assertion, that one of the first questions put to me by my acquaintances in Europe, has ever been on that subject; and from the

conversations I have had with Asiatics upon the same topic, both parties have universally appeared to entertain in their imaginations the highest ideas of beauty of each other's women.<sup>28</sup>

The idealized women of the other became objects of male desire. Seeking the fulfilment of their fantasies, journeymen pursued exotic sex unobtainable at home. For many Europeans, as Said has observed, "the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe."<sup>29</sup> Likewise Ibrahim Sahhafbashi, a late nineteenth-century Iranian traveler, ascertained that, "Anyone who wrote a travelogue, exalted [Europe] and anyone who heard these reports desired [to visit] it." These desires for Europe were displaced desires for European women. Such "preprogrammed expectations" overdetermined what travelers sought, saw, and cited.<sup>30</sup>

Thus women figured prominently in the travelers' understanding of the rising political dominance of Europe. They often established a causal relation between the education of women and the progress of Europe. For them the public appearance and behavior of European women symbolized a different order of politics and gender relations. I'tisam al-Din, for example, recognized the significance of schooling in the shaping of social and gender relations:

In England it is usual for the people of rank to send both their sons and daughters to a distant place for education. . . . The people of wealth in England, commencing at the age of four years, keep their sons and daughters constantly employed in writing, reading, and acquiring knowledge; they never permit them to be idle. If a man or woman not be acquainted with the musical art, be unable to dance or ride, he or she is accounted by people of substance as descended from a mean parentage, and taunts and reproaches are not spared. . . . The ladies, particularly, who can neither dance nor sing, are considered in a very inferior light; they will never get well married.

I'tisam al-Din found the institutionalized disciplining in England more beneficial to the children of the elite than the Indian practice of hiring private teachers at home. Like nineteenth-century reformers, he praised the European devotion to education and scientific inquiry, contrasting it to the worthless Persian-Indian quest for the beloved:

They are not like the people of this country, who repeat Hindi and Persian poems in praise of a mistress's face, or descriptive of the

qualities of the wine, of the goblet, and of the cup-bearer, and who pretend to be in love.<sup>31</sup>

Mirza Abu-Talib, like Itisam al-Din, was interested in the European educational system, especially that of women. Commenting on the “apparent freedom” (*azadi-i zahiri*) and education of English women, Mirza Abu-Talib noted that through education the English “have cleverly restrained” women from deviant deeds. He viewed education and the veiling as two diverse patterns of disciplining women. He observed that “the institution of the veil as a form of restraining is [also] an instigator of sedition and corruption.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly Mirza Salih, who resided in England from 1815 to 1819, explained that the English women, while unveiled as a result of education, “do not have the propensity of committing wicked acts.”<sup>33</sup> Disciplining women through education was more appealing to Persian travelers who viewed the veil as an instigator of moral depravation. Mirza Abu al-Hasan, for instance, in a conversation with Mrs Perceval in January 1810, comparing European and Persian women, remarked: “Your custom is better indeed. A veiled woman, with downcast eyes [*zan-i masturah-i chashm bastah*], is like a caged bird: when she is released she lacks even the strength to fly around the rose garden.”<sup>34</sup> Likewise, in a Persianized English letter published in the London *Morning Post* (May 29, 1810) and reprinted in many other newspapers and journals, Mirza Abu al-Hasan observed:

English ladies [are] very handsome, very beautiful . . . I [have] see[n] best Georgian, Circassian, Turkish, Greek ladies – but nothing so beautiful as English ladies – all very clever – speak French, speak English, speak Italian, play music very well, sing very good – very glad for me if Persian Ladies [were] like them.<sup>35</sup>

On many other occasions Mirza Abul Hasan wished that Iranian women could become like British women. The patriarchal example of the English woman who was devoted to her husband provided a modular form of familial organization that was free from the extensive network of female relatives who made the Persian wife autonomous of her husband.

As God is my witness, I wish the women of Iran could be more like the women of England. Iranian women are chaste because they are forced to be – they are shut away from men; but the English women are chaste by choice. They are free and independent and responsible only to their husband, whom they look upon as the only man in the



world. They do not hide themselves away, but appear veil-less in society.<sup>36</sup>

Such arguments became fashionable among modernist men who linked the unveiling of women to the progress of the nation. Likewise women utilized the same rhetoric in their struggle for suffrage and participation in public life. For instance Bibi Khanum Astarabadi, in her *Vices of Men*, argued that European men serve their wives and live with them "in perfect harmony and concord" whereas Iranian men "all endeavor to humiliate women."<sup>37</sup> Such rhetorical comparisons became an essential component of the discourse on women's rights in Iran.

Persian travelers were also conscious of the legal order that made women's participation in the public sphere less restrictive. ʿIṣām al-Dīn explained the sexual liberty of Europeans in contrast to Muslim women in terms of the different legal systems:

The courts have nothing to do with cases of simple fornication, unless a woman complains that she was forcibly violated. . . . If a man and woman commit fornication in a retired house, or even in any place whatever, they may do so with impunity, and neither the *cutwal* [police] nor the censor (*muhtasib*) can take any notice of it; for it is a common saying, "what business has the superintendent inside a house?" (*Muhtasib ra dar durun-i Khanah chah kar?*) In England it is completely the reverse of what it is in this country, for there the *cutwal* and the censor have little or nothing to do, and don't have the power of seizing either a fornicator or a fornicatress, whatever the people may say.

He further observed that "the King of England is not independent in matters of government . . . and can do nothing without first consulting and advising with his ministers and nobles and a few selected men." By focusing on the relative freedom of women and the restriction on the power of sovereign, he shifted the meaning of freedom (*azadī*): "It is the English but also the European norm of freedom (*rasm-i azadī*) . . . that neither the elite nor the poor ever subjugate themselves to others." Contrasting this to the conventional historical practices, he observed that their norm is different from those of other countries where people "are proud of the title of the servant of the king" (*binam-i ghulamī-i padishah fakhḥ kunand*).<sup>38</sup>

Such observations on gender and political "space of experience" in Europe expanded the "horizon of expectation" for the travelers and

their circles of audience. *Azadi* (freedom) was among the first temporalized concepts deployed by travelers to project the observed experiences in Europe into the expected future for their own homeland. It also became a key concept for "diagnosing" norms of life at "home" and for legitimating interventions for their future progress (*tarraqi*). This is evident in Sahhafbashi's observation that "We raise our girls in a cage and would not teach them anything besides eating and sleeping . . . Unfortunately we comprehend the enjoyment of eating and intercourse more than progress and education (*tarraqi va tarbiyat*)."<sup>39</sup> The futurist concept of *azadi* produced its own counter-concept of *istidbad* (tyranny/despotism), which was used to characterize the mode of governance in Qajar Iran. To strengthen their nation, many nineteenth-century Persian travelers, either directly or indirectly, called for the establishment of a constitutional government and the participation of women in the public sphere.

### Libertine women

Unlike many nineteenth-century travelers, Mirza Fattah Garmrudi, who traveled to Europe in 1838, developed a distaste for European manners and characteristics and warned against closer contacts with them. He called upon the *'ulama* and the political elite to distance themselves from this "wicked group" (*guruh-i nabikar*). Aware of the colonization of India, he warned that Europeans should not be trusted. For if opportune, they would "damage the religion and the state and destroy the Shari'ah traditions." He referred to Europe (*Farangistan*) as the land of the infidels (*Kufristan*) and concluded his 1842 *Shah Namah* (Nocturnal Letter) by noting that "due to the emotional depression and immensity of regret and sorrow that resulted from my observation of the state of affairs in *Kufristan*, I have been able to narrate no more than a seed from a donkey's burden and a drop in a sea about the obscene acts and indecent behaviors of this malevolent people [*in qaum-i bad sigal*]."<sup>40</sup> Mirza Fattah's pornographic view of Europe was the precursor of a Europhobic political imagination that sought to protect Iran from the "feminization of power" and European domination by guarding Iranian women from the malady of Europeanization. Like the earlier genre of *Lizzat al-Nisa'* (Joy of Woman), which was widely disseminated in homosocial male gatherings, *Shah Namah* was the prototype of a new erotic literature that constituted the uninhibited women of Europe as the locus of male sexual fantasies and arousal.

Mirza Fattah Garmrudi was a member of an Iranian delegation which was dispatched to Europe in 1838 and traveled to Vienna, Paris, and

London. The main objective of the mission, led by Mirza Husayn Khan Ajudanbashi, was to offer condolences to Queen Victoria (r. 1837–1901) on the death of William IV (1765–1837), to congratulate her on her accession to power, and to ask the British government to recall John McNeil, its Minister Plenipotentiary, for being unsympathetic to Iran's political claim to the city of Herat.<sup>41</sup>

This delegation, arriving in London in April 1839, faced a most discourteous reception. Queen Victoria declined to see them. The British government refused to receive them as governmental guests. Lord Palmerston pointed out that “[t]he Persian Ambassador must be Europeanized” by making him pay for all of his expenses.<sup>42</sup> This was a reversal of the earlier protocol according to which the British government, like its Iranian counterpart, paid all the expenses of diplomatic guests for the duration of their stay. Adding to the insult, the Iranian delegate was asked to revise Muhammad Shah's (r. 1834–48) letter to Queen Victoria, changing her title from *Malikah* to *Padshah*, for, according to Palmerston, “we have no sexual distinction for our sovereign,” a distinction which was implied in the concept *malikah* but not in *padshah*.<sup>43</sup> This hostility, instead of the expected hospitality, shaped the Iranian delegates' image of *Farangistan* and perception of *Farangis*.<sup>44</sup> This is clearly illustrated in Mirza Fattah's *Shah Namah* (1842). He recounted about 20 anecdotes and incidents witnessed by him or Iqbal al-Dawlah, his newly found Persian-Indian friend who was in England at that time.<sup>45</sup> Mirza Fattah constructed a pornographic view of Europe that focused particularly on the sexual debauchery of British women.

After discussing the source of his anecdotes, Mirza Fattah noted that he would “briefly explain some of the conditions and characteristics of the women and their husbands.”

In this land of diverse persuasions, women and girls are generally pantless and without a veil [*chadur*] and have a constant desire for able pummelers. Covered women are rare and unacceptable. Women are masterful in the realization of the wishes of men. They are addicted to pleasure and play, and are free from suffering and toil [*az ranj va ta'ib azad*]. In actualizing the demands of their partners, they are always daring and exquisite. But they are incompetent and frail in preserving their own honor.

According to Mirza Fattah, “A common characteristic of women is their extreme desire for sexual intercourse.” In his view,

They have escaped from the trap of chastity into freedom and have masterly leapt from the snare of purity. They have extreme desire for union with men and are endlessly coquettish and flirtatious. They glorify freedom and appreciate self-reliance [*bah azadi tafakhur darand va bah khud sari tashakkur*].

He equated English women's freedom with a lack of honor and chastity. This constituted the nodal point of the emerging Europhobic and misogynist discourse. Women and men, according to Garmrudi, were united night and day in ballrooms, theaters, coffeehouses, and whorehouses. To highlight the sexual debuchery of the English, he offered a pornographic description of how some women satisfied their sexual desires by keeping dogs at home. He explained that this practice was accepted and appreciated by the husbands:

In this land, due to the enormity of a woman's lust, a man does not have the strength to satisfy and realize her wishes promptly. Consequently, if a woman has an affair with another man and receives from him a payment, or due to her nobility and magnanimity, doesn't receive anything, according to the law of the nation [*qanun-i millat*] the poor husband has no right to punish her. Under such a condition the zealous husband is thankful that the dog has done the job for her instead of a neighbor or an ignorant rogue in the street. To be just and fair, the poor husband cannot be blamed.<sup>46</sup>

Men's sexual impotence and their inability to punish their wives was viewed as a cause of women's bestiality. To further illustrate the legal restrictions on men and the resultant sexual appetite of women, Garmrudi recounted the story of a wife who was "ugly and bad looking, and singularly ill-created and ill-humored." Her husband had become repulsed and preferred "living in a cave with a snake" to her companionship:

But since in their nation [*millat*] it is established that a man cannot have more than one wife, he was compelled to give in to his destiny and persevere, always praying to God for mercy and his liberation from her yoke of damnation.

One day the husband came home to find his wife with another man. He asked the adulterer why he was not looking for a better woman. The adulterer replied, "I do not have such bad taste. I am laboring and getting paid for it." Because of the incompetence of European men and



the voracious sexual appetite of European women, Garmrudi reported that women had to rely on extramarital relations or on dildoes to satisfy their desires. But he also described in graphic detail the pleasures of oral-genital sex between men and women.

Why did Mirza Fattah write such a disparaging account of European women, when earlier travelers had offered exalting reports? One is the obvious fact that the special mission was ill-treated by the British government. But there are a number of other factors which may illuminate his motivation for the writing of *Shah Namah*. For example, he wrote:

With all these destructive conditions and deplorable actions, if a person in the nations of *Farangistan*, especially in England, unintentionally (which is the necessary nature, meaning that it is the second nature of human beings) names chest and breast, or vagina and phallus, or the like among women, they will immediately print and register them in the newspapers and will disseminate it around the world that so and so in such and such gathering, had no shame and talked about such and such in front of women.

So Mirza Fattah and his colleagues might well have been victims of journalistic admonishment and intrigue, which capitalized on the Persian travelers' unfamiliarity with European norms, mocked them, and portrayed them as indecent and uncivilized. Might this also explain Mirza Fattah's rather negative view of newspapers, which earlier Persian travelers greatly admired? He wrote,

Since the majority of newspapers print pure lies and they lie thoroughly, then it is clever of them to clean their posteriors with these papers. There is no better use for them. They believe that with these papers the feces is cleaned from their rears, but this is neither clear nor obvious. It is not clear whether in reality their rears are cleaned by the papers, or whether the newsprint is actually purified by the excrement.

The members of the special mission had become extremely sensitive to and angry with journalists who seemed to have reported on all that seemed irregular and unfamiliar to their readers. There are other possible explanations for Mirza Fattah's negative representation of Europeans. As this same text suggests, Mirza Fattah was responding to a denigrating European view of Iran.



With all these desolate affairs and deplorable conditions, they [Europeans] have written some books to reproach and reprimand Iran. Especially the Englishman [James Baillie] Fraser has vulgarly denigrated Iran and has gone to extremes in this regard. Among his charges is that the men of Iran have excessive desire for beardless teenagers and some men commit obscene acts with them. Yes, in the midst of all nations of the world, some fools, due to the predominance of lascivious spirit and satanic temptations, commit some inappropriate acts. It is far from just that the people of *Farangistan*, with all of their imperfect attributes and obscene behaviors for which they are characterized and are particularly famous, i. e. the establishment of homo-houses [*amrad-khanah*] and whore-houses, where they go at all times and pay money and commit obscene acts, that they characterize the people of Iran with such qualities and write about them in their books.<sup>47</sup>

After expressing his disapproval of Fraser's generalizations about and condemnation of Iranians,<sup>48</sup> Mirza Fattah narrated the story of an Italian lord who copulated with the son of an English gentleman after gaining the consent of the boy's father. He concluded that:

The above incident, besides indicating unfairness and engagement [of Europeans] in demeaning behaviors, is also an indication of the stupidity and foolishness of this people; but they ignore all these incidents and occurrences amongst themselves and attached their own characteristics to others.

As Mirza Fattah Garmrudi observed, Europeans were reading their own behavior and ways into Iranian character. Reflecting on the European perception of Iran, Garmrudi recognized the importance of power in determining the type of relations Europeans establish with other countries:

Apparently, they always interact on an appropriate and humane basis with strong states and never initiate opposition. With a state which appears weaker, however, they constantly search for excuses, make downright illogical statements and resist listening to logical views.

Mirza Fattah did, however, praise some European political institutions. Concerning the parliamentary arrangements, he remarked, "Individually, the people of *Farangistan* are not very wise or mature nor are they

endowed with much eloquence or intelligence; but the parliament and the house of consultation [*mashvirat khanah*] that they have established apparently conceal these shortcomings." Despite their parliamentary form of government, he observed that on most occasions Europeans "deploy shenanigan and deception." He concluded that, "in fairness, any government whose elite are addicted to this habit are not considered amongst the wise and the mature but should be regarded as swindlers and ignoramuses."<sup>49</sup> The *Shah Namah* ends with a warning that the governmental elite should distance itself from the "wicked" Europeans, for they would damage the foundation of the state and religion.

During the nineteenth century, pornographic views of Europe, similar to Mira Fattah's *Shah Namah* provided the ammunition for an intensified struggle against the reformists who were idealizing Europe. Such pornographic denunciation of Europe entered into the Islamist discourses on the danger of unveiling and women's suffrage. The threat of feminization of power played a pivotal role in the articulation of a counter-modernist Islamist political discourse. In the counter-modernist discourse the "fairy-faced" women of Europe appeared now as demonic. Mirza Fattah was amongst the originators of such a Europhobic discourse, a discourse in which the political threat of Europe was connected to the sexual debauchery of European women. By its erotic condemnation of sexualized European women the discourse interfaced the erotic and political genres. The success of this politico-erotic literature created a serious cultural opposition to the traveling of Iranian women to Europe.

### Narrative plots and the scapegoating of women

Fascination with non-Muslim women has a long history in the Perso-Islamic literary culture. The mystical "Story of Shaykh San'an" by Farid al-Din 'Attar (d. c.1230) is one of the most famous and often narrated tales expressing the Persian imagination on the erotic and the exotic.<sup>50</sup> Shaykh San'an, the keeper of Mecca's holy place and an accomplished mystic with 400 disciples, had fallen in love with a Rumi (Roman/Greek) Christian girl whose beauty "was like the sun in splendor." Her eyes "were a lure for lovers," her face "sparkled like a living flame," and "the silver dimple of her chin was as vivifying as the discourses of Jesus." To unite with the Muslim mystic, the Christian woman set forth four difficult conditions: "prostrate yourself before the idols, burn the Qur'an, drink wine, and shut your eyes to your religion." After accepting these apostatizing conditions and converting to Christianity, instead of the

usual dowry, the woman requested, "Now, for my dowry, O imperfect man, go and look after my herd of pigs for the space of a year, and then we shall pass our lives in joy or sadness." Deeply in love, Shaykh accepted this "unkosher" task: "Without a protest the shaykh of the Ka'aba, this saint, resigned himself to becoming a hog-ward."<sup>51</sup> At the end of the tale, Shaykh reconverted and his Christian beloved also accepted Islam. This and other similar stories provide a glimpse of how the exotic and erotic Christian women figured in the mystical and religious formation of identities in premodern South and South-west Asia.

In the course of the nineteenth century, pornographic views of European women became as prevalent as the views that they were educated, decent, and self-restrained. Sahhafbashi, who praised the education of women, also observed that in Europe "virgin women are rare and womanizing [*dukhtar bazi*] is like eating bread and yogurt in Iran and is not offensive."<sup>52</sup> Reports of the sexual laxity of European women provided the Iranian clerisy (*ulama*) with effective moral ammunition to attack the modernists who were questioning their moral and intellectual leadership. An early example of clerical scapegoating of European women is evident in the writings of Hajj Muhammad Karim Khan Kirmani (1810–71), a leading Shaykhi theologian.<sup>53</sup> Writing in 1856, Kirmani believed that Iran was becoming infected with a "new malady" which was the result of "pleasure-seeking individuals, who refuse to associate with the ulama, and would no longer abide by religious principles."<sup>54</sup> Relying on the eyewitness account of Europe narrated to him by "a leading Iranian notable" who had taken refuge in England,<sup>55</sup> he warned of the ensuing feminization of power in Iran.

Can any Muslim allow incompetent women to have affairs in their hands so that they could go wherever they choose, sit with whomever they desire, leave the house whenever they wish? They [Europeans] have not yet gained firm control of Iran but they are already ordering our women not to cover themselves from men. Would any Muslim consent to women wearing makeup, sitting in the squares and at shops, going to theaters? Can any Muslim consent to the independence and beautification of his wife and allow her to go to the bazaar and buy wine and drink it and get intoxicated . . . and sit with rogues and ruffians [*alvat va awbashi*] and do whatever she chooses? God forbid! Would anyone consent to allowing freedom and losing charge of one's daughter, wife, slave, and housekeeper? And allow them to go wherever they please and do whatever they like and sit with whomever they choose and have available in their gatherings any



kind of wine they desire and mingle with rogues, and not be able to protest because an unbeliever has ordered the establishment of a land of freedom [*vilayat-i azadi*]?<sup>56</sup>

Kirmanji described his antagonist as an "ignorant, conceited youth who, upon hearing the call of freedom, immediately make themselves look like Europeans, adopting European customs and betraying Islam and Islamic values."<sup>57</sup> He warned:

When they hear the call to freedom [*nida-yi azadi*] they would shape themselves like the *Farangis*, organize their assemblies and associations patterned after Europeans, model their behaviors on the bases of European customs, and turn away from Islam and Islamic traditions.<sup>58</sup>

Fearing that the imitation of Europe would lead to the de-differentiation of gender and religious identities, Muhammad Karim Kirmani cautioned Muslim men:

Then if your wife abstains from you, if she chose to convert to Armenianism, she would go to a church and after she is baptized in public, she would enter the Christian religion... If the deviant women wish to become apostates no one can protest. Due to freedom a large number of people would become apostates and the clergy and others would have no power to speak out. In conclusion, they would establish schools, and classes would be taught by European teachers... and then the simple minded people would send their children to European schools and they would become totally Christianized.<sup>59</sup>

He further warned the male believers that if Iranian women mingled with European women, they would be tempted to dress like Europeans, dance in public celebrations and gatherings, drink wine, and sit with men on benches and chairs and joke with strangers. By becoming a "land of freedom" (*vilayat-i azadi*), women of Iran would copulate with Europeans and no one would dare to protest. Muhammad Karim Khan concluded his counter-modernist essay by declaring that "anyone who befriends a European would be considered an European himself... and thus has apostatized and adopted the religion of the Europeans."<sup>60</sup> This line of argument became a significant component of an Iranian counter-modernity that equated undesirable sociopolitical reforms with the Europeanization and Christianization of Iran. Iranian modernity

was always constrained by the terms established by its powerful counterpart.

Persian travelers' accounts of their journeys to Europe frequently followed the narrative plot of the "Story of Shaykh San'an." While enthusiastically reporting on the liberty of European women – their mixing with men in masquerades and dancing parties and their sexual laxity – at the same time they often sought forgiveness for deviating from the straight path during their journey to "infidelity" (*kufriстан*). For example, Mirza Abu Talib confessed to having abandoned his cherished goal of learning "English sciences" (*'ilm-i Ingilish*) in favor of "love and gaiety" in London. On his return journey to Calcutta he visited the shrines of the Shiite imams 'Ali, Husayn, and Zayn al-'Abidin and sought their forgiveness for his sins in Europe.<sup>61</sup> He also composed two elegies in praise of 'Ali and Husayn,

Whilst at Baghdad, I had them beautifully transcribed, on gold paper, and suspended them near the tombs of those illustrious saints at Karbela and Najaf. These elegies were much approved by both the superintendents; and they promised me to take care they were not removed, but they should be preserved, a testimony of my zeal.<sup>62</sup>

Not all travelers visited Muslim shrines, repenting for their experiences in Europe like Mirza Abu Talib; instead many assumed the posture of objective and disengaged observers in the recounting of their self-experience. This objectivist posture, like repentance, enabled the travelers to reintegrate themselves into their own society by eroticizing and exoticizing Europe.

Through the narrative recounting of their *observations* in Europe, the Persianate travelers induced the production of two competing Europhilic and Europhobic discourses. In the Europhilic discourse Europe was represented as an orderly and law-bound *heterotopia* with educated and disciplined women who were perfect companions to their husbands. In the Europhobic discourse Europe was depicted as an *ectopia*, an abnormal place with lewd and libertine women who could not be sexually satisfied by their husbands. These competing representations of Europe were deployed by Iranian modernists and counter-modernists in their divergent strategies of refashioning Iran. Identification with Europe served as a strategy for the subversion of the dominant Islamic discourse and the construction of a new pattern of identity rooted in pre-Islamic history and culture. By mocking Europe, counter-modernists sought to preserve the existing order and to subvert the political

strategy of de-Islamizing Iran. Both the modernist Europhilia and the counter-modernist Europhobia deployed Europe as a point of reference; both, however, were actively involved in creative construction of alternative bodypolitics and vernacular modernities.

### Seeing oneself being seen

The Persian travelers narrated the spectacle of Europe and the European onlookers reported the spectacle of the exotic Persians in their midst. The surveyors of Europe and its cultural differences found themselves surveyed by Europeans. Reflecting on his own experience as a spectacle, I'tisam al-Din wrote:

Whenever I went outdoors, crowds accompanied me, and the people in the houses and bazaars thrust their heads out of the windows and gazed at me with wonder. The children and boys took me for a black devil, and being afraid kept at a distance from me.<sup>63</sup>

Mirza Abu Talib recalled happier experiences. Remembering his visit to Dublin, he wrote:

As I would walk out of the house they would surround me and every one would say nice things about me. Some said that I must be the Russian General, who had been for some time expected; others guessed that I am a German ruler, and still others would view me as a Spanish noble. But the greater part perceived me as a Persian Prince.<sup>64</sup>

Observing the details of English social and political life, Mirza Abu al-Hasan was likewise constituted as an object of popular gaze and amazement. According to *The London Literary Gazette*, he was so great an object of public curiosity, that

he could not leave his hotel without being surrounded by a multitude of gazers. When he attended fashionable parties, the eagerness evinced by the ladies to gain a sight of him, subjected him to a degree of embarrassment the more insupportable, as the people of the East entertain notions very unfavourable to that kind of female curiosity.<sup>65</sup>

Abu al-Hasan's appearance provided a signifying surface for the rearticulation of cultural differences and the replaying of European sexual

fantasies. Drawing on the culturally available resources, *The Morning Herald* (March 29, 1810) offered a spectacularized description of his appearance:

The Persian Ambassador attracts the particular attention of the Hyde Park belles as an equestrian of a singular order, for he rides in silken pantaloons of such a wide dimension, that, being inflated by the wind makes his Excellency appear [more] like flying to a Turkish Harem, than riding for the pure air in Rotten Row.<sup>66</sup>

The *harem*, a misrecognized space, had already become an exotic site for the projection of European sexual fantasies. As a symbolic condensation of the Muslim Orient, the *harem* became a point of reference for culturally placing the Persian travelers who were often asked about polygamous practices.

The Persian visitors were the objects of intense public voyeurism. To ward off the public eye, they went "native" and cross-dressed. By replacing their Persian dress with European costumes, the visitors hoped to de-exoticize themselves and remove the most obvious sign of their otherness. Such transvestite protection from public voyeurism sought by Muhammad Riza Bayk (d. 1714), a Persian envoy to France, provided Montesquieu with material for the *The Persian Letters*. A central episode of *The Persian Letters* terminated with the question "How can one be Persian" (*Comment peut-on être Persan?*). The Persian Rica found the excessive public curiosity to be burdensome and so decided "to give up Persian costume and dress like an European."<sup>67</sup>

The protective shield of cultural transvestism was occasionally sought by Mirza Salih Shirazi. On the occasion of King George's birthday, Mirza Salih was asked by his friends to participate in the public celebration. Worried about the public gaze and harassment, Mirza Salih intended to wear a European costume instead of Persian attire. But his friends advised him against it, arguing that he should not be worried since he was to be accompanied by Englishwomen and men. Upon their insistence, Mirza Salih wore his Persian garments and, holding hands with a certain Miss Sara Abraham, accompanied his friends to the public celebration. But the sight of an "exotic Persian" walking hand-in-hand with an Englishwoman intensified public curiosity: "All of a sudden, the masses, who had not seen a person dressed like me, appeared from all sides and in a short time five hundred people gathered around me." Mirza Salih escaped from the scene, went to his apartment, and after changing into European dress, rejoined his friends. According to his

own report, no one harassed him after he cross-dressed.<sup>68</sup> Such harassing public curiosity was also reported by European travelers who visited the Middle East in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

With the global hegemony of European perspectives, the Persian mode of dress became associated with premodernity. The Persian travelers who were conscious of the use of dress as a *time-distancing* device in European imagination, *contemporized* themselves by shedding their Persian dress in favor of European mode. The European dress, as it will be explained in Chapter 6, was initially adopted as a military uniform in 1839 by the modernizing Muhammad Shah. Having likewise internalized the time-distancing European perspectives, almost a century later Riza Shah sought to visually *contemporize* Iran with Europe by imposing European dress on men and by unveiling women. These policies of self-refashioning were driven by two interlocking inferiority complexes: a sense of inferiority to *contemporary* Europeans and a feeling of inferiority to the imperial ancient Persians, an imperial tradition that was created in the sixteenth century and popularized in the nineteenth century.