

Abstracts and Bios

Keynote Speaker

Janet Afary (and Roger Friedland), Mellichamp Chair in Global Religion and Modernity, and Professor of Religious Studies, the University of California, Santa Barbara

Title: **The Growing Popularity of Non-Standard Marriages and Unions in Iran and South West Asia/North Africa (SWANA)**

Abstract:

In recent years, there has been a significant change in union formations in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia (MENASA) region. The age at first marriage for both men and women has gone up, while rates of marriage have been declining. These trends conflict with customary attitudes in the region that see marriage as a fundamental aspect of a man or woman's transition to adulthood. Researchers in different parts of the region are also reporting significant increases in rates of non-standard, particularly 'urfi customary marriages in the region. Because such marriages are often not registered, it has been extremely difficult to document this trend. In 2017-2018, we used Facebook (FB) banner ads in seven Muslim-majority countries to survey the young and computer-literate populations of Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, Palestine, Tunisia, and Turkey as well as those living in diaspora. This paper will look at a cross section of those who took our survey and either expressed their attitudes about non-standard marriages in the region (*sigheh* and *mut'a*/*'urfi/misyār*) and/or admitted that they were currently living in such a union, rather than in a formal marriage.

Bio:

Janet Afary holds the Mellichamp Chair in Global Religion and Modernity at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she is a Professor of Religious Studies. Her books include: *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge University Press, 2009, winner of the British Society for Middle East Studies Annual Book Prize).

Panel Presenters

Mostafa Abedinifard, Assistant Professor without Review of Persian Literary Culture and Civilization, University of British Columbia

Title: **Negotiating (Un)Desirability: Non-Normative Bodies and the Patriarchal Economy of Power in Modern Iranian Fiction and Film**

Abstract:

This paper explores understudied characters in select instances of Iranian fiction and film that feature bodies deemed undesired within a gendered context, and vis-à-vis what will be identified as hegemonic narratives of embodiment in modern Iranian culture and society. The major characters analyzed are the protagonists of Sadeq Hedayat's short stories "Ābjī Khānum" (also translated as "The Spinster") and "Dāvūd the Hunchback," who are respectively afflicted with "ugliness" and "kyphosis." Briefly discussed are also minor characters in Ahmad Mahmoud's novel *Hamsāyih-hā* [*The Neighbors*]; Rakhshan Banietemad's film *Rūsarī-ābī* [*The Blue-Veiled*] (1994); and Asghar Faradi's film *Shahr-i Zibā* [*The Beautiful City*] (2004). In focusing on the

characters' non-normative embodiments, based on their age, physique, disability, appearance, and skin color, the paper will foreground the ways that these gendered beings' rejected corporealities affect their possibilities for negotiating un/desirability within interpersonal and social relationships, while also revealing the interplay between embodiment, social meaning, and material and social conditions in modern Iranian society and culture.

Bio:

A literary critic and cultural historian, Mostafa Abedinifard is currently an Assistant Professor without review of Persian Literary Culture and Civilization in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia. His research interests include critical diversity studies, mainly gender and sexuality. Prior to joining UBC in 2018, Abedinifard was a SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations at the University of Toronto. His articles have appeared in *Asian Cinema*, *The British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*, *Social Semiotics*, *de genere: Journal of Literary, Postdoctoral and Gender Studies*, *Iran Nameh*, *Literary Criticism* (Tehran), *Mahoor Music Quarterly* (Tehran). Abedinifard's current research projects involve monographs on men and masculinities in modern Iranian literature and culture, humor in Iran, and Persian literature as world literature.

James Barry, Research Fellow at Deakin University in Australia
Title: **Intermarriage and Ethnic Boundaries in Iran**

Abstract:

Iran is a multiethnic society, and intermarriage between ethnic groups is common, particularly in major cities like Tehran. At a national level, ethnic difference is managed by an official avoidance of its existence, historically through an emphasis on Islam and Iranian-ness in forming Iranian national unity. Therefore, interethnic unions which involve religious difference are more complicated. In these cases, such marriages can disrupt family relations, as well as become the concern of the wider ethnic community. Intermarriage between Iranian Armenian and Iranian Muslim couples is one such example. As intermarriage is an increasing practice that remains highly taboo, especially from the perspective of Armenian institutions in Iran, narratives around the topic tend to elicit sharp reactions from the families of the couple. This tension – which relates directly to Barth's description of the ethnic boundary – has become less taboo in recent years and more openly discussed. This paper, therefore, will look at the narratives around marriage between Armenians and Iranian Muslims within the context of wider debates around ethnicity in Iran.

Bio:

James Barry, PhD, is a Research Fellow at Deakin University in Australia. Barry is an anthropologist specialising in ethnic and religious identity in Iran. His monograph, *Armenian Christians with Iran*, was published through Cambridge University Press in 2019. He is presently expanding his research focus to Sunni Muslims in Iran, and is currently working with the Chair of Islamic Studies at the Alfred Deakin Institute. Barry's research has been published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Iranian Studies* and *the British Journal of Middle East Studies*.

Nasim Basiri, PhD Student, Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Oregon State University
Title: **The Politics of Love in Iran: Implications of “Religious Hypocrisy of Clerics” in the Form of Temporary Marriages**

Abstract:

For the last recent decades, family structures, marriage, social contracts and love have been in transition through reformed versions of Islamic law in Iranian society. Temporary marriage or *sigheh* however, has been recognized and defended by the Islamic Republic as a solution to the sexual needs of the Iranian youth since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

In order to offer a critique, this paper aims to reflect on the implications of temporary marriage for the Iranian youth through looking at the jurists' patriarchal defense of temporary marriage which favors religious men the most, their denial and opposition to premarital or extramarital sex and ultimately how Iranian women and their children of temporary marriage have been the main victims of this so-called “Islamic solution to the social ill”.

This paper utilizes a mixed methods approach to highlight the implications of “Religious Hypocrisy of Clerics” in the form of temporary marriages, aiming to uncover the institutionalized violence associated with temporary marriage, a justified law in post-revolutionary Iran targeting Iranian nation in general and women in particular.

Bio:

Nasim Basiri is an Iranian poet, activist and feminist researcher, currently works as a Graduate Teaching Assistant and studies a PhD in Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Oregon State University. She is also a columnist for *Independent Persian* who offers commentary and opinions on human rights and women's issues in Iran.

Dominic Parviz Brookshaw, Associate Professor of Persian Literature, University of Oxford
Title: **Shirin's Equal, Leyli's Rival: allusion, embodiment, and archetypal stand-off in the poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad**

Abstract:

Through a close reading of key poems from *Divar* (1956) and *Tavallodi digar* (1964), this paper will explore instances of allusion (*talmih*) in the poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad (d. 1967) to two archetypal heroines of premodern Persian poetry: Shirin and Leyli. It will be shown how Farrokhzad employs allusions to Shirin to provide a chaste backdrop for her own erotic exploration of female sexuality through a process of embodiment. In contrast, Farrokhzad's allusions to Leyli facilitate a powerful stand-off with received notions of female beauty and established patterns of female-male relations. When alluding to Leyli, Farrokhzad appears to reject the paragon of femininity she represents and seeks to replace Leyli with a new archetype of her own design. In the interest of contextualising the freshness of Farrokhzad's employment of gynocentric *talmih*, this paper will also draw on lyric poetry written by women poets of early Qajar Iran in which similar, if not identical, use of allusions to Shirin and Leyli is made.

Bio:

Dominic Parviz Brookshaw is Associate Professor of Persian Literature at the University of Oxford, and Senior Research Fellow in Persian at Wadham College. Dominic currently serves on the Editorial Board of *Middle Eastern Literatures* and, for a decade (2004-2014), he served as

Assistant Editor for *Iranian Studies*. He is a former member of both the Board of the International Society for Iranian Studies, and the Governing Council of the British Institute of Persian Studies. His latest book is, *Hafiz and His Contemporaries: Poetry, Performance, and Patronage in Fourteenth-century Iran* (I B Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2019).

Alexander Jabbari, Farzaneh Family Assistant Professor of Persian Language and Literature, the University of Oklahoma

Title: **Race Against Time: Racial Temporality and Sexuality in Modern Iran**

Abstract:

Scholars of race and sexuality in the US (and elsewhere) have long argued that the two are mutually constitutive and should be studied together. This essay attempts to think race and sexuality together in modern Iran. I argue that temporality links race and sexuality together through the figure of the Indian in Iraj Pizishkzad's massively popular Persian novel *Da'i Jan Napil'un* ("Dear Uncle Napoleon," 1973). I first explore some of the ways in which Indians had been racialized in premodern Persianate and Islamic texts, before turning to the position of the Indian as temporally out of place in modern Iran, illustrated by the Indian characters in *Da'i Jan Napil'un*. I demonstrate how what I term 'mock Hindi' in the novel uses sexual innuendo to mark the Indian characters as racially and temporally out of place. Finally, I turn to the enduring use of 'mock Hindi' in contemporary Iranian media, which continues to simultaneously racialize and sexualize Indians in the Iranian imagination.

Bio:

Alexander Jabbari is the Farzaneh Family Assistant Professor of Persian Language and Literature at the University of Oklahoma. His research focuses on modernization, sexuality, and literary exchange between Iran and India, and he is currently working on a book about the emergence of literary history as a genre of writing in Persian and Urdu in the 19th and early 20th century. He received his PhD in Comparative Literature with a designated emphasis in Feminist Studies in 2017 from the University of California, Irvine.

Ehsan Sheikhalharam, PhD Candidate Teaching Fellow, Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Title: **Crumbling of Spatial Boundaries and the Collapse of the Intimate Domain in Farhadi's Cinema**

Abstract:

In rethinking the canon, Fredric Jameson draws a line between the cultural productions of the third-world and the western literature. The radical difference resides in the contrasting social structures undergirding them. While in the west, "the private individual destiny" is sheltered off from the political, in the cast of the third-world countries, he argues in his 1986 article, private life is always entangled in social, economic, and political antagonisms. Since the configuration of the personal and the political are extraneous to the western experience, cultural products of the third-world are somehow alien to "western readers." Jameson's characterization ensures a troubling consequence: non-canonical forms do not offer similar satisfaction to that of the canon itself. The task here, then, is to think of examples that fall outside this rather exceptionalist claim. Asghar Farhadi's acclaimed film, *The Salesman* (*Le Client*), poses a challenge to Jameson's

thesis – not by refuting its basic assumption, but precisely by confirming it. What the international audience identified in the story had little to do with the metalevel constellation of private and public, but with the affective level of protagonists' responses to their entangled circumstances. I would argue that *Le Client* adds a distinctly spatial element to Jameson's ontology of private-public. "[T]he primordial crime of capitalism," Jameson observes, resides in privatization of space, where "the older forms of collective life" are forcibly displaced. This paper identifies the rather disturbing events represented in *Le Client* as spatial problems: protagonists find themselves occupying places that are fraught with accusations, traumas, and agonies. This reading of Farhadi's film suggests that the private domain is constantly transgressed through over-proximity, involuntary overlaps, and undesired interpenetrations. Beyond engagement with Jameson's work, this paper draws on theories of space and geography to articulate the problem of spatial proximity.

Bio:

Ehsan Sheikhalharam is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Religious Studies at UNC-Chapel Hill. Holding master's degrees in architecture and religion, his work is concentrated around theories of space and sexuality. His research has been published in *American Academy of Religion's Reading Religion*, *CLOG*, *WIT Press*, *ARTHEO*, and *ZEMCH*. He has received recognitions from prestigious institutions including the University of Miami, Dumbarton Oak, and Roshan Cultural Heritage Institute. Ehsan has served as a Part-Time Faculty in Architecture at the University of Miami and North Carolina State College of Design. He has also served as a guest critic at the DUKE University.

Mahdi Tourage, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Social Justice and Peace Studies at King's University College, London, Ontario

Title: *The Supreme Leader and I: Erotic Desire in Iranian Female Poets Reading Their Poems for the Supreme Leader of Iran*

Abstract:

This paper is an examination of desire staged during annual poetry readings by selected Iranian female poets in the presence of the Supreme Leader of the country. Using desire as a conceptual tool in its psychoanalytical formulation I will argue that these poems, especially the highly eroticized ones, open up discursive pathways towards pleasure, creativity and agency. By way of contrast I will also discuss Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), a *New York Times* bestseller, which is her account of forming a book club in Tehran during 1990's to discuss Western literature with her seven chosen female students. By pointing out similarities of the two I will map out the hegemonic operations of masculine imaginary to which cultural productions of desire are subjected. More importantly, I will discuss their differences, which show two different models of agency and resistance that emerge under structures of subordination. The first model is Nafisi's "emancipatory model," which revolves around acts of resistance that challenge social norms and male domination and operate according to the binary logic of subordination and subversion. The annual events of poetry readings by female poets in the presence of the Supreme Leader, however, are not transgressive. In fact they conform to and support the regime's normative discourse. However, poetics of desire makes these events the locus of creative agency and erotic indulgences that surpass the regime's designs for domination and control. I will conclude that investigating the discursive conditions under which these female

poets cultivate various forms of desire (including desire for conformity) can teach us much about the complex texture of literary – and by extension political – resistance in contemporary Iran, and the feminist projects of resistance and agency.

Bio:

Mahdi Tourage, PhD (2005, University of Toronto), is currently Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Social Justice and Peace Studies at King's University College, London, Ontario. He is the author of *Rumi and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism* (Brill 2007) and edited volume *Esoteric Lacan* (with Philipp Valentini, Roman & Littlefield 2019). His publications have appeared in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, *Iranian Studies* and *International Journal of Zizek Studies*. His areas of interest are Islamic religious thought, Sufism and postmodern theories of gender and sexuality.

Maryam Zehtabi Sabeti Moqaddam, PhD candidate in comparative literature at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst

Title: Girls for Sale: The Politics of Child Marriage in Iran

In *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (2008), Sheila Jeffreys explores the intersection of marriage and prostitution. She forcefully argues that all patriarchal marriages contain elements of prostitution as they are founded upon the male sex right and the unchecked recourse of a husband to the wife's sexuality. The resemblance between marriage and prostitution becomes even more remarkable in the case of 'servile marriages' in which women are, for economic reasons, made to pledge their sexual and reproductive body as well as domestic labor to a man they feel no affection for. Child marriage, as the most blatant form of servile marriage, allows sexual access to a girl below the age of consent, as a result of an economic transaction that takes place between her family and the groom. The non-negotiable and arranged nature of the marriage for the bride as well as the significant age gap that usually accompanies such unions, ensures her oppression within her future family and further consolidates the patriarchal status quo. Child marriage, which is still flagrantly common in Iran, is the locus of the most uncharitable confluence of skewed religious traditions, atavistic cultural convictions, and unrelenting patriarchal ideology that legitimizes a man's claim to desire and sex, while disregarding and disparaging that of a woman. In Iran, a great many writers, intellectuals, and artists have tackled this great evil and condemned the practice through laying bare the traumatic physical and psychological consequences of such marriages. *The Mare* (1985) by Ali Zhekan is the prime example of this undertaking in filmmaking and masterfully depicts the prevailing feelings, values, and attitudes toward child marriage. Drawing upon this film, I wish to shed light on not only the plight of child brides in Iran, but also the definition and function of marriage in a religious, patriarchal system that lends its unwavering support to this practice and ensures its endurance.

Bio:

Maryam Zehtabi Sabeti Moqaddam is a PhD candidate in comparative literature at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst. She is particularly interested in women, gender, and sexuality studies and the intersection of religion and feminism. She is currently writing her dissertation on the representations of prostitution in Persian literature and film. She also aspires to introduce Iranian

women writers to Western audiences through translation and criticism of their works. Her translations have appeared in *Asymptote*, *The Guardian*, *MDash*, and *Silk Road Review*.

Leila Zonouzi, PhD candidate in Global Studies, the University of California at Santa Barbara
Title: Integration in Diaspora: A Study of Interracial Partnerships in Iranian Diasporic Literature

Abstract:

According to Milton Gordon, intermarriage can be considered a major indicator of assimilation in the migration experience (Brettell and Hollifield 2015, 124). While the study of assimilation and acculturation has advanced significantly since Gordon's groundbreaking 1964 theorization, migrants' choice of friendships and marriage partners has remained pivotal in the study of integration. Seeing as Iranians occupy a liminal racial identity, or what Maghbouleh calls "racial hinge" (Maghbouleh 2017, 5), the study of intermarriages and partnerships can offer valuable information about the ways migrants view themselves or aspire to be viewed by the larger society. In this paper, I will be analyzing relationships in diaspora within the Iranian diasporic literature, works such as Farnoosh Moshiri's *Against Gravity* (2006), Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi's *Call Me Zebra* (2018), and Porochista Khakpour's *Sons and Other Flammable Objects* (2007). I argue that by portraying these relationships as interracial, these authors examine the issues of race and immigrant identity and illustrate that by entering a relationship with a white partner, Iranian diasporic persons demonstrate that they have fully integrated and acculturated in their host countries. I will also be analyzing the degree to which first generation and 1.5-generation migrants' Iranian identity is salient in their marriages and partnerships as portrayed in these three diasporic novels. I will conclude that depending on the time and means of migration, the migrants' commitment to their Iranian identity varies.

Bio:

Leila Zonouzi is a PhD candidate in Global Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. Her dissertation research is a comparative diasporic study between Iran, Egypt, and Turkey, where she looks at securitization and its effects on the creation of diasporas.

Roundtable Remarks

Janet Afary, the Mellichamp Chair in Global Religion and Modernity, and Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara

Title: Iranian Romance in the Digital Age: from Arranged Marriages to White Marriages

Janet Afary will be speaking about their forthcoming edited book (with Jesilyn Faust), *Iranian Romance in the Digital Age: From Arrange Marriage to White Marriage*, which is scheduled to appear with Bloomsbury Press in 2021. She will discuss the dramatic changes that have taken place in the last forty years, in romantic relationships and in the institution of marriage, at the village, tribal, and urban levels.

Bio:

Janet Afary holds the Mellichamp Chair in Global Religion and Modernity at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she is a Professor of Religious Studies. Her books include:

Sexual Politics in Modern Iran (Cambridge University Press, 2009, winner of the British Society for Middle East Studies Annual Book Prize).

Mehrangiz Kar, writer, attorney, and activist specializing in women's rights and family law
Title: **Laws against Love and Loving in Iran**

After the victory of Islamic revolution, love and loving were locked up within legal boundaries to an extent that Iranian women had to forget love and loving due to the fear of legal restrictions and had to love only in the context of marital life, in cases when the husband has sexual desires and enjoys sexual affairs with the wife. The leaders of religious- revolutionary government in power assumed that women would not violate such harsh laws on love due to the fear of legal violence. They also assumed that with the implementation of such laws, single women would wait for a marriage proposal by men, accepting all sorts of sexual restraints and never falling in love with another man. The leaders were expecting an ideal society for men and basically in this area of human life, “love and sexual crimes” will not occur, so the Islamic rulers do not need to deal with such crimes. The penalties were so severe that the rulers believed Iranian women, though undesirable and violent for them, would never seek for relationships with other men. According to the leaders, men also do not need extramarital sex despite having legal permission for polygamy. Through ordering drastic punishments including executions, they also assumed that LGBTQ people would abandon their sexual orientation due to the fear of prosecution. Based on the history of such discriminatory and violent laws on love and loving in post-revolutionary Iran, Kar looks at the failure of Islamic Republic’s orders and intends to look at the escape routes Iranian people in general and women in particular found to break the traditional and legal taboos. She also highlights a number of discriminatory laws on love and loving imposed on Iranian nation after the Islamic revolution.

Bio:

Mehrangiz Kar is a prominent writer, attorney, and activist specializing in women's rights and family law. Currently the Senior Technical Advisor for Rule of Law at Siamak Pourzand Foundation, she was formerly a visiting scholar at Harvard University, Brown University, University of Cape Town, Wellesley College, California State University Northridge (CSUN) and Brookings Institution. Having practiced law in the Islamic Republic of Iran for 22 years, she has published numerous books and articles on issues related to law, gender equality and democracy in Iran and abroad. Kar has received several international awards for her human rights endeavors including the Democracy Award from the National Endowment for Democracy, Ludovic-Trarieux International Human Rights Prize, and the Human Rights First Award. Examples of her books published in Iran relevant to the topic of this case study include: *Women’s Participation in Politics: Obstacles and Possibilities* (2001), *Violence Against Women in Iran* (2000), *Legal Structure of the Family System in Iran* (1999), and *Elimination of Gender Discrimination: A Comparison of the Convention On Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Iran’s Contemporary Laws* (1999). Her book, *Violence Against Women in Iran* (2000), has turned into an essential reading and a reference for research on VAW in Iran. She has also published a number of journal articles and book chapters in English in recent years.

Nayereh Tohidi, Professor and former chair of the Gender & Women Studies Department and currently, the founding director of the Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at California State University, Northridge

Title: The trajectory of change and continuity in the past 40 years in attitude, norms and discourses toward love, marriage, sexuality, and body politics

Bio:

Nayereh Tohidi is professor and former chair of the Gender & Women Studies Department and currently, the founding director of the Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at California State University, Northridge. She is also a research associate at the Program for Iranian Studies and the Center for Near Eastern Studies of UCLA where she has been coordinating the Bilingual Lecture Series on Iran since 2003. A native of Iran, Tohidi earned her BS (with Honors) from the University of Tehran in Psychology and Sociology and her MA and Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her teaching and research expertise include gender and development, women's movements, feminism and Islam, human rights, and ethnic issues with a focus on Iran and Republic of Azerbaijan. She is recipient of several grants, fellowships and research awards, including a year of Fulbright lectureship and research at the Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan; post-doctoral fellowships at Harvard University; Stanford University; the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; the Keddie-Balzan Fellowship at UCLA; and NEH grant to develop the MEIS Program at CSUN. She has held visiting professorships at Universities of Paris-7; UCLA, USC, Harvard, Minnesota, and Iowa. Her extensive publications include many book chapters, peer-reviewed articles, and editorship or authorship of three books: *Globalization, Gender and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts*; *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity within Unity*; and *Feminism, Democracy and Islamism in Iran*. Some of Tohidi's publications have been translated into several languages and used in university textbooks in different countries. She has integrated her transnational human/women's rights activism and advocacy with excellence in academic work and scholarship, including frequent media appearances and public lectures at international conferences as invited keynote speaker or panelist. Tohidi has also served as a consultant to the United Nations (UNICEF and UNDP) on projects concerning gender and development, and women and civil society building in the Middle East and post-Soviet Eurasia. She represented women NGOs at both the third and fourth World Conferences on Women in Nairobi and Beijing sponsored by the United Nations. Since 2015, Dr. Tohidi has also joined the faculty of the online Institute for Social Sciences-Iran Academia based in the Netherlands.