

Reflections on Love, Gender, and Sexuality : Perspectives from Classical to Modern Persian Culture

Ali-Asghar Seyed-Gohrab
Utrecht University

Contents of this Volume

This book is about the role of gender in Persian culture, focusing on gender's representations and implications, especially in poetry and the visual arts, but also giving attention to the recent socio-political protests in Iran:1 Women, Life, Freedom. Femininity and masculinity in particular are depicted in Persian poetry in diverse ways, and if we limit ourselves to literary genres, we see how the beloved in early Persian *qaṣīdas* and *ghazals* is a male youth, but in the genre of narrative poetry the beloved is often a woman. The physical and mental depictions of the male beloved are stereotypical in the *qaṣīdas* and many *ghazals*, he being portrayed from top to toe in a metonymic fashion, referring to his tall stature like a cypress, his curly locks as hyacinths, his eyes as narcissi, etc.2 The female beloved in narrative stories (*mathnavīs*) also has specific traits which are woven into the plot of the story to create specific effects. The beloved's portrayal in these genres and poetic forms influences the lover's masculinity, how he sees himself and how he engages with the female beloved in narrative stories.

This volume of essays elaborates upon diverse aspects of femininity and masculinity in Persian culture, devoting attention not only to the classical literary masterpieces but also to their impact on and reception history in modern times. I would like to argue that stories from medieval Persian literature have a deep impact on modern notions of femininity and masculinity. An example is the application of posters illustrating verses from Firdowsī's *Shāh-nāma* during the Women, Life, Freedom revolutionary movement, which started after the tragic death of 22-year-old Ms. Jina Mahsa Amini on 16 September 2022. The Iranian morality police had arrested her for allegedly not wearing her hijab in the right way. Her murder unleashed nationwide protests across Iran, leading to more arrests and the killing of innocents on the streets. Iranian women have been ill-treated for the last century. Among the posters used during these protests were those inspired

by characters from Firdowsi's *Shāh-nāma*, notably Gurdāfarīd, who fought as a man against champions in the battlefield. Such posters show how Iranian women followed her example in their fight against a totalitarian system which did not respect the female body, space and integrity.³

This volume is an analysis of femininity and masculinity in Persian culture, focusing on several key works, genres and moments in the long Iranian history. The first contribution is by Dick Davis, entitled 'The Vale of Soul-Making: The Evolution of the Persian Verse Romance from Gurgānī to Jāmī,' in which he examines three romances, namely Gurgānī's *Vīs and Rāmīn*, Nizāmī's *Khusrow and Shīrīn*, and 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī's *Salāmān and Absāl*. The chapter investigates how the female beloved changes from a profane sensual character to a spiritual beloved from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. This spiritualisation of the beloved also affects its romance, changing it into a mystical allegory. This invaluable contribution shows both how characters in Persian romances change under the impact of mysticism which gradually imposed itself on Persian culture and literature from the twelfth century onwards, in such a way that the spirituality of several romances written after the thirteenth century cannot be denied.

Related in several ways to the previous chapter, my own contribution traces back the foundation of Persian mystical love poetry and its, themes, motifs and imagery to early Persian court poetry, entitled 'The Earthly Roots of the Heavenly Beloved.' It offers a courtly and literary background to the beloved in early Persian poetry and how this image forms a basis for the portrayal of the spiritual beloved in subsequent centuries. The chapter records a panoply of courtly rites and rituals, mainly drawn from the genres of *Fürstenspiegel* and praise poems, to show how images of fighting and feasting (*razm u bazm*) are blended in the sensual and military metaphors deployed to depict the beloved, and how this has become the backdrop of mystic poets' depictions of the beloved.

The invaluable contribution by Christine van Ruymbeke is entitled 'An Emperor Accused of Sexual Transgression: What Is Really Happening between Bahram Gur and his Musician Slave Girl?' This is a popular topic among poets, visual artists and scholars, who have devoted their attention to the relationship between the Sasanian King, Bahrām, and his enslaved musician, who journeyed with him to keep him company using melodies. Van Ruymbeke investigates the two oldest and mostly illustrated versions of the romance, namely those by Firdowsī and Nizāmī, suggesting a new dimension in the relationship between Bahrām and Fitna. This novel reading places Bahrām as a sexual transgressor who, in a love play, provokes her into responding to his often-impossible suggestions, and records how Fitna responds and teaches the king lessons of love, magnanimity and civility.

Although examples of splendid Persian romances appear in Firdowsi's monumental epic, *Shāh-nāma*, and include *Zāl u Rūdāba*, *Rustam u Tahmīna*, and *Bizhan*

u Manīzha, there are other romances such as ‘Ayyūqī’s *Varqa and Gulshāh* and ‘Unşurī’s *Vāmiq u Aẓrā*. A productive line of romances started with Fakhr al-Dīn Gurgānī, a poet of the eleventh century, who composed the romance *Vīs and Rāmīn*. It has pre-Islamic roots and is believed to have connections to the European romance, *Tristan and Iseult*, whose extant version by Bérout appeared 100 years after *Vīs u Rāmīn*.⁴ Several scholars have made comparisons between these two romances, among whom is Davis, who analyses the literary motifs in these stories.⁵ Various literary aspects of this romance inspired the virtuous Persian poet, Nizāmī of Ganja, to compose his *Khosrow and Shirin*. One aspect of *Vīs u Rāmīn* concerns how Gurgānī portrays the character of the main protagonists and how love impacts on their physical and mental characterisation and how the poet seeks to portray the male lover and the female beloved. In her chapter entitled ‘The Character of Vīs in Gurgānī’s *Vīs u Rāmīn* and The Functioning of Love,’ Mira Boose analyses this fascinating aspect of the romance, while also paying attention to the role of sensorium in a love relationship.

Without any doubt, the genre of romances is indebted to the Persian poet, Nizāmī of Ganja (ca. 1141–1209), who wrote three matchless romances, imitated throughout the Persian cultural area more than 100 times and which have also known creative emulations in various Islamic languages.⁶ Several scholars analyse aspects of his romances in the volume, and in one chapter entitled, ‘Masculinity and Dialogism: Reconsidering Mysticism in Nizāmī’s *Laylī and Majnūn*,’ Allison Kanner-Botan concentrates on one important aspect of the depiction of the character of the ill-starred protagonist, Qeys, who became ‘possessed’ (*majnūn*) by Leylī’s love, leaving his family and the community of men to wander in the desert. Kanner-Botan focuses on the trait of *javānmardī* (literally, ‘young/youth manliness’), an ethical character trait, which receives a different connotation, depending on the background of the character in question. For a character such as Majnūn, every aspect of whose life is dominated by the codes and virtues of love, *javānmardī* means loyalty to the beloved, even if this paradoxically means to live in the agonies of separation; but for a go-between such as the chieftain knight, Nawfal, it means honour and how to uphold this honour at all costs. While examining the semantic contexts of this ethical concept, Kanner-Botan also devotes her attention to how *javānmardī* becomes the locus of recognition between these two characters, as well as analysing ‘how the undermining of Majnūn’s mystical masculinity suggests that Nizāmī’s text need not be read as a holistically Sufi work, but rather as a work that brings conflicting value systems into dialogic tension in order to incite critical thought in the reader.’

Nizāmī’s romances gave rise to several generations of creative emulators. One such early creative emulator is Khvājū-yī Kirmānī (ca 1290–1349), who composed a quintet (*khamsa*) in order to enter into Nizāmī’s literary path.⁷ Christine Kämpfer’s