

Women's Sexuality: the Safavid Legacy

Faegheh Shirazi*

Dept. of Middle Eastern Studies University of Texas at Austin

Abstract: Literature from the Safavid era suggests that issues of female fertility, sterility, and sexuality were controlled by a well-entrenched patriarchy. Muslim women placed trust in the learned *hakim* or male "healers"- believing that they were following religious doctrine established by the Prophet himself. Consequently, women who could neither read nor interpret the Qu'ran deferred to the *hakim*, participating in elaborate ritualistic practices to promote fertility and to win their husbands' affection. Some would suggest that this collective dependency on and submission to patriarchal control—sealed during the Safavid era—springs from a historical trinity comprised of the Prophet Mohammad, his son-in-law Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, and Majlesi, the 16th century Shi'i *alim*.

Keywords: Safavids, Iran, Shi'i Islam, Ritual, Talisman, Medicine of the prophet and spiritual medicine.

INTRODUCTION

A majority of Iranian historians agree that the Safavid dynasty (16th to 18th centuries) made substantial contributions to Iranian religious culture, including the establishment of Shi'ism as the state religion. Of particular interest from the Safavid era is *elm-e ramel*, *fonun-e sehr va jadu*; that is, the science of geomancy, the art of sorcery and witchcraft, and a belief in the power of various *jen / jinn* (supernatural beings). These folk practices, legitimized under the banner of "Islam," have been used for centuries to prescribe curative remedies for diseases and ailments.

An impressive number of influential Shi'i *ulama* (religious scholars) from the Safavid era authored popular religious texts on *fonun-e ramel*, *sehr* and *jadu*, texts which addressed sexual concerns pertaining to both men and women. Although sexual matters were considered a societal taboo, men and women alike knew who to consult and where to obtain potent remedies from to overcome specific sexual problems.

The most intimate and private aspects of women's lives — fertility, sterility, and sexuality — are discussed and documented in literature from the Safavid era. The purpose of this article is to examine those sources, and particularly, their connection to *Olum-e ramel* (the science of geomancy), *jadu* (witchcraft), *sehr* (magic), *nojum* (astrology), and *Olum-e gharibeh* (strange/magical science). Secondly, this article will discuss remedies, potions, and advice offered in these manuals for sexually related problems — curative prescriptions that draw on a combination of *teb-e*

rouhani (spiritual medicine) and *teb-e Mohammadi* or *teb-e nabi* (medicine of the Prophet). Professor Beeman, a linguistic anthropologist notes that some of the rituals of Shi'i Moharram (is the month of martyrdom observed for Imam Hossayn, the grandson of Prophet Mohammad) have their root of origin in pre-Islamic era, which goes back to ancient Mesopotamian rituals. Such rituals also entered into the ritual practices of Manichaeism, Judaism and Christianity. To this, I add that perhaps the traditional Zoroastrian religious culture can easily be traced in the Shi'i culture of Iranian people. For example, the scent of rose water or *gulab*, or burning of the wild rue or *esfand* in many of the Iranian ritual ceremonies are for the purpose of the purification of the air, and averting the evil eyes.

Additionally, this article will shed light on the ritualistic practices women engaged in to combat infertility. A woman's desperation to have a successful, full-term pregnancy, to give birth to a male child, or to remain the favorite wife in the household and avoid dealing with a *havo* (co-wife) often meant engaging in practices that were potentially harmful. It is impossible to determine the success rate of these ritualistic practices; one can only analyze the prescriptive side of the equation.

Finally, the central objective of this paper is to shed light on patriarchy as a structure to promote sexual advantage and domination over women by keeping literacy—and especially the interpretation of religious texts and sayings—a male-only privilege. I intend to demonstrate how men who were regarded by their respective cultures as "pious" and "holy" purposefully manipulated and controlled women by exploiting their most intimate sexual secrets. Beginning with the Safavid era, *ulama* and *imams* placed women's bodies and their sexuality on the table for male discussion. This phenomenon, the legacy of which remains active

*Address correspondence to this author at the Dept. of Middle Eastern Studies University of Texas at Austin; Tel: 5129121921; E-mail: fshirazi@Austin.utexas.edu

in 21st century Iran, could only have been possible through a centuries-long consolidation of patriarchal power-supported by a literate male élite and the authority of *ahadith*.

In current scholarly literature on patriarchy, feminism, and the power of sexuality, one discovers general consensus—from feminists to Foucauldians—that the female body is a site of power, and therefore “a location upon which dominance is established and docility accomplished.” [1]. Female sexuality, especially in its most potent or blatant forms is demonized- it becomes woman’s job to preserve her chastity, but also to avoid *fitna* or chaos, tempting men or appearing promiscuous. The potent sexuality of woman always remained as an intriguing subject for many centuries among many religious groups.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data for this research relies on a plethora of available books and publications, some in the original Persian and others, the Persian translation of various manuscripts dating from the 16th and 17th centuries. Additional manuals consulted for this study include *konz al-Hosayn* [2], *Haftad va do div*, *Olum-e gharibeh* [3], *Majmu`eh-e olume gharibeh*, *Kashkul-e Shaykh Baha`i* [4], *Asrar-e Ghasemi dar Elm-e kimiya, simiya, limiya, rimiya, va himiya* [5] and [6].

Today a large number of popular manuscripts dating from the 16th century are still used as references in the modern era. These include *Behar al-Anwar* and *Hilyat al-Mottaqin*, both authored by Alameh Mohammad Bagher Majlesi. Majlesi’s books in particular his *Hilyat al-Mottaqin* for the first 10 years of the Islamic Revolution of Iran (1979) became a well-known household item as numerous copies were purchased and read by many. The popularity of this particular book is evident by its multiple reprints. At the pick of its popularity we could divide the readers into two big general categories. The first group are those who would read it for religious purposes, as they believed what Majlesi said has religious legitimacy, and also wanted to know how to be more pious as the government is Islamic-they did not want to miss the band wagon. The second group (including myself) were just curious about the content of the book and read it to learn about the social, religious and cultural aspects of the Shi`i Iranians during the time of Majlesi.

In this study, I have relied heavily on Majlesi’s *Hilyat al-Mottaqin* as a major source for my research. Majlesi

wrote numerous Shi`i religious texts, many of which have been enthusiastically revived and sanctioned by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Shirin Mahdavi [7] notes the rise of orthodoxy under the Safavids and the growing power of *ulama*, which “... culminat[ed] in the unprecedented political, social, and religious power of ‘Allama Muhammad Baqir Majlisi (1627-1700?).” [7]. In fact, Majlesi held several governmental posts, earning titles such as Shaykh al-Islam and Imam Jum`a (1686) [8]. “...[Majlesi’s] title of Shaykh al-Islam changed to Mullabashi on the accession of Shah Sultan Husayn to the throne.” [8]. Thus, Allamah Majlesi not only attained the highest religious title possible but also used his impressive power to enforce specific social and political agendas.

Referring to Allama Majlesi’s *Hilyat al-Muttaqin*, Mahdavi emphasizes the challenge in categorizing this book. Mahdavi concedes that it is not a book of law but rather falls between two categories: *akhlaq* (morals) and *adab* (manner). Although Majlesi voices nothing more than personal opinion, and dominate cultural patriarchy of his time. He cleverly attributes this opinion to either the Shi`i imams or to the Prophet Mohammad. Nevertheless, Majlesi is perceived as an authority since no one questions his sources. Unfortunately, his seventeenth-century views on women and their roles in society are unmistakably misogynistic. These views have been adopted by *ulama* over the centuries—up to and including the 1978 Islamic Revolution of Iran. *Hilyat al-Muttaqin* has been reprinted countless times and used as a Shi`i primer to further fundamentalist doctrine in Iran.

In his detailed examination of Baqir al-Majlesi, Andrew J. Newman critiques other scholars’ writings on Majlesi’s position, fame and influence on Iranian Shi`ism [9].

Newman emphasizes the similarities between Prophetic medicine and Shi`i Prophetic medicine: ... both [forms of medicine] are conventionally portrayed as ferociously anti-rationalist. Both al-Majlisi and Shi`i prophetic medicine would appear to have been exceptionally well-suited to each other” [9].

According to Dr. Husain F. Nagamia, the Qur`an contains scant information on medicinal substances or practices [10]. There are only occasional references to ingesting wholesome foods, such as honey—or to abstaining from harmful intoxicants, such as alcohol. Early in the Islamic era, however, *hadith* (sayings and traditions of the Prophet) literature was compiled in a

collection called the "Prophetic Medicine". Nagamia points to considerable misconceptions throughout this literature in terms of defining Islamic Medicine. Referring to these early authors, Nagamia suggests that definitions of Islamic Medicine vary widely, depending upon individual perspective. Indeed, a definition of terms depends on the intention of each author, as well as the cultural, historical, scientific, geopolitical and pharmacological contexts. Nagamia further states that:

- These edicts expounded on virtues of diet, natural remedies, and management of simple ailments like headache, fever, sore throat, conjunctivitis, etc. More importantly, however, injunctions were prescribed against contact with persons having a contagious disease; for instance leprosy, or entering or leaving an area of an epidemic or plague, thus helping to limit the disease. In addition, a large number of traditions were collected under the title of '*Spiritual Medicine*'. These were a collection of the verses of the Qur'an or prayers to the Almighty, which invoked blessings and which had to be recited when affliction was to be expurgated [11].

In medieval Islamic history, Ibn Khaldun (1332 to 1406 A.D.) – perhaps the most famous historian and jurist of his period – clearly states in the *Muqaddimah* (an introduction to his larger work on Muslim history) that the pre-Islamic Arabs employed a type of medicine that was entirely experiential and not always very effective. This traditional medicine was passed generation to generation by tribal members. There can be no doubt, for example, that among Arabs of the early Islamic era, Bedouin medicine was widely practiced. However, as Nagamia points out, no evidence exists that Islam sanctioned this type of medicine.

Cyril Elgood (1918 -1953) insisted that Prophetic medicine was a pre-Islamic form of medical practice, implying that scientific vision among orthodox Arabs was restrained by their religion. [9] Newman quotes Elgood's definition of Islamic Medicine (which runs contradictory to that of Nagamia):

- ... a body of knowledge of Medicine that was inherited by the Muslims in the early phase of Islamic History (40-247 AH / 661-861 AD) from mostly Greek sources, but to which became added medical knowledge from, Persia, Syria, India and Byzantine. This knowledge was not

only to become translated into Arabic, the literary and scientific lingua franca of the time, but was to be expounded, assimilated, exhaustively added to and subsequently codified, and 'islamicized' [10].

Thus *al-teb al-nabawi* (Medicine of the Prophet), *al-teb-al Islami* (Islamic Medicine) and *al-teb al ruhani* (spiritual Medicine) are all common terms used for the same type of medicine. However, according to Johnstone, " This medicine [*al-teb al-nabawi*] remained distinct while interacting with medicine which was then being learned from Greek, Persian and Indian sources, the latter process resulting in a synthesis in the hands of such masters as al-Tabari, al-Razi and Ibn Sina and known as Islamic medicine." [12]. Clearly, as a result of conflicting sources and interpretations, one must accept a certain level of ambiguity regarding the term "Islamic medicine."

Willem Floor [13] states that during the rule of Qajar Persia (1781 -1925), three systems of medical knowledge prevailed. First, the Greek or Galenic, known in Persian (and Arabic) as *teb-e yunani*, practiced mostly by elites. Second, the theurgic, folk and magical medicine known as *teb-sonnati* (one of the oldest most widely practiced systems) and finally, the Prophetic medicine known as *teb-nabi*. This last system was used to

- "... domesticate Galenic and folk medicine by giving it a Moslem veneer while at the same time legitimizing questionable practices; *i.e.*, from an Islamic religious point of view, of folk and Galenic medicine ... the medical counsel attributed to the Shi'i Imams, *teb al-a`emmeh*, was added to the Prophetic medicine." [13]

In short, the medical literature attributed to the Prophet or to the Imams turned out to be a *mélange* of traditional medicine, astrology, aphrodisiac practices, and personal hygiene embroidered with Greek concepts and words.

Folk medicine was based on the belief in a spiritual world inhabited by a variety of ghouls (*ghouls*) [1], demons (*divs*), jinns (mentioned in the Qur'an), and *efreet* [2] in addition to fairies (*paris*). Thus a mixture ensued combining cultural elements with prophetic medicine, as Floor explains, "... a seamless effort to adopt the pre-Islamic Persian demonic world into the Islamic world." [13]

Numerous 16th century manuscripts may be found with chapters on female sexual matters, manuscripts such as *Kashkul-e Shaykh Baha'i* [3]. A significant number of such publications have been translated into Persian from original works in Arabic, Hindi, and Urdu such as *Konz al-Hosayn*, *Nader al-ramel*, *Jafr-e a'zam*, *Olum al-gharibeh-e haftad va do div*, and *Telesmat temteh-e Hendi taskhir-e rohaniyat va a'zam-e jenniyan*. This genre of texts, still used today in Shi'i religious circles, is especially popular among women who believe in the power of *jen* and *Olum-e gharibeh*. A close examination of these manuscripts reveals countless remedies and advice for various female ailments.

LITERATURE

By merging Shi'i Islam with popular cultural beliefs, religious authority figures have successfully dominated women and controlled their bodies for centuries. Women have been promised, for example, that if they followed the prescribed ideals of gender roles, they would be healthier physically. Likewise, if they followed the prescribed curatives for sterility, chances for conception were possible. Needless to say, illiterate women had no way of questioning the authority of *ulama*, the learned men of religion.

As Henri Masse noted in his travel accounts to Iran, a Muslim woman's value has always been equated with her fertility and, therefore, sterility is nothing less than anathema:

- In the Orient, a sterile woman has always been the object of scorn. Chardin (IV, 441) shows this clearly: "Sterile women are the most superstitious of all, for since sterility is the greatest disaster in the Orient, there is nothing in the world that a woman will not do to be rid of her disability. I have seen women who did not know what saint to make their vows to next, and they even made pilgrimages to Christian churches. All the more reason, then, to go to the Islamic oratories and sanctuaries... Sometimes they do not even hesitate to ask for an effective remedy from a Christian traveler. [14]"

In every historical period, it has been primarily women rather than men who have steadfastly believed in and adhered to remedies purporting to cure sexual problems -remedies that required the advice of a *hakim*, or religious medicine man expertly versed in the literature. Generations of women have placed great

faith in home remedies and in healing through *do'a* (prayer and supplication). They have invested *imams* and the *chahardah ma'sum* (fourteen Shi'i infallibles) with remarkable powers and have kept alive the tradition of religious banquettes or *sofrehs*, hosted and attended by women only. Many of these centuries-old traditions have emerged from the strength of women's beliefs in the power of the supernatural [15]. One might argue that a strong motivating factor behind this belief system has been the critical importance of fertility, and particularly the ability to produce a male child.

For example, among the Shi'is of Iran, a woman would choose a Shi'i saint or imam and request to be blessed with a male child. If the wish [expressed to the saint] materialized for the preferred gender, several procedures were followed. For example, a woman who previously had only daughters would vow to pierce her son's ear; thus, if she gave birth to a son, she would put rings or small hoops in the son's ears. This procedure was a form of consecration, known as *Ali Haydari Kardan*, meaning to devote the son to the first Shi'i Imam Ali. [16] Another popular vow included giving the child a religious name to honor a saint, or paying respect to Imam Ali, or his son Imam Hosayn by naming the boy *Gholam* Ali, meaning the servant of Imam Ali —or *Gholam* Hosayn, the servant of Imam Hosayn. Sometimes the devotee made a pilgrimage to the tomb of a particular saint and if her wish were granted, the child was later taken to the tomb and named after the saint. Still another example that illustrates popular religious practices is the recitation of the Qur'an in a particular ritualistic manner to be blessed with attractive children. [16]

For example, if a pregnant woman recited Sura 36 of the Qur'an (*Ya-Sin*) forty times over forty thoroughly red apples, blowing on each apple after each recitation, and ate one of the apples each day for forty days, her child would have a good complexion or color. This practice is in the literature of *Kolsum Naneh* of Mula Agha Jamal Khansari, one of the notable clergymen from the Safavid court. [17]

Ulama 's Advise on How to Chose the Best Wife, and Sexual Matters

With these practices in mind, let us examine some of the key sources in the literature of the Shi'i *ulama*. In the fourth chapter of his book *Hilyat al-Mottaqin* (The Adornment of the Pious), Alameh Mohammad Bagher Majlesi [4] devotes attention to women and sexuality, the intention of having sex, the etiquette of having sex,

the etiquette of praying before sleeping with the newlywed on the night of consummating the marriage, the rights and duties of a man and a woman as wife and husband, and special prayers for having children. [17]

Alameh Majlesi begins his chapter on sexual matters with a discussion of a *tayyib* (pious) and virginal wife:

- "... the Prophet said: "Ask in hands for virgins, because the virgin's breath is fresher, their wombs are dryer, and their breasts are fuller with milk, and they are capable to bear more children ..." [18]

The text also opens with a description of the physically ideal wife, including a preference for black eyes, good hair, a *gandomgun* (wheatish) complexion and *por gusht* (chubby) body. The preference for a light-skinned woman is mentioned twice in the same section: "Imam Reza said: lucky is the man who has a fair skinned, *sefid* [white, fair complexion] wife." [18] Yet the most interesting trait required for a good and pious wife is that she should be *zalil*, which in Persian means weak or passive; *i.e.*, a woman who can be dominated. This *zalil* trait was emphasized as pious and holy. In addition to her *zalil* ness, a marriage candidate should also be sexually obedient. A wife must "... listen to whatever her husband demands, and whenever her husband asks for sex she must agree. However, she should not insist [initiate] or demand to have sex with her husband." [18] Hence, the importance of seeking a *zalil* wife, since only a *zalil* wife will obey all such demands.

In matters of sex, the emphasis is on the man's pleasure and desire, not the woman's. As previously stated, sex must never be initiated by the woman. Here Majlesi's advice runs contradictory to the words of the Prophet Mohammad. Ironically, in the same text, Majlesi praises the Prophet for his *hadith* recognizing the fact that wives have equal sexual desires. Indeed, according to the Prophet, the husband is duty-bound to provide his wife sexual pleasure, as indicated by the following foreplay advice: "...[men] must not be in a hurry when they want to have intercourse with their wives..." [18]

In stating preference for a *zalil* or obedient wife, Majlesi again contradicts the Prophet's *hadith*. Majlesi insists that a man's (self-centered) sexual urges and desires must be fulfilled. A woman's desire is, at best,

of secondary concern. Reading further in this section, one discovers yet another requirement. The *mehr* (bridal money; a religious obligatory sum of money paid in advance to seal the marriage contract) must be kept small, so that the bride will be "cheap" to obtain. [18]

As part of the wife selection process, the "pious" woman must also pass a physical health check. Majlesi cites Imam Sadeq, insisting that the ideal woman must be able to bear childbirth easily; the "worst of women" are those who experience a difficult time during childbirth. [18] It is not clear from the source how one can predict ease in childbirth well in advance of marriage. Majlesi clearly anticipates that a long, painful labor and delivery would be cause interruption in the husband's life. In this context, even childbirth must not disturb the husband's daily routine, inconvenience his sleep patterns, or impact meal times—a consideration of paramount importance when selecting a "pious" mate. The reader must pause for a moment to appreciate how skillfully Majlesi manages perhaps to attribute his own personal marriage criteria to the words of the Prophet and Shi'i *imams*.

Majlesi continues by warning men to avoid marriage with a barren woman. The importance of a woman's fertility and the danger of barrenness are central to this section of Majlesi's writings. Working on the assumption that a "pious" woman must be a virgin at the time of marriage (a cultural requirement, not mentioned in Qur'an), how could the husband possibly determine whether or not she was fertile?

Majlesi apparently dismisses the possibility of impotence on the husband's part. Infertility is presented as a woman's issue entirely. The traditional normative culture demanded that men have offspring, a norm that Majlesi rationalizes in his writings, quoting Prophet Mohammad: "Because on the Day of Judgment I will side with other prophets and challenge you [on this choice], don't you know that [on the Day of Judgment] children will ask Allah for their father's forgiveness" [18].

Here Majlesi considers only the father as a "parent" and excludes the mother from benefiting from the pleas of her children. The assumption is that by remaining childless, a man may miss his chance to receive the blessing and forgiveness of Allah on the Day of Judgment.

The next selection from Majlesi's book is titled "Of Etiquette Regarding Marriage and Sexual Matters," and

relates to the consummation of marriage and the legality of sex between couples. This section is primarily concerned with the appropriate time of day to have intercourse to insure conception. Here contradictions abound. One part instructs the reader on the dangers of daylight in terms of *zafaf* (consummation):

- Be aware to do *zafaf* during the time when the moon is in *aghrab* (Scorpio). When there is light, *zafaf* (consummation) should not take place. Light is *makroh* (distasteful) [18].

A subsequent part sanctions having sex in the sunlight, as long as a drape is hung. Still another part suggests noontime copulation:

- If you have sex on Thursday at noon [when the sun is out], Satan will avoid this child forever, and God will bless this child with health, earning, and prosperity and goodness in religion [18].

Leaving nothing to the imagination, Majlesi provides instructions on the act of *jama`* (mounting) in this section. How to engage in intercourse correctly and how to enjoy a wife in her menses is also included (Qur`an exclusively forbids it). Majlesi states that entering a woman from her *faraj* (vagina) is forbidden during menses; however, he allows for differences of opinion on this ruling, which is for sure his own interpretation of how to deal in a situation like this- he states:

- “Some religious authorities still consider *jama`* to be *haram* (forbidden) before she does religious *qusl* (ablution), unless there is an extreme sexual urgency, in which case he can order her to rinse and clean her *faraj* (vagina) so that he can have intercourse with her” [18].

The distasteful act of *vatay dobor zan* (having anal sex) is explicitly addressed in this section, as well as admonitions about wasting semen outside of the *faraj*. Majlesi makes it clear that withdrawal is not a religiously sanctioned act, and backs this assertion with rulings by other *ulama*. The Prophet Mohammad is mentioned here regarding the advantage of foreplay with one’s wife. Imam Jafar Sadeq is also referenced to underscore the importance of not looking at the wife’s *faraj* during intercourse and not speaking to her during the sexual act. Both of these behaviors may result in children with various deficiencies such as blindness, deafness, epilepsy, or madness; worse yet, the child may become an adulterer when s/he grows up.

In the same section one finds Imam Musa’s responses to specific sexual inquiries. For example, the question is asked, “What if a man kisses the vagina of his woman?” Imam Musa replies, “It is fine.” He may possibly have meant kissing the vagina with the eyes closed? Majlesi also draws upon Imam Musa’s sage advice to sanction numerous ways of having sex with a woman. That is, a husband may penetrate the wife with every part of his body, but not with a foreign object [18].

In another section in *Hilyat al-Mottaqin*, the reader receives advice on having sex with one’s wife, or a concubine, while others are in the house. Interestingly, a man may certainly have sex with a concubine—even while others hear or witness them. The fact that this is a perfectly acceptable behavior reflects that the honor of a concubine is not worth saving. Even having anal sex with a concubine is not forbidden. Majlesi states: “According to a *sahih hadith* [no reference cited] to do *vati* (anal sex) with a concubine is alright” [18]. Apparently, engaging in sex with a concubine in no way endangers a man’s honor. By contrast, a man’s wife symbolizes his honor; therefore, the privacy of their sexual interaction must be protected. For others to hear or witness a man having sex with his own wife is distasteful and dishonorable. In other words, the honor of a man’s wife must be protected because, simply put, her honor is nothing more than an extension of his own.

It may appear odd to the reader that religious scholars devoted such time and attention to sexually explicit topics, especially in a culture that prohibits public discourse regarding the topic of sex. In Majlesi’s era, literacy was a privilege granted mostly to the upper class and to men of religious scholarship. For those few men who knew how to read and write, the subject of sex proved irresistible. Perhaps because men were forbidden from publicly discussing sex, access to material such as Majlesi’s provided an alternative, religiously sanctioned forum for exploring the curiosities of sex. Religious books with sexual content, as well as Qur`anic *tafsirs* (interpretations) and other volumes of *Sharia* (religious law) collections were readily available. One would neither be judged nor suffer any negative stigma by perusing them.

Among Majlesi’s commentaries regarding specific do’s and don’ts on sexual matters, he includes advice handed down by the Prophet to his son-in-law Imam Ali. Some of this advice runs contrary to commentary written by Majlesi in the same chapter. One specific piece of advice Majlesi attributes to the Prophet -

advice given directly to Imam Ali -is that Ali should abstain from intercourse with his wife if he is fantasizing about another woman. Several pages later Majlesi quotes Imam Ali as saying:

- “When a man sees a woman who captures his attention [sexually giving him pleasure], then he should go home and have sex with his own wife since what is with this [other] woman, is with his own wife.” [18]

Since Alameh Majlesi is regarded as one of the highest authorities in religious scholarship, it is surprising that he would make what seem to be such careless mistakes. Majlesi's writings reflect gender bias to an extreme. Women are regarded as market commodities; that is, wives are considered personal property, although property to be protected. Their honor is paramount, as has previously been stated, only because the wife is a symbol of her husband's honor. However, other women, especially those who are non-blood related, are viewed through an entirely different lens. For example, the concubine was perceived as little more than human chattel. The following opinion advanced by Majlesi exemplifies this perspective and even for the era in which it was written, belies a chilling sentiment:

Having sex with two women

- Hazrat Sadeq said: if a man has sex with a concubine and wants to have sex with another concubine [on the same day] before he does *ghosl* [5], it is all right for him to do *wodhu* [5] (ablution) only.
- It is agreeable among the ulama that a man can sleep in between two of his concubines at the same time [having sex with them at the same time in front of each other], but it is *makroh* (distasteful, by the rule of Islam if it can be avoided it is better to be avoided) to do the same act with two of his wives at the same time. Hazrat Jafar Sadeq said: it is all right to sleep with two concubines at the same time but is *haram* to have his *jam`* (mounting) while facing *qibla* [18].

Because men such as Majlesi framed the language and developed the prescriptions, they seem to have favored their own gender, in terms of requirements. For example, Majlesi's advice regarding infertility lets men off lightly with prescriptions that are simple and easy to

follow. Men are told to recite a few extra prayers, follow a specific *do`a* (prayer or supplication), or recite “I seek Allah's forgiveness” a certain number of times a day. No complicated rituals are required, neither are men asked to put their bodies in danger, nor enlist an expert or *hakim* to achieve their goals. In contrast, prescriptions demanded of women -for example, the curative remedies for infertility -often required following intricate formulas, creating devices, and performing lengthy and sometimes dangerous rituals. It is women who are required to dig in graves and drink dissolved paper with ink. As a final blow, all remedies and curatives prescribed for women are useless without assistance from the male *hakim*. The implication that men are more virtuous, and therefore more capable of performing religious “ritualistic” acts independently, is unmistakable.

Creating or Increasing Mohabbat (Love) for Men, Women, and Others

The second section of this paper addresses select formulas of *sehr va jadu* (sorcery) specifically, how to attract love and affection. These formulas purportedly guide the individual to receive assistance from the *jen*. Some of the formulas include recitation of Qur'anic verses in a manner reminiscent of magic formulas and incantations. Some formulas rely exclusively on prayer. The first selection is excerpted from *Kunz al-Hosayn*, a popular manuscript dating from the late 19th century. This manual provides various solutions to the above-stated problem, citing experts in the field of magic. [19]

- Awakening and increasing love, according to the Mowlana Hosayn Akhlaghi
- In preparation: the person who is going to perform the following tasks first must be facing *qibla* and secondly must have the *wodhu* [purified ablution]. A wax figurine of the person [the subject of the affection] is made; this task must be performed at noon as instructed.
- The name of the subject's mother should be known. Mowlana Hosain instructs that the performer of the task must determine the numerical values [6] of the subject and his mother's name, mix them with *horuf-e samet* (unvoiced letters in the alphabet). A square-shaped piece of paper is prepared. A triangle is drawn on a separate sheet of paper and inside that triangle the prepared numerical values of the mentioned names and the unvoiced letters are written.

- This triangle is placed on the square piece of paper. Then, the wax figurine, the triangle, and the square piece of paper are all placed inside the mouth of the person for whom this task is performed and removed at once. The next step is to place these objects in a dark house or inside a skull of a dead person in a grave [7]. *Inshallah* [God willing] the wish will be granted.
- If a woman wants to be admired and loved by a lot of people [inclusive of her husband, mother-in-law and other members of the husband's family], she should write down the names, determine all the numerical values of those names, mix these [numbers] with *horuf-e samet* and write it inside a triangle, copy it [make three copies]. The first copy must be torn in very small pieces and mixed with dirt from a gravesite. This mixture should be sprinkled on the members of the family. The next step is that she must find a dead person's skull and fold the 2nd copy and place it inside the skull. The 3rd copy must be dissolved in vinegar, then mix this vinegar solution with some aromatic scent such as rose water, musk, or extract of orange blossoms [to reduce the sour smell of vinegar], and then sprinkle this mixture on the people from whom she wants love. This recipe must be followed as instructed in the same sequence; otherwise it will not be effective [19].

The book of *Haftad va du div, Olum al-gharibeh* [11] contains numerous formulas for curative and protective purposes, including the use of various *telesm* (talismans) to protect a woman's fertility. The following talisman must be created on a Thursday.

A formula is engraved on a square metal piece and washed with pure water, which is then saved. On the following morning [Friday] before having breakfast, the barren woman should drink this water. Soon after having sex, she will become pregnant. The woman must carry this talisman with her at all times. The author further instructs the reader: "This is from the *mowjezat-e payghambar ast* (one of the Prophet's charms) ... [and will work] even if the woman is 100 years old." This last comment no doubt confirms the formula's potency [19].

Another talisman requires writing a formula on a piece of paper and wearing it on the right arm. However, the talisman should not be worn while having sex. The author promises that this magic will not fail. If

the same talisman is wrapped around a tree (not worn around the arm), it works as a form of birth control; that is, the woman will *not* become pregnant while having sex as long as the talisman is wrapped around the tree.

One section of this manuscript is devoted entirely to preventing miscarriages [20]. The following talisman is advised for a pregnant woman experiencing difficulties carrying her baby to full term:

- This woman must collect flour from seven neighbors living in the direction left of her house. Mix all the flour together and prepare a dough mixture. Then she should bake bread with this dough and write a specific formula on the bread and feed this bread to a female dog. When the female dog gives birth, her puppies will not survive, but the woman's child will be born safely [20].

Of the numerous formulas and talismans included in this manual, some must be eaten, rubbed against the body, and/or secretly fed to others for optimum results.

Mowlana Mohammad Bagher Mir Hosayni Fenderski, is the author of a book commonly known as *Mirdamad-e Kabir*. [21] This manual is a typical self-help text, designed to teach the reader how to apply the science of magic to a variety of situations. In the section titled "Desiring a Child," the author includes certain Arabic words, which do not seem to be completely correct. Perhaps text has been inadvertently omitted. Nevertheless, the following appears in my copy:

- "The barren woman should write the following words: Ali, Laho, Beh, Howa, La ilaha illa Allah Mohammad Rasul Allah, Ali Wali Allah wa Salla Allah Ala Mohammad wa ila [Alihi?], Ya Allah, Ya Shakikifi,[?] Ya Qaher, wa Ya Allah, Wear it around her neck; Inshallah (God Willing) she will become pregnant" [21].

In another remedy, the instruction states: "Inside a porcelain bowl with saffron, write *Sura Al Imran* (Chapter III of the Qur'an), then wash it with *golab* (rose water) and let the barren woman drink it. "As God is my witness, she will become pregnant. This has been tested before" [21].

The book of *Asrar-e Ghasemi, dar elm-e kimiya, simiya, rimiya, limiya va himiya*, [10] dating from the mid 18th to early 19th centuries, provides explicit instructions for making someone fall madly in love. This

formula or *telesm*, credited to Mowlana Abd al-Latif Gilani, provides intricate instructions on how to steal someone's heart.

Another 16th century manuscript, *Kashkol-e Shaykh Bahaei, majmu'eh-e olum-e gharibeh va khavas-e Aasma Allah*, is dedicated in part to the virtues of God's names.

Its author, Shaykh Bahaei, was appointed as the *Shaykh al-Islam* (highest religious authority) in the Safavid court. His father is the famous Shaykh Husayn who was also the *Shaykh al-Islam* in the court of Shah Tahmasp Safavi [22].

Interestingly, even today, individuals seeking curative solutions use the ninety-nine beautiful names of God (known in Arabic as *al-Asma a-Hosna*). This is especially true among those who follow the *teb-e ruowhani / teb-e Mohammadi* (the religious medicine and the medicine of the Prophet Mohammad). In *Kashkol-e Shaykh Baha'i*, one finds a chapter titled *Dar Bayan-e Khavas-e Asma al-Hosna* (Regarding Virtues of Allah's Names). In this chapter Bahaei makes reference to other scholars such as Shaykh Rajab ibn Mohammad ibn Rajab Hafez who declared: "By reciting the word Allah in the morning, afternoon and in the evening each time for 66 times, your wish will be granted" [22].

As for the infertile woman, Shaykh Bahaei states:

- "The word *Al Musarar* (one of Allah's name) is the cure. The barren woman must fast for seven days and write this name '*Al Musawar*' in a drinking glass and while writing it she must recite it 13 times, then rinse the glass and fill it up with water and drink that water. Her *barakat* (God's blessing) will be a boy" [20].

Alameh Majlesi, referred to earlier in this paper, also writes extensively on the subject of fertility. Here is an example of his *teb-e rouhani* for increasing a woman's fertility. Majlesi states:

- "According to Imam Jafar Sadeq, if a man wants his wife to become pregnant, after finishing his Friday praying he must pray two additional *rok'at*, or units, of prayers. He should slow down on his prostrating and standing up in these particular units, and end his praying with a special prayer exclusive for this purpose" [18].

Another *hadith* mentioned by Majlesi, which he credits to Imam Mohammad Bagher, insists that if a man recites *astaghfer Allah* (I seek Allah's forgiveness) one hundred times a day, his wife will become pregnant.

Having Sexual Dreams: Interpretations and Outcomes

A singularly popular text (with multiple reprints) is the translation of *Ta'bir-e Khab-e Kamel* (Complete Book of Dream Interpretations) by Shaykh Abu al-Fadhal Jish ibn Ibrahim Taflisi [23]. In the section on *jama'* the author provides various interpretations of sexual dreams.

Jama' [having sex]

- If a person dreams of having sex with his own wife, and she is on the top and he is positioned on the bottom, it means he will be taking another wife from whom he will greatly benefit.
- Ibn Sirin said: when dreaming of having sex with your own wife or another woman from behind [10], or having anal sex, it means the man is thinking of doing something improper, which is not in line with the tradition of the Prophet Mohammad.
- When dreaming of having sex with a woman with whom having sex is *haram* (forbidden), such as your own mother, sister, or another forbidden woman, it means your relationship with them will be in danger. This is a sign of depression and sadness. Some experts say that if the forbidden sex partner in the dream is a living person, it means you will benefit from that person in kindness and you may go on *hajj* (pilgrimage). [Note the contradiction in the same dream interpretation. On the one hand, the interpretation is positive: the dreamer will be going on *hajj* and will be blessed with kindness from the person in the dream. On the other hand, the dream is also considered a danger signal and indicates signs of depression].
- Should a man dream of having sex with a woman who is already dead, he will be depressed, sad and becomes needy. If he dreams of having sex with the widow of an unknown man, it means he will achieve in life what he had previously given up due to difficulties.

- Dreaming about having sex with a woman who is in her menses means misfortune will come to his life ... some experts say dreaming of having sex with a woman who is in her menses means the dreamer is not taking his life seriously... If a woman dreams of having sex with another woman, it means she will benefit from the female sex partner of her dream, and any wish she makes will be granted [23].
- Dreaming about Childbirth
- Imam Sadeq said: if a woman dreams of giving birth to a male child and immediately starts talking to him, it means soon she will die, and if she dreams of giving birth to a girl, this child's offspring will rise to a high position, perhaps as head of the family [23].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article discussed only a small sampling of material, dating primarily from the 16th century Safavids Iran, with a few additional examples of popular manuscripts from the 18th and 19th centuries. However, one can begin to see—especially in reading Majlesi's *Hilyat al-Mottaqin*—the emergence of an authoritative trinity. On one end is Majlesi, the prominent and commanding 16th century *Shaykh al-Islam* figure, whose legacy stretches even into 21st century Iranian popular religious culture. Next is the Prophet Mohammad, whose words, behavior and lifestyle have been emulated by pious Muslims since the 7th century. The third part of the trinity is the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib, also known as Amir al Mu'menin (the Commander of Believers)—and a host of other Shi'i imams whose words and lives continue to provide inspiration for the Shi'is.

Because men such as Majlesi framed the language and developed the prescriptions, they seem to have favored their own gender, in terms of requirements. For example, Majlesi's advice regarding infertility lets men off lightly with prescriptions that are simple and easy to follow. Men are told to recite a few extra prayers, follow a specific *do'a* (prayer or supplication), or recite: "I seek Allah's forgiveness" a certain number of times a day. No complicated rituals are required, neither are men asked to put their bodies in danger, nor enlist an expert or *hakim* to achieve their goals. In contrast, prescriptions demanded of women—for example, the curative remedies for infertility—often required

following intricate formulas, creating devices, and performing lengthy and sometimes dangerous rituals. It is women who are required to dig in graves and drink dissolved paper with ink. As a final blow, all remedies and curatives prescribed for women are useless without assistance from the male *hakim*. The implication that men are more virtuous, and therefore more capable of performing religious "ritualistic" acts independently, is unmistakable.

Even assuming that women were able to read in the 16th century, though most could not, the procedures to follow were so complicated that they necessarily required the expertise of an outsider male. This dependence on the *hakim* sabotaged a woman's sexual privacy and effectively handed over her sexual autonomy to men. While men could perform prescribed prayers in the privacy of their home without drawing attention to motive or objective, women were forced into public spaces in order to seek out the *hakim*. This normally involved several people who helped to arrange and secure an appointment; thus, a woman's most intimate sexual concerns were subject to the scrutiny of others.

Clearly, the private sexual space of Iranian women was invaded centuries before the modern era. Popular religious scholarship, exclusively in the hands of *ulama*, sealed this arrangement. Because sexually oriented materials were composed and read solely by men, women suffered the consequences not only in sexual matters but also in the widely differing gender expectations and cultural norms that emerged in Iranian society.

Contemporary Iranian religious scholars continue to rely on outdated collections of popular religious materials mixed with folk beliefs. Furthermore, they do so without making any reference to the socio-cultural era or providing any explanation of the political context that made these publications possible. Unabashedly, they continue leading the public back down shadowy corridors of 16th century Iran where the "medicine of the Prophet" was mixed liberally with folk and traditional medicine. Like their patriarchal forbears, they remain particularly skillful in taking advantage of lay people's religious sentiments.

REFERENCES

- [1] Afary J and Anderson K. (eds.) *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: gender and the seductions of Islamism* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2005.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226007878.001.0001>

- [2] Gholam Mohammad Basti Khadem. *konz al-Hosayn*. Kabul. (No dated).
- [3] Sheykh Hosain ibn- Ibrahim (1835). *Haftad du dive*, Olume gharibeh. (No dated).
- [4] Majmu'eh-e olume gharibeh, *Kashkul-e Shaykh Baha'i* (No dated)
- [5] Asrar-e Ghasemi dar Elm-e kimiya, simiya, limiya, rimiya, va himiya. Quetta: Pakistan (No dated)
- [6] Mowla Hosain al Kashefi. *Asrar-e Ghasemi dar Elm-e kimia, simia, limia, rimia, va himia*. Tehran: Marvi publication. (No dated).
- [7] Mahdavi S. 'Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, Family values, and the Safavids', in *Safavid Iran and Her Neighbors*, (ed.) M. Mazzaoui Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2003, 81-99.
- [8] Stewart D. 'The first shaykh al-Islam of the Safavid capital Qazvin', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 1996; 116(3): 387-405.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/605145>
- [9] Newman Andrew. 'Baqir Al-Majlisi and Islamic medicine: Safavid medical theory and practice re-examined', in *Society and Culture in the Early Modern Middle East, Studies on Iran in the Safavid Period*, (ed.) A. Newman (University of Edinburgh: Brill) 1998; 371-396.
- [10] Husain F, Nagamia MD. Clinical Assistant Prof. of Surgery, University of South Florida Medical School, Tampa, Florida.
- [11] International Society for the History of Islamic Medicine (2004) 'Islamic medicine history and current practice' <http://www.ishim.net/ishimj/4/04.pdf> (accessed 30 March 2016).
For another source on the same topic also see the following:
- [12] Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi. *Saints and Saviours of Islam*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons. 2005
- [13] Al-Jawziyya, Ibn Qayyim. *Medicine of the Prophet*, (trans.) P. Johnstone Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society 1998
- [14] Floor W. *Public health in Qajar Iran*. Washington DC: Mage Publishers 2004
- [15] Masse H. *Persian beliefs and customs*, (trans.) C. Messner. New Haven: Human Relations Area Files. 1954
- [16] Shirazi F. 'the sofreh: comfort and community Among Women in Iran', *Iranian Studies* 2005; 38(2): 293-309.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00210860500096345>
- [17] Abadi M, Farokhi M and Kiyai M. (eds). *Bavarha va Danesteha dar Lurestan va Ilam*. Tehran: Markaz-e Mardom Shenasi 1358 SH/1979CE
- [18] Khonsari M. *Kulsum naneh* (ed.) B. Chobineh Koln: Ghadesak 1999
- [19] Majlesi A. *Hilyat al-Mottaqin*. Tehran: Nas Publication 1993
- [20] Kunz al-Hosayn. Quetta: Jane Mohamad Basti. (Not dated)
- [21] Sheykh Hosain ibn Ibrahim. *Haftad du div*, Olum al-gharibeh, Asef ben Barkhia (1835).
- [22] Fenderski M. *Mirdamade Kabir, Khud Amuz dar Ulum va Funune Ghariba Pakistan: Maktab al-Arabia*. (Not dated)
- [23] Stewart D. 'The First Shaykh al-Islam of the Safavid Capital Qazvin', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 1996; 116(3).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/605145>
- [24] Tafli Sheykh Abu al-Fadhil Jish ibn Ibrahim Ta'bi-re Khab-e Kamel, (trans.) S. Garmarodi. Tehran: Salman Farsi Publisher 1999

Received on 08-12-2015

Accepted on 14-04-2016

Published on 15-06-2016

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15379/2410-2806.2016.03.01.02>

© 2016 Faegheh Shirazi; Licensee Cosmos Scholars Publishing House.

This is an open access article licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License

(http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), which permits unrestricted, non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the work is properly cited.