

Research Article

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“Their Beastly Manner”: Discourses of Non-Binary Gender and Sexuality in Shi’ite Safavid Persia

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0068>

Received March 23, 2018; accepted November 16, 2018

Abstract: The Safavid dynasty ruled Persia between sixteenth and eighteenth centuries and is known as a turning period in the political, social and religious trajectories of Persian history. The ethnographic literature about the Safavid Persian culture written by Western travelers is an indication of the forming relations between the West and the Orient. The travelogues indicate that Safavid discourses of sexuality were different from their counterparts in the West. These non-binary discourses were not based only on gender and sexual orientation, but also on social factors such as age, class and status. Relations of these factors to different forms of “masculinities/femininities” were focal for gendered and sexual categorization. Non-binary sexual/gendered identities and expressions were explicit, and a sexual continuum was prevalent. The fundamental differentiation of masculinity and femininity were not valid, and sexual relationships were not confined to heterosexuality. This study uses historical sources to explore the discourses of gender and sexuality during the Safavid era. Drawing on criticisms of Orientalism, implications of Western narratives on our understandings of sexuality and gender in the Safavid era are discussed.

Keywords: Gender, Orientalism, Persia, Safavid, Shi’ism, sexuality

Introduction

Safavid dynasty ruled Persia for over two centuries between 1501 and 1736 C.E. During this era, many encounters between the Persian and the Western culture took place and grew over time. The rich ethnographic literature about Safavid culture written by Western travelers, clerics and ambassadors from Western contexts is an indication of the forming relationships between the West and the Orient (Rafifar and Lorafshar). The Safavid era is considered a turning point in Persian history. During this period, formation of an independent state with clear geographic boundaries and central ruling power, and adaptation and formalisation of Shi’ite Islam as the official religion were the main factors playing significant roles in Persia’s developments into both Iranian and Shi’ite state (Arjomand). The founding of the Safavid dynasty is thus said to mark the genesis of the Persian nation-state (Matthee). European states sent ambassadors to Safavid Persia mostly for political and economic reasons, but there were also other travellers such as missionaries, writers and adventurers who travelled for personal, commercial, military, missionary other reasons. These travellers have written extensively about the differences between the Safavid discourses of gender and sexuality and the discourses that were prevalent in the West at the times of their visitations.

Our current understandings of Safavid cultural discourses highly rely on Western narratives of sixteenth to eighteenth century Persia. These accounts—despite obvious significance and anthropological

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value—should be studied prudently because of their cultural distance, their positions in power hierarchies, and their socio-cultural differences from their field of study/attention. Contemporaneous with the Safavid period in Persia—during sixteenth to eighteenth century—Western discourses of sexuality were based on what has been called the “[early] modern” discourse (Gil), characterized by increasing and developing naturalistic tendencies that associated sexualities and genders to each other and defined binary gender roles (Laqueur). The predominance of these philosophical elements sometimes led the Western travellers to present exoticized and mystified depictions of the Safavid culture. There are stark differences between the local historians’ and Western travellers’ perspectives as a result of the cultural differences or individuals’ affiliations to different political and religious entities.

This historical study uses data from local and non-local (i.e. Western travelogues) textual sources to explore the discourses of gender and sexuality during the Safavid era. Drawing on criticisms of Orientalism, implications of Western narratives of gender and sexuality on the historical understandings of Oriental/Safavid sexuality are discussed.

Orientalism and the Oriental Sexuality

In *Orientalism* Said discusses that *the Orient* is associated with a “powerful sexual appetite.” While the prejudiced perceptions of the Orient in Said’s analysis went beyond gendered and sexual aspects of the cultures of the Orient, imaginaries of oriental sexualities played a focal role in outlining the representations of these cultures. Western travelogues written during the Safavid period indicate a dominantly polarized “self” versus “other” cultural categorization. Such self/West versus other/Orient polarizations often represent images of “Oriental sexuality” that fundamentally differ from their Western counterparts and are seen as natural, untamed, animalistic and “beastly” as stated by the Sherley brothers’ travelogue (Sherley et al. 52). The comparison of “the self” with “the other” has historically been used to define identities versus those perceived as “opposing,” “threatening,” “immoral,” “non-mainstream,” or simply not desirable. The conditions of “otherness” must be naturalized to be accepted as essentialist categories in order to enable the formation of the identity of the self. The comparisons are inherently accompanied by prejudices, judgmentalism, and differentiating between the self, as “holy” and the cultural other as “unholy” sites (Fakouhi). Such arguments that practice “cultural othering” are used in the narratives of Western travellers of the Safavid period, characterized by “fear of the unknown” (Sanderson).

The existing studies of gender and sexuality during the Safavid dynasty have mostly focused on women’s issues and women’s representation and participation in the society. Most of these studies have also adopted approaches that inherited the orientalist lens by using Western travelogues as the primary sources of historical research. In his book *Analysis of Safavid Travel Diaries*, Daneshpajouh has given a brief description of the popular viewpoints of the writers of several travelogues; but a critical analysis of these narratives is lacking. Shoja and Hejazi have provided analyses of gender hierarchies and women’s situations and social status during the Safavid period. These studies are rich in historical referencing but do not offer critical approaches and analyses of the concepts of gender and sexuality, and pay no attention to the nature of notion in the Safavid period. Mehrabadi has also provided information about women’s everyday lives. Her work relies heavily on Western travelogues. As such, like other studies, it does not question, challenge or criticize the orientalist viewpoints starkly evident in the travel narratives. Other studies such as Qazikhani and Barani, and Taghavi and Mousavi have provided descriptive analyses of the social status of women during the Safavid period.

The study of Safavid discourses of sexuality should take the discursive challenges and the necessity of suspending binary gender and sexuality into account to be able to provide a description or analysis of Safavid gender and sexuality (Rahbari). Investigating the historical evidence critically, this article aims to both rectify the gap in critical research and provide a descriptive overview of the discourses of gender and sexuality in the Safavid Period.

Research Methods

This study is conducted by carrying out a content analysis of multiple historical sources. The existing historical literature and sources of information on Safavid gender and sexual discourses are (i) a combination of Western diaries, journals, reports, and extensive travelogues (e.g. Chardin; Contarini; Della Valle; Figueroa; Grès; Kaempfer; Katof; Olearius; Sanson; Sherley et al.; Tavernier; Tectander...). The studied travelogues included twenty-three volumes that dated between 1436-1707 C.E. (ii) Persian historians' narratives, and writings in the form of court reports, medical texts, literary pieces such as poems and prose (Aqa Jamal Khansari; Asef Rostam Al-hokama; Ghazvini; Hakim Arzani; Hosseini Tonekaboni Deilami; Vaez Kashefi Sabzevari; Vasefi) (iii) available literature and analysis of visual data in the form of Safavid paintings, artefacts, architectural pieces, etc. To conduct this study, the first two categories of materials were used and carefully investigated. All the references, connotations and elements of gender and sexual discourses were selected for analysis. These selected pieces were then reviewed, and thematic content analysis was performed on them. The sources were diverse. In the cases of travelogues, some were written by the travellers themselves, and some were written by their companions and can be considered second-hand experiences. Some consisted of mostly socio-political information while others were richer in ethnographic data on society, culture and living conditions of "the common people" and the Safavid court's inhabitants. Since all but one of the travelogues were written by men¹ their accessibility to female spaces was limited. This has sometimes resulted in inaccurate or biased information about the lives of women under the Safavid reign. The bias, however, is not limited to travellers' reports and is extendable to the local historians who were in many cases salaried writers for the courts. While all the resources have their shortcomings, the combination of the available resources can lead to somewhat realistic, non-romanticized and non-mystified understandings of Safavid discourses of gender and sexuality.

Gender and Sexuality in Public Spaces

Although depending on changes in the political and religious power relations, the representations of sexuality oscillated throughout the Safavid period. Candid and outspoken representations were traceable throughout most of the Safavid history. The legalization and taxation of the brothels, dance and tea houses (reported extensively in e.g. Chardin; Figueroa; Katof) made sexual entertainment popular and accessible in all cities, except for Ardabil which was considered a holy city.² The Safavid king, the supreme spiritual power of the country and the leader of the society, was often one of the major clients and aficionados, and the main economic beneficiary of the authorized and taxed sex work. The Safavid court in its early and middle periods had a high income from brothels and entertainment houses in which dancers of different genders performed theatrical sexual and erotic plays. With the development of apparatuses to control sexuality, sexual crimes were mainly judged/sentenced according to the religious provisions, and the punishments for sexual crimes were decided according to governmental and religious authorities (Alvandi 35-38). Olearius reported that sex-workers were sometimes supported by the men in power. He witnessed that a governor followed up a complaint by a sex-worker, who had not been paid by a client, and made sure that she got paid. Many travellers have referred to the popularity of sexual entertainment and treating guests with sexual services (Figueroa 228; Grès 221-222; Olearius 222). Olearius—German ambassador to Shah Safi's court (re. 1629-1642) in 1637—reported that it was common practice in Safavid Persia to offer sexual services to guests. The guest could choose someone among the dancers and performers to have sex with during the ceremony, after which the guest returned to the feast and the dancer continued performing, both without feeling any shame (Olearius 222). Despite the existence of separate districts and neighbourhoods allocated to brothels, sex-workers attended public

¹ Except for Marie Claude Petite's travelogue during the Shah Soltan Hosein's reign (re. 1694-1722) at the end of the Safavid dynasty's ruling.

² Ardabil is home to Sheikh Safi-al Din Ardabili's Shrine, an important figure in Islamic Sufi order, who was born in Ardabil.

events, even the religious ceremonies such as ceremonies during the holy month of Moharram³ when they appeared in public without disguise (Figuerola 308-309).

For restricting sexuality, it is essential to control its discursive aspects (Foucault). During the Safavid period, speaking of sexuality and eroticism, and sexually transmitted diseases was common practice in public spaces (Chardin *Chardin’s Travelogue, Volume Seven* 30). Chardin—who visited and stayed in Persia between 1666 and 1677 during the reigns of Shah Abbas II (re. 1642-1666) and Shah Suleiman (re. 1666-1694)—reported that speaking about sexually transmitted diseases was very common among the people as if they were talking about a “fever.” Pietro Della Valle—Italian artist and writer who visited Persia between 1617 and 1621 during the reign of Abbas I (re. 1588-1629)—has written about outspokenness of sexual matters in the court and reported an incident where Abbas I (re. 1588-1629) asked a monarch who was married to one of Shah’s former wives to share details of his intimate moments with his wife (Della Valle 256). Local historians of Soltan Hosein’s reign (re. 1694-1722) also reported that the Shah was known for his sexual vigor as much as his religious piety and that the two were not contradictory (Asef Rostam Al-hokama 201). There were also visual representations of sexuality and eroticism in Safavid paintings and miniatures (see e.g. Devlin; Welch), and in wall painting that were a common feature of the built environments (Grube). In literature, erotic writings in the larger Islamic Middle East contained varieties of prose and poetry. The roots of these types of literature were sometimes pre-Islamic as well, and they were influenced by Indian and Persian traditions (Ze’evi 42). These traditions continued during the Safavid period. A prominent Persian poet of the Safavid period, Mohtasham Kashani wrote love poems directed both to women and men. His autobiographical description of his love relationship to both female and male beloved challenge the monolithic narratives of Westerners travellers in regard to both women’s lives and sexual relationships (Losensky). Mohtasham’s account of his affair with the young male lover eschews the idealization of divine beauty in “mystical” relationships and is characterized by “earthly” relationship challenges such as jealousy, suspicion and reconciliation (see Losensky 752-756).

During the Safavid period *hakims*⁴ would write prescriptions for men and women to enhance their sexuality, increase their sexual vigor and bolster their productivity (e.g. Hakim Arzani 290-301, 313-317; Hosseini Tonekaboni Deilami 1202) as well as to heal sexually transmitted diseases (e.g. Hakim Arzani). The early Safavid researcher and writer, Vasefi (287), wrote about herbs and potions, such as a pound Mandragora⁵ seed, used by women to enhance sexual pleasure during the very beginning of the Safavid period. Hosseini Tonekaboni who was Shah Suleiman’s (re. 1666-1694) special hakim also wrote about these prescriptions that helped both men and women in their sexual gratification (Rahimi et al. 167-169). Safavid Travelogues have also mentioned medical discourses, and the popularity of the usage of such potions that raised sexual power (Kaempfer 28; Olearius 291). In his book *Safavid Medical Practice*, Elgood (253-294) gives a detailed account of Safavid medical discourses around female sexuality, reproduction and contraception. He also noted that women used different potions for enhancement or healing, and sometimes orgasm was prescribed as a treatment for perceived neurological issues (Elgood 257). The significance of medical texts such as *Tebb-e Akbari* written by Hakim Arzani is revealed by choice of Persian language as the language of the ordinary people instead of Arabic, as the language of the scientific elite, to make the text accessible to the public. This choice of language is also an indication of changes in the culture and reclamation of national markers such as the Persian language which slowly became prevalent in writing scholarly work throughout the Safavid period (Encyclopaedia Iranica “Safavid Dynasty”).

³ The first month of the Islamic calendar. It is in this month that Imam Hosein Ebn Ali, the third Shi’ite Imam and the grandson of the Prophet, was killed by the forces of the second Umayyad caliph in Karbala.

⁴ Hakim, translatable to the scholar and the wise in Persian, was usually referred to a person of the philosophical and medical profession.

⁵ Plant with flowers and berries that grows in Iran and was considered to have a “love” effect.

The Prevalence of Non-binarism

Gender Groups

Throughout the Safavid era, multiple forms of gender and sexuality were accepted and present in society and in language. Terms such as *amrad*⁶ were used in similar ways—but not equivalent—to some contemporary gender expressions of queer gender. These gender categories shocked some of the Western travellers. Sherley brothers referred to the “beastly manner” of same-sex relationship between men and young boys called *beardless* (Sherley et al. 52). Figueroa and Asef Rostam Al-hokama referred to *amrad*, beardless young boys who performed and dressed similar to women and were coveted by older men. The travellers were not shy to express their disgust and openly criticize these practices.

The other groups known as *mokhannas* were adult men desiring to be the object of desire for other adult men (Najmabadi *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*). The *mokhannas* would perform their gender by using typically female clothing and body management such as refusing to shave their beard as they aged. This meant that they aimed to maintain a youthful and “clean full-moon” face and that they were available for pleasure, although not suitable partners for the creation of a family (Karalius). In Persia and in other Middle Eastern contexts between sixteenth and nineteenth century, the category of *luti* also existed. *Luti* referred to athletic entertainers and members of brotherhood guilds (*fotowwa*). The category is not limited to Persian history. In the premodern Arab world, *luti* had a reputation for being active sodomites as well, and had intercourse with other men, regardless of whether they were active or the passive partner and effeminate (El-Rouayheb). Roscoe and Murray discuss that the existence of such sexually receptive masculine adults could have been subversive of the sex-gender hierarchies. There are speculations that *luti* has originated in Persia.⁷ Vaez Kashefi, a Safavid folk scholar, wrote *Fotowwat-nameye Soltani* (16th-century text written over decades)⁸ to explain the lifestyle and the ethics of the *lutis* (also called *javanmard*).⁹ But unlike its Arab counterparts, due to the marginalization of *luti* by the central state powers (Babayan *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* 163), the Safavid *luti*’s sexuality is vague and hard to determine (Bell 14).

Another notable category was a group of people considered biological men who were enslaved, men who had endured genital damage (Lemos) and sometimes as punishment for a crime (Della Valle) who then would be—dominantly by force—castrated. After castration, they were placed in a new category that held a position between the male-female binary.¹⁰ The eunuchs (who were called *Khaje*) could then freely interact with women (Sanson 177), and for this, they were usually hired as security guards and messengers to move freely in and out of the harems. Despite the existence of different gender groups, there is evidence that the Safavid understanding of sex was dualistic. Giving birth to a boy or a girl mattered, and the child’s sex was immediately declared after the sex. According to Abolhasan Ghazvini (118) the late Safavid historian, the birth of a girl was not a “celebrated event.” Olearius (293) witnessed that Shah Safi (re. 1629-1642) rewarded men who had the highest number of sons every year.

⁶ Beardless adolescent boys coveted by older men.

⁷ See Zakeri, Mohsen. *Sasanid Soldiers in Early Muslim Society: The Origins of ‘Ayyārān and Futuwwa*. Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995.

⁸ Translatable to *The Book of Chivalry*.

⁹ *Javanmard* was a man who displays his commitment to ethics through diligence in his labor, the doing of good works in the community, the cultivation of martial strength and bodily improvement, and through a series of rituals and specific codes of dress, and readiness for battle, as explained by Bell, Robert Joseph. “Luti Masculinity in Iranian Modernity, 1785-1941: Marginalization and the Anxieties of Proper Masculine Comportment.” *Master’s Middle Eastern Studies*, University of New York CUNY, 2015.

¹⁰ Similarly, in a study of eunuchs in Byzantium, Ringrose, Kathryn M. *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium*. University of Chicago Press, 2007, *ibid.*, Ringrose, Kathryn M. discusses that while eunuchs might not have constituted a third sex, they did constitute a third gender within Byzantium.

Sexualities

Polygamy, in the form of having multiple permanent or/and temporary wives, was widely practiced before and during the Safavid period. Women were available as permanent wives, female prostitutes, slaves, and according to the Shi’ite tradition, as temporary wives (Shay). Despite this, heterosexual relationships were not considered the only norm as there is evidence of bisexuality, seasonal sexuality, and poly-sexuality. In *Qabusname*, a popular eleventh-century Persian book of mores, the author suggested that having both male-male and male-female relations have benefits (Onsor Al-Maali 74). He then suggested that men should have sex with men during summer and with women in winter. Sherley brothers referred to the same seasonal preferences in their travelogue (Sherley et al. 52). Western travellers have also mentioned the prevalence of sexual relationships with amrads throughout the Safavid period (Figueroa 233-234; Katof 74; Sanson 216). Afary (90-91) argued that in pre-modern Persia, homoeroticism and same-sex sexuality were witnessed in public spaces such as the royal court, monasteries, seminaries, taverns, military camps, gymnasiums, bathhouses, and coffeehouses. Some men even shunned marriage, believing that relations with women would diminish their physical prowess. Until the mid-seventeenth century, male brothels (*amrad-khane*) were tax-paying establishments. In the literary traditions, praise for a male lover and writing of male love were common tropes and were used as metaphors for religious devotion or sometimes as criticism to the moralist society (Ze’evi). The homoerotic practice of *nazar* or *shahed-bazi*, in which Sufis¹¹ frequently brought into their midst a beautiful young man to gaze upon as proof of God’s creation of beauty, was practiced and depicted in artistic works such as countless miniature paintings (Shay 137). In paintings and literary evidence of the Safavid period—similar to the later Qajar period—homoerotic love is prevalent (Najmabadi “Gendered Transformations: Beauty, Love, and Sexuality in Qajar Iran”).¹² Najmabadi (*Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*) has outlined the standpoints of local historians, and Western sources about the sexuality of Persians during the Qajar period. She referred to different narratives by the Western writer Tancoigne,¹³ and Saba, the court’s poet. She argued that while for Saba procreation and sexual inclination belonged to separate domains and praised the Shah in both homo- and heteroerotic terms, for Tancoigne, the Shah was a heterosexually married man because he had a harem full of women. Her analysis is applicable and valid the case of Safavid historians such as Rostam Al-hokama’s descriptive attitude, and the Western travelers’ heteronormative readings of Safavid sexuality.

The relation between age and sexuality is another important differentiating aspect of Safavid discourses of sexuality. This is because the modern notion of childhood and the distinctions between adulthood and childhood was not valid during the period. While a notion of age and different stages and periods of life existed, behavioural codes for younger people were not very different from adults. This attitude was generalizable to sexual ethics and sex-related behavioural codes. Children were not seen as sexuality-free, and sexually non-active. This meant that children were espoused at very early stages of their lives. Pari Khan Khanum I¹⁴ married when she was fifteen, and Pari Khan Khanum II¹⁵ married when she was only ten or eleven years old (Gholsorkhi 146). Chardin reported that Armenian Persians married their children as early as when they were still infants (*Chardin’s Travelogue, Volume Eight* 399). There is evidence that many of performers, sex workers and dancing artists were among ten to sixteen years old (Figueroa 86; Sanson 216). It has also been reported that boys were considered adults at the age of seven years old and subject to

¹¹ For information on Sufism refer to Lewisohn, Leonard. *The Heritage of Sufism: The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150-1500)*. vol. 2, Oneworld Pubns Ltd, 1999.

¹² As discussed by Ze’evi, Dror. “Hiding Sexuality: The Disappearance of Sexual Discourse in the Late Ottoman Middle East.” *Social Analysis*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2005, pp. 34-53 contrary to the belief that Islamic cultures were reticent about drawing the human forms in both Ottoman and Persian territories there were great amounts of paintings, drawings depicting human body produced.

¹³ Tancoigne travelled to Persia in Qajar period 1807-1808.

¹⁴ Shah Esmail’s daughter.

¹⁵ Shah Tahmasb I’s daughter.

punishments for sexual crimes such as looking at Shah's wives during *ghorogh*¹⁶ just as adult men (Figuroa 346; Sanson 109).

Just like young age, old age was also not considered an obstacle for a sexual relationship. There is evidence that men would use natural prescription such as cannabis which raised sexual power (Kaempfer 28; Olearius 291). The emphasis in using such potions and other techniques was put on enhancing reproduction as an important expectation from the marital relationship (Elgood 284-313; Hakim Arzani 288-324). In same-sex relationships between men, a large age gap was prevalent. The age difference is visible in Safavids paintings' homoerotic imagery. In the *Portrait of Shah Abbas with a Young Page* (1627), Shah is seen with a visibly younger boy. The artist Riza-i Abbas also specialized in scenes of young men being pursued by older men (Devlin). Typically, but not always, same-sex relations were between men of not only different age, but also different class, and social status (Shay). Afary has discussed the importance of the degree of class difference between the boy and the man he was in a relationship with. She has also discussed that in same-sex relations, as seen among Persian *Sufis*, the erotic and mystical relationship included occasionally erotic and sensual celebrations. The relationship between the lover and the beloved was based on a series of mutual obligations and responsibilities to one another, and the love that bound them both. The relationship was a pathway to spiritual love, and a way to gain better social status.

Women's Sexuality and Lives in harems

The only female Western traveller's report—Claude Petite who visited the court of Shah Soltan Hosein (re. 1694–1722)—did not show special interest in women's affairs or include in-depth data on topics such as women's lives, except some general information on court life and courtesans (Grès). Women's living conditions and freedom in public spaces were subject to change in different periods and might have worsened towards the end of Safavid period when the extremist Shi'ite clerics' power and control over the state grew. Giving their attention to court women, elite sex workers and royal harem, the writers have by large left out the accounts and stories of ordinary, rural and lower-class women (Sadeghi 823).

There are however some local and Western stories about women's lives in different periods of the Safavid era. These accounts are predominantly written about higher class, elite and court women. Among these, Chardin *Chardin's Travelogue, Volume Eight* (386) reported that according to the midwives and soothsayers working in the court—who could enter the harems—female-female sexual relationships were prevalent. These narratives of female homosexuality in harem relied on the conceptualization of same-sex relations as “situational” due to extreme gender segregation. But the same-sex relationships of women in harems in the Islamic world is more supposed than observed (Murray 97). While lower class women had more mobility, for the elite and the higher classes, because of the prevalence of harems, women spent most of their time in the interior parts of houses. For this, there is little known about the daily activities of these groups of women. Figuroa (158) observed the classed nature of women's freedom of movement, noting that poor women walked in the city together, but women of affluence didn't get out of the house, and even bathed in their own houses. Ordinary women who had more freedom of movement, went out of the house for visiting relatives, attending mosque or going to the public baths; they covered themselves head to toe with large *chadors*¹⁷ leaving a hole in front of the eyes to see the passages (Kaempfer 58; Tavernier 522; Tectander 57).

Figuroa (397) wrote about his interaction with an old woman who he estimated was about seventy years old. He explained that the woman socialized with them and appeared in front of them without a

¹⁶ Ghorogh was a public curfew for male people seven years old announced publicly if the King's wives were going to be present in public space. during ghorogh, all men within this age group had to stay away from the roads and locations where the Shah's wives were visible. Many travelogues reported that a failure to do so was severely punished, mostly by death Chardin, John. *Chardin's Travels in Persia*. translated by Eghbal Yaghmayi, Toos Publication, 1993, Kaempfer, Engelbert *Travelogue of Persia*. translated by Keykavood Jahandari, Kharazmi, 1985, Sherley, Anthony et al. *The Travelogue of the Sherley Brothers*. translated by Avans, Negah, 1983, Tavernier, Jean-Baptiste. *Travelogue of Tavernier*. translated by Hamid Arbab Shirani, Niloofar, 2003.
¹⁷ Chador is a one-piece Persian garment used to wrap around the head and the entire body, sometimes leaving the face and hands exposed.

face-veil but warned them that there were younger women in the house who should be avoided. Olearius (156) also reported that young sex-workers were accompanied by an older woman who would speak to the customers. Such instances might be an indication of the effects age and fertility had on women’s social status and freedom of movement and interaction.

It is also suggested that keeping bondwomen (*Kaniz*) at home—who were mostly enslaved by Persians in wars from the Caucasus region or were purchased from India and Africa (Clarence-Smith 93)—was a common practice especially among the noble and rich men connected to the court. *Kaniz* were sold out in local bazaars (Figueroa 233) and were used for both domestic and sexual services, and if they were considered beautiful, they might have ended up in harems as wives (Kaempfer 25). Despite the prevalence of harem life and severe spatial divisions that were based on religious rules, the boundaries were broken by powerful men. There are several resources that reported incidents when Safavid Shahs or the local governors entering other men’s harems (Chardin *Chardin’s Travelogue, Volume Three* 113-114). Women who lived in harems were mostly concerned about having a successful, full-term pregnancy, giving birth to [at least] one male child, and remaining the favorite wife in the household in rivalry with a *havo* (co-wife). This often meant engaging in practices that were potentially harmful to the women (Shirazi 5).

If one relies on travelogues and Western literature of Safavid era, it is possible to come to know it only as a period of severe oppression for women when they did not serve any purpose except for reproduction (as stated by e.g. Tavernier 522). Studies of poems, local religious texts, histories and prose however, do offer an alternative image of women’s relationships and sexualities. In Mohtasham Kashani’s autobiographical love poem *The Lovers’ Confection*, the beloved is an educated bold woman of discerning taste in clothing, music, and poetry who rides a horse in public; an example of the high class “public women” who enjoyed a high degree of independence (Losensky 753). Women’s sisterhood relationships (*Khaharkhandegi*) have been shown to be more than sisterly, but also amorous, erotic and possibly sexual. These relations, although underreported and in terms of involvement of physicality, are witnessed during the Safavid period (see e.g. Babayan “‘In Spirit We Ate Each Other’s Sorrow’: Female Companionship in Seventeenth-Century Safavi Iran”) up to the twentieth century (see e.g. Afary). Babayan “‘In Spirit We Ate Each Other’s Sorrow’: Female Companionship in Seventeenth-Century Safavi Iran” revealed the female-female homoerotic sentiments as she read through an autobiographical poem by a Safavid female writer (called *the Widow*). The widow’s narrative could be considered an important exception of transgressing gendered roles during one of the most strictly controlled Safavid periods, as she exposed feminine spaces in Isfahan¹⁸ established through sisterhood rituals that even caused male anxiety to the degree that Aqa Jamal Khansari—a renowned Shi’ite cleric—used moralistic and sarcastic tone to criticize the practice of sisterhood (Babayan “‘In Spirit We Ate Each Other’s Sorrow’: Female Companionship in Seventeenth-Century Safavi Iran”). Aqa Jamal Khansari’s book *Aghayed Al-Nesa* also shed light on intimate aspects of women’s lives such as hygiene, public bath picnics, celebrations, and superstitious beliefs. These accounts create a more colourful imagery of women’s everyday lives rather than the monolith and homogeneous brush of the Western travellers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Safavid: Not a Homogeneous Era

During the Safavid ruling in the Persian territories, cultural discourses witnessed great changes. Within the Safavid era, different periods of time experienced different forms of sexual representation in public that transformed in relation to the changing power institutions’ approaches towards appropriate public behaviours. The characteristics of the different periods sometimes changed from the reign of one king to the other. Since the kings—or in some cases other court officials—had the religious and political authority, cultural discourses depended heavily on their personal decisions. These discourses included legitimate modes of gender and sexual expression and were different in terms of the state’s control over gender and sexuality through the

¹⁸ Isfahan was the capital city in this period and for the most of the Safavid era.

justice and penal system. For instance, in 1474, at the time of the founding forefather of the Safavid—Uzun Hassan—Ambrogio Contarini, a Venetian diplomat, reported that women were seen in public while they were setting up tents (Contarini). The female members of the leading *Qizilbash* military-tribal aristocracy had a great deal of social and economic power in the early Safavid period (Zarinebaf-Shahr). Caterino Zeno—a Venetian ambassador—also reported that despite the general rules of public appearance, he was allowed to visit the queen Despina Khatun in person (Grey). Such encounters with women would not be possible in 1617—during Shah Abbas I's reign (re. 1588-1629)—as reported by Spanish diplomat de Silva Figueroa, since the rules of public appearance for women were stricter (Figueroa). While Abbas I's reign changed the rules on courtesans' interactions with the outside world, it was also known as a period when same-sex eroticism was accepted in public, and with the Shah's personal interest in the matter, celebrated in the Safavid court. Same-sex eroticism was less stark during Shah Abbas II (re. 1642-1666), or Shah Soltan Hosein's reigns (re. 1694-1722) and in the latter case it would be severely punished (Rahbari). Abbas II's court attempted to ban male same-sex relations (Chardin *Chardin's Travelogue, Volume Two* 333; Hejazi 20; Sherley et al. 534). Soltan Hosein went further and started one of the most socially intolerant periods after his coronation. He proscribed all kinds of “un-Islamic” behavior, from the production and consumption of alcohol and visitation of coffeehouses, to women going out unaccompanied by male escorts, and even recreational activities such as pigeon-flying and playing games (Encyclopaedia Iranica “Soltan Hosayn”; Nasiri 35-48).

Before the Safavid and during the first half of Safavid ruling in Persia unrestrained representations of sexuality in the public spaces were more prevalent including women's appearances in public spaces. There is not enough evidence to discuss a possible linear increase in the oppression of expressions of sexuality from the beginning of the era towards its end, but the intolerance reached a peak during the Shi'ite extremist reign of Shah Soltan Hosein (re. 1694-1722) (Jackson and Lockhart 312-315). It is thus important not to consider the entire Safavid period as a homogeneous era in terms of gender and sexual expression. As Babayan and Najmabadi discussed, there are no monolithic rendering of Islamic [or Shi'ite] sexual discourses and practices throughout the ages.

Concluding Remarks

This study looked into the Western diaries and travelogues, and accounts of native and local Persian historians, writers, hakims and artists to explore and provide a descriptive account of discourses of gender and sexuality during the Safavid reign in Persia. The research offered not only an exploratory and comparative image of sexuality in Safavid Persia through the Western and oriental lenses, but also tried to place itself within the criticism of the orientalist historical literature on Safavid Persia (and sometimes on the Middle East) by performing a content analysis and recognizing and pointing out the orientalist aspects of Western literature on the matter. When possible, comparisons were made between the perceptions of Western writers and local evidence to investigate the orientalist approaches and images formed around the Safavid period.

A general review of the studies of this period showed that there were certain attempts to control sexuality by religious and moral principles backed by religious entities whose relation to the central royal powers shifted. Despite some attempts to control sexual expression, sexuality was still strongly visible for most of the Safavid reign. Safavid sexual discourses have been discussed as bearing fundamental contradictions because of being based on two opposite forces, (i) Shi'ite Islamic religion and (ii) the mythical character of Persian king's sovereignty. Some have discussed that the combination of Shah's mythical power and his charisma with him being on the top of the religious hierarchy made it difficult to make a distinction between state's political and religious authority (Rahbari). However, Arjomand discusses that within the Shi'ite viewpoint of religious authority, the authority of the Prophet passed on to the Imams and devolved upon the “ulama” after the *Occultation of the Twelfth Imam*¹⁹ could easily be reconciled with the Shah's religious authority if he did not have claims of being heir to the Prophet.

¹⁹ It is at the center of the Twelver Shi'ite Islamic belief that the twelfth Imam, Mahdi or Imam Zaman (Imam of Time) has disappeared but is alive and will reappear (*Zohur*) one day to fill the world with justice.

The research additionally showed that during the Safavid period gender and sexual binarism did not dominate the forms of expression and behavior. Instead, multiple forms of expressions of genders and sexualities existed during this era. Alternative sexualities—other than the binary forms recognized in the modern or contemporary discourses—were explicit in the public social life, and thus it is more accurate to speak of a gender/sexuality continuum as the prevalent model. Consequently, while the discourse did not challenge biological sex, the fundamental differentiation of masculinity and femininity were not valid and sexual relationships were not confined to the heterosexual relationships.

Another important finding is that gender and sexuality depended not only on sex and desire but also on other factors such as age, physical appearance and socio-cultural status in which relations to embodied and imagined forms of “masculinities/femininities” were focal for categorizations. Modern concepts of masculinity and femininity did not apply to the Safavid embodied and performed possibilities of gender and sexuality. According to Shay (136-137), masculine codes did not only include physical prowess but even stressed on possessing literary talents, being a good and generous host, having an appreciation of fine food and drink, carrying on a witty conversation, and possessing knowledge of music.

Western travelogues of the Safavid period undeniably provide exclusive anthropological, historical, geographical, and demographical information. The information was sometimes complementary and other times at odds with each other, or with the local historians’ accounts. It is important to note that while both Western travelers and the local historians captured some aspects of sexuality and gender, all of them were biased at times because of their dependency on courts, religious, military and social institutions for whom the reports were prepared, and thus far from impartial.

The idea of sexual oppression and cultural corruption in the travelogues of the Safavid period were based on the contextually formed sensibilities and perceptions by Western observers of the natural, social and sexual life. Diversity of gender and sexual forms and what is considered “same-sex” relationships, the existence of polygamy and harems, sexual practices at early ages, advances in medicines to enhance sexual desire, sex work and sexual entertainment industry during the Safavid period, all propelled the Western travelers to build up an image in which Persians were depicted as creatures overfilled with sexual drive. The articulations of the many different forms of sexual and gender expressions were either remarkably judgmental or accompanied by abhorrence or remarked as the indicator of oriental primitivism.

The travelogue narratives clearly symbolized the West as “the civilization,” whereas the Orient equalled backwardness. The Orient was depicted as contrasting and opposing to the Western progressive ideas of rationality and morality; ideas which were reinforced by the amounts of findings by the travellers, who depicted the Orient as the “opposite” and the sexual and cultural “other.” Their orientalist depictions of gender and sexuality—that is also based on a notion of universal ethics and Western superiority—depicted the discourses of Safavid sexuality as incomprehensible, non-humanistic and sometimes animalistic. The images such travel writers created of Persia were sometimes as boasting as the eroticism in the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*; of boundless, tireless, and insatiable eroticism and sex taking place between men who were endlessly satisfying themselves, and with women who were loaded with sexual appeal and assent. These images are the representatives of the imaginary and fantastical myth of “Oriental sexuality”—discussed by Said—as the prevailing idea in the discourses built by Western travelogues. The construction of such an image of the Orient was crucial in that it was not only beneficial but also necessary to differentiate and dignify the West as the representative of the morally superior attributes such as dynamicity, merriment, and civility. The construction of the oriental sexuality also generated from the same ideology in which the Orient was defined as a wild and “beastly” world with a natural order; it was much closer to the nature than it was to culture and “civilization” and thus was over-occupied with basic instincts such as lust, hence “the beastly manner” of the oriental [hu]man.

While these narratives usually described discourses of sexuality and sexual behaviours of the inhabitants of the visited territories as profligate and decadent, they did include elements of amazement, praise and sometimes nostalgia. These elements, as discussed in the literature on queer imageries of the Orient also create exoticized narratives of sexual anarchy and utopias of fluidity (e.g. Behdad; Moussawi).

The civilizational discourses of the travelogues have not only affected the Western understandings of Safavid sexual discourses. Through what Tavakoli-Targhi (Preface, X) called *de-historicizing and*

de-temporalizing, the Iranian intellectuals who studied the Western travelogues and were influenced by their Orientalism, propagated the narratives through which the Persian history was portrayed as backwards and non-civilized. These intellectuals believed that the salvation rested in emulating the West (Karalius 7). These self-perceptions of the Orient are traceable in the writings of the early modern writers, and some of the Persian literature discussing sexuality and gender during the Safavid period, briefly introduced in the research background section of this paper.

To conclude, this research did not intend to associate gender and sexual categories with the modern queer categories of gender, but to discuss and show that these discourses of non-binary genders and sexualities predated and prevailed modern conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity. Despite the existing narratives, the history of the Orient is not condemned to remain silent about itself or to be defined and identified through the pens of the Western travelers who thought it needed to be tamed and civilized. At the same time, it is important to keep a distance from the romanticized perspectives where the ancient Orient is seen as a queer paradise, and devoid of oppressive cultural regimes. To recognize that the diversity of non-binary gendered and sexual diversity was not a luxury of the Safavid Shahs and the elite is to believe that Safavids had a culture in which, dualisms did not yet dominate the modes of thinking. We can then see Safavid sexual discourses in a different light that investigates, accredits and understands premodern sexualities, while critically analyzing social factors that contributed to the formation of structural and interpersonal power relations that legitimized social and sexual liberties and constraints.

Acknowledgement: This research is made possible by the support of Flanders Research Foundation (FWO).

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