
When Pardis Mahdavi visited Mashad in 2007 she was shocked to find many young women in Iran’s holiest and arguably most conservative city walking the streets in ‘makeup, tight coats or mantos, and brightly colored headscarves with a lot of hair showing—and not getting arrested’. Only seven years earlier, Mahdavi had found ‘most Mashadi women [to be] wearing chadors; even young women were encouraged to wear long, loose mantos and tightly wrapped dark headscarves’ (29). Passionate Uprisings is Mahdavi’s attempt to come to terms with what the author suggests is nothing short of a ‘soft’ revolution now underway in Iran, an enghelab-e-jensi (sexual revolution) and enghelab-e-farhangi (sociocultural revolution) whose locus is outward comportment, fashion and sex and whose consequences can be felt in the dramatic shift in the public discourse on sex and in the regime’s increasingly accommodating posture toward previously unacceptable public behavior. Just as the United States’ own sexual revolution in the 1960s began as a largely urban and bourgeois youth phenomenon, so is Iran’s enghelab-e-jensi rooted first and foremost among the secular middle- and upper-class youth in Tehran. In the first case, changing attitudes about sex ultimately spread across socioeconomic and spatial boundaries; Mahdavi argues that this is precisely what is happening in Iran. Passionate Uprisings, then, is an ethnographic account of the changing discourse on sex and public comportment more broadly among Tehran’s young adults. Mahdavi, who writes accessibly and as much for scholars of social movements as for the general public, draws here on several hundred interviews with young Tehranis, their parents, and public health workers conducted during the author’s visits to Tehran from 2000 to 2007. The author is less interested in any changes in comportment per se than she is in what Iran’s youth have to say about their own behavior. Mahdavi takes her informants at their word—focusing on what linguistic anthropologists might call the informants’ ‘metapragmatic accounts’—and argues provocatively that risqué public fashion, drinking and sex are inherently political in the context of a regime that has made the regulation of outward comportment a central tenet of its governance. ‘If wearing a Gucci scarf were truly just a symbol of consumerism’, Mahdavi writes, ‘it would not have been, at one point, a punishable offense’ (129).

Mahdavi, like the young adults who are the subjects of Passionate Uprisings, is a ‘child of the revolution’. The ethnography begins with an overview of the changes that the author has observed among her erstwhile Tehrani contemporaries (‘the line between informants and friends was blurred regularly’) from
her first visit to Iran in 2000 to the conclusion of her ethnographic work in 2007 (35). Mahdavi argues that these changes have been marked, most obviously in regard to what Tehranis are willing to wear in public and, in turn, in what the *komite* (‘morality police’) and the regime in general are willing to tolerate. Less obvious but no less important have been the remarkable changes in attitudes about sex and young Tehranis’ willingness to brave *komite* raids on parties, where, significantly, drugs and alcohol are found in abundance (31).

In addition to her subjects’ own efforts to push back at the regime, Mahdavi cites the proliferation (largely due to the efforts of Mayor Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi) of public spaces in Tehran—parks, malls, pizza parlors, and coffee shops—as creating the space for discourse and social ferment. Mahdavi also emphasizes the regime’s coincident demographic and economic woes: Not simply do urban young adults account for nearly two-thirds of Iran’s population, but this group is highly educated and underemployed (about half of Tehranis under thirty are officially unemployed) (9). But Mahdavi is less interested in the structural bases for youthful rebellion than in the ‘agency’ that she sees at work in Iran’s *laj* or ‘playful rebellion’ (19).

The second chapter of *Passionate Uprisings* is structured around accounts of seven ‘key players in the sexual revolution’, each of whom ‘represents different types of people in the emerging sexual culture of Tehran’ (40). Mahdavi, who shadowed them during their daily routines and over an extended period of time, presents entertaining and compelling accounts of the informants. The initial disdain felt by the author toward her young female subjects, ‘Iranian Stepford Wives’ as she originally described them, gradually gives way to a more sympathetic understanding. Mahdavi’s sympathy is rooted largely in the fact that she comes to see her subjects’ stylistic moves as simultaneously political moves that index agency and self-empowerment amid illiberal circumstances (34). Understood in this way, the fact that Alaleh, a 24-year-old divorcée, ‘starts drinking at 4 p.m.’ with her married friends or that Babak enjoys group sex (‘As we walked closer to the pool, I realized that a full-blown orgy was taking place inside it’) signifies, both to the ethnographer and to her informants, political subversion: ‘It’s great; we can voice our discontent with the regime by what we do, how we look, and what we do for fun’, Nina tells the author (91). Mahdavi insightfully presents her young adult subjects’ efforts to incursively move further into the public space, collapsing the cleavage between the *zāher* and *bāten* (the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, respectively) and bringing behavior and dress that once would have been confined to the home (if that) to cafés, restaurants, and the streets (cars play an enormous role in the lives of Tehrani youth). ‘We will soon party in public’ (191), Hassan tells Mahdavi.