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## Writing History as if Women and Gender Mattered

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Middle East

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Current histories of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905–1909) frequently begin with the bastinado of three Tehrani merchants, on 11 December 1905, upon the orders of Tehran's governor. This incident, we are told, led the two leading Tehran clerics to stage a sit-in protest, demanding dismissal of the governor and the premier, as well as calling for the institution of a House of Justice. Some months later, two men of religion were killed when government soldiers attempted to break up a protesting crowd in Tehran's Friday Mosque. This set off a chain of events that culminated in the issuance of the Constitutional decree by Muzaffar al-Din Shah on 5 August 1906. By telling a different story of these same revolutionary years, I question how these particular events have come to form Iranian collective memory of that revolution, while others have been merely forgotten.

# Writing History as if Women and Gender Mattered

and his companions worked (and continues to work) to produce a sense of shared religious tragedy that crafted a sense of a Shi'ite community, recitations of the Story of the Daughters of Quchan provided a text for 'national narration', producing a sense of belonging to a national Iranian community.

Not only in public display of grief over common loss, but through the production of a sense of national solidarity and power, the story was effective in creating a sense of national togetherness. As the Daughters of Quchan became the daughters of the nation, our daughters, daughters of Iran, 'we, Iranians' became more meaningful.

The dissemination of this tale acted as such a powerful focus of national imagination that shortly after the opening of the new parliament in the fall of 1906, relatives of some of the captive women demanded that the parliament hear their grievances and act to punish those responsible for the crime. Upon the initiative of the Majlis (the Iranian Parliament), the newly re-constituted Ministry of Justice formed a commission of investigation and put a number of people of high station on trial for their responsibility in what had become a truly national affair. The investigations and the trial were the first under the new regime. They thus became constitutive of many of the new judicial institutions. The verdict issued by the Minister of Justice was brought back to the Majlis, setting off a new round of parliamentary debates and power struggles. The investigations, the trial, and their subsequent political repercussions provided the contesting terrain upon which some of the central institutions and political concepts of the constitutional regime took shape.

How did a familiar tale of rural destitution and the story of yet another Turkoman raid become a uniquely outrageous story, traveling not only the length and breadth of the country at a crucial historical moment, but also in between the many genres of revolutionary literature? And how, through these travels, did it contribute to the crafting of a sense of 'nation-ness' among Iranians? How did the fate of ordinary peasant girls and women provide the scenario for contestation over the most critical political themes of the revolution and the shaping of the new constitutional order? I argue that in the Constitutionalist discourse, acts of oppression or cruelty against women and children were recited to produce condemnation of autocratic rule. A power that oppressed the most helpless and weak was immoral and intolerable. It deserved to be overthrown. Both in the narratives of grievances against the autocracy, and in the rhetoric of mobilization for a constitution, women were cited as oppressed and dishonoured by the vices of autocratic government. Men were called upon to act against these vices, to rise up against autocracy and form a constitutional government, to establish the will of the nation and to re-establish moral order. In most such narratives, oppression and cruelty were linked with transgressions against women's sexual integrity (defined as men's honour). This linkage produced a multiple sign that political, moral and social oppres-

sion had gone beyond the limits of tolerance and it was time for 'great change'.

The Story of the Daughters of Quchan was by far the most frequently cited narrative of its kind. In this one tale, transgressions across many politically explosive boundaries were transcribed into a remarkable story, which included the class tension between peasants and aristocrats, the ethnic, sociological, and sectarian boundaries between Turkish Sunni raiding tribes and Persian Shi'i settled peasants. It also dealt with the selling of young virgin girls (the sexual honour of the family) to outsiders who were said to have taken them across the Russian-Iranian border (thus betraying national honour) and sold them to Armenians of Ashkhabad (thereby transgressing religious honour). Through its narration in a variety of genres of revolutionary literature, this single act was transcribed as signifying a multiplicity of national, moral, and religious loss. Yet, in the later historiographies of the Constitutional Revolution we are hard put to find a trace of the Daughters of Quchan. Instead, the two other episodes mentioned earlier are invariably cited as the events that sparked the revolutionary upheavals. When I first came across the story in primary sources of the Constitutional period some ten years ago, I was deeply puzzled by my own unfamiliarity with it. I had only the faintest recollection of having briefly encountered the story many years earlier in my first reading of the history of that revolution by Ahmad Kasravi. Nor had I come across the story in the more analytical political histories written by such major historians as Firaydun Adamiyat. The other events, however, were in every single history of Iranian Constitutionalism. Like many Iranians, I had come to remember them as the originating events of the Constitutional Revolution. A story that had magically moved and captured me in 1989 was simply not part of my cultural memory of that Revolution. How was this to be understood? Why were the Daughters of Quchan forgotten? What does this massive erasure of their story from Iranian national history tell us about the political culture of modern Iran, the constitution of the national memory, and modernist historiography?

Some events become subjects of history because of how they constitute an important part of national memory. Unlike such events, the Story of the Daughters of Quchan is marked as a 'scene of forgetfulness', a site of national amnesia. But this amnesia could not have resulted from a lack of the story's political and cultural significance for its contemporaries. Rather, it is the larger plot of later histories that has marked it as too insignificant to be included. Particular events acquire significance through their consequent effects and subsequent narration by historians. In other words, it is the consequent developments and the subsequent historiography that deem certain events important, others trivial. The broad outline of the narrative of the Constitutional Revolution has become fixed as a revolution made possible by the alliance of progressive clergy and bazaar merchants, united by their common opposition to foreign cultural and

economic intrusions, and led by enlightened intellectuals. Once this outline became accepted as the frame story of Constitutionalist historiography, those events that could be memorialized as the symbolic representations of that outline found an eternal place in subsequent historiography. Remembering the punishment of merchants and murder of men of religion as the events that sparked off the Constitutional Revolution became the memorialization of the critical alliance of the clergy and bazaar merchants. Without any place accorded to either women or peasants in such a plot, however, there was hardly any reason for the Daughters of Quchan to be remembered. In other words, the urban-centredness and male-centredness of the plot of this subsequent historiography, as well as the central place allocated in it to the alliance of the clergy and the bazaar, have crafted the particular opening of the narrative.

The act of remembering the Story of the Daughters of Quchan then is a recuperative effort: recuperation of women into the national narrative and of gender into historiography. It is a proposition for writing a different kind of history of modern Iran that is interested in many issues thus far considered unimportant, mundane and quotidian, which are more often than not gendered through and through. And their very gendered-ness tells us a great deal about the political culture of society. This is not simply a desire for a more accurate history of the Constitutional Revolution. More importantly, it is an attempt at reconfiguration of national memory, at producing a counter-memory, counter to a cultural setting hostile to a central presence of women in its important cultural texts and in its political memory. ♦

## The Story of the Daughters of Quchan

### Gender and National Memory in Iranian History



Afsaneh  
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The story concerns young girls and women who, in 1905, had been sold by needy peasants to pay taxes in a bad harvest year. Others had been taken as booty in a raid of a village settlement by Turkoman tribes. Neither of these events was extraordinary for its time and place. Yet, happening as they did within the political context of increasing agitation against the central government, they became woven into a much-narrated tale of outrage and grievance. They became a 'story', the Story of the Daughters of Quchan. From their pulpits, Muslim preachers lamented the fate of the girls. Social Democratic militants used the story as a tale of injustice of the rich and the tyranny of rulers.

The many retellings of this story within the literature of grievances against the old regime contributed to popular mobilization against autocracy and in favour of a constitutional regime. These recitations also provided much opportunity for the construction of a sense of 'nation-ness', of 'Iranian-ness', through a shared sense of grief that the teller and the audience, the writer and the reader, would experience in the events' repeated public remembrances. In these performances, both the themes of the story and its modes of performance were drawn from the familiar Karbala' narrative. While the recitations, remembrances, and collective weeping over the tragic fate of Husayn