

REVIEW

Reading Gender, Reading Sexuality: Joan W. Scott, Afsaneh Najmabadi, and Categories of Historical Analysis

Howard Hsueh-Hao Chiang

In “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” (1986), Joan W. Scott invites historians to reconsider the way history has typically been written prior to the burgeoning of the field of women’s history in the 1970s, namely a tradition of writing history without giving gender an explicit analytic role.¹ Within twenty years, Afsaneh Najmabadi responds to Scott’s invitation with the publication of *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards* (2005), which won the prestigious 2005 Joan Kelly Memorial Prize awarded by the American Historical Association. This review essay uses Najmabadi’s recent book as a window on the influence and limitations of Scott’s argument in “Gender,” thus tracing an unique path of gender historiography that reflects how the field has evolved over the last two decades. Comparing Najmabadi to Scott reveals that Najmabadi’s work not only holds up Scott’s notion of treating gender as “a useful category of historical analysis” remarkably well; moreover, *Women with Mustaches* offers fresh and innovative insights, beyond what Scott has initially proposed, regarding the analytic role of gender in historical writing. Specifically, Najmabadi’s study illustrates the methodological point that gender and sexuality should not be treated as two distinct categories of historical analysis: their historical meanings are most powerfully articulated in and through one another.

In the introduction to her book, Najmabadi identifies her project as an example of historical analysis that considers gender as its main analytic category. Najmabadi begins with a brief anecdote, confessing that she made the following remark years ago to another historian of Iran: “if we use gender analytically, sources about men are also sources about women” (p. 1). This remark, Najmabadi soon realizes, is an evident misinterpretation of Scott’s claim for using gender as an analytic tool, because it articulates a starting point of historical analysis that assumes an ahistorical ontological opposition between men and women. In the words of Scott, to treat gender as a valuable analytic category is to “treat the opposition between male and female as problematic rather than known, as something contextually defined, repeatedly constructed” (p. 49). As such, using gender analytically does not mean to infer historical information about women from sources about men, but to question and historicize the very processes by which the opposition between male and female consolidated over time.

In the second paragraph of her introduction, Najmabadi immediately corrects the problematic assumption inherent in her earlier remark and rearticulates the goal of her project: “To consider gender as an analytical category poses questions different from those relevant for retrieving women’s history. My questions became, What work did gender do in the making of Iranian modernity, and how did it perform this cultural labor?” (p. 1). Throughout the rest of her introduction, Najmabadi provides a short overview of the examples that she relies on in her book in order to answer these questions, arguing for the intensification of the men/women gender binary in nineteenth-century Iran. In early Qajar Iran (1785-1925), according to Najmabadi, male youths (“amrads”) as well as women were both deemed beautiful and sexually desirable by adult men, who were distinguished from the amrads solely based on the marker of a full beard (chap. 1). Therefore, Najmabadi’s study of the transformation of gender over time—from a non-binary state in which adult manhood was constructed against both womanhood and young manhood in early Qajar Iran to a binary formulation in which men and women were thought to be opposite and complimentary by late Qajar Iran—precisely resembles an approach that “treat[s] the opposition between male and female as problematic rather than known,” offering a historical account of the emergence of the gender binary itself.

A major unexpected theme of her project, Najmabadi tells the reader, is the historical transfiguration of sexuality – the heteronormalization of love and erotic attraction as an effect of Iranian modernization. In contrast to early Qajar Iran when both amrads and women were considered aesthetically pleasing, beauty became exclusively associated with female femininity by the end of the nineteenth century, when tolerable notions of male beauty and same-sex love disappeared concurrently (chap. 2). With this in mind, Najmabadi ends her introduction in the following way: “This book began as a project of gendering historiography of Iranian modernity... Yet the project has ended in an elsewhere – of sexuality” (p. 8). In the course of her research and writing, Najmabadi has shifted from telling a story solely about gender to telling a story also about sexuality. Gender in *Women with Mustaches*, therefore, denotes a central analytic category with which Najmabadi was able to trace the shifting configurations of other social institutions and normative concepts, most notably those related to sexuality. By pointing out that the transformation of sexuality represents one of the “cultural labors” of gender in the making of Iranian modernity, Najmabadi’s study precisely illustrates the method of writing history through the analytic lens of gender that Scott advocates.

In emphasizing the interlocking relation of gender and sexuality, Najmabadi’s investigation also demonstrates the way in which gender functions as a “primary way of signifying relationships of power,” a central tenet of Scott’s understanding of gender (Scott, p. 42). Criticizing the Iranian modernist interpretation of women’s unveiling practice, for example, Najmabadi writes:

Iranian modernist narrative has focused on the emancipatory effects of gender heterosocialization in general and unveiling more particularly. In the modernist imagination, premodernity is that time when women were unseen and unheard. Modernity was to transform the invisible and mute woman into an unveiled and vocal public presence. This emancipatory narrative is dependent on the silenced/voiceless, segregated, and oppressed woman for delineating its own temporality. Moreover, it ignores the disciplinary effects of the same process – upon which its own emancipatory work was dependent. The nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century gender heterosocialization rescripted women’s language, reconfigured women’s bodily presence in public, and recoded women’s wisdom and knowledge (p. 151).

For Najmabadi, women's unveiling signals much more than a mere "emancipatory" effect in the way women relate to men: in the process of moving from the "premodern" social norms of veiling to the "modern" norms of unveiling, women are not relocated from a place within oppressive power to somewhere outside the regulation of power. On the contrary, unveiling simply marks a new "way of signifying relationships of power," a rearrangement of how power operates (see Foucault). By rescripting, reconfiguring, and recoding women's experience, the practice of unveiling defines new parameters of acceptable gender behavior and imposes a new heteronormative framework of gender practice. Acknowledging that power always inhabits a *disciplinary* dimension alongside an "emancipatory" dimension, Najmabadi therefore uses the example of women's veil/unveil to show how gender, to quote Scott, "is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated" (p. 45).

To interpret Najmabadi's work merely as exemplifying Scott's contention for the analytic use of gender, however, would be underappreciating Najmabadi's historiographical contribution. Arguing that the shift from women's veiling to unveiling indicates a "heterosexualization" of Iranian culture, for instance, Najmabadi goes beyond analyzing sexuality through the lens of gender by simultaneously explicating an analysis of gender through the lens of sexuality. Najmabadi stresses that although it is perfectly valid to view the heterosocialization of Iranian public space as a result of women's unveiling, a different set of appropriate gender roles has also emerged as a product of the "heteronormalization of Iranian society" (p. 151). Under the changing boundaries of sexuality, gender relations shifted from implicit public segregation and homosocialization (a kind of social organization in which homosexual affairs between adult males and *amrads* were actually tolerated) to explicit public interaction and heterosocialization (a form of social organization in which homosexuality became a sign of backwardness). Whereas Scott calls for placing gender as the primary analytic category through which historians can study other social norms, concepts, institutions, organizations, and relationships, Najmabadi opposes the radical separation of gender and sexuality as two distinct categories of historical analysis altogether. In Najmabadi's framework, gender is as much a social norm, concept, institution, organization, and relationship that itself requires historical

interpretation written from other analytic standpoints, such as sexuality, as it is an analytic tool.

Accordingly, it is not sufficient to hold the variable gender constant in analyzing sexuality or interpreting gender based on the analytic position of sexuality alone: for Najmabadi, gender and sexuality are two categories of historical investigation whose meanings are most powerfully articulated *in and through* one another. Iranian modernity, for example, can be fully explored only by employing the analytic approach of understanding gender *in and through* sexuality and sexuality *in and through* gender:

Once homoeroticism and same-sex practices became marked as a sign of Iran's backwardness, heteronormalization of eros and sex became a condition of 'achieving modernity,' a project that called for heterosocialization of public space and a reconfiguration of family life. This process was by no means identical for men and women. Whereas male homoerotic affective bonds were reimagined as asexual sentiment among citizen-brothers, and men's friendships were transformed into patriotic national camaraderie (critically de-eroticizing its homoaffectivity and reorienting its eroticism toward a female beloved vatan), female homosociality came to be seen as deeply implicated in the production of 'the vice.' Men's same-sex liaisons and sexual practices were blamed on ignorant wives (pp. 146-7).

According to Najmabadi, the making of Iranian modernity fundamentally depends on a framework of heteronormativity in which the cultural definitions of gender entail a different process for men and women respectively. Based on Najmabadi's reading of gender through sexuality, Iranian modernization restructures male same-sex socialization from "homoerotic affective bonds" to "patriotic national camaraderie," but accentuates the negative cultural connotation of female same-sex socialization by (re)depicting it as the potential source of male homosexual "vice." Reading sexuality through gender, Najmabadi also shows that the emergence of naturalized heterosexuality and the eradication of certain normative modes of "premodern" homoeroticism critically rely on the modernist redefinition of gender conventionalities, such as the public normalization of women's unveiling. The inter-articulations of gender and sexuality are well captured by the dominant cultural assumptions associated with the "family life": when husbands engage in extra-marital homosexual relationships, ignorant wives are blamed for failing to achieve modernity; but

if women engage in same-sex liaisons, they are also blamed for being the potential cause of male homosexual practice.

Tightly connected to the project of modernity, the example of Iranian nation-state formation further illustrates how gender ideology is deeply intertwined with the cultural machinery of heterosexism. For instance, Najmabadi claims that the abjection of the amrad critically anchors the making of a modern Iranian nation. "In the public modernist discourse," writes Najmabadi, "older man-younger man sexual liaisons had become a source of national shame" (p. 149). In this process of abjecting the amrad figure and making it a national shame, Iranian modernists construct their nationalism based on European standards of modernity, which repudiates homosexuality and portrays civilized men as beardless (pp. 149-51). Moreover, Najmabadi reminds the reader that not only do male homosexuality and beardlessness encode Iranian "backwardness," but so does women's veil — the marker of female homosocialization: "If women had to be unveiled and men had to shave their beards to become modern citizens, they could not look like each other and, more urgently, could not resemble that other figure which was to be forgotten, the amrad" (p. 151). Therefore, in throwing the role of the amrad into the country's amnesia, Iranian nationalism is fundamentally characterized by what Najmabadi has called the "gender and sexual *anxiety* of Iranian modernity" (subtitle, emphasis added). Iranian nationalist discourse precisely exemplifies how the normative regulation of gender (the practice of unveiling for women and Europeanized beardlessness for men) is always part of the operation of sexuality (the national repudiation and dismissal of "premodern" homosexual behavior), while the normative arrangement of sexuality (the modernist heteronormalization of culture and love) is always part of the "cultural labor" of gender (the consolidation of a men/women binary through the forgetting and abjection of the amrad figure).

Logically, one might ask: Does gender come before sexuality or does sexuality come before gender in historical analysis? According to Scott's position stated roughly twenty years ago, to write history in which gender is decidedly a present and valuable category is to trace the workings of gender in cultural symbols, normative concepts, social institutions and organizations, and individual subjectivities (p. 42). In this respect, gender comes before sexuality: sexuality is analyzed historically through the analytic lens of gender. Najmabadi in

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her recent book, on the other hand, employs an interpretive strategy that not only examines sexuality from the analytic perspective of gender, but, more importantly, treats gender and sexuality as inseparable tools of historical investigation. In Najmabadi's framework, gender comes before sexuality at the moment when sexuality comes before gender: constantly reinforcing one another, gender and sexuality have interacted reciprocally to produce an Iranian modern nation-state. Taken together, Scott's initial groundbreaking reading of gender in the 1980s and Najmabadi's innovative reading of sexuality two decades later reveal how historians have sharpened the sensitivity and the interactive dynamics of analytic categories over time, reflecting a historiographical trajectory since the 1970s that continues to transform itself today.

NOTES

1. Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, Vol. XCI, Is. 5 (December 1986): 1053-1075. Reprinted in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, revised ed. (1999 [1989]), 28-50. Subsequent citations will be from the reprinted version.

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