

# Queering the Iranian Nation: *Be Like Others* and Resistance to Heteronormative Nationalism

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Dedicated to the life-affirming work of Maryam Khatoun Molkara (1950-2012)

## Introduction

Tanaz Eshaghian's 2008 documentary *Be Like Others* simultaneously messages entrenched stereotypes about the Islamic Republic of Iran, but also moves beyond a cursory exploration about the life of trans Iranians living in the present-day country. The film offers the viewer opportunities for reflection about the role of gender, sexuality, whiteness,<sup>1</sup> and belonging in nation-building broadly, and in the post-1979 landscape of Iran, in particular. Eshaghian's work

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<sup>1</sup>I will turn to the critical intervention by M. Shadee Malaklou in thinking about Iranians and how they "narrate their non-normative genders and sexualities as identity and type to negate (for themselves as Other, not pace Hegel but Fanon) the racial schemas that atavistically hail them in modern historiography." Maryam Shadee Malaklou, *Chronopolitical Assemblages: Race/ism, Desire, and Identification in Iranian Contexts* (ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2016), 13.

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as a filmmaker follows a longer legacy of Iranian artists pushing back against hegemonic-governmental control of the narrative of Iranian-ness, extending to the late-Qajar era through contemporary times. The film closely follows the stories of several trans Iranians, particularly Male-to-Female trans persons who are undergoing the Iranian regime's four- to six-month process of medical and psychological therapies ending with partially subsidized sex reassignment surgery (SRS). Throughout the film, the viewer catches glimpses of contemporary Tehran with flashes of urban life with the usual hustle and bustle of cars, skyscrapers, and more specifically, *chador*-clad women. Huge murals of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei amidst revolutionary heroes and the Iran-Iraq war martyrs puncture the narratives of the trans persons, signaling cues about expected gender roles for men.<sup>2</sup> Amidst these images of the pious, brave, and pure, *Be Like Others* focuses on the personal spaces and intimate relations of the trans protagonists, which works in counterpoint to the stereotypical images of masculinity throughout the film as these trans individuals were born male.

Despite the focus on the experiences of the trans persons, Iran's gender binary system reverberates in nearly every conversation, landscape, and visual representation in the film, especially as regulated by the Islamic Republic. In multiple scenes, which I explore in depth below, the discussions center on making the trans person fit into the mold of heteronormativity as dictated by the Islamic state.<sup>3</sup> Thus, *Be Like Others* complicates post-1979's project of nation-building through a narrative of heteronormativity by countering this representation of citizen-subjects as gender and sexuality conforming thereby

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<sup>2</sup>Shahin Gerami, "Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men: Conceptualizing Masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Men and Masculinities* 5, no. 3 (January 2003): 257-274. In this essay, Gerami traces the development of "an Islamic hypermasculinity" which focuses on developing heteronormative men and women who abide by new "ideals of manhood" with three main identities for men: "mullahs," or clerics, as wise interpreters of the Quran; "martyrs," as young men who sacrifice their lives for the Republic; and "ordinary men" who benefit from Shari'at at the family and civil society level, but suffer depending on class status.

<sup>3</sup>*Be Like Others/Transsexual in Iran*, directed by Tanaz Eshaghian (2008), Film.

“disrupt[ing] the political order by binding audiences to stories that are open not only to interpretation, but also to political and cultural negotiations.”<sup>4</sup> Eshaghian’s *Be Like Others* showcases the Islamic Republic’s homophobia and transphobia by allowing the viewer to know the trans subjects through their own descriptions of their gender and sexuality identities, and how the state and cultural customs disrupt their connections to their hometowns, families, and desires to pursue education, jobs, and living spaces. Thus, gender and sexuality stand out as part of a *network* of self-identity and livelihood and not a singular issue contrary to the government’s approach towards these complexities. Benedict Anderson’s concepts of nostalgia, romance, and a sense of belonging to a particular region and cultural heritage of the world in *Imagined Communities* (1991), is a particularly useful point of entry to discuss the project of nation-building in Iran starting in the late 18th-century with a peak in the mid to late 19th-century. The nation as an “imagined community” is “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>5</sup> The Iranian regime’s acceptance of post-SRS trans Iranians as citizen-subjects presupposes the “imagined community” of heteronormative Iran.

With the “imagined community” in the backdrop, that is, a collective of heteronormative, patriarchal and religious nationalists looming over the citizens, the film focuses on the stories of Iranians seeking SRS. The film emphasizes that they are in this process because they want to remain in Iran and must undergo the procedure of transformation in order to live with equal rights and access to the resources of the nation, dignity, and safety. However, as these narratives unfold throughout the film, the viewer realizes that the trans Iranians participate in “passing” as female because in order to its members to remain Iranian citizens, the nation requires that they ascribe to the gender binary system. In this regard, I will elaborate on

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<sup>4</sup>Mino Moallem, “Passing, Politics, and Religion,” *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, Issue 9.3: Summer 2011, [http://sfonline.barnard.edu/religion/moallem\\_01.htm](http://sfonline.barnard.edu/religion/moallem_01.htm).

<sup>5</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 1991), 6.

the intertwining legacies of the role of gender and sexuality starting in the late-Qajar and Pahlavi regimes, which then established networks of medical-legal-religious governmental interventions in the lives of its subjects, so that Iran could stake a nationalist claim on the world stage in line with European modern nation-state building.<sup>6</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi reminds us that, “Iranian state-formation is an on-going, fractious, and volatile process, which—more than three decades after the 1979 revolution—continues to shape and reshape, fracture and refracture, order and reorder what we name ‘the state.’”<sup>7</sup>

This effort to modernize Iran through gender and sexuality transformations mimicked a Victorian European nationalist turn in the early 1800s as Iranian and European interactions gained strength. While not solely a consequence of colonialism and European influences in Iran, gender and sexuality became increasingly entangled in the narrative of nation-building complicated by the white gaze. This “white mimicry” as M. Shadee Malaklou points out, reveals that “Iranians who narrate their same-sex or trans sexualities in [documentaries] seek recognition from the gatekeepers of empire not for their non-normative genders and sexualities but for their modern human types.”<sup>8</sup> While I agree with Malaklou’s assessment, *Be Like Others*, simultaneously seeks this recognition and challenges the controlling mechanisms of the Iranian government because audiences in some parts of the world can readily access this counter-narrative with relative ease,<sup>9</sup> which in turn thwarts the Islamic regime’s efforts to control and disseminate a heteronormative and modernist national identity. To complicate the Iranian government’s turn to heteronormativity as requisite to citizen-belonging and nation-building since the era of the Qajars, the concept of time and the evolution of gender and sexuality under the guise of Enlightenment

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<sup>6</sup>Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>7</sup>Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 6.

<sup>8</sup>Malaklou, *Chronopolitical Assemblages*, 2.

<sup>9</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*. The film is readily accessible online in the US under the title, *Transsexual in Iran*.

Humanism are at stake. Malaklou states,

Social and political constructions of time induced by Enlightenment Humanism are chronological and continuous; they privilege persons with access to the social, political, and economic capital to move forward (literally and metaphorically) towards an identity or type that is whole, polished, and perfected. If, as Foucault describes it, ‘to be modern’ is ‘not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments,’ but rather ‘to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration’—to ‘[occupy] an imagined place at the new end of a sequence’—then to be atavistic or uncivilized, as Iranians are caricatured in literatures of empire, is to be chronopolitically queer.<sup>10</sup>

The European gaze upon Iranians as primitive and archaic, which renders them as out of time and sync with progress, modernity, and therefore, the ability to be fully human terrified the Iranians of the nineteenth century and set the stage for the urgency to find acceptance from and approval into whiteness. This anxiety of being subservient to Europe’s dominance becomes paramount to the government’s notions of nation-building. Ultimately, the gaze from Europe and America overpowers and heavily influences the discourse of nation-building in Iran.

### **Encountering Gender and Sexuality in Qajar Iran**

In *Women with Mustaches, Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, historian Afsaneh Najmabadi outlines the transformation of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth-century as notions of masculinity and femininity merged with notions of “an imagined political community,”<sup>11</sup> which led to the rise of nationalism and statehood in the early twentieth century.<sup>12</sup> Najmabadi details how in the last half of the nineteenth-century as Iranians and the British

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<sup>10</sup>Malaklou, *Chronopolitical Assemblages*, 12.

<sup>11</sup>Anderson, “Introduction,” *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>12</sup>While still recognized as a functioning monarchy, Iran, then known as Persia, formed a *majlis* or parliament in 1906, thus heralding the early steps to statehood.

in particular became more interactive, Iranians repressed male and female homosociality in recognition of ascribing to European notions of nationhood.<sup>13</sup> Soon, there developed a narrative about “vatan”<sup>14</sup> (homeland) as female in need of masculine protection and adoration, which harmed the once accepted bonds of homoeroticism and deemed homosociality as a dangerous passageway to homosexuality. One overt attempt to modernize Qajar Iran was to discourage men from effeminate behaviors and desires and pulling women away from their homosocial bonds and into the public sphere. In practice, this meant men chose female companions in the public and private spheres. Najmabadi says, “Centered on a female beloved, [the concept of love of vatan] indicates the depth of transformations already taking place in Iranian erotic sensibilities. The overpowering love of a female vatan mediated between homeland and heterosexuality, between nation and gender.”<sup>15</sup> This project of modernization through clear practices of gender and sexuality combined with efforts of nation-building required the removal of so-called backward practices and behaviors likened to homosexuality and developed the current gender binary system of male-female in Iran. Nineteenth-century Iranians’ attention to implementing a gender binary, and therefore establishing heteronormativity as the status quo, developed as a result of their knowing that another gaze was present from Europe. Najmabadi reflects, “Iranian men interacting with Europeans in Iran or abroad became highly sensitized to the idea that their desire was now under European scrutiny.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the project of modernization from the time of the Qajars until today, as revealed in *Be Like Others*, remains to a large extent, a replication of homophobia and transphobia in imitation of the structures in Europe and now, America, with the hope

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<sup>13</sup>Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches, Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Najmabadi relates how “Iranian modernity was shaped in the rearticulation of concepts like nation (*millat*), politics (*siasat*), homeland (*vatan*), and knowledge (*ilm*),” 1.

<sup>14</sup>Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 98.

<sup>15</sup>Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 1.

<sup>16</sup>Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 4.

of recognition as “coeval...with Western, presumably white nations and persons.”<sup>17</sup> Malaklou signals the work of anthropologist Johannes Fabian who states, “Coevalness aims at recognizing contemporality as the condition for truly dialectical confrontation between persons as well as societies [...] [We] are not the same societies at different stages of development, but different societies facing each other at the same time.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, Iranians wrestle with the cultures, history, religions, and politics of their own development as part of an emerging nation-state as well as Europe’s notions of racial superiority. As Najmabadi notes, even “the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is [...] oblivious to the irony of its shared ground with secular modernists and with Orientalizing Europeans [whose] concept of homosexuality—sexual deviancy, *inhiraf-i jinsi*—[is] more akin to late nineteenth-century western European concepts than to anything from Islam’s own classical heritage.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the Qajars’ efforts to display visual political representations of the Western gender binary system such as that of the male lion wielding a sword in front of a female sun rising in the backdrop of the homeland, Qajar artists continued to represent androgynous couples. Najmabadi observes, “notions of beauty were largely undifferentiated by gender in early Qajar Iran (1785-1925); that is, beautiful men and women were depicted with very similar facial and bodily features.”<sup>20</sup> A popular emblem of gender and sexuality, the male-female amorous couple, particularly in paintings, Najmabadi suggests, allowed for homoerotic passing because we see visual depictions of men and women in androgynous modes: with facial hair as a marker of masculinity, painters depicted women with facial hair and men without facial hair. Najmabadi calls this passing “masquerading”<sup>21</sup> as both Qajar men and women look the same in

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<sup>17</sup>Malaklou, *Chronopolitical Assemblages*, 2.

<sup>18</sup>Malaklou, *Chronopolitical Assemblages*, fn. 3, 2.

<sup>19</sup>Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 57.

<sup>20</sup>Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 11.

<sup>21</sup>Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 58.

these paintings except for certain clothing adornments that indicate male and female distinctions. This latent homoerotic desire often depicted in Qajar paintings and other visual modes such as on tapestries, pottery, and playing cards moves beyond a simple “dyad” between painter and subject and becomes more of a triangular mode of desire between painter, subject, and viewer.<sup>22</sup> Thus, several agents participate in complex desire: the painter; the subject depicted in a romantic embrace with someone of the opposite sex; and the viewer who can desire the male or female subject in the artwork.

In this sense, the case of the Qajars reveals that Iranian artists and their visual representations of gender and sexuality posed a contentious challenge to the project of nation-building among the emerging citizen-subjects and the government; people’s desires and self-expressions or representations of gender, sexuality, and desire broadly did not readily align with the emerging heteronormative impulse of the government. This Qajar-dilemma remained palpable during the Pahlavi era and continues to haunt current efforts of the Islamic regime’s nation-building as evident in *Be Like Others*, which again reveals the complications and nuances of gender and sexuality, not only in family and social life, but especially as trans Iranians navigate the governmental dictums for streamlining desire and citizenship. While the current vein of Islamophobia and Iranophobia in the United States and Europe paints the current Iranian regime as particularly brutish, corrupt, and homophobic, a closer turn to the Pahlavi regime and the mid-twentieth century intellectual ideologues of the Islamic Revolution reveals a troubling truth: the Islamic Republic adopted earlier iterations of homophobia.

### **Pahlavi Iran**

A closer examination of the cultural and political transformations regarding sexuality and gender reveal that in the past two centuries, Iranian (including Islamic Iran) modernity required a significant repression of public displays of homoeroticism in order to support

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<sup>22</sup>Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 27.

a sense of belonging to 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century social science notions of human becoming.<sup>23</sup> While the Qajars configured representations of the nation to depict heteronormative gender and sexuality such as in emblems for public, namely European, consumption (i.e., national flag), the social and cultural transformations occurred sporadically and with resistance from the citizens. This tension continued to exist in the Pahlavi era with the indoctrination of the Iranian polity with Western notions of manhood and womanhood as well as governmental enforcement of gender roles and expectations.<sup>24</sup> Reza Shah's particular allegiance to whiteness in the guise of Iranians as Aryans<sup>25</sup> transferred to his son, Mohammad Reza Shah. During the Pahlavi era, the conflation of race with gender undergirded the project of modernity.<sup>26</sup> Even those who politically opposed

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<sup>23</sup>Malaklou dissects this idea through a turn to antiblackness in notions of modernity. She says, "Liberal pluralism, the grandchild of evolutionary humanism, assigns Iranian and black persons non-commensurate ranks in the saga of Man. Theirs is a difference not of degree but of kind; while Iranians can slowly stand upright to arrive at human capacity abstracted in shades of white, black persons as 'the missing link between ape and man' are altogether proscribed from human dialectical spirit and agency," *Chronopolitical Assemblages*, 8.

<sup>24</sup>The era of Reza Shah Pahlavi's terror on the masses is well known. As Najmabadi says, "Riza Shah's state was a re-formed military and bureaucratized state, even though it was centered around the individual figure of the king [...] Riza Shah's manhood and kingship did not tolerate frivolous and playful associations with what had now become signs of a despised manhood and womanliness," *Women with Mustaches*, 93.

<sup>25</sup>Reza Zia-Ebrahimi, "'Arab Invasion' and Decline, or the Import of European Racial Thought by Iranian Nationalists," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37, no. 6 (November 2012): 1046. Zia-Ebrahimi traces the adoption by Reza Shah and the Pahlavi regime in general of the developing nationalist ideologies of Qajar era intellectuals such as Mirza Fath'ali Akhuzadeh (1812-78) and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1853-96). This ideology, he says, grew out of "a racialized historiography of Iran developed primarily in nineteenth-century European scholarship," 1045. In, "Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the 'Aryan' Discourse," *Iranian Studies* (2011), 44:4, 445-472, Zia-Ebrahimi elaborates on the development of the identification of nineteenth-century Iranians with the concept of Aryan and how they used literature, politics, and culture to align themselves with European notions of whiteness and superiority.

<sup>26</sup>Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007). Modernity for the Pahlavi regime meant embodying whiteness through imitation of European fashions and values. Although her analysis fails to think through antiblackness and the Pahlavi project of Aryanness, Sedghi posits, "My focus is on

the Pahlavi regime, such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, condoned gender conformity. Al-e Ahmad ridicules Iranian men in particular who ascribe to “Weststruckness” by describing them as “effete [*qerti*]. He is effeminate [*zan-sefat; efféminé*]. He attends to his grooming a great deal. He spends much of his time sprucing himself up. Sometimes he even plucks his eyelashes.”<sup>27</sup> The important connection here between the governmental push to modernize through streamlining gender and sexuality with the critiques against empire by Iranian intellectuals is a shared practice of homophobia. While Al-e Ahmad, Shariati, and other Islamic intellectuals turned their backs to Iranian subservience to European and American imperial projects, they nonetheless echoed the need for a gender-binary system and heteronormativity.

### Islamic Republic of Iran

Although SRS became a legal-medical health topic under the Pahlavi regime, intersex people were the main recipients of the procedure.<sup>28</sup> While LGBTQ citizens were a part of Pahlavi society, there were no particular edicts and codes of conduct for LGBTQ individuals other than typical homophobic sentiments, which forced most LGBTQ peoples into oppression or exile. There were no governmental procedures, programs, or discourses concerning the well-being of LGBTQ persons and specifically, no protocols for people identifying as trans who sought SRS, even though according to Najmabadi, the first documented case of SRS occurred in 1930 for an inter-sex individual.<sup>29</sup> However, as early as 1964, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini discusses the acceptable practice of SRS within Islamic paradigms as part of his two-volume series of fatwas known as *Tahrir al-Wasilah*.

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the centrality of unveiling to Reza Shah’s policy and politics. I view unveiling [and the adoption of European dress] in the context of state-building,” 85.

<sup>27</sup>Jalal Al-i Ahmad, *Occidentosis: Plague from the West*, trans. R. Campbell (Mizan Press, 1984), 96.

<sup>28</sup>As Najmabadi notes, “In its earliest reported appearance in Iran, in the 1930s and 1940s, ‘changing sex’ referred to intersex transformations—some reported as spontaneous—but increasingly the phrase indicated those transformations effected through surgical interventions,” *Professing Selves*, 38.

<sup>29</sup>Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 40.

In a section called “The Changing of Sex,” Khomeini states, “The prima facie [al-zahir] view is contrary to prohibiting the changing, by operation, of a man’s sex to that of a woman or vice versa [...] [sex change] is not obligatory if the person is truly of one sex, and changing his/her sex to the opposite sex is possible.”<sup>30</sup> Even before the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the Supreme Leader envisioned a plan to address the trans community in Iranian society. In the Pahlavi era, Khomeini’s fatwa carried little more than light conversations among clerics and for several years after the Islamic revolution, the fatwa remained untenanted. The policy changes under the Islamic regime were the result of the staunch activism of Maryam Khatun (formerly Fereydoun) Molkara, a Male to Female (MtF) transgendered activist in Iran, who risked her life and relentlessly wrote to urge Khomeini to enact the fatwa. Molkara even met with the Grand Ayatollah, enduring violent attacks, to encourage him to uphold his earlier musings.<sup>31</sup> Because of her tireless efforts, SRS became governmental policy in 1985 backed by various modes of support for the post-SRS trans community.

This seemingly pro-trans position stands in stark contrast to a regime known for its various human rights violations. Presently, Iran is the only Muslim-majority nation in the world whose government partially subsidizes SRS for its citizens. However, a closer look at the four- to six-month process of undergoing religious-medical-legal interventions towards SRS makes clear that the fatwa for sex reassignment aims to abolish homosexuality by ensuring a particular form of trans identity. The film shows that the trans persons only go through with the process because it is required by law; not because their identities and desires necessarily fall in line with government

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<sup>30</sup>Although Khomeini briefly discusses the case of trans people as accepted in Islam in his works, he never clearly outlined the state’s role in the well-being and inclusion of trans individuals who do not ascribe to the gender binary system Ayatollah Ruhullah Khomeini, *Tahrir al-wasilah*, 2 volumes (Najaf: Matba’at al-Adab, 1387 AH/1967/8).

<sup>31</sup>“Transgender in Iran: The Story of Maryam Khatoun Molkara,” *Transgender Universe*, 25 February 2016, <http://archive.transgenderuniverse.com/2016/02/25/transgender-in-iran-the-story-of-maryam-khatoun-molkara/>.

expectations. Near the end of the film, two trans women share that they would have refused SRS if “we were not in Iran”<sup>32</sup> and if they had known that the process would sever their family ties.<sup>33</sup> To further complicate matters, the government sponsors trans-activists and organizations, partially subsidizes SRS, and issues new birth certificates and identification materials to *post*-operative trans citizens, which supports an overt rejection of homosexuality. In a sense, the nation gives many incentives to LGBTQ Iranians as far as citizen-subject recognition and access to state-mandated resources if they follow through with SRS procedures, and for the nation, despite the gender and sexuality identifications of the Iranian individuals, SRS eradicates homosexuality in a bureaucratic sense. In a cruel sense, the trans community in Iran finds one of its most stable, albeit treacherously dubious, allies in the government and not in the social, cultural, and familial experiences of living in Iran. The simultaneous rejection by society-family and acceptance by orthodox nation-state strengthens the Islamic Republic’s reputation as a guardian of its citizens.

As Mino Moallem posits, “the emergence of a gendered Islamic subject in the context of the Iranian revolution of 1979 and its aftermath provided a surface on which cultural and religious nationalists were able to write their own meanings of the Islamic nation.”<sup>34</sup> Following Foucault’s notion of “the art of governmentality,”<sup>35</sup> the Iranian government uses various modes including technology such as visual media to display its self-narrative,<sup>36</sup> but *Be Like Others* functions

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<sup>32</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 55:46.

<sup>33</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 57:26.

<sup>34</sup>Moallem, “Passing, Politics, and Religion.”

<sup>35</sup>In his lectures, Michel Foucault describes the various modes by which governments produce citizens to fit into their notions of policies, practices, and self-narratives. Foucault includes political, legal, religious, educational, familial, and socio-cultural inventions including the use of technology and media by the government to control the narrative of its ideologies.

<sup>36</sup>As Ziba Mir-Hosseini notes, “Through its various organizations, the regime promoted the creation of a distinctively Islamic cinema in the early 1980s. In those years no quality film was produced [...] and women and love were almost totally absent from the screen,” and today, the Islamic government contends with filmmakers who want to expand beyond the *fiqh*, or

as counterpoint to the project of heteronormativity by depicting the tensions between state-sanctioned gender and sexuality identities and human desires.

In “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” John D’Emilio traces how with the rise of industrialization and capitalism, the heteronormative family became less necessary, thus allowing a new category for homosexual men and women to emerge, who could also contribute to the economic system without relying on interdependent family units. As D’Emilio observes, “only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity [and therefore a political entity].”<sup>37</sup> Thus inadvertently, capitalism was imperative in the earliest stages of LGBTQ liberation, but also simultaneously a terrorizing force to repress and punish sexual variation and desire. While D’Emilio examines these shifts in European and American contexts, his observations apply to the Iranian case as well. Just as European values, beliefs, and practices shifted with the new economic system of capitalism, Iranian society underwent transformations that upheld industrialization, capitalism, and the project of modernity. However, in the Iranian landscape, European colonialism impacted the rise of heteronormativity.

### ***Be Like Others***

In *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran*, Najmabadi highlights that Iranian LGBTQ concerns took the forefront during the early years of this new century. Namely, between 2003-2008, a substantial focus from the national and international communities as well as a plethora of visual productions emerged during these years highlighting the experiences

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Islamic jurisprudence ideology, because it is still palpable in Iran. See Iranian Cinema: Art, Society and the State,” *Middle Eastern Research and Information Project*, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer219/iranian-cinema>.

<sup>37</sup>John D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharan Thompson, New Feminist Library Series (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 470.

of Iranian trans communities. Perhaps this interest in LGBTQ Iranians stemmed from the more liberal and reformist political climate of President Mohammad Khatami, but the concerns facing the oppression of LGBTQ experiences certainly became critical when on September 24, 2007 President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declared at a talk in New York that, “In Iran we don’t have homosexuals like in your country.”<sup>38</sup> Ahmadinejad’s avowal, while atrociously reductive and simplistic, alludes to a conundrum among Iranian Islamic authorities and theorists who were left with no particular strategies in dealing with Ayatollah Khomeini’s declaration that “[sex change] is not obligatory” and that trans individuals’ experiences are acceptable within Islamic faith. Saying that “In Iran we don’t have homosexuals like in your country” reveals that the Iranian government officially denies the existence of LGBTQ Iranians and instead funnels the broad spectrum of LGBTQ identities into only one form of queer existence, which encourages people with same-sex desire to follow a program of transitioning away from homosexual practices. Essentially then, homosexual people whether cisgender male or female, that is whether gay or lesbian, do not exist in the Iranian national narrative.

Najmabadi surmises, “keeping all gender/sex variant desires and practices in close proximity”<sup>39</sup> demonstrates the continuous and contentious discourses among biomedical, psycho-sexual, and Islamic jurisprudential experts while the lives of trans Iranians remain in the balance. For many of these specialists and scholars, the legal, religious, and medical consequences outweigh the preferences and lived experiences of trans Iranians; especially for the religious officials, the most critical issue remains abolishing homosexuality at all costs. I would argue though that this insistence on the “sinful prohibited practices”<sup>40</sup> of LGBTQ people in Iran moves beyond Islamic dictums and demonstrates the Iranian government’s

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<sup>38</sup>Satyam Khanna, “Iran Denies Existence of Gays in Iran,” *Think Progress*, 24 September 2007, <https://thinkprogress.org/ahmadinejad-denies-existence-of-gays-in-iran-e1418f709193/>.

<sup>39</sup>Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 185.

<sup>40</sup>Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 182.

homophobia and fear of appearing weak on the world stage. In the Ahmadinejad statement, his emphasis is on the concerns of the “country” while he is speaking in the United States, a historic enemy, which indicates that the Islamic Republic’s main focus remains on the image of the nation rather than a progressive program for improving the lives of its citizens.

Moallem suggests that “Islamic notions of masculinity are influenced by the perceptions of the modern nation-state and the relationship between nationalism, masculinity, and respectability.”<sup>41</sup> Further, “after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the hegemonic masculinity of the citizen/subject became a site of tension and contradiction between the pious masculinity of the clergyman and the secular masculinity of the citizen.”<sup>42</sup> *Be Like Others* allows us to interrogate the contentious negotiations between the nation and its trans citizens. The documentary opens with two lines on a black screen: “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, sex change operations are legal” and “Homosexuality is punishable by death.”<sup>43</sup> The film immediately addresses the viewer’s curiosity about the apparent irony of trans Iranians living in an Islamic country.

The scene cuts away and focuses in on Mirdamad Surgical Center, Iran’s premiere privately-owned institution for SRS where Paris-trained surgeon, Dr. Bahram Mirjalali examines, advises, and schedules procedures for trans Iranians on “Tuesdays and Wednesdays” as the voiceover informs the viewer.<sup>44</sup> The film captures the crowded waiting room of trans men and women and their companions all of whom rise to greet and shake hands with the stoutly and silver-haired Dr. Mirjalali who speaks warmly as he receives each extended hand or touches his heart with a slight bow and moves rapidly into a private room to meet a patient. The voiceover informs the audience about Dr. Mirjalali’s extensive record of performing SRS in Iran “with

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<sup>41</sup>Moallem, “Passing, Politics, and Religion.”

<sup>42</sup>Moallem, “Passing, Politics, and Religion.”

<sup>43</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 0:03 and 0:07.

<sup>44</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 0:52.

the approval of the Iranian government.”<sup>45</sup> This particular caveat, which indicates the Islamic regime acknowledges the existence of queer Iranians despite Ahmadinejad’s declaration, also reveals the interlocking systems in Iran, which respond to trans issues in the country. The medical, psychobiological, Islamic jurisprudential and political networks must all work in tandem.

Soon after this introductory glimpse at the clinic, the viewer eavesdrops on the consultation between Dr. Mirjalali and the only patient seeking a Female to Male (FtM) sex reassignment surgery highlighted in the film. Dr. Mirjalali says to his patient, “Shoma yek mowjudat-e estesna-yi hastid” [“You are unusual creatures”—film’s translation], “vali sad-dar-sad tabi-ee hastid”<sup>46</sup> [“But perfectly normal”—film’s translation]. The voiceover alerts the viewer to a sobering fact after Dr. Mirjalali’s encouraging thoughts: “Those who seek treatment from the doctor realize that the authorities see their condition as an illness that has a cure.”<sup>47</sup> For this reason, Iranians seeking SRS are required to undergo a six-month process that includes physical examinations, hormonal therapies, and psychological evaluations to confirm that they are identifiable as trans men and trans women before the surgery and thus are obliged to endure SRS to be recognized as citizen-subjects. The patient seeking FtM transition interrupts the doctor’s explanation of the required process and asks that he introduce the patient to a psychiatrist who is “enlightened” like the doctor and will not end up “put[ting] a bad label” on the patient<sup>48</sup> and in essence, rejecting the patient’s request for the surgery. This patient’s fear of the psychological process indicates what many queer Iranians fear about the six-month process of evaluations. Often, the process ends up with the patients’ experiencing forced exiles, unwanted interventions, and suicide or murder because the multi-layered vetting system for SRS reveals the complexities of trans identity which do not always align

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<sup>45</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 1:07.

<sup>46</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 1:24-1:32

<sup>47</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 2:18-2:22.

<sup>48</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute 2:48-3:00.

with the regime's dictates of singular sexuality. Needless to say, SRS is not the desired option for many trans Iranians, but for those who wish to remain in Iran and live with less police harassment, social stigma, and gain equal rights, SRS paves a viable path.

*Be Like Others* highlights that staying in Iran is a critical issue for trans Iranians. For various reasons, many trans individuals wish to remain in Iran and therefore seek SRS as a means for safely pursuing their lives in the nation. As citizen-subjects, trans Iranians want the same rights and dignities as their fellow non-trans compatriots. The film focuses on the question of gender through representation with nuanced care. At one point, someone asks a MtF seeking SRS, why a man would want to live as a woman in Iran in particular. The trans Iranian replies that living in the guise of a stereotypical man is not any easier for a trans person because of the harassment trans persons receive from law enforcement, their families, and broader Iranian society. The political, economic, social, religious, and familial rejection of being trans forces Iranians to succumb to the government's dictates of streamlining gender and sexuality through SRS.

The film never explicitly identifies the class positions of the trans Iranians it follows, but one can assume from the individuals' lifestyles, jobs, and hometowns (not all of them are from the capital but end up in Tehran for SRS) that we are watching what middle- and lower-class trans Iranians have to do in order to remain in Iran with equal rights and access. As one of the exchanges in the film between a transwoman and a conservative Muslim journalist reveals, the surgery itself is not desired by all the trans Iranians undergoing the mandated evaluation. The journalist retorts, "Iran has the best social services in the world for transsexuals. First of all, no other country on Earth changes the gender on your birth certificate [...] The first supreme leader, the first religious authority in the whole world to give a ruling on sex change is Imam Khomeini."<sup>49</sup> While her commentary

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<sup>49</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 36:03.

aligns with the official national position on transsexuality, she never acknowledges the decades of trans-activism which influenced Khomeini's edict becoming policy and trans-activists such as Vida in the film, who continuously engage directly and at great risks with governmental agencies to ensure a dignified life for trans Iranians.

Further, as the trans Iranian woman replies, "In European countries, religion is not the law [because religion is separate from politics— (the film does not translate this part)],"<sup>50</sup> which pulls on the anxieties of the Iranian regime in its struggles to appear powerful especially when placed in a comparative context with Global North nations. This instance in the film highlights the tensions between trans experiences and the nation's self-narrative which hopes to appear as "enlightened Shi'ism" and not "homicidal homophobia."<sup>51</sup> We see how murky the distinctions are between acceptable citizenship and disciplinary mechanisms for deviant behavior, while recognizing the Islamic Republic's mimicry of Victorian European values of nation-building.

One of the trans women in the film says, "In this society, you have to be either a man or woman;" otherwise, the nation will punish alternative gender representations. *Be Like Others* allows the viewer to understand the connections between nationalism, gender, and sexuality and the restrictions upon these categories by the Iranian government. In another scene, one trans Iranian SRS-patient's mother brings her employer to a conference about transsexuality out of fear that she may get fired from her job if her son receives SRS. She asks Dr. Mirjalali to speak to her boss and explain that legally, medically and religiously, trans people are accepted and respected. The doctor speaks to the conservative man, but the employer chillingly tells the woman and Anoush, her trans child, that they should be "patient" and not go through with the surgery. He tells them he will email the doctor to understand more, but the look on Shahin's face indicates

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<sup>50</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 36:12.

<sup>51</sup>Afsandeh Najmabadi, "Verdicts of Science, Rulings of Faith: Transgender/Sexuality in Contemporary Iran." *Social Research* 78, no. 2 (2011): 2.

to the viewer that she did not get the answer and reprieve from unemployment anxiety that she was hoping for with his attendance at this conference. This scene depicts the nexus of class, nation, and gender expectations in explicit terms which other media fails to showcase.

Moallem's observation that "filmic space [is] an alternative site for cultural struggle,"<sup>52</sup> allows us to examine gender and sexuality dynamics in the Iranian landscape as part and parcel to the Islamic regime's program of self-representation and nation-building. The pressure to eradicate so-called weakness-*cum*-homosexuality from the nation-state appears in the daily dealings of the Iranian polity such that one's livelihood is threatened if the parameters of ideal citizenship are not met. In this case, Shahin is already a single-mother and in addition to this less than desirable status in Iranian society, as her eldest child is trans and seeking SRS. Despite governmental acceptance of her child's situation and the process involved in aligning their family with state dictates about acceptable citizenship, Shahin still struggles with social and economic prejudices of other Iranians, which can completely undermine her family's well-being. This dilemma is double-edged: for her child, SRS may allow a more equitable and liberatory life in Islamic Iran, while for her, it could mean shame, ridicule, unemployment, and virtually, disenfranchisement from all of Iranian society. As the documentary traces, whether the trans Iranians remain connected with their families or not, the emerging relationships are strained, confusing, difficult and often result in more complications for both the trans person and the extended family.

*Be Like Others* ends with some complicated issues remaining unresolved for the trans Iranians in the film. Several times towards the end of the film, the trans Iranians are asked whether they would go through with the surgery if it was not required by the government. In every reply, the answer was a clear "no." When one trans person says

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<sup>52</sup>Moallem, "Politics, Passing, and Religion."

in the film, “Who is forcing you to have the operation?” she is met with silence from her peers and then she answers for the collective with, “Society.”<sup>53</sup> She continues that “I am an Iranian. I want to live here”<sup>54</sup> and thus, in order to live safely and humanely, she and other trans Iranians, have to comply with the government dictates and cultural expectations. The film shows the viewer that the lives of post-SRS trans Iranians involve a series of more medical tests, evaluations and procedures while they have to deal with the adjustment for themselves and their loved ones to their new identities. One couple, Anoush/Anahita and Ali, who plans to get married, moves forward with the engagement but the male-identifying partner becomes more hesitant about marriage after his fiancée’s operation. While Anoush/Anahita is satisfied with the post-operation situation, with the hope that they can marry sooner than later, Ali seems despondent and reluctant as he relays to the interviewer that “I don’t want to get married.”<sup>55</sup> Ali’s hesitance indicates that the heteronormative lifestyle, required by custom and law in Iran, remains undesirable for some Iranian subjects. He says he can “handle” the sex-change status of his partner, but to fully engage in heteronormativity is not what he wants for himself.

In another instance, a trans woman named Farhad who comes to Tehran to support her friend through her transition, tells the interviewer that she has decided to wait on the operation. She says that in part, she hesitates to go through with the surgery because although her relationship with her family is strained, they agree to talk with her so long as she avoids the operation. She continues that her friends who went through with the procedure seem unhappy and often tell her about attempted suicides because they no longer experience sexual satisfaction; they have health complications; and she indicates that some of the trans Iranians end up “forced to do

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<sup>53</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 37:17.

<sup>54</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 37:19.

<sup>55</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 55:25-55:33.

things you don't want to."<sup>56</sup> In essence, this Iranian subject defies the system as she lives a non-gender binary life within the nation despite the risks and rejections this situation brings to her.

Ali-Asghar, now Negar after the operation, struggles to live in Tehran. The voiceover tells the viewer that "like many who have had sex-change surgery in Iran, she's struggling to make ends meet."<sup>57</sup> The viewer sees Negar enter a small apartment, take off her black chador, and reveal a hot pink, tightly fitting dress. Negar tells the interviewer about her life after her operation and says that after a period of depression, she now feels she "has been born again."<sup>58</sup> She no longer has a relationship with her family who "shunned"<sup>59</sup> her, but she lives with other trans Iranians who have had the operation and she is happy with their living arrangement. When asked how they afford their apartment and lifestyle, Negar says "I do business"<sup>60</sup> and then lists the various boulevards and streets where one can find her at work. She boldly says, "I do a temporary marriage" and "we sell ourselves."<sup>61</sup> Negar emphasizes that they have "principles" such as making sure to "first do a temporary Islamic marriage contract" before having sexual relations with someone because "halal mishim" (translation, "In other words, it's allowed by Islam").<sup>62</sup> Negar continues, "Since we don't have female reproductive parts and can't get pregnant, we can get 'married' once an hour or so."<sup>63</sup> Earlier in the film, Veda, a trans activist, discusses that prostitution becomes one of the only work opportunities for trans Iranians, which also indicates her plea for more support of the trans community. Prostitution is illegal in Iran for trans and non-trans citizen-subjects alike, but the government cannot curtail its existence especially for disenfranchised

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<sup>56</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 49:26-49:29.

<sup>57</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 51:51.

<sup>58</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 51:57-52:00.

<sup>59</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 52:26.

<sup>60</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 52:47.

<sup>61</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 52:56-53:01.

<sup>62</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 53:03-53:12.

<sup>63</sup>Eshaghian, *Be Like Others*, minute mark 53:16-53:26.

citizens whose identities are shunned and rejected by larger society. Ironically, the Islamic custom of the temporary marriage supports the legal application of prostitution for trans Iranians who cannot financially support themselves otherwise.

The film ends with these unresolved stories: Ali, whose sexual identity remains unknown and who rejects heteronormative patriarchy; Farhad, who identifies as trans but opts out of SRS; and Negar, who declares she has killed a sense of love in herself after following through with the complete process dictated by the government. Foucault reminds us to think about these individuals' situations as reflective of the "sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual co-determin[ing] each other's emergence."<sup>64</sup> Despite the Islamic regime's intervention in defining gender identities for the Iranian trans community, the film leaves the viewer with a sense that sexuality and gender cannot be boxed into a binary system. Further, the film shows that a sense of national belonging and desire to remain in Iran as a full Iranian citizen complicates the living conditions of the trans community in Iran. The intersection between politics, gender, class, and sexuality in *Be Like Others* disrupts the "art of governmentality" and thus, the project of modernization in Iran. Moallem suggests, "it is crucial to challenge dichotomous notions of gender, religion, culture, and modernity in order to interrogate and deconstruct the conditions under which political and cultural citizenship constitute and are constituted by citizen-subjects"<sup>65</sup> and *Be Like Others* allows us to continuously engage with these issues. Highlighting Malaklou's interventions in Enlightenment Humanism, the viewer also finds the intersections of race with gender and sexuality in a critical rupture in this film: Iranians stumble towards whiteness vis-à-vis the European social and political order as the Islamic Republic dubiously stakes a claim in patriarchal heteronormativity.

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<sup>64</sup>Thomas Lemke, "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique." Paper presented at Rethinking Marxism Conference, University of Amherst, 21-24, 2000, [www.thomaslemkeweb.de/publikationen/Foucault,%20Governmentality,%20and%20Critique%20IV-2.pdf](http://www.thomaslemkeweb.de/publikationen/Foucault,%20Governmentality,%20and%20Critique%20IV-2.pdf).

<sup>65</sup>Moallem, "Politics, Passing, and Religion."

In a nation whose visual self-representation includes images of martyrs in military uniforms, pious clerics with austere gazes, chador-clad mothers, sometimes holding a child in one arm and a weapon in the other, the Iranian family is a heteronormative, patriarchal, devoutly religious unit and therefore, the pillar of the Islamic nation. As Gerami observes,

Three versions of masculinities in postrevolutionary Iran stand out well beyond the revolutionary stage: the martyr as brave and innocent, the mullah as otherworldly and pious, and ordinary men as sexual and dominant. Women were not discouraged from emulating the manly traits of the first two prototypes.<sup>66</sup>

However, *Be Like Others* challenges the Islamic Republic's notions of gender and sexual identity by disrupting the monolithic depictions of Iranian masculinity and femininity. While the film participates as a tool in "the art of governmentality," its purpose of highlighting the complex stories of trans Iranians makes the film a work of resistance against the state's mission to use technology to promote its self-image. If we understand visual technologies such as print media, television broadcasts, and films as part of what Foucault calls "the art of government," then *Be Like Others* pushes back against the government's "technologies of domination."<sup>67</sup>

Further, by showing the complexities of trans lives, the film pushes back against the homophobia and transphobia of the Iranian state that falsely proclaims that the Iranian government, contrary to more democratic nations, supports its trans population and allows these individuals more freedom to live in their authenticity than other nations. In *Be Like Others*, this visual representation of trans experiences inside and outside of Iran is particularly powerful as the Islamic regime relies heavily on visual culture to promote its ideals, values, and political philosophy to its own citizenry and by extension, the world. The film provides a critical tension against

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<sup>66</sup>Gerami, "Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men," 264.

<sup>67</sup>Lemke, "Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique," 2.

the state's domination and disciplinary program, making it difficult for the Islamic regime to control the effects of the film on its own population or the broader world's viewers.<sup>68</sup> The film continuously challenges Iran's best efforts to eradicate homosexuality and gender-queer identities by merely remaining in the public's access.

## Conclusion

While Iranians never experienced settler-colonial practices, their on-going relationship with the British in particular shaped many of the emerging nation's homophobic views. As early as 1838, Iranian travelers to Europe were writing about same-sex practices in various countries in Europe and condemning the hypocrisy of Europeans towards homosexuality in Iran. Najmabadi suggests that this "anxiety over Europeans' judgment of Iranian sexual mores and practices remained a preoccupation"<sup>69</sup> for nineteenth-century Iranians, but it also plagued the Pahlavi era and continues to haunt the Islamic regime. Today, Iran's government vehemently invests in erasing visual representations of queer identities. By directly coercing queer Iranians into SRS, the Islamic Republic maintains the most rigorous program of heteronormativity of the last two centuries of Iranian regimes.

Najmabadi reminds us, for instance, that "Nineteenth-century Iranian culture...had other ways of naming [gender beyond the man/woman binary], such as *amrad* (young adolescent male) and *mukhannas* (an adult man desiring to be an object of desire for adult men), that were not equated with effeminacy"<sup>70</sup> but indicated same-sex relations. That said, Iranian masculinity weakened as female agency to dictate the parameters of marriage, sexual relations,

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<sup>68</sup>Indeed, the Islamic Republic continues to make counter-documentaries and interviews to reinforce and render as ethical and acceptable its own viewpoints. For some videos that depict the Islamic Republic's efforts to erase homosexuality and position itself as supportive of trans Iranians, please see [www.aparat.com/result/%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%B3\\_%D8%B3%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84](http://www.aparat.com/result/%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%B3_%D8%B3%DA%A9%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84).

<sup>69</sup>Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 37.

<sup>70</sup>Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 3.

and divorce, gained strength. With the establishment of a military and state bureaucracy under Reza Shah Pahlavi, gender roles and expectations increasingly dictated the political, social, and economic behaviors of Iranian men and women, but until the establishment of the Islamic Republic, manhood, masculinity, and sexual behaviors were not under the jurisdiction of the government, although as Sivan Balslev notes, “during the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, western-educated elite men created and promoted a new model of Iranian masculinity by means of mass communication, cultural production, modern education and governmental reforms.”<sup>71</sup> While masculinity re-presented itself after 1979, “the Islamic revolution and the Republic constituted a hypermasculine social order. This misogynistic order was hard on women, but it also harmed men. The state’s imposition of Sharia, its harsh implementation of sex segregation and condoning of vigilantism, hurt men as it did women”<sup>72</sup> and effectively obliterated any gender and sexual nonconformity. Needless to say, this deliberate erasure, by any means necessary, makes the project of Iranian nation-building problematic and inhumane.

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<sup>71</sup>Sivan Balslev, “Dressed for Success: Hegemonic Masculinity, Elite Men and Westernization in Iran, c. 1900-40,” *Gender & History* 26. no. 3 (November 2014): 546.

<sup>72</sup>Gerami, “Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men,” 260.