

# Familial Undercurrents

## Untold Stories of Love and Marriage in Modern Iran

Afsaneh  
Najmabadi

# Familial Undercurrents

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UNTOLD STORIES OF  
LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN  
MODERN IRAN

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Duke University Press Durham and London 2022

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Najmabadi, Afsaneh, [date] author.

Title: Familial undercurrents : untold stories of love and marriage  
in modern Iran / Afsaneh Najmabadi.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2022. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021020918 (print)

LCCN 2021020919 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478015154 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478017776 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478022398 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Najmabadi, Afsaneh, 1946—Family. |

Marriage—Iran—History—20th century. | Families—

Iran—History—20th century. | Families—Iran—History—

20th century—Case studies. | Marriage—Iran—History—20th

century—Case studies. | BISAC: HISTORY / Middle East /

Iran | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Ethnic Studies / American /

Native American Studies

Classification: LCC HQ666.4 .N356 2022 (print) |

LCC HQ666.4 (ebook) | DDC 306.810955/0904—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021020918>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021020919>

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Cover art: *Four generations*, 12 May 1936. Author family photo.  
Courtesy the Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran archive, Harvard  
University.

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*For Bushra and Naseem*

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

‘Abbas	<i>my father</i>
‘Alaviyeh Khanum (Khanum jun)	<i>my maternal grandmother</i>
Aqa’i	<i>my paternal grandfather</i>
Aqa jun	<i>Nuri Khanum’s father</i>
Badi’ al-Saltaneh	<i>my maternal grandfather</i>
Badi’ al-Muluk	<i>my aunt</i>
Fakhr al-Muluk	<i>my aunt</i>
Fari	<i>my mother</i>
Gawhar al-Muluk	<i>my aunt</i>
Iffat Khanum	<i>my aunt</i>
‘Isa Khan	<i>Iffat’s husband and ‘Abbas’s uncle</i>
Latifeh Khanum	<i>my aunt</i>
Mansureh Khanum	<i>my father’s other wife</i>
Nuri Khanum	<i>my paternal grandmother</i>
Qamar al-Muluk	<i>my cousin</i>
Sadiqeh Khanum	<i>Nuri’s sister</i>

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## PREFACE

This book is inspired by a personal story. In early March 1987, I received a phone call from Tehran. On the other side of a bad connection, a man claimed he was my brother-in-law, married to my sister Mina. I had never before known of a sister named Mina. This was a short few months after my father's death in October 1986 (in Cambridge, Massachusetts). Rather shocked, I asked him to send me any corroborating documents, discontinued the conversation, and conveniently tucked it away into forgetfulness. I disbelieved the claim, and for a combination of reasons (including my mother's distress and refusal to meet with them on her visits to Iran), I did not connect with Mina until twenty years later. In 2005, I began to visit Iran regularly. I met Mina for the first time in 2007; slowly and hesitantly, I established a relationship with her. But then I became gripped with a detective fever, with an obsession to know about my father's other life, the family he had kept a secret from us.

Over the following years, I interviewed numerous people on Mina's mother's side of the family, my father's side of the family, and my mother's as well. A much more complicated and fascinating family story emerged from these conversations as I learned the story of this "other family" I had to trace, and retrace, many times over. I would find a new piece of information that would splice together previously disconnected episodes. At the same time, filling those gaps would push apart other episodes I thought had fit together. Smoothing one set of edges would frustratingly create other ragged ones that would refuse to fit. The second family turned out to include a first love and many unexpected turns and twists. Over the many years that I followed these conversations, the stories often changed from one telling to another. At the end, a relatively coherent story (for the most part!) took shape.

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Mina's mother, Mansureh, had had a roughly sixth-grade formal education. In subsequent years (in the mid-1930s), she had been tutored in literary and religious texts by my father's father. Apparently, he had tutored several members of Mansureh's family, and socialized with them, all the way to the end of his life in 1948. Mansureh was possibly also tutored in math by my father, 'Abbas. That is how they met. My father fell in love with her and asked for her hand in marriage. Apparently, Mansureh was also fond of my father. Her mother, however, opposed the marriage—she had already promised her daughter to her brother's son, who was also very much in love with Mansureh. My paternal grandfather, Aqa'i, had also been very fond of Mansureh. I was told by Mina's husband that, at one point, my grandfather even considered transferring the title deed of his house to her name.

This was rather unusual. Was this reported intention meant to support the veracity of the “first love” story? Why would he transfer his property? To persuade Mansureh's mother to let his son marry her daughter? But then one would expect him to turn the ownership to 'Abbas, as it was done in numerous marriage contracts. Usually, part of the *mahr* included property that belonged to the groom's father, and then the groom's father would turn that property over to the groom, but never to the bride. In any case, if that was the intention, it failed. Mansureh and her cousin were contractually married (*'aqd*) on 26 May 1936. However, their marriage was not consummated for another six years, in October 1942, at which point Mansureh renegotiated her *mahr*, increasing it from 8,000 to 60,000 rials.

Six years was a rather long period between signing the marriage contract and its consummation. That too was unusual. A time lapse between the formal marriage contract and the wedding was not unusual. But it usually lasted between a few months or at most a couple of years; sometimes the bride was considered not physically mature enough for consummation of marriage, or sometimes the groom needed the time to prepare properly for his wife-to-be. But six years was highly unusual.

For a couple of years, Mansureh's husband had been away on his military service. But then, how to explain the other four years? Was Mansureh resisting the wedding, hoping her cousin would release her from the marriage contract? In the meantime, in September 1941, my father, 'Abbas, had met my mother, Fari, fallen in love with her, and married her in January 1942. Was that why Mansureh eventually resigned herself to the marriage with her cousin in October 1942? Fari and Mansureh had two daughters in exactly the same years, 1944 and 1946. Throughout the 1940s, both 'Abbas and his fa-

ther had continued to visit Mansureh. She was apparently unhappy with her marriage. Her husband was a member of the Tudeh Party; he couldn't hold a steady job and would be fired frequently for his labor organizing. Money was not an issue, since he had inherited much property near Tehran. But apparently the unsettled pattern of life was unbearable for Mansureh. In 1947, she asked for her full mahr to be paid, presumably hoping to bargain it back in exchange for a divorce. Her husband turned over all his properties to her but refused to divorce her for another five years. By all family accounts, this was because he had been so in love with her that he wouldn't give up hope for a possible reconciliation. In the meantime, 'Abbas had purchased a piece of land in September 1948, close to where Mansureh had been living, built a house on it, and turned the house to Mansureh in the spring of 1949. This enabled her to move out of her marital home and live with her children in the new house, which she shared with her mother and for a few years with her grandmother as well.

Mansureh remained on friendly terms with her cousin even after the divorce and her marriage to 'Abbas; her now-ex-husband visited the girls frequently. Once Mina was born, he was very kind and fatherly to her as well. Mina recalled fondly some of the gifts that he had brought her, including a first camera.

In effect, not only had my father kept two families through the legal possibility of bigamy, but Mansureh too had two men in her life from the mid-1930s to the time of her cousin's death in 1980. One was her husband, the other, a family friend; by the early 1950s, they switched positions. The cousin/ex-husband continued to visit the family as a friend. Mansureh had managed to keep the two men openly as family; my father chose to hide one family from the other. This, at first, seems quite counterintuitive—that the woman seemed to have had more leeway than the man!

During these years of playing family detective, I also started talking about my family story to anyone willing to listen. In almost every instance, the response was something like, "Oh, yes, so-and-so in my family acted similarly. Only after his death we learned he had another wife." The repetition of the pattern made it clear that my father's secret family was not simply a quirky exception. It seems that over a short generation, what had been an acceptable open practice—men's polygyny—had become, for at least a layer of urban, educated, middle-class Iranian men, something socially frowned upon; it was something to keep secret, even though it was not illegal. After all, my mother had grown up in a bigamous household. While my father's father had mar-

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ried only once, numerous men in the larger Najmabadi clan of his father's generation had more than one wife.

Beyond my personal family fever, I thus became preoccupied with understanding this larger pattern of change in familial practices. This book aims at a historical contextualization of the changes in ideas of what constituted a family, how these changes came about, and how practices of family life adapted—or did not. Its scope is limited to Tehran and its newly emerging middle class in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Whether further generalizations could be made remains a topic for future research.

In the first chapter, "Marrying for Love," I trace how this idea entered and acquired dominance within a layer of the urban middle class, especially for women who also expected the companionate marriage to be monogamous. I look at how the diverse literature of the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century contributed to this process. In particular, I discuss romantic novels and morality tales, reformist newspapers, works of satire, plays, writings about social life in Europe, and somewhat later romantic films.

The second chapter, "Objects," presents ordinary objects of everyday life in terms of how they contributed to conjugalization of the family. These include letters of affection, exchanged at times between a man and a woman who had married contractually ('aqd) but had not yet cohabited; wedding outfits that marked the new couple from their parents' generation; wedding studio photographs; and more generally family photographs that contributed to and at the same time resisted conjugalization of the family.

"Meanings of Marriage," the third chapter, takes up the changes from the older concept of what forming a family was for (forming a household and begetting children) to the couple-centered family of the modern period. Concurrently, the practice of *mut'a* (*sigheh*)—a marriage for a fixed period of time—for (male) sexual pleasure became reconceptualized as religiously sanctioned prostitution. For more modernized men, *sigheh* was replaced by taking a *maîtresse* (mistress). Other men practiced *sigheh* both secretly and openly. The chapter also considers how women reacted to finding out that their husbands had taken another wife.

The last chapter, "Urban Transformations," analyzes how the growth of cities enabled having two families in one city, one unknown to the other. Keeping a secret family depended on the rupture of networks of information and gossip within a small neighborhood. These transformations also changed the size and architecture of houses, which were no longer suitable for keeping two wives in one household. The smaller housing units became

couple-centered, even if at times one of the in-laws lived with the couple. Lastly, the epilogue brings out how these changes have changed the naming of marriage and of kin.

Much of the material for this study comes from the life stories that people told me in these years of interviews. At the time of these interviews and conversations, I had no plan to write a book. With no prior permission, I have thus changed names and other identificatory markers. My parents' story became one of them. Integrating my family story into the narrative of all the chapters has meant that I also have become a character in this text.

I wove the stories I heard with archival material to trace the transformation of concepts and practices of what constitutes family. I also use material objects of everyday life—photographs, clothes, letters written by couples, among other things—to trace how this change took shape. This latter body of archives became available to me through working on Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran. Some of the challenges of using this archive to write this manuscript I discuss in “In Lieu of an Introduction.” Further, I discuss the ethics of telling stories that people seemed not to want to tell, as well as the issues of writing a manuscript in which I appear both as a character and as a historian.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Started in 2014, this book has accumulated much debt over the years of its writing and many rewritings. During these years, I have enormously benefited from conversations and correspondence with many colleagues, friends, and family, and it is my pleasure to thank them here: Suad Joseph, Laura Wexler, Lila Abu-Lughod, Deniz Kandiyoti, Sue Lanser, Jill Lepore, Irvin Schick, Naghmeh Sohrabi, Naseem Makiya, Bushra Makiya, Kanan Makiya, Judith Surkis, Janaki Nair and the Feminist Faculty Collective at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Farshideh Mirbaghdadabadi, Azadeh Tajpour, Heather Love, Mana Kia, Houchang Chehabi, Amy Motlagh, Jaleh Jalili, Pamela Karimi, and Talinn Grigor. Also, special gratitude to Michael M. J. Fischer, to whom I owe not just many insights but also the title of this book.

Various parts of the book were presented at Rutgers University, the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University, and Jawaharlal Nehru University. In each instance, I received invaluable feedback from the audience.

Several grants from Harvard University supported the research and writing of this book. I am deeply grateful for a grant from the Anne and Jim Rothenberg Fund for Humanities Research, to Peter Marsden in his capacity at the time as dean of social science, and to Michael Smith in his capacity at the time as dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

I had great research help from Huma Utku, Monique Hassel, and Reza Salami and transcription help from Shahrad Shahvand. I thank Emma Dolkhian for helping me with deciphering and typing up my mother's written memoirs.

The writing of this book took an unusual detour. In late March 2017, I was diagnosed with cancer, and the next six months, taken up with ensuing treatment, gave me a break from a tightly scheduled life, which had been intended to enable me to complete a first draft during my 2016–2017 academic

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leave. My recovery turned out to be a gift of reflective incubation for this project, especially as it coincided with my immersion in reading the doctoral dissertation of Michael Amico, “The Forgotten Union of the Two Henrys.” More than any other previous attempt (and the wonderful feedback I had received with each rewrite), Amico’s work impacted my final decisions on how to rewrite this text. Years of sustained conversations with Mike, even before I imagined writing this book, throughout its shaping, writing, and rewritings, have seeped in, in numerous ways, within the veins of this book. Perhaps the traces are visible just to him and me. Being grateful goes nowhere close to saying something about my deep debt to these conversations, but grateful I am.

I am also thankful for suggestions from the anonymous readers of the manuscript.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my superb editor at Duke University Press, Courtney Berger, whose suggestions for revision were of enormous help.

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# In Lieu of an Introduction

From the outset, this project took shape under the shadow of two major challenges that affected the structure of writing and the approach to sources and their uses. In simplest form, these challenges were as follows:

*How to think about the ethics of telling stories that people did not want re-told*

*How to tell a story in which I was implicated both as a character and as a historian*

## **How to Think about the Ethics of Telling Stories That People Did Not Want Re-told**

My mother chose not to talk about my father's second marriage with anyone beyond a couple of her siblings and nieces. Nor did she even hint at it in her interviews in the 1990s and in her written memoirs. My father had kept his second family a secret from the first to his dying days.

Their silence posed for me, throughout the work on this project, the unresolvable ethical dilemma that many (auto)biography writers and memoirists have noted. As Nancy Miller has put it, "Memoir writers necessarily blur the lines between autobiography and biography, self and other, especially when a child tells the parents' story." Telling these stories is "to retrieve a past that is ours but not ours alone."<sup>1</sup>

What right did I have to write my parents' story when they had chosen silence? Shouldn't I respect my father's secrecy and my mother's desire for keeping its knowledge confined? I understood my father's keeping the second marriage a secret to have been an effect of a middle-class modernist and Baha'i embarrassment, if not shame, over his bigamy, his way of living his

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love for Mansureh under circumstances that had made that option no longer a publicly accepted practice. As Deborah Cohen has put it in a different context, “Secrecy guaranteed both security and authenticity.”<sup>2</sup> In my father’s case, the authenticity of his being a modern Baha’i, whose new faith emphasized monogamy much more strongly than his old faith and practices in his parental generation had, and security from the possibility of losing Fari and the custody of his two children (me and my sister, Farzaneh), a possibility that had been shaped by my mother’s education and professional life, as well as the support she received from her family (inclusive of her sister’s husband who was my father’s uncle too)—secrecy guaranteed both.

I understood my mother’s desire for keeping a relative silence over that belated knowledge as her way of saving face, of remaining respectful as many relatives had said, in circumstances where things going wrong in marriage were by default seen as shortcomings of the wife. But things mattered only if they were known. Keeping silent made keeping face possible. I thus justified my desire to tell their story as my way of attempting to open up the possibility of reducing injury and disrespect, embarrassment and shame, over their life choices.

It is at times said that historians are motivated by the desire to speak of the dead and, even more, to speak on behalf of the dead. Some of the recent decades of recuperative historiography have indeed been informed by this desire to compensate for silences in history and give voice to the silenced. Yet what of the desire of the dead to remain silent? What of the lives made possible through keeping silent?

Quite early on, when I first started thinking about this project, I contacted one of my maternal cousins to inquire about memories of our mothers and our grandmother. She was reluctant to talk; she wrote that her “first reaction was that I wanted to ‘protect’ them and their legacy. Would my mother or yours want to have the public exposed to the ‘family secrets?’” What right did I have, she insisted, to tell the stories of “family members unable to speak for themselves”?

At the time, I shrugged this objection off, largely because I was thinking of my writing as an act of empathy with these lives, not as critical judgment of their choices, decisions, and lives lived. As my work developed, I was even more certain that I could write in total empathy with all my characters; though at times empathy with my father would become challenging!

Nonetheless, my cousin’s early warning remained an echo in my head that wouldn’t go away. Conversations with other relatives would bring it back in

<sup>2</sup> · In Lieu of an Introduction

new contexts. A paternal uncle talked about several incidents he had heard about: two related to my father’s “scandalous behavior,” apparently propositioning other women from the family, but several were about other people—so many Najmabadi men’s scandals . . . we began to joke about whether this was a genetic trait! Each time, he made it clear that none of these stories were meant for re-telling. He emphasized that even though he talked about these stories to me, this had been a very rare thing for him to do; he definitely would not want any story to be re-told. Another relative told similar stories about Najmabadi men, repeatedly prefacing each story by saying, “I don’t engage in gossip, *astaghfar allah* [may God forgive me], but . . .”

The repeated disavowal of gossip, in conversations with Arafat Razzaque and his dissertation on ethics of speech in the formation of early Islamic piety, brought forth another layer of this shadowy weight on my writing.<sup>3</sup> I too had grown up within an ethics of speech centered on restraint of the tongue, *hifz al-lisan*. This ethics was not simply located within the high Islamic culture of texts and teachings on piety, within books of ethics and injunctions to the pious. I too had grown up with cautions concerning excesses of talking that seeped through often-repeated advice: Why do you think God has given you two ears and one tongue? Hear twice before you talk once.

Most severely, the narrative attributed to the Prophet on gossip was often repeated: *al-ghiba ashaddu min al-zina*, roughly translated as “gossip is worse than fornication.” Given that telling about someone else’s sinful deed is considered a sin, and perhaps even a more severe sin than the committing of the sin itself, how does one go about telling other people’s lives—sins and all? Given the culture of keeping things unsaid, letting things pass rather than be told and re-told, how ethical is my writing of other people’s stories? If we take gossip itself as a critical “way of knowing,” indeed, at times, as a “weapon of the weak,” as an important source for historical cultural understanding, how do we deal with the shadow of shame hanging over the knowledge generated through gossip?

Within this kind of cultural ethos, how does one write about family secrets in a way that does not do harm to others’ sensibilities? Is there a way of telling a story they had chosen not to tell that would open up possibilities of reducing injury and disrespect? Do I just not tell things that were “too scandalous”? Clearly my father didn’t want the family on this side of town to know about the family on the other side of town. His story had, of course, already come out after his death because of legal requirements related to inheritance division, but even then, it had remained known only within a lim-

ited circle of people. Yet over the past years, my pursuit of his story has made it known to ever wider circles of people. Each time when I started a conversation with another relative by saying, “Did you know my father had another wife?” I made that circle of knowing larger. Writing and publishing a book would make it known to an even wider circle.

The ethics and politics of retrieving a past “that is not ours alone” is not simply a memoirist’s dilemma, of course. This is what historians do all the time. Usually, we have no reason to assume that the stories retrieved are objectionable to those whose stories we have retrieved. But we also usually have no information on whether it would *not* be objectionable. For characters unknown to us personally, we tend not to worry.

What are the ethics of using what we save, or have been entrusted to keep? My parents had come to London in the winter of 1980 to visit me and my family. They had planned to stay a month or so, then go to Phoenix, Arizona, to visit my sister. The visit became an immigration: we insisted that they were retired and both their children were abroad; life in Iran, especially in the middle of nowhere on the outskirts of a small town, during the early revolutionary years of upheaval and with attacks against Baha’is, seemed to be too risky to return to, even though my father’s conversion might not have been locally known. Why not stay for a while in the United States until things calmed down? We kept them abroad.

They had come with two suitcases. The following spring, on my visit to Tehran, I selected things to bring for them: some clothes, a few books, a selection of photographs from family albums, and a bunch of letters tied together. I recognized my father’s handwriting. On closer inspection, they turned out to be letters my father had written over the first year of my parents’ marriage when he was not in Tehran with his new bride. These also came with me. At one point, when my mother was angry at my father after she had found out about his other wife, she had wanted to throw them out. I told her I would like to save them; they became mine, though I did not read them until my familial detective journey began in 2014.

Is it ethical to use my father’s letters to my mother, which she wanted to throw out? Just because I asked her to let me keep them and she agreed? At the time, of course, neither she nor I had any reason to imagine that some two decades later I would be writing this manuscript. What makes them mine to use for this project?

Nor is it just a problem in relation to my own family history. Since 2009, I have worked on Women’s Worlds in Qajar Iran (wwqi), a digital archive

and website. We visit families to photograph and digitize their relevant documents, photographs, and objects of daily life. Within that context, I have heard numerous stories of lives. A photograph brings out a memory, an object becomes the occasion for recalling a relative's wedding, yet another family story. When families have agreed, we have recorded these stories and the audio files are available to the public. Some stories, we were explicitly told, were not for public use. We either did not tape them or else kept them unpublished. But I, as the writer of these lines, have heard them; there is no way of erasing them from my mind. Invariably these stories have impacted how I understood other documents and objects from their family and have also influenced my thinking about other people's lives. At times, I have changed names and details in order to use a family vignette. Is that an ethical use of stories I heard?

There is a similar problem in relation to my conversations with my own relatives. This was not a structured ethnographical project. When I began to visit and speak with many relatives in pursuit of understanding my parents' life and my father's other family, I had no plan or thought of writing a book. I just wanted to know, especially to know my father who had suddenly become an enigmatic character for me. I thus did not seek formal permission for what I might, in some future date, do with what I heard. I did not tape these conversations. Often at the end of the day, recalling the conversations and writing about them was my way of reflecting over my parents' lives. When I decided there was a story worth telling, only then did I begin to take more formal notes and tape some of the conversations. Again, I have changed names, relations, and details. But is it ethical to use stories told by people who had no idea, nor did I, that their stories could be re-told in writing?

The privileged access I have had to one family's papers extends decades before the WWQI project, or any imagined manuscript I would be writing, further complicating the issue of the use of such papers in subsequent research. In 1992, I had edited and published an 1894 (previously unpublished) manuscript by Bibi Astarabadi, *Ma'ayib al-rijal* (Vices of men); in winter 1994, I received a letter from one of her granddaughters, Mihrangiz Mallah. Thus began my correspondence with her, which subsequently developed into visiting the family. Mihrangiz said that she had prepared the life narrative of her mother (Afzal) and wished to publish it. Several years before Afzal passed away in 1980, one of her sons, Husaynali Mallah, had recorded an extensive interview with her about her life. A few years after her death, upon her brother's suggestion, Mihrangiz had transcribed the interview. She

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had then prepared a narrative of her mother's life, based on the transcript and other family information, but composed as if in Afzal's voice. She inquired if I was interested to help with its publication. I was, of course, delighted. I asked whether the original tapes were available. They were not; after their transcription, the tapes had been reused for new recordings (very common in Iran at the time, given the price of cassette tapes and a dominant recycling culture). I requested a copy of the full transcription (upon which her ventriloquized manuscript had been based). This came months later (in July 1997), after her book had been published. I read it immediately and was taken aback by how much had been removed or radically changed and how much had been added into the published text that was not there. I found the original interview transcription immensely more powerful and felt that it had been a pity to have transformed it into a different text.

Soon, one of Mihrangiz's nieces contacted me and expressed interest in translating her aunt's book into English. Giving a couple of examples from the transcription, I asked Mihrangiz if we could add sections from the transcript into the English translation. She declined, feeling that such inclusion would upset her consideration of keeping everyone satisfied. She did not wish to write things that would cast life in Mazandaran (much of her mother's interview had been centered on her life there) in a negative light.<sup>4</sup> The English translation was not published; decades later the transcription was digitized and added to the Mahlaqa Mallah collection on the *wwQI* site.<sup>5</sup> By then Mihrangiz had passed away and there was no way of knowing if she would have given her permission for this inclusion.

Knowing Mihrangiz's earlier reluctance, was it ethical on my part to push for that inclusion—thus making it available worldwide? Was this interview transcript hers? Her brother's? Her mother's? I could tell myself that this was an anticensorship measure, given how much Mihrangiz had changed her mother's account in the first place. Yet I cannot stop thinking that my insistence must have had something to do with the fact that the shift within one generation in narratives about familial life, as evidenced in a comparison of the transcription and the published text, aligned with my thinking about changes in concepts and practices of marriage and family so perfectly as to make its broader availability to historians irresistible.

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## How to Tell a Story in Which I Was Implicated Both as a Character and as a Historian

The second dilemma posed the difficult question of the structure of the text. This manuscript went through many more reconceptualizations and rewritings than any of my previous writings, and still I had no really satisfactory resolution for its structure. Should I tell the story as a continuous narrative, not burdened with historical contextualization of a historian, or is such contextualization unavoidable and critical to the very telling of the story itself? Should I tell the story, followed by a series of historical essays, so that readers with varying interests could select what they read? How much of myself as a family member as well as a family detective and my sleuthing footprints do I preserve in the telling of the story, without overwhelming the story with an authorial I? Both as a character within the story and as a historian, I became engaged in detective work. As one question seemed to come close to an answer, numerous new puzzles would emerge. How would I keep the traces of personal and historical detective work, which is what makes research exciting, without overwhelming the story itself?

Like a real-life crime detective, like a good investigative reporter, a historian—cum—family detective needs a frame, “a loose frame” as Richard Péres-Peña has put it. But as you pursue the story, the facts of events, or “the surprise along the way,” of which this research had a large share—especially as I pursued Mansureh’s life story—tend to “blow it apart.” As Péres-Peña puts it, “That is not what the reader usually sees. An article is, by definition, hindsight; it aims to make sense, in a condensed account, of what the reporter [historian, biographer, . . .] found, which can feel sprawling and confused while the reporting [the research] is underway.” Is it possible for historians to write in a style that preserved “a feel for what it’s like to be the reporter [the researcher] pursuing it”?<sup>6</sup>

For my project, a related issue was the question of how I positioned myself vis-à-vis the historical subjects in this manuscript. In a very fundamental way, tackling the problem of *how I positioned myself vis-à-vis the historical subjects in this manuscript*—a positioning that radically changed over the years of multiple rewritings—affected both my dealing with the ethical dilemmas, and how I was approaching my various sources, including family papers and pictures, the many informal conversations with relatives, family gossip, and rumors, as well as how I was using both the wwQI digital archive and historical documents in general.

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Quite often, explicitly and more often implicitly through the narrative structure and arguments of the texts we write, we as historians position ourselves, to put it bluntly and simplistically, in the position of “I am smarter than my historical subjects, and I understand and can explain them, what they did, etc., better than themselves.” Through many email conversations with Michael Amico, I felt even more strongly that our job as historians is to explain to our contemporary audience how our historical subjects saw the world, what they experienced at their time and place, and how to make sense of the choices they made. In other words, we attempt to tell our historical subjects’ stories in a way that generates a sentiment of empathy, rather than judgment, in ourselves and in our audience.

For example, in some of the earlier versions of this book, how I told my mother’s commitment to marriage for love was dominated by my own perplexity over how she, and other women and men since her generation, believed and continued to believe in marrying for love as a recipe for happiness, and as necessarily monogamous, despite what I had called, following Elizabeth A. Povinelli’s observations, the unreferentiality of such expectations in facts. I wrote of this deep belief as an illusion, as what blinded and betrayed my mother. Not only did the notion of illusion run “the risk of getting us off on the wrong track, because it has an unpleasing suggestion of gullibility, simplistic and even offensive,” the more difficult task turned out to be making that faith in, and desire for, marrying for love meaningful to myself and my readers, despite my own views on promises of a love marriage and monogamy.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, at issue was not so much my disdain that modernists considered temporary marriage as prostitution, or arranged marriages as forced, but to bring to life how changes in conditions of life, including education of women and their pursuit of professional lives, and changes in the urban scene and structures of work and living spaces, generated the material conditions within which arranged marriage did come to be experienced as forced marriage, how the presumption of monogamy of companionate love marriage had come to emerge, and how temporary marriage became reconceived and projected as prostitution.

Approached thus, the meaning of various genres of documents and how we use them can change as well. Not only does gossip, for instance, remain an important source of knowledge, but its significance is no different from presumably more objective resources that can be fact-checked. As Arlette Farge has written in a different context, in neighborhoods where social life outside

the home revolved around talk, where “making the smallest purchase requires endless verbiage, and lowering the price a few sous wears out the lungs of both parties, even extensive conversation in a room is not enough. It is customary to continue conversing in the doorway, on the landing, and all the way down the stairs.”<sup>8</sup> Circulating words act as a source of social knowledge and critical life decisions. As Alain Corbin has written, within small communities, “when it became necessary to choose, or rather to procure, a spouse for this errant young lady, a whole squadron of informers was called into action: confessors and curés acted as marriage brokers; provincial relations acted as intelligence operatives; lawyers and notaries were employed to question their colleagues; bureaucrats were questioned about the virtues of their subordinates, and servants were sent out to gather rumors.”<sup>9</sup>

Gossip and rumor work regardless of their truth status; they form in specific ways how people experience particular other facts of their lives. For instance, because there was rumor and gossip around my father’s tendency to flirt with women, such gossip and rumor defined how my mother would experience his interactions with women at parties and other social occasions. It may have, as well, defined how other women flirted with my father.

To bring out the complexities of their time and place, the historical context and material conditions within which my parents lived, risks some of the pitfalls of historicism. As Amico has put it, “Historicism, in its call for an overarching set of characteristics of a time and place, has replaced them [here he is discussing specific relationships between people, “almost romantic friendship,” “mutual, unselfish love and devotion to each other”] with ideas such as brotherhood and friendship. Individual relationships are then, in the fashion of Enlightenment thought, simply asserted as examples of an idea, a word to turn around and upside down, its boundaries still clear.”<sup>10</sup> How does one contextualize without turning particular people into examples of general ideas, such as “modern woman,” “enlightened man,” and so on?

Amico’s proposed style of contextualization, however, amounts to a different kind of reclaiming experience, not as some prediscursive ground for authority to speak (for the dead), but as an attempt to ground

analysis in the subject’s point of view “on the ground.” The guideline I’ve used for myself is: A subject only acts (and actions include analyzing and narrating) within the constraints of the sources. This way I can better understand how ideas and thoughts and theories are generated by the historical subject, and myself. The material turns—whatever re-

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ality brings—continue to disrupt the analyses and narratives along the way, producing moments of knotted blockages, like the one you find your mother experiencing. These then must be resolved by new ideas and narratives. So constraints are also opportunities. I wouldn't say that any one story or trope is non-referential, an empty idea, or delusional (three ideas you introduce in assessing your mother's understanding) but rather that these stories and tropes are themselves the attempt to surmount the obstacles of materiality, and that this process is what constitutes a traceable life. . . . This is related to thinking about basic dynamics of force and choice that can be felt by the reader as well, not as ideas but in terms of actual material developments and paths that facilitate, hide, or block people's way, and are then felt as impediments or new avenues of access in an individual's thought process or movement through space and time. . . . [H]ow contingent and inventive are the stories and histories and fantasies we tell to manage the truth of our desires. Is there any other way but to live through the forgetfulness of narrative . . . ? Narrative reveals and remembers and organizes and explains—yes, but *in order to do all that*, it also forgets. Forgetting, and trying to see past the blind spots and jump over the obstacles that confront us, seems to be inseparable at some level from generating a new life. I suppose the historian's job is to forget as transparently as possible. What the reader sees through the historian's way of telling a story are all the twists and turns along the way.<sup>11</sup>

At first, it seemed that shifting my position vis-à-vis my historical subjects magically made my ethical dilemma vanish: I would tell my parents' story from a position of deep empathy for both of them, explaining the choices they made within the material conditions of their time and place, including why they wanted the story not to be told and yet why I was telling it. That, clearly, would be a disingenuous claim to make. At the end, I made the decision of telling the story, despite such equivocations, and there is no way of escaping the ethical responsibility for that decision.

But perhaps as importantly, the effort to understand in its own time and place how people made the choices they did out of their given material reality required a different approach to reading my sources, hearing the family stories, gossip and rumors included, and seeing photographs and objects of daily life. Not only do deep interpretive readings, informed by hermeneutics of suspicion, and the search for hidden meanings become inappropriate, sur-

face reading as well is inadequate, unless we reconceptualize the surface to cut across and connect many texts and documents of a given time and place, to read across many surfaces at once.

To do that kind of across-surface reading also requires using multiple genres of documents. People in the past, as we do today, did not just write letters, books, newspaper articles—all the usual textual material that composes the vast majority of archival sources used by most historians. These texts are intimately bound up with, and acquire their meaning from, the practices of everyday life. Even when we cannot witness these practices firsthand, we can find traces of them in objects, photographs, oral histories, and so on. By reading a text through related objects and spaces, in connection with sounds and memories, we can gain new insights that would be impossible to reach by reading the text alone. Working with family papers, photographs, kin accounts of past family events, and objects all make familial sleuthing easier and yet, at times, more risky—posing risks of overhearing mistakenly, over-reading harshly in hindsight.

And the question remains: How relevant is one family's story to a larger understanding of its time and place? Who, but I and my family, cares about my parents' marriage, secrets and all? If I resist making them "examples of ideas," what is the relevance of the story I tell? My hope is that things could work in the opposite direction: excavating my family history and contextualizing it through the stories of many other families' lives—some through interviews, some through the *wwQI* archive—in other words, by locating a few persons' stories within the world in which they lived and how they made their life story as they went along, can also open up ways of seeing the larger world around them. This approach brings closer together what presumably distinguishes the work of a historian from the work of a historical fiction writer. Amico's description of how he went about collecting his archive for his dissertation reads remarkably similar to how Amitav Ghosh explains his research for writing the *Ibis* trilogy—piecing together memoirs, newspapers, diaries, letters, other primary sources, and the many travels that would trace their characters. For Amico, those materials related to two actual Civil War participants; for Ghosh, his imagined characters. While a historical dissertation writer does not have some of the liberties that a historical fiction writer might have, at their best they have pulled very close to each other. I suspect many of us wish we could write our histories with the same richness of feeling of time and place that Ghosh succeeds in bringing out in his fiction.

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## NOTES

### IN LIEU OF AN INTRODUCTION

1. Nancy Miller, “Putting Ourselves in the Picture: Memoirs and Mourning,” in *The Familial Gaze*, ed. Marianne Hirsch (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 51–66, quotes from 51.
2. Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: Living with Shame from the Victorians to the Present Day* (London: Viking, 2013), 122.
3. Arafat Razzaque, “The Sin of Ghiba in Early Islamic Thought: The Zuhd Tradition, Late Antique Religion, and Ibn Abī l-Dunyā’s Book on the Ethics of the Tongue” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2020).
4. Letter of 16 September 1996.
5. The URL of the manuscript is <http://www.qajarwomen.org/en/items/14129A59.html> (accessed 11 May 2021).
6. Richard Péres-Peña, “Reporting the Reporting, Step by Step,” *New York Times*, 1 April 2017, A2.
7. Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 137.
8. Arlette Farge, “The Honor and Secrecy of Families,” in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 3: *Passions of the Renaissance*, ed. Roger Chartier, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 571–607, quote from 582.
9. Alain Corbin, “Backstage,” in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 4: *From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, ed. Michelle Perrot, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 457–667, quote from 469.
10. Michael Amico, “The Forgotten Union of the Two Henrys: A History of the ‘Peculiar and Rarest Intimacy’ of the American Civil War” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2017), 352.
11. From Michael Amico’s email to author, 12 May 2017, emphasis in original.

### CHAPTER 1. MARRYING FOR LOVE

1. This quote came from a videography produced by Soheila Rafeizadeh and Safoura Rafeizadeh in 1990.

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