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Enabling sexual self-fashioning: embracing, rejecting and transgressing modernity among the Iranian Dutch

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ABSTRACT

Modernity figures prominently in understanding change in diasporic sexual cultures, particularly when it comes to Muslim immigrants living in Western countries. Prevailing academic analyses of sexuality in the Iranian diaspora focus on the willingness and ability to embrace ‘modern’ notions of sexual liberty, individual self-fulfilment and gender equality. This approach attributes an assumed progression from a traditional past to a modern present to the Iranian immigrants, and determines simultaneously the extent of their integration into the ‘host’ culture. As an alternative to this dominant perception of change in which modernity is seen as an indicator of cultural progression, this paper proposes the concept of sexual self-fashioning to investigate the diasporic articulations of sexuality in various discursive uses of modernity as investments in processes of subjectivity. Based on an ethnographic research conducted between 2010 and 2014, the Iranian Dutch’ perceptions of specific sexual issues are analysed as vehicles to sexual self-fashioning. It is argued that a sexual self is actively negotiated and created through embracing, rejecting and transgressing modernity, which enables the interlocutors to position themselves in different fields of socio-cultural or religious belonging.

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Introduction

Sexuality and gender have been focal points in recent discussions of the position of Islamic immigrants and refugees in Western societies, especially following the large number of Syrian refugees seeking asylum in different European countries over the past few years. The aftermath of the sexual assaults and harassment of many women in Cologne on New-Year’s eve 2015 by men presented as Muslim and/or Arab refugees and immigrants in various media serves as a striking example of this. The subsequent public debates across Europe centred on the question whether fundamental cultural differences ascribed to these groups coming to Western countries could ever be bridged. Portraying Western and non-Western cultures each as homogenous entities based on attitudes towards gender and sexuality, these debates often (re)produce a deeply rooted, persistent idea of cultural
difference between the Western ‘us’ and the Muslim/Arab ‘other’ (Jansen 1993). Simultaneously, those who emphasise cultural heterogeneity and historical contingency risk being dismissed as naïve at best and as dangerous at worst.

The depiction of the Netherlands as a tolerant nation via sexuality in Dutch media and in Dutch immigration policies has been scrutinised by several scholars (Bracke 2012; Butler 2007; Dudink 2010, 2011; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Van der Veer 2006). Dudink (2010) illustrates the symbolic function of sexuality as a marker of cultural, religious and national boundaries informing the critique of the Dutch ‘consensual politics’ in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Dutch politicians, he argues, were blamed for turning a blind eye to problems related to multiculturalism and held responsible for the lack of integration of immigrants. According to Dudink, homosexuality has become a non-negotiable benchmark of Dutch cultural achievement and a point of cultural and religious distinction from Muslim immigrants, which is supposed to be unambiguously defended by Dutch politicians. Especially the populist, anti-immigration rhetoric of the openly gay right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn, who was murdered in 2002 by a white radical leftist activist, contributed to making Dutch Islamic communities’ perceptions of homosexuality a public concern in the Netherlands (Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Van der Veer 2006). More broadly, sexual freedom and gender equality have served as a yardstick for integration in Dutch national multiculturalist rhetoric and policies (Butler 2007; de Leeuw and van Wichelen 2014). Moreover, as argued by Ghorashi (2010), the Dutch integration discourse is characterised by an omnipresent ‘culturalist’ approach to migration that takes culture as the determining factor in explaining societal problems. Islam, as both culture and religion, is here constructed as an obstacle to the emancipation of gays and women and the freedom of speech of liberal-minded individuals (El-Tayeb 2012; Wekker 2009). Within this Dutch and transnational discursive setting, minority groups with an Islamic background, such as the Iranian Dutch, are dealing with issues of identity, socio-cultural change and belonging.

For several years in a row, the Iranian Dutch have been identified as ‘well-integrated’ based on their level of education, active participation in the job market, their interest in Dutch politics and their relatively non-clustered geographical distribution (CBS 2012–2016; Dourleijn and Dagevos 2011). More generally, the Iranian diaspora appears reserved in terms of participating in social, cultural and political activities related to the sensitive Iranian post-revolution politics (Hessels 2002, 24; Spellman 2004, 40; van den Bos 2006, 86), with the exception of various transnational (cyber) initiatives and collaborations around and after the Green Movement (Ghorashi and Boersma 2009; Mohabbat-Kar 2016). Moreover, highly diverse ideological affiliations have been noted among the Iranian Dutch (Ghorashi 2003). In their media appearances in the Netherlands, some have at times received considerable public attention owing to their fierce criticisms of Islam depicting it as an oppressive religion towards women and sexual minorities. Nevertheless, more nuanced contributions to the Dutch public debates on integration questioning assimilationist positions are also provided by other well-known Iranian Dutch (Ghorashi 2003, 2004, 2010; Nekuee 2009). Still, the Iranian Dutch are generally perceived as successful and modern in the Dutch multiculturalist discourse, falling outside the problem zone in which other Muslim minorities, notably Turkish and Moroccan Dutch, are located (Schinkel 2011).
Next to this diasporic discursive field of sexuality and migration, the entanglement between sexuality and modernity builds on historical identity construction processes among Iranians in Iran. As illustrated by Najmabadi (2005), the nineteenth century Iranian authorities’ attempts at modernising the nation and the intense preoccupation of Iranian intellectuals with the orientalist framing of Iranian culture as sexually corrupt by Western travellers led to the condemnation and eradication of certain sexual and gender customs, such as male homoerotic practices and gender segregation in public spaces. While the male pederast was seen as a symbol of backwardness representing a form of ‘unnatural love’ in European and in Iranian elitist accounts of the nation, progress and catching up with the West were associated with public visibility of women (Tavakoli-Targhi 2001). These sexualised figures of the male pederast and the emancipated woman were deployed as a site for crafting of difference and identification. Gender and sexuality have also been identified as crucial factors in nation-building projects around the revolution of 1979 (e.g. Afary 2009; Bauer 1985, 2000; Floor 2008; de Groot 2007; Moallem 2005; Najmabadi 1991; Shahidian 2002; Talattof 2011; Tavakoli-Targhi 2001). Determined to undo the ‘westoxication’ (Al-e Ahmad quoted in Najmabadi 1991) of the Iranian culture engineered by the previous modernist Pahlavi regimes, the Islamists envisioned a future in which women would play a central role as mothers and wives responsible for producing strong Muslims and thus a strong nation. These analyses attest to historically deep entanglements between sexuality and modernity in the constructions of the nation, with which Iranian political refugees and immigrants have a complicated relationship.

In the following section, selected key scholarly works on sexuality within Western-based Iranian diaspora will be discussed. We will briefly outline how our approach of modernity will go beyond that of the existing literature, by focusing on the way interlocutors subjectively employ notions of modernity when talking about sexual issues.

**Scholarly accounts of progressive change in Iranian diasporic sexual cultures**

Attitudes towards, practices of and concerns about sexuality among Iranian immigrants and refugees residing in Western countries have been analysed by numerous scholars (e.g Ahmadi 2003a, 2003b; Darvishpour 1999; Farahani 2007, 2012; Jaspal 2014; Khosravi 2008; Mahdi 1999; Merghati-Khoei, Whelan, and Cohen 2008; Shahidian 1999, 2002; Shakhsari, 2012). The majority of these studies point at a gradual yet fundamental change in the studied communities in the direction of a more liberal and secular attitude towards sexuality and gender relations. According to Shahidian (1999, 2002), for instance, Iranian immigrants in Canada creatively select between ‘traditional’ options available to them based on their Islamic background and ‘modern’ alternatives offered by Canadian society. Since taking residence, Shahidian (2002, 203) observes, Iranians in Canada have increasingly come to question the ‘Iranian patriarchal masculinity’ and, especially women from middle-class families, are claiming sexual freedoms such as premarital sex. Far more than the community and Islam, he claims, the individual has become the point of reference among the Iranian Canadians when articulating notions of sexuality.

Similarly, Ahmadi (2003a, 2003b) notices that a transition has occurred among Iranian immigrants in Sweden when confronted with the ‘egalitarian Swedish sexual culture’
As a consequence of living in Sweden, Ahmadi states, ‘male dominance’ has weakened among the Iranian immigrants, ‘individualism’ has evolved, and girls and boys are now more involved in premarital sexual relations despite occasional stigmatisation. Both Shahidian and Ahmadi point at the difficulties experienced in Iranian diasporic communities, especially by the middle-aged men who feel left behind, as well as discrepancies and the gender-based double standards while going through these progressive cultural changes. The Iranian women’s educational and occupational remarkably active participation in Western societies has been put forward also by other scholars as a main force beyond challenging Iranian ‘traditional’ norms of sexuality and gender in diasporic settings.

A more complex approach to change in sexual culture is presented by Farahani (2007). In her work, change is not so much a phenomenon observed by the researcher as it is a matter of ‘a perception’ or ‘a sense’ articulated by the research participants themselves. Farahani explores dilemma’s, negotiations and coping tactics among 10 Iranian Swedish women engaged in different power relations, which reveal a hybrid experience between ‘Swedishness’ and ‘Iranianess’ (2007, 261). Despite this emphasis on tactics, negotiation and inbetweenness instead of measuring change from a modernist perspective, some of Farahani’s analytical expressions such as ‘partial violation of and bargaining with patriarchy’ when discussing faking virginity as a tactic among the research participants (2007, 84–90), suggest an underlying emancipatory quality attributed to the overcoming of tradition through mockery. In this process, it is assumed, these Iranian Swedish women become slightly less traditional and more liberated.

Far less attention has been paid to perceptions of homosexuality among Iranian immigrants despite its increasing popularity in public discussions within the Iranian diaspora. A notable exception is Sima Shakhsari’s (2012) study on the role of homosexuality in Iranian transnational cyberspace activities. Whereas Iranian queers were previously denied a legitimate space in Iranian ‘diasporic imaginations of the nation’, she postulates, tolerating and embracing homosexuality have now become central in Iranian oppositional discourses in a race towards representing the most free and democratic version of an imagined nation (2012, 16–17). Based on both a shift from exilic sentiments to broader transnational diasporic understandings of ‘Iranianeness’ and the transnational post 9/11 ‘war on terror’ logic, the Iranian queer has become included in the imagined democratic future of Iran (2012, 15). However, this inclusion, Shakhsari observes, is normative in the sense that it only applies to what its advocates perceive as ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’ homosexuality (2012, 28). Celebratory articulations of homosexuality, this study shows, rather than being a sign of a progressive cultural change, play a symbolic and political role in diasporic imaginations of progressiveness within a particular transnational socio-political setting.

Our approach goes beyond the previously described dominant modernity discourse in which the position of individuals is evaluated based on the extent to which they have freed themselves from tradition or religion and have managed to appropriate a liberal attitude towards sexuality and gender relations. However, what our paper shares with most of the outlined literature in this section, and therein differs from Shakhsari’s study, is a focus on individual subjective experiences and articulations of gender and sexuality at the micro level. Such subjective articulations and the larger socio-political sensibilities, however, are understood as mutually constitutive. Nevertheless, while Shakhsari’s analyses engage mostly with the collective symbolic and political diasporic positioning, our main interest
lies in the individual socio-cultural positioning of the interlocutors. What we do share with Shakhasari’s approach is the focus on the deployment of sexuality in processes of subjectivity and identification, rather than measuring the extent to which the Iranian Dutch have become modern based on their articulations of sexuality. Although rejecting or mocking of traditional norms have often been interpreted as emancipatory in research on sexuality among Iranian immigrants, here we employ a broader understanding of agency by including the constructions of religious subjectivities via sexuality. This poses a question about an implicit secularist framework in scholarship on sexuality and gender in the Iranian diaspora that seems to attribute a necessarily conservative position to religion by excluding it from discussions about progressive cultural change.

**Conceptual positioning**

As an alternative to the previously discussed dominant modernity discourse, we use the concept of modernity as a claim-making device (Cooper 2005, 113–132). Cooper identifies four main approaches to this concept: (1) modernity applauded as central to European history and culture and an inspiration for the rest of the world, (2) modernity as a European imperial construct imposed on others, (3) modernity as an exclusively European accomplishment that needs to be defended against ‘others’ and (4) modernity as plural, such as reflected in notions of ‘multiple modernities’ or ‘alternative modernities’. The shared problematic aspect of these conceptualisations, Cooper argues, is that they all ascribe coherence to modernity and neglect its (historical) contingency (2005, 114–142). Even the notion of ‘alternative modernities’ assumes an original or real (Western or European) version, from which, for instance, Islamic or Chinese modernities are an extraction (2005, 113–114). This maintains the assumption of an evolutionary movement from traditional to modern. Moreover, if we were to understand modernity as a global condition of ‘the now’ that includes everything and everyone, the concept would lose its distinct analytical potential altogether. Instead of thinking in terms of a metanarrative, Cooper proposes to look at what has been said in its name, by whom, in what context and why. Following Cooper’s suggestion to ‘unpack’ modernity (2005, 132), we will analyse how the Iranian Dutch use it as a device to claim a certain identity while articulating their attitude towards sexuality.

In contemporary Western societies, Foucault ([1976]1990, 117–131) argues, sexuality has come to serve as the master key to the self in the process of knowing who we are; sex is where the truth about the self lies. This interrelation between sexuality and subjectivity is further taken up by Butler (1990, 1993), according to whom the body that we tend to regard as male or female is a signifying practice and not a materiality that precedes signification: our bodies are not male or female, they become so through ‘doing gender’. This becoming is a matter of social construction to be investigated in a given context and with regard to a particular phenomenon. Nevertheless, despite being socially constructed, becoming male or female is a process that leads to ‘a natural sort of being’ (Butler 1990, 33). This entanglement between becoming a subject and the constructions of gender and sexuality, Foucault ([1976]1990) explains, emerges within a discursive field of power. In his view, the subject is both the object and the instrument of power, assuming a mutually constitutive relationship between the two. In this understanding of power and subjectivity, agency is not an outcome of transgressing the discursive field of power; the
very process of becoming a subject within the discursive field of power necessarily entails agency. Following this social-constructionist approach, this paper studies sexuality’s role in contingent yet naturalising processes of fashioning a sexual self among the Iranian Dutch research participants.

Mahmood (2005) further develops this Foucauldian-Butlerian concept of agency by criticising what she perceives as its underlying teleological feminist liberal ideal of resistance and the failure to recognise other forms of agency. In her ethnographic work on a women’s piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood illustrates that through orthodox religious practices these women manage to negotiate with various levels of authority without rejecting principles of women’s subordination. An active claim of orthodoxy as a form of subject-formation is here understood as agency, which is realised via compliance, rather than through subversion and resistance (see also Avishai 2008; Bracke 2008; Jansen 2011). In our analyses of the Iranian Dutch research participants’ accounts of sexuality, we are concerned with what these accounts enable in terms of processes of subjectification, understood ‘as the modes through which human beings are made into subjects’ (Bracke 2008, 63). This approach counters the exclusion of religion from scholarly discussions about change in the Iranian diasporic sexual culture, which reveals an understanding of religion as necessarily conservative and outside the framework of ‘change’.

Talking about sexuality is in this paper considered an ongoing act of storytelling through which the self becomes fashioned. As argued by Plummer (1995), when seen as socially constructed, meaningful in a particular social setting and as part of a socio-political argument, stories become ‘real’ (1995, 167–168). He suggests, therefore, that we pay attention to their social consequences and the reason why people tell them. Looking at the power of storytelling in everyday life to constitute the self, makes storytelling ‘a major clue to understanding identity’ (1995, 172). Talking about sexuality then enables the fashioning of a self in relation to a comprehensive past, a turbulent present and an anticipated future. In our paper, we take articulations of sexuality by the Iranian Dutch as acts of sexual storytelling in order to better capture the enabling role of those stories in the constructions of the self as a socio-cultural positioning.

To combine the analytical insights discussed in this section and further develop a framework towards the goal of this paper, we coin sexual self-fashioning to comprehend the Iranian Dutch’ articulations of sexuality. Sexual self-fashioning is here understood as a discursive process in which sexuality, rather than indicative of a fixed cultural position, is deployed in the constructions of a subjectively experienced coherent self. Both sexuality and the self are thus approached from a social-constructionist perspective, as always in the process of becoming. Fashioning the self via sexuality, we assume, involves concerns, concessions, negotiations and strategies in dealing with a multi-layered diasporic and domestic discursive field of inclusion and exclusion, difference and identification. Sexual self-fashioning, in this way, is a space in which sensibilities of belonging are enacted. As the empirical parts of the paper will illustrate, modernity lies at the heart of the Iranian Dutch’ practices of sexual self-fashioning as a dominant frame of reference.

Methodological approach

This paper is based on an ethnographic research conducted between 2010 and 2014. Four comprehensive qualitative methods of in-depth one-on-one interviewing (30), focus group
discussions (5, another 22 interlocutors), participant observation (numerous, 8 selected for analysis) and online text analyses (hundreds, 65 selected for analysis) were used for data-collection. All of the Iranian-born participants had entered the Netherlands as political refugees, including men and women from different age categories (the youngest was 25 and the oldest 54), living in small to medium-size and large, cosmopolitan Dutch cities, with different ideological and religious backgrounds, educational degrees and occupational positions. Given this project’s interest in the relation between sexuality and subjectivity, the various ways in which the self was presented through articulations about premarital sexuality, virginity, homosexuality and non-marital cohabitation were systematically traced. These four topics of sexuality were chosen because of their popularity in both heated public Dutch debates on the position of Islamic immigrants in the Netherlands and Iranian diasporic cyberspace discussions of sexuality. In the analyses of the data, we were particularly interested in how the participants narrate their own position on the chosen topics of sexuality, reject other positions, express dilemmas and uncertainties, articulate a sense of belonging, distance themselves from a past, imagine an ideal future and (dis)identify with others. When analysing the various articulations of sexuality that enabled the research participants to claim a sexual self, we identified three positions: those of embracing, rejecting and transgressing modernity, which we will discuss in the next three sections.

**Embracing modernity**

Discussing premarital sexual relations with Amin, a middle-aged Iranian Dutch man, he made a distinction between his ideas ‘at this moment’ and ‘11, 12 years ago’, when he, his wife and their two young daughters had just fled to the Netherlands. Amin, who had studied medicine in Iran for a few years and was looking for a job at the moment of the interview, described the change in his ideas about premarital sex as a progressive process in which he got rid of his previous misconceptions:

> There is a big difference between [Dutch] and [Iranian] society. My ideas began to change here [in the Netherlands]. I started to think of premarital sex as something normal. I used to think that those who have sex before marriage are unable to control themselves. But here I saw that it is possible to have sexual relationships with even more than 10 people and have a good marriage later in life.

Amin’s previous assumption regarding the uncontrolled and disruptive character of premarital sex had been adjusted after his experiences in the Dutch context. Further explaining how this change came about, Amin referred to his friends’ influence on his perception of premarital sexual relations:

> I think that having contact with modern Iranian and Dutch friends has influenced me profoundly. If I had hung out with traditional Iranian families, I would have stayed the same, or maybe had changed only a bit.

The acceptance of premarital sex as normal due to having contact with modern Iranian and Dutch people allows Amin to claim a position in this group that embraces modernity. The self is here, simultaneously, dissociated from those that are perceived as traditional and incapable of change. Reflecting on his own experiences of change, the
active choice for certain friends is presented as an important step towards becoming modern.

This sense of progressive change in stories about sexuality and the self was also articulated by several other research participants. Aref, a man in his thirties who had come to the Netherlands at the age of 19, expressed doubts about his suitability as a participant in this research as he thought he was not representative of the Iranian culture.

It is a long time since I belonged to that [Iranian] culture. I have the same ideas and thoughts about sexuality as Dutch people [...]. The more open-minded Iranian Dutch have changed a lot. They have become very modern. I’m glad I have changed.

A change towards modernity is here equated to a change away from the Iranian culture, and celebrated as an achievement of the self. In itself, Aref’s hesitance to participate indicates that he thinks he knows what ideas Dutch people have about sexuality, a context he discursively puts himself into. Simultaneously, he argues that Iranian views are different and in this respect, he does not see himself as representative.

Talking about virginity in a focus group discussion, two fathers started to talk about their teenage daughters:

Javad: Let me be very clear. My daughter is free to experience sex before marriage. In fact, I think it is healthy for women and men to have such experiences.

Mohsen: Yes, this way they can find out about what they want in life. [...] She should be able to taste modernity in this society. It is my duty as a good father to allow that instead of acting like a backward religious old man [laughing in the group].

Javad: Yes, but it should be based on mantegh [reason].

Mohsen: Yes, of course, otherwise they [the daughters] end up hurting themselves.

As the whole group of eight middle-aged men and women participants nodded in agreement, they were asked what was meant by mantegh with regard to premarital relationships. Javad replied:

Well, it is important whether you choose your [sexual] partner based on mantegh or just because you want to have fun. If you use your mantegh, then you are more likely to make healthy decisions. Otherwise, you will be disappointed in life.

While the freedom to experience premarital sexual relations was celebrated as an opportunity offered by ‘modern’ Dutch society, mantegh provided the rhetorical tool to avoid a total loss of control over the younger generation’s sexuality. Through this conditional acceptance of premarital sex, the self can be positioned within modernity and away from backward religiosity associated with Iranian society.

In December 2009, on the website of the Amsterdam-based Persian broadcaster Radio Zamaneh, in the rubric Degarbash (queer), an article was published on Iranians’ perception of homosexuality, titled ‘An Analysis of the Reasons for Rejecting Homosexuality’ (Maha 2009). The author poses that homosexuality is widely perceived as a sickness among Iranians and problematises this position as ‘scientifically unjustified’, referring to the World Health Organization as a source. The author argues:

While in Iran ‘political and social circumstances on the one hand and the general difficulties to discuss issues related to jensiyat (gender/sexuality) on the other, have prevented us from having serious and impartial scientific discussions [on homosexuality], we should make use
of the freedom of modern societies and available scientific knowledge to review our previous perceptions.

In the context of the Netherlands as a modern society, Iranians are here invited to take a more scientifically oriented and thus more tolerant position towards homosexuality. Below the article, 25 readers discuss homosexuality among themselves, expressing mainly positive, but also negative attitudes towards sexual diversity. Paraphrasing the popular Iranian poet Sohrab Sepehri, one of them calls for change: ‘We need to clean our eyes and look differently’. Several references are made to Iran as a traditional society in opposition to the Netherlands, a country whose legal protection of gay rights is applauded by most discussants.

Also in the discussions about non-marital cohabitation, a celebrative account of modernity was heard. In a focus group discussion with only women, Shiva, a young mother of two children, reflected regretfully on her marriage several years ago in Iran by saying: ‘We didn’t have any freedom. My parents made all the decisions. It’s here [in the Netherlands] that I started to realise what marriage and being someone’s partner means’. This ‘realisation’ made her think about the advantages of non-marital cohabitation, a widespread Dutch phenomenon, for her own daughter when she became old enough to consider marrying someone. According to Shiva, non-marital cohabitation would enable a well-informed decision about marriage. To rule out promiscuity as a potential negative association with premarital cohabitation, she emphasised: ‘Of course, I will never allow her [the daughter] to change partner every day, but we should make use of the opportunities of living in a modern society where people have more sexual freedom’. Embracing this freedom, though not unconditionally, allows the self to imagine a move towards modernity.

As the analyses in this section reveal, the interlocutors imagine a process of change from a traditional Iranian past towards a modern present in the Dutch context. This narrative of change is evidenced by new, more progressive understandings of sexuality, which enable the socio-cultural fashioning of a sexual self outside tradition and within modernity. However, embracing modernity is sometimes conditional, which shows an active, well-considered and reflective engagement of the interlocutors when fashioning a sexual self. Furthermore, the felt necessity to tolerate or accept homosexuality refers to the particular Dutch context where gay rights are seen as an exemplary national trait (Dudink 2017). Embracing homosexuality thus serves as a prime indicator of belonging to contemporary Dutch society. This also holds true with regard to non-marital cohabitation as an uncontested widespread Dutch phenomenon (Latten 2004). The interlocutors’ sensibilities of belonging are shaped by what is perceived as typically Dutch. The fact that both homosexuality and non-marital cohabitation are almost entirely absent from research on sexuality in the Iranian diaspora in other Western countries points to the specific contextual considerations among the Iranian Dutch in positioning the self.

**Rejecting modernity**

Mina, a middle-aged mother of a teenage boy, was known for her explicit religiosity. She explained that her contact with the rest of the Iranian Dutch community, including her family, was limited due to her Islamic appearance and beliefs, which she said made her
look ‘suspicious’ among the Iranian Dutch. She wore a dark-coloured long, wide skirt, a long-sleeved shirt and a grey headscarf tightly tied around her face and completely covering her hair. She explained that the critique she received from the other Iranian Dutch made her in fact more mosammam (determined) to keep wearing hijab. When asked why she thought her religiosity made her suspicious among the Iranian Dutch, she said: ‘They have lost their culture, they have become corrupted. They have lost themselves to this society’s modern temptations. I’m different and they don’t know how to handle someone like me’. The rejection of religion in the Iranian Dutch context, Mina suggested, was a sign of self-denial. Those who did remain faithful to their true, religious self would be discredited by being accused of potentially spying for the Iranian regime. Against this paranoid, inauthentic Iranian Dutch community she positioned herself as strong and steady by making statements such as ‘you need to know who you are, what you want and what you want to achieve in life’. Islam provided her a way to work towards what she thought was most important in life, namely moral and spiritual strength as opposed to getting lost in insignificant earthly matters. ‘I have my religion. I don’t need their modernity. I have remained faithful to myself. […] Instead of working on themselves, they [other Iranian Dutch] only care about material things. Morality means nothing to them’.

Talking about homosexuality, it became clear that Mina’s understanding is more complicated than a mere distinction between authentic, true self on the one hand and the corrupted self on the other. She described homosexuality as either a ‘hormonal problem’ to be fixed by medication or ‘a matter of choice’ and thus a sign of ‘moral corruption’. In the latter case,

Homosexuality is just an uncontrolled feeling. […] Homosexuals let themselves go. They might be in love, but that is only a temporary feeling. It’s just a matter of nafs [the carnal self]. You should ask yourself why you like someone. If it’s about sex, then you should stop yourself immediately. If it’s not about sex, then you should just be like brothers.

Homosexuality, here reduced to male homosexuality, is conceptualised as the lack of the ability to control nafs, the carnal self, which equates giving into ‘morally corrupt’ sexual desires. To ‘like’ someone of the same sex seems to be allowed as far as this feeling does not lead to a sexual relationship. The authentic self consists of a carnal part that requires mastering. To feel sexual desire towards the same sex is not inauthentic. Rather, another morally aware part of the authentic self is supposed to take over and restrain the nafs. The self that Mina holds in high regard is placed outside, yet closely connected to the materiality of the body. At the same time, modernity understood as related to self-denial, materiality and temptations is rejected, while religiosity is embraced as the opposite of modernity and associated with authenticity and moral strength.

Embracing religiosity as opposed to modernity, however, did not necessarily equate intolerance towards homosexuality. In one of the online discussions on the website of Radio Zamaneh following an article titled ‘Sex, An Alternative Way’ (Rahimi 2007) about the experiences of a gay Iranian man, some of the participants presented their understanding of God’s will as one that cannot entail the marginalisation and punishment of a group of people based on their ‘sexual inclination’. Ramin, a male participant says:

How could God knowingly create a group of people [gays] who are supposed to be punished by another group of human beings? This does not correspond with God’s zaat [true nature]. You don’t have to be modern to accept homosexuality.
Masoumeh, a female participant agrees and continuous:

In my opinion we should accept others and approach everyone equally, since God used his great power and knowledge to create every one of us as part of the reality of life. A true believer would know this. And yes, these self-acclaimed modern people don’t have a monopoly on tolerance.

The true religious self that respects and understands God’s will cannot but tolerate homosexuality as part of life. Here, the essentialisation of homosexuality as a natural, God-created phenomenon goes hand in hand with the construction of a true and tolerant religious self. Simultaneously, the exclusive link between tolerance and being modern is challenged. Tolerance as a value, in fact, is presented as a common ground between modernity and religiosity, without dissolving the difference.

The youngest research participant, who embraced Islam as part of his identity, as well as the identity of all Iranians, is Hamid, a highly educated, unmarried man in his early thirties. According to Hamid, who came to the Netherlands as a child, the Iranian diaspora suffers from ‘anti-religious anxiety’. Traveling around in different West-European countries, such as the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany, he had noticed that Iranians tend to be hostile to anything that has to do with Islam. Connecting this to the traumatic experiences of the Iranian Dutch as (former) political activists and living in exile, Hamid accused them of holding extreme ideas about Islam. Instead, he proposed, ‘they should come to terms with who they are’. To him Islam forms an important part of the Iranian identity, denying which would mean denying a part of the self.

It’s not healthy to keep running from your roots and embrace modernity uncritically […]. By saying that I don’t believe in Islam, the hundred years of Islamic influence don’t just go away. Islam is part of my heritage […]. It is nonsense to believe that you can disconnect yourself from this background […]. It’s actually kind of silly to see Iranians act so anti-religious. It’s quite childish.

Elaborating on this ‘childlike’ attitude, he mentioned an anecdote about his friend’s surprised reaction to his plan to marry his girlfriend. “Who marries nowadays?”, they wanted to know.’ Getting married, Hamid explained, is not fashionable among his highly-educated friends anymore. Afraid of losing their freedom, they would rather cohabit without getting married. This, he believed, attested to the unwillingness to get involved in ‘committed and meaningful relationships’ among his generation. On the contrary, he thought that ‘submitting yourself to old rituals such as marriage’ was an act of ‘maturity’.

In my view people have the innate need for rituals. Even though modernity does not allow to admit to such needs […]. The ritual of marriage has something unconditional, it’s an unconditional promise. If you think about it, there is something very mature about it.

Submitting to both Islam as a given part of the Iranians’ background and marriage as an unconditional commitment is here presented as a sign of the ‘maturity’ of the self. This maturity becomes accessible when one, such as Hamid himself, manages to overcome anxieties that come with running from one’s cultural and religious roots and embracing modernity uncritically.

Mahnaz, a highly-educated young woman in her twenties used the word ‘profoundness’ to describe the quality she attributed to a disciplined religious self. While her family was ‘more traditional than religious’, Mahnaz had found her ‘own way of being religious’.
Raised under, what she called, strict rules of her parents, she thought this upbringing had helped her in becoming a mo’mene vaghe’i (true believer) and protecting herself from ‘persistent influences of modernity’. As an example, she referred to revealing clothing as something that her parents never allowed her to wear as a teenager. Later, as an adult Muslim, she started to understand and appreciate her parents’ strict upbringing.

Wearing revealing clothing would make the wrong impression on others, my parents said. I understand why they said that, because now I know that there are more profound things in life than focusing on the appearance. Now, I completely agree with them. I don’t find it very difficult anymore to keep myself from what most of the Iranians here have to do just because they want to be seen as modern.

The importance of a disciplined body, such as in the case of modest clothing, was furthermore apparent in how Mahnaz talked about sex before marriage. ‘I think there are higher things in life. I prefer to wait until I am fully grown. “Grown”, az lahaze akhlaghi [in the moral sense]’. It is in the context of marriage, Mahnaz assumes, that the necessary moral maturity is reached in order for a sexual relationship to take place. Achieving moral maturity and maintaining a sexually disciplined body by deliberately rejecting modernity’s influences allow Mahnaz to claim a true religious self.

The narratives in this section contain a religion-based rejection of the perceived mainstream Iranian Dutch uncritical embracing of modernity. However, rather than a passive religious positioning of the self in the Iranian past, the interlocutors express a sense of determined, strong and authentic subjectivity. In fact, the unpopularity of their position supposedly attests to their moral strength. Simultaneously, the religiosities embraced by the interlocutors do not necessarily go hand in hand with dismissing values generally associated with modernity or Dutch culture, as the quotes about homosexuality show. Contemporary concerns are thus actively and thoroughly negotiated to enable the fashioning of an authentic self through sexuality.

**Transgressing modernity**

The story of the first sexual experience of Katy, a journalist in her early thirties was framed as ‘getting rid of virginity’. ‘I was already 20 years old and determined to lose my virginity before going to Iran for holidays’. After having lived in the Netherlands for more than a decade, she explained, she did not want to be seen as an unexperienced, dull woman by friends and relatives in Iran. She thought she was expected to have made use of the sexual freedom for women in the Netherlands. Moreover, she associated virginity with passivity as a negative personal quality:

I see a virgin woman as someone modest and naïve, someone who doesn’t have the guts to do something significant in life just for herself, someone who doesn’t do or say much and awaits her destiny patiently, someone who does what is expected of her by tradition and hides those feelings that don’t correspond with it, an introvert and shy person. That’s what I imagine when I hear the word virgin. It’s about being passive.

Against this figure of passive virgin, Katy positioned herself as someone who decisively creates the circumstances for her needs and concerns to be met. Talking about her first sexual encounter, she said:
The guy that I slept with for the first time was actually quite confused to see how urgently I wanted to have sex with him. I didn’t feel much [...]. I didn’t care about the foreplay. That changed later, but at that moment, losing my virginity was the only goal […]. This is how I started my sexual life.

While embracing the transgressive sexual subject as opposed to the traditional passive subject seems to resonate with the narratives of embraced modernity, what makes Katy’s story distinct is the deliberate upsetting and transgressing of dominant norms by foregrounding her own subjective sexual needs. For those Iranian Dutch who take premarital sexual relations as a sign of modernity, love forms a condition. For Katy, however, love is not the reason to break with ‘traditional values’ and to fulfil the expectation of sexual transgression associated with living in the Netherlands. Rather, it goes one step further in that to act in accordance with one’s own concern – losing virginity – is the only consideration. Emphasising the ‘guy’s confusion’ strengthens the image of a transgressive self in terms of both gender and sexuality. As a woman, she is not supposed to be forthcoming about her sexual desire. While the narratives of the research participants who explicitly embraced modernity entailed some sort of justification for sexual freedom – future marital happiness, healthy life, appealing to scientific authority – for Katy sexual freedom is mainly a matter of self-fulfilment. Furthermore, other than in the previously presented focus group discussion about the promotion of ‘reason’ as a way to mark acceptable premarital sex, to Katy, gaining experiential knowledge enjoys higher priority.

Part of the research participants’ transgressive narratives of sexuality included ideas about ideal household formations. Sina is a student of architecture in his mid-twenties, who came to the Netherlands together with his parents and sisters about 15 years ago. Based on his previous romantic relationships and his friends’ experiences, Sina was convinced that couples should avoid living together in pairs. He would rather share a house with a group of friends, while ‘My partner can, of course, come and visit me for a few days […]. I think we can even have children, without living together. That way we can have other [romantic] relationships as well’. When asked about where he imagined their child would live, he said, ‘That doesn’t really matter, for instance, with me and my friends. Why should children necessarily live with their mother and father? Living with more people can in fact be more stable, safe and joyful’. The specific arrangements regarding the living situation of the parents and the children, Sina thought, depended on practical considerations and the specific wishes of the couple rather than following a certain blueprint provided by society. However, Sina saw his own position as ajib-o-gharib (unusual). While laughing, he said, ‘probably no one except me wants to live like this’. These articulations enable him to claim uniqueness, a position opposite to the (implicit) importance attributed to the nuclear family in various celebratory as well as disapproving accounts of modernity as discussed previously.

Long-term relationships had lost their romantic attraction for Shadi, a woman in her thirties who recently had divorced or, as she puts it, ‘released’ herself from the load of conventions her marital life had laid on her. ‘There is no guarantee for staying together forever. I don’t like the expressions “I love you” or “I can’t live without you”. I can live without anybody if necessary’. While cohabiting with a man whom she is romantically involved with, she says, both of them are having sex with other people. ‘I wouldn’t call it a relationship. We sometimes eat together. We have a big house with a lot of rooms. We have decided to inform each other before inviting someone for a night. We both
have our own lives’. Shadi says, she is determined to become a mother soon. To make that happen, she relied on her ‘strong network of friends’ as she was looking for a suitable sperm-donor.

It’s a difficult process. I need someone who is not going to claim the child later on. Of course, he should be allowed to see the child, but I’m not looking for a father for my child in the traditional sense, but I realise how very unconventional this is.

Since her divorce, Shadi has changed her ideas about both relationships and family. ‘I am not a romantic person anymore. I don’t want to play that game any longer. I can easily move on, I don’t become dependent emotionally’. The polyamorous arrangement and pursuing a child outside the nuclear family allow Shadi to imagine unconventionality.

Having left Iran due to involvement in student political activities five years before our conversation, Tara, another young female research participant, said that unlike other Iranian Dutch she never experienced a cultural shock upon her arrival in Dutch society. ‘I have heard that for some people it is strange to see a couple kissing in public. Not for me. I have never lived a normal life, not in Iran, nor here in the Netherlands’. Explaining this lack of normalcy in her life, she referred to her previous relationship with someone who was born as a woman, but dressed and behaved more like a man. This relationship was not comprehensible to her family, friends and ‘even highly educated, self-identified modern colleagues’. ‘They don’t understand me. I could use the word queer to describe myself, but that is too difficult for them to understand’. However, Tara appreciated the position of not being understood:

One of the things that I loved about this relationship was that after a long time, there was something that I had to fight for. It’s difficult to explain this feeling. There is something rebellious about it, anarchism. I love anarchism. I believe that everybody should try to break taboos in society […]. But, that requires a courageous person.

To have been in a relationship with someone with an unclear gender identity as a sign of queerness allows Tara to claim a transgressive self in relation to (modern) others for whom her life style and choices are incomprehensible.

Similarly, Hammed, a young artist in his early thirties, felt the need of breaking taboos of gender and sexuality, ‘especially among the Iranians in the Netherlands’. Otherwise, he said, ‘we can’t have a healthy society. I want Iranians to become open-minded’. To him, this was ‘a personal mission’. In his private life, he explained, he tried to break taboos continuously. For example:

I have never had sex with a man, but I can’t say that I never will. At this moment, I don’t feel the need, but in the past, it did cross my mind a few times […]. I don’t find it difficult to say that I see this as a possibility. I see sexuality as something that is very fluid.

While the acceptance of homosexuality as a phenomenon out there was perceived as a sign of becoming modern in some of the previously discussed narratives, in this case, Hammed imagines having a homosexual encounter himself based on curiosity rather than an inclination. Admitting to one’s queer desire as opposed to assumed fixed sexual identities, here, provides the self with the means to imagine and claim transgression.

The narratives of transgression presented in this section are insightful in making the boundaries of modernity’s implicit promise for liberation tangible. They question love as a condition for premarital sex, the normativity of monogamy and copulatedom,
gender binaries and fixed understandings of sexual desire, all of which are values embraced by those Iranian Dutch who claim to have become modern. While modernity is often assumed to be progressive and liberating, the interlocutors’ accounts in this section make the less visible disciplinary mechanisms of modernity in the Iranian Dutch context traceable. Rather than a socio-cultural positioning of the self, these younger research participants claim a self that transgresses such notions of belonging and instead fashion a self beyond culture. Paradoxically, however, this transgressive sexual self relies on cultural norms from which it draws legitimacy. Transgressiveness and normativity thus mutually constitute one another, rather than being exclusive opposites.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we showed that for the Iranian Dutch refugees who participated in this ethnographic research project, articulations of sexuality are investments in processes of subjectivity, which enable sexual self-fashioning. Understanding these articulations as sexual storytelling, rather than reflections of a deep-seated cultural characteristic, is an active, processual and contemporary undertaking. As we illustrated, modernity is taken by the interlocutors as a central point of reference, which is embraced by the majority, rejected by some and transgressed by another small group belonging to the younger generation. Sexual freedom understood in terms of accepting premarital sex, homosexuality and non-marital cohabitation is perceived as characteristic for modernity. While most of the research participants idealise this position, some accuse modernity of superficiality, artificiality and a lack of moral guidance, whereas others question modernity’s implicit norms of meaningful sex, nuclear family and fixed categories of gender and sexual identity. Although such positions could be interpreted as a measure for these groups’ modernity, we argued that embracing, rejecting or transgressing modernity, are in fact stories about a coherent self, told within a multi-layered domestic and diasporic discursive field of belonging.

Approaching modernity as a claim-making device allowed us to understand articulations of sexuality as practices of sexual self-fashioning, rather than taking modernity as a self-evident yardstick for the ‘integration’ of immigrants and refugees with an Islamic background. Modernity, we argued, is a site for negotiating identities and belonging. Though some of the sexual stories of the Iranian Dutch in this paper reproduce normative notions of progression towards modernity, we also observed, for instance, how modernity’s feared possible promotion of promiscuous sexual behaviour among young women is limited by their fathers through promoting another value, namely ‘reason’. This points at a gendered strategic attitude towards modernity, a mechanism that appears in the process of unpacking this dominant framework. Moreover, a more inclusive conceptualisation of agency that goes beyond its common liberal understanding in terms of resistance enabled us to analyse the rejection of modernity as part – and not outside – of the cultural change that immigrants and refugees go through. While adherence to religion and tradition tend to be dismissed as passive, static and located in the past in the modernist understanding of progressive change, our findings showed that claiming a traditional and religious self might involve active negotiations with contemporary dominant cultural scripts. The transgressive stories about sexuality and the self among the younger generation of the research participants, furthermore, helped us in uncovering the less explicit
normative aspects underlying modernity’s celebrative accounts. Whereas sexual freedom and gender equality are seen as the obvious components of the modern, these transgressive stories point at the implicit norms regulating gender and sexuality. Regardless of whether these young Iranian Dutch manage to actually transgress modernity, their accounts helped us in tracing the less visible disciplinary work that is done through modernity’s promotion of gender relations and sexuality. In summary, approaching modernity as a claim-making device enabled us to identify the diverse ways in which the interlocutors negotiate issues of belonging through notions of sexuality.

Notes


2. See the following examples: (1) Afshin Ellian, a professor of law, speaking about the need to expose the dangers of political Islam in Dutch daily newspaper Volkskrant, 2 November 2012: https://www.volkskrant.nl/opinie/afshin-ellian-het-is-mijn-nood-lot-de-islam-op-de-operatietafel-van-de-rede-te-leggen~a3341565/; (2) a photo project by the artist Sooreh Hera (pseudonym) in which scantily-clothed homosexual dark-haired men wearing masks of prophet Mohammad and the first Shi’ Imam, Ali, are photographed in intimate settings such as a bedroom: http://soorehhera.com/ (accessed 10 June 2016); (3) the co-founder of the Dutch Central Committee for Ex-Muslims in Dutch news program NOVA, 10 July 2010: https://www.ntr.nl/player?id=NPS_1069582&ssid=203.

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