

Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet is Robert I. Williams Term Professor of History and director of the Middle East Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Her first book, Frontier Fictions: Shaping the Iranian Nation, 1804-1946 (Princeton University Press, 1999) examines the history of Iranian nationalism from the perspective of Iran's contested borderlands. Her most recent work is Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran (Oxford University Press, 2011), in which she reveals the complex relationship between health, hygiene, citizenship, and gender in modern Iran. She is returning to the issues that animated her first book in a forthcoming work entitled Tales of Trespassing: Borderland Histories of Iran and the Middle East (Cambridge University Press). In addition to her scholarship, Kashani-Sabet has published a novel, Martyrdom Street (Syracuse University Press, 2010). It tells the story of three Iranian women across borders and generations.

INTRODUCTION & INTERVIEW

G.S. NIKPOUR

DOCUMENTING DISSENT

FIROOZEH KASHANI-SABET ON THE BORDERS OF THE BODY AND THE BODY POLITIC IN IRAN



In winter of 2013, B|ta'arof sat down with Kashani-Sabet to discuss the history of the Iranian body, the prickly terrain of Iranian nationalism, dissent at the borderlands, patriarchy, and feminist politics. We also discussed the process of writing, the difference between academic and literary forms, and the relationship of the diaspora to the homeland.

The theme for this issue of B|ta'arof is “the body.” In the modern era, the body of the citizen becomes very important to the newly minted nation. Could you speak to the historical importance of the body in the context of modern Iran in general, and Iranian nationalism in particular?

I'd like to move it away from nationalism a bit; even in the absence of these modern expressions of political self-assertion, the relationship between a person and her body has always existed. For instance, the ways in which women come to terms with their gender-specific concerns is not merely a modern phenomenon mediated by the modern state. This relationship has a long history before the advent of nationalism. I think the way to examine the body in history is to keep in mind that the question of the relationship of the self to the body is a deeply personal one at times, but also one that becomes part of public discourse. This happens in many societies, not only modern ones.

The difference that begins with modern nationalism – certainly in Iran, although this happens in other places as well – is that over time women's bodies and the bodies of citizens in general become seen as important objects of propaganda and state intervention. Prior to the coming of modernity such control was not possible. For instance, it wasn't possible to mass-produce images of women in newspapers. It wasn't possible to mass-produce outfits for widespread and rapid public consumption. We didn't have fashion houses. It wasn't possible to popularize a discourse of medicine, health, and wellness. These only developed in the second half of the 19th century into the 20th century, and continued to expand exponentially as a result of the technological and material changes that Iranian society went through over the course of those fifty or sixty years.

You immediately invoke the female body. In your other work, you argue that we see a rise in something called “Iranian hu-

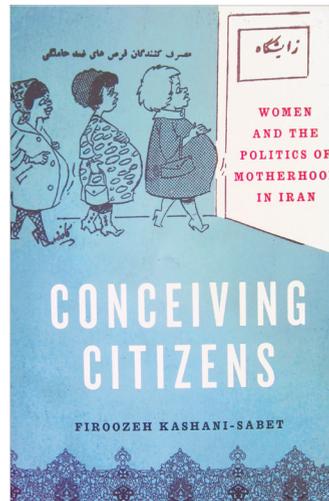
manism” in the late Qajar and early Pahlavi periods, and that this discourse makes women's bodies visible and public in a new way. Could you explain what you mean by that?

Many of the regulations in modern society are undoubtedly based on gendered norms, expectations, and differences. This means that in the modern era the Iranian body becomes increasingly gendered. The discourse on humanism actually is much older than the contemporary period. It's a way of looking at art, literature, poetry, and society that has much older roots than the modern era, with roots in Platonic philosophy. What's interesting to me as a historian of Iran is why there was

a heightened interest not only in the idea of humanism but also in the terms used to designate “humanism” – *aadamiyat* and *ensaaniyat*. These terms do not actually mean the same thing. I argue that *ensaaniyat* has more to do with humanity, while *aadamiyat* has to do with the concept of humanism. Sometimes the terms were used interchangeably, but during the Constitutional period (1905-1911), in the literature I studied most carefully in relation to this subject, *ensaaniyat* was often used in conjunction with incipient notions of human rights, or *huquq-e bashari*. In the same era, secret societies emerged with the term *aadamiyat* in their titles. A newspaper called *Aadamiyat* also appeared during this time.

We often see discussions of “humanism” in the political discourse of the period, which is a “civilizing” discourse. The arguments being made hinge on the notion that a “civilized” or “modern” society should respect the precepts of humanism and humanity. To me, there is a democratizing component to this conversation, but also an individualistic component. The notion emerges that individuals are extensions of the state and the body politic, but they also have rights as distinct individuals.

***Conceiving Citizens* attempts to move away from a long-standing trend of viewing gender in Iran through the politics of veiling – a seemingly inexhaustible topic for those who write**



on Iran and gender. It presents research on the history of health and hygiene and analyzes their relationship to the state. Can you tell us about what you're trying to do in that book, and how you came to that project? And why the need to move away from discussions of the politics of veiling?

I actually became really interested in the topic of health and hygiene when I was researching my first book, *Frontier Fictions*. This happened for two reasons. First of all, my sources revealed a number of articles that referenced medical issues. I was looking for articles on geography, and almost as frequently I would encounter articles on health and hygiene. These should be distinguished, however, from discussions of medicine. I always make this distinction. Historically, “medicine” as such was considered high culture, while “hygiene” was plebeian. In the context of Iranian and Middle Eastern scholarship, historians hadn’t really written about hygiene. Medicine, yes. Hygiene, no. The two were almost always written about interchangeably, but the two branches are to be distinct.

Second, as I was researching the eastern boundary of Iran, I noticed historical conflict between the Russian and British boundary negotiators about the border between Iran and Afghanistan. One of the British officials said, “Oh, the Russians are going to fish for any excuse – typhoid, or this or that – to bring a halt to the work of the commission delineating these boundaries.” This made me realize that the history of health and epidemics in the Middle East was very politicized.

Then, as I got into the subject, I happened to get pregnant. [Laughs.] I was fascinated by the changes that my body was undergoing. My personal experience of pregnancy made me realize that there is very little work done on women and hygiene.

Going back to the question of citizenship, while looking through my sources, I realized that the words *aadamiyat* and *ensaaniyat* were used *constantly* in the literature on health and hygiene. There was a lot of emphasis on the connection between this notion of humanism, with its evocation of modernity and civilization (*tamadon*), and the state being able to

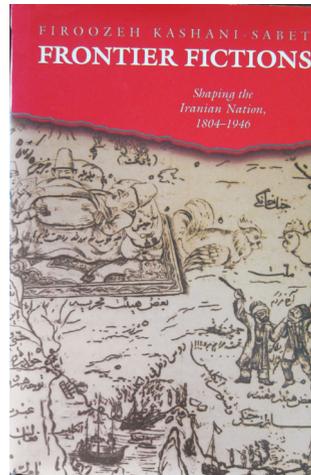
provide for the health of the body. That is to say, a healthy body was the desired goal of a modern state. This was tied to an older notion of what had been called *ensaane kaamil*, the perfect human being. There are historians of Islam who have written far more eloquently about this concept, which is linked to Sufi and medieval Islamic literature. In the modern period we see a reinterpretation and reconfiguration of these ideas and terms. The intersection of these histories and terms was, for me, fascinating.

I also wanted to make a contribution to the field of Middle Eastern women’s history by moving away from well-trodden concepts such as veiling and education. While both are significant prisms through which to consider the history of women, I argue that the history of reproductive health is equally if not more significant.

One of the things I’m fascinated by in *Conceiving Citizens* is the history of the move away from midwifery towards what we think of as “modern” nursing and medicine.

One of the components of the story that I tell about the involvement of women in the politics of reproduction, health care, and maternity is that, at a relatively late date (the early 1970s), the Iranian state had to recognize that it still needed midwives – and that it needed *traditional* midwives, because it had not been able to go into many rural communities to provide modern healthcare for all of its citizens. The state made huge progress in its project from the inter-war period into the 1970s with the creation of different categories of caregivers and health care professionals. This included assistant nurses and other types of providers who participated in health-care quite apart from reproduction, pediatrics, and maternity. For example, a school of public health was established, to be distinguished from schools of medicine. A lot of infrastructure was put in place. And yet to the chagrin of the state, the project remained, in a sense, inchoate. Traditional “healers” were among the official groups of health practitioners in Iran.

Another crucial element in this story – mindboggling, really – is that a profession that had been dominated by women, midwifery, could in such a short period of time be dominated



and managed largely by men. To me, this development shows how patriarchy has been embedded in the institutions created by the state in Iran. The fact is that modern medicine was a male-dominated discourse and space.

You argue that we shouldn't confuse the discourse of maternalism with feminist politics. You have a formulation in the book that maternalism – both in the Pahlavi period and in the Islamic Republic – is not interested in civil rights but is attending to and policing the “civic womb.” (That is, the state believes that the health of the nation is tied to the reproductive health of the mother, but does not insist on full political rights for that same mother as a citizen in her own right.) This strikes me as a way to argue against the notion that patriarchy in the Iranian context is an invention of the Islamic Republic, a common belief. It seems that you are arguing the 1979 Revolution did not necessarily give rise to – or abolish – patriarchal institutions on its own?

Clearly, there is a paternalistic framework and paternalistic in-

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stitutional structures in Iran that we have not really broken through. Even the notion of women's rights and empowerment was shaped in Iran within a paternalistic framework. It was exactly in that vein in the Pahlavi period and remains consistently so in the Islamic Republic. There hasn't been, in my opinion, a true feminist breakthrough.

I'd like to talk about the difference between maternalism and feminism. These two are very distinct. Maternalism had (and continues to have) to do primarily with infant and maternal health, and state efforts at curbing mortality for both mothers and children. It had to do with healthful reproduction, such as causes of mortality and checking for venereal disease. It wasn't about legal rights for women. Nevertheless, none of these debates were occurring in a vacuum; all of these conversations were interconnected. Many of the advocates for maternal rights were also at the forefront of feminist and suffrage movements in Iran. Of course, some weren't. It was a very complicated terrain.

I'd also like to emphasize the distinction between the women's movement in Iran and the women's movement in the United States, or the West in general. In the early U.S. feminist movement, the female identity as mother was eschewed. That didn't really happen in the feminist movement in Iran. To this day, in the Islamic Middle East, “mother” is a very common marker of identity. One doesn't have to explain motherhood nearly as much as we do here [in the U.S.] – in terms of staying and working at home. One needs fewer qualifiers. Largely, the expectation for women is for motherhood. Of course, this doesn't mean that there hasn't been defiance or deviance or difference. Regardless, the discourse of motherhood is still a very dominant one in Iran.

In the U.S., feminism shaped itself in opposition to maternalism and expectations of motherhood. The notions of women as mothers or caretakers were seen as shackles. I would argue that in Iran, the discourse of maternalism – despite its roots in patriarchal institutions – gave Iranian women unexpected

opportunities to talk about previously taboo subjects such as venereal disease, or the push to get women to be responsible for their own sexual health. Indeed, maternalism wasn't about equal rights but it was empowering in other respects for women.

So you're saying that maternalism, perhaps paradoxically, offered women unprecedented opportunities to have a public life.

Yes, and a public voice and public visibility that women had previously lacked. Maternalism provided this visibility in a serendipitous way; it wasn't planned. This public visibility was an unintended consequence of a paternalistic discourse.

I'd like to take a moment to move away from the content of your work to its process. It seems to me that your work is unique in Iranian studies because it deals much more directly with the everyday lives of ordinary Iranians, with the politics of everyday life, rather than the history of the state or elites. Has this been an intentional decision on your part? What does this mean for you, practically speaking as a scholar? Are

you writing against other historiographical trends?

When I decide to work on a particular subject, the foremost concern is my desire to be passionate about it. We live with a subject for so long, and I've learned that the only way to come out of it on the other end and feel somewhat satisfied with the process is to be invested in the project on multiple levels: intellectually, personally, and to some extent, emotionally. Part of what I try to do as a scholar is to follow what engages me. I also ask, why does this matter? Why should I spend years of my life researching something? This is particularly true for a difficult subject like midwifery, which was very, very challenging to research for the 19th century. I was so proud of myself, for instance, that I found two manuscripts that spoke to the subject! Still, I have encountered certain obstacles in finding materials, so a topic has to be of great personal value and have social significance.

When I was writing my first book, there was a lot of new work being done on Iranian nationalism. It was a topic that was important to me as someone who was living in the Iranian diaspora. So much of the literature that I read as a student on nationalism was very political science-oriented and with very

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little narrative. I didn't get a sense of the granular, everyday component of life in Iran. I also didn't get a sense of dissent. One of the things that you will see across all of my work is an effort to document dissent.

For me, the discourse of nationalism along the frontiers was first and foremost about that - which is why my article was called "Fragile Frontiers." That is also why I talk about frontier fictions; because in nationalism, it matters whose story is being told, whose fiction it is. My new book on frontiers is going to be called *Tales of Trespassing: Borderland Histories of Iran and the*

Middle East, and will be a continuation of my effort to document the transgression of these boundaries - the clashing of divergent narratives about borderlands, the nature of legal and illegal, or history and ethnicity in the peripheries in various empires, states, societies, communities.

In *Frontier Fictions*, you refer to the "homogenizing logic" of state nationalism and the concept of "Iranzamin" - both of which you are writing against by focusing on borderlands. This logic assumes a notion of Iranian citizenship that is Persian-speaking and Shi'ite Muslim. Your work is arguing that there has always been a tension with these understandings of Iranian-ness, and that some of those tensions live at the borders. Does your focus on the borderlands mean that there is a "heartland" - the space of a normative Iranian citizen - for which there isn't this tension? Or are frontiers to be understood metaphorically as well as physically, geographically?

In order to answer that question, we'll have to go back to when I originally started working on that book. Oftentimes I think in Iranian historiography there is an embedded nationalist logic, an implicit belief in Iranian grandeur - though this isn't true of every Iranian historian who has worked on the subject, of course. On the contrary, what struck me as interesting in studying frontiers was how *nebulous* the nation was, particularly in the 19th century, and how much uncertainty there was about it. I found that the best place to document it was precisely at the frontiers, because that is where all the lines are blurred. In fact, there *were* no lines!

Among the other things I appreciated was that everything depended on whose perspective I was writing from. That same frontier looked very different from the Afghan perspective, or the Ottoman perspective. And taking it further, what did that really mean? Was there really an "Afghan perspective" in the 19th century?

Or are we just anachronizing contemporary identities...?

Exactly. Or are we talking about various local rulers who were enconced in certain areas asserting a kind of dominance? One of the things that I love about the history of frontiers is the way borderlands are described. One of the reasons why I call my new book *Tales of Trespassing* is that it raises the question: who is trespassing? Is the Iranian the transgressor going into Afghanistan? Is it the

opposite? At what point does traveling constitute transgression? At what point is that traveler, statesman, diplomat saying, “This is also ‘home.’” For me, those interactions – and sometimes clash of perspectives – are what remain fascinating and constitute the tales I narrate in my forthcoming book.

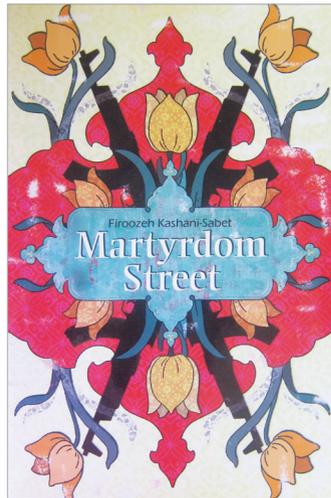
Your first book looks extensively at Ottoman as well as Iranian archives. You told me recently that you are considering doing more scholarly work on Ottoman history for your next project. Is *Tales of Trespassing* going to continue “trespassing” across that border, so to speak?

Absolutely. One thing I’d like to do in the new frontier book is to engage with the literature more, and to present a richer perspective on that particular border. I do it from the Eastern/Afghan boundary as well. The book I am writing now is more focused on the outside of that border looking in, rather than the inside looking out.

It’s true that both Iranian historiography and Ottoman historiography stay largely within their national domains. Since my book was published in 1999, I have seen very little work done on borderlands history, though the subfield is definitely growing.

Do you think this can be explained practically, because of linguistic difficulties in working on both archives? Or is there a theoretical reason as well for the reticence to work across this line? Would you say that your work is a conscious desire on your part to get away from the nationalist logic inherent to having one nation-state as your unit of analysis? Have these academic sub-disciplines unintentionally (or maybe intentionally) absorbed a nationalist ethos?

Well, I think it’s certainly difficult in terms of language. It’s also partly training. Not everybody trains to be both an Ottoman and an Iranian historian in terms of what is available to them at their university. It takes a very long time to be able to read not only different languages, but to master different kinds of paleography [i.e. reading manuscripts in arcane languages].



My desire is to do more of this comparative work. I’ve collected and worked on many more Ottoman documents than I could use in the first book. The Ottoman archives are a great resource, and more of us outside of the field of Ottoman history should be using that archive.

Let’s close by discussing your literary work. I’d like to ask you a question about your novel, *Martyrdom Street*. How do you situate this work in the context of your scholarly writing? Is it part of one larger story that you are trying to tell?

About the decision to write a novel... I always say that I am first and foremost an intellectual. I express my intellectual concerns in multiple ways and in multiple forms. Academic writing offers me the opportunity to pursue subjects in a particular way while adhering to the strictures of my discipline. It uniquely allows me to tell historical narratives; I try to bring to light historical realities that we know little about. But scholarly writing doesn’t really enable me to get at the emotions behind these experiences.

My emotional self is also an important part of how I intellectualize the world, and how I explain the world to myself and to others. One can’t easily dissociate all of this, though in academic writing we are trained to approach subjects dispassionately. Doing so, however, means that certain ways of thinking are left out. Fiction enables me to tell the lives of characters in ways and chronologies that are real but that are freeing in ways that academic writing is not.

Your novel raises an important question for me: what does it mean for Iranian history that so many millions of Iranians live in diaspora, while millions still live in the country? Are our lives and futures still tied to one another? Why was it necessary to write a novel that is set both inside and outside the country?

I firmly believe that Iranians in the diaspora and Iranians in the homeland proper are very interconnected. Despite the distance, we continue to speak to one another. The diaspora is comprised of people such as myself who see themselves as fitting in both places and as not fitting in either place. My work is increasingly about those narratives – of belonging and of not belonging.

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