Introduction

Sexuality and Identity Construction among the Iranian Dutch

In the summer of 2006, a group of Iranian Dutch organized a demonstration against the policies of the Iranian regime in the city center of The Hague. During this gathering, a conversation took place between an older friend of mine and a middle-aged man who was a remote acquaintance. He looked distinctly pale and sad and suddenly started telling my friend about an unbearable painful situation he had been experiencing. Worried and a bit confused, my friend asked him what caused it, to which he answered: "I recently lost both my mother and my daughter." Intensely moved by this announcement, my friend asked him how it happened. He replied that his mother had died of old age, whereas his daughter was "not really" dead. His seventeen-year-old daughter had slept with a young man, he continued, which in his view meant that he had lost her. To him, she was symbolically dead. He was now considering putting her on the street. Gradually, other Iranian Dutch joined the conversation, which quickly turned into a group discussion about how this man was supposed to handle the situation.

Almost unanimously, the people who took part in the conversation advised this man to "get over it," to accept this "natural" aspect of life, and to try to build a healthy, close relationship with his daughter. Several people kept referring to what they perceived as the general acceptance of premarital sexuality in Dutch society and the necessity for Iranians to adapt themselves to this liberal (sexual) culture. Some of them seemed even angry at him for being unable or unwilling to liberate himself from "traditional" ideas about sex.

A young woman stated that after having freed herself from conservative ideas about sexuality, she now understood having sex as something as simple as *ab-khordan* (drinking water), suggesting that there was no need to complicate a natural desire shared by all. At that point, a group of approximately ten men and women, mostly middle-aged, were giving advice to this man about domestic problems, articulating what ideals they believed should be followed by Iranians in relation to sexuality in the Dutch context.

Various thoughts come to mind with regard to this incident. For instance, why would this man share this personal story at such a public place? Did he on some level expect his compatriots fellow countrymen to talk him out of the idea to expel his daughter, whom he obviously still cared about? Why did this personal conversation turn into a group discussion about traditional versus liberal understandings of sexuality? What motivated those people to eagerly and immediately reject this man's way of dealing with his daughter's sexuality, even though they seemed to recognize what he was going through? How does all this relate to their new residence in the Netherlands? Could this political protest against the Iranian regime in a public place in The Hague simultaneously be an act of dissociating oneself from conservative notions of sexuality? And if so, then at whom was this act of dissociation directed and what was to be gained through this dissociation? What role did gender and age play when a male parent is enormously concerned with his female child's sexuality?

What happened that day, about seven years ago, was one of the significant events that made me more sensitive to Iranian Dutch ideals as well as discontents in relation to sexuality in their self-presentations. This, moreover, happened in a distinct broader Dutch sociopolitical context where the political Dutch ruling elite was accused of not taking "Islam's danger" to Dutch society seriously. Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, public distrust erupted in the Netherlands, which was further intensified by the foundation of Pim Fortuyn's political party *Leefbaar Nederland* (Liveable Netherlands) in 2002 (Prins 2002). Ably using the Dutch media, Fortuyn spread his anti-Islam and anti-immigration views and managed to gather an unexpectedly large number of followers. According to the polls, he was well on his way to becoming the leader of the largest political party in the country right before he was shot dead by a radical environmentalist. Many would remember him for "saying what others didn't dare to say," a formula that gradually seeped into the Dutch public discussions of immigration and Islam. The need to break ta-

boos instead of choosing a relativistic approach to cultural difference, being straightforward instead of fearing backlash, and being realistic instead of naïve characterized the sociopolitical atmosphere in which the abovementioned incident took place and in which the seeds of the research project underlying this book were planted.

In this book, the Iranian Dutch perceptions of sexuality as connected to, what I will call, processes of self-fashioning will be looked at. I am interested in the ways articulations of sexuality enable constructions of the self. Regarding the aforementioned anecdote, my concern, therefore, is with the reactions of people to what the man shared with us rather than providing an analysis of or a solution for the kind of "problem" he was dealing with. What is intriguing about the reactions to this man's story are the negotiations involved in idealizing and claiming a "liberal" self through the acceptance of premarital female sexuality. According to Henry Rubin, "When we ask what is the matter with someone, we are often in search of a diagnosis and a cure. If, alternatively, we ask what matters *to* someone, we are asking after their taste of the world" (2003: 10). This book's approach is of the latter nature, looking at what matters to the Iranian Dutch in how they conceptualize sexuality.

In the following, I first present a discussion of the Dutch discursive multicultural context at the beginning of the twenty-first century in which this study is embedded. Next, a short overview of studies on sexuality, gender, and identity issues among Iranian immigrants living in European and North American countries will be provided. This will be followed by the introduction of the main research questions. A brief discussion of the three sexual fields of contestations in which I will explore the positioning of the Iranian Dutch is the focus of the subsequent section. Furthermore, the research group, the methodological approach, a reflection on my own position as a researcher, and the outline of the book will be presented.

Embedding the Research

In the period before and during my research project, several Dutch media productions focusing on anti-Islam views received a lot of attention. An example is the short movie *Submission Part One* (2004), written by the former politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali and directed by the assassinated filmmaker Theo van Gogh, which was presented as a controversial critique on violence against women in Islam. This

movie led to an explosion of heated public debates within and outside the Netherlands. In the film, Quranic verses in Arabic are calligraphed on the body of the female English-speaking narrator who is covered only by a transparent veil. Lamenting to Allah, the narrator talks about domestic (sexual) violence and forced marriage in a mixture of prayer, confession, and testimony.[1] The repeated focus of the camera on her naked body, particularly her breasts, attributes a symbolic role to the sexualized female body as the contested site where the battle between "backward Islam" and "modern/civilized Western values" is fought. The entanglement of Muslim women's sexuality in debates on multiculturalism and integration is characteristic of a comprehensive discourse of the "other" in European and North American countries (Scott 2007).

In the Dutch context, citizens with a Moroccan and Turkish origin have regularly been identified as a group that experiences difficulties in dealing with certain issues of sexuality and gender due to their Islamic background (Crul and Doomernik 2003). "Dutch culture" is implicitly or explicitly assumed to consist of a high level of tolerance towards sexual diversity and individual choices in sexual behavior and relations. This is further opposed to "Islamic concepts" such as honor and piety which are assumed to be restrictive of sexual freedom, particularly for women. It is then through sexuality that a difference between "Dutch" and "Islamic" cultures is imagined and constructed. This prominent role assigned to sexuality and gender in public debates on integration and citizenship,[2] whereby a form of holistic cultural dissimilarity between "Muslims" and "Westerners" is produced, is indicative of the discursive context in which *Submission Part One* should be understood.[3]

In the same period, anti-Islam views expressed through sexuality, furthermore, emerged in more formal and institutionalized contexts. In a Dutch policy document from 2002, *Emancipatie en familiezaken* (Emancipation and Family Issues),[4] "honor killings," "genital mutilation," "as well as practices that might be less striking such as limiting one's physical and social space to move" appears as a hindrance for the integration of Muslim women and girls in the Netherlands, for these "traditional practices contradict Dutch fundamental rights." Some years later, in another Dutch policy document on integration and citizenship (2010),[5] Islam is mentioned as the faith of a considerable number of immigrants, which "evokes anxieties" among forty-one percent of the Dutch population because of "other traditions, views and the association with violence and radicalism elsewhere in the world as well as in the Netherlands." It

is then stated that the government recognizes these anxieties, and, operating within the boundaries of the freedom of religion, it works to protect he democratic Dutch constitution. The Dutch constitution is, among others, defined as opposed to "excrescences" such as "honor-related violence," "polygyny," and "forced marriage" as phenomena observed especially among young women who enter the Netherlands on grounds of "family formation" or "family reunification". The ethnic or religious background of this group, however, is not mentioned explicitly, implying an implicit consensus on whom this document is targeting.

Tracing and analyzing the Dutch integration debate between the 1970s and 2000s, the philosopher Baukje Prins indicates the dominance of the discourse of "new realism" (2008, 2002). According to her, in this discourse, starting from the 1980s, culture and more specifically gender became entangled with issues of immigration and integration. Until the 1990s, value pluralism was celebrated as a Dutch characteristic, while cultural relativism was simultaneously criticized and rejected by important Dutch public figures. As part of this discourse of "new realism" the multicultural approach of the Left progressive Dutch politicians and intellectuals was presented as the reason why immigrants failed to truly integrate into Dutch society. Later on, in the 2000s, the discourse of "new realism" began to entail a call to: listen to ordinary people for they represent what is "really happening" in society; dare to face the facts and speaking "frankly"; criticize the "political correctness" of Left progressive politicians; and ignite a revival of Dutch patriotism. As a result of this atmosphere, issues related to immigrant Muslim women and sexuality—e.g., cult of virginity, homophobia, and forced marriage—came to the center of public attention. Presumably, these problematic "culturally inherent" matters were finally dealt with. Prins regards this development as both a blessing and a curse, for the previously ignored position of immigrant women was paid attention to, yet, by playing the culture card, these women were depicted as "either victims or accomplices of their oppressive cultures" (2008: 365–68).

Sexuality was and remains a crucial element in culturalization of "us-versus-them" constructions within the Dutch integration debate. More recently, the debate has slightly changed its focus and now extends to refugees or asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa, notably Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, and Turkey. In particular, young men from these countries have come to occupy the role of the gendered and racialized Other, who are a threat to European white women (De Hart 2017).

Providing a historical and analytical picture of homosexuality as a political tool in the Dutch multicultural context, the historian Stefan Dudink illustrates the symbolic function of sexuality as a marker of cultural, religious, and national boundary (2010). In the same vein as the "new realism" theory (Prins 2008, 2002), Dudink describes how in the aftermath of the Dutch "consensual politics," which was criticized and held responsible for the lack of integration of immigrants, homosexuality is appropriated as a benchmark of Dutch cultural achievement and a point of cultural and religious distinction from Muslim immigrants since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Due to the compulsive focus on negotiation and making compromises, the argument goes, the Dutch "consensual democracy" had resulted in blurring cultural differences. In this regard, the tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality was brought forward as a moral value around which a distinctive Dutch nationalism could be imagined against the assumed increasing Islamic influences in Dutch society. The Dutch consensual political climate was to be replaced by one that—in accordance with the concept of "new realism"—promoted frankness and transparency. Like a homosexual person who is encouraged to "come out" and to be open about his/her sexual orientation, Dutch politicians were supposed to be honest and clear in taking a position regarding collective cultural and religious diversities. In discussions on the legitimacy of multicultural society, Dudink concludes, the tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality came to represent a morally non-negotiable cultural hallmark of "us" (2010: 31–33). How the Iranian Dutch relate themselves to this specific Dutch cultural hallmark in their quests for belonging is one of the main questions of this book.

The link between the celebration and protections of gay rights goes beyond the Dutch context. With the concept of "homonationalism," the women's and gender studies scholar Jasbir Puar (2007, 2013) argues that gay rights have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is measured in the US as well as transnational contexts. Using this frame, Puar sets to historicize how a nation's status as "gay friendly" has become desirable and used as a tool for imperialist projects, fundamentally questioning the assumed opposition between the queer and the nation-state. Within this global context, it is not surprising that refugees, and queer refugees in particular, with a non-Western background are compelled to reproduce the same imperialist discourse when seeking asylum (Sharif 2015). The Iranian diaspora is no exception (Shakhsari 2012), which I will explain further when

discussing the significance of the topic of homosexuality for this book.

Remarkably, the approximately forty-four thousand Iranian Dutch, who would also qualify as a "minority group with an Islamic background" such as Turkish Dutch and the Moroccan Dutch communities, remain absent from Dutch discussions on integration. At least they are generally not perceived as a "problematic" group. In fact, as a minority group they have been evaluated as "well-integrated" by the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS 2012: 11), based on their relatively high level of education and employment participation (Luijk 2017). Although in-depth sociocultural studies on the Iranian Dutch that examine this "well-integrated" status are lacking, in their media appearances some of them claim a position that could easily be identified as fitting the dominant Dutch integration discourse. Especially in the period around which this research project was conducted public debates about Islam and integration intensified; a number of famous Iranian Dutch vocal in the media held positions that fiercely critiqued Islam and its relation to women's roles, rights, and sexual freedom. Examples include: Afshin Ellian, a professor of law, who said he believes it to be his "duty to defend freedom and criticize Islam"[6]; Sooreh Hera (pseudonym), an artist who garnered publicity with her photo project *Adam and Ewald*, in which barely clothed homosexual Middle-Eastern–looking men and others are wearing masks of the prophet Mohammad and the first Shi'i imam Ali in erotic settings such as a bedroom[7]; and, Ehsan Jami, a publicist and former politician, who cofounded the Dutch "Central Committee for Ex-Muslims" with the aim "to break the taboo of apostasy in Islam" and "to defend freedom."[8] Next to these, however, non-exclusionary, diversity-oriented voices on Muslims and integration were and are present among the members of this minority group, such as reflected in the work of the anthropologist Halleh Ghorashi, who calls for cultural hybridity as opposed to an essentialist approach to culture.[9]

Criticizing Islam and praising "the West" as the beacon for freedom has furthermore been noticed in various (scholarly) initiatives by Iranians at the international level. For instance, Joan W. Scott and Saba Mahmood speak of a trend, which they describe as "orientalist narratives," in the works of a number of authors with an Iranian background in France (Scott 2005; Mahmood 2006, 2009). These contemporary orientalist narrators, according to Laetitia Nanquette, can be viewed as excessive critics of Islam and at the same time as uncritical proclaimers of the West through which a polarized

vision of the world becomes constructed (2009: 269–70). An example of such a "native narrator" is the Iranian French anthropologist Chahdortt Djavann, famous for her pamphlet "Down with Veils" (2003) and her book *How Can One be French?* (2006). In the discussions on veils and secularism in France, she takes a critical position towards Islam, representing it as a fundamentally oppressive, prejudiced religion with regard to gender relations.

More recently, however, younger generation Iranians living within and outside the Netherlands have started supporting and joining anti-racist and anti-Islamophobic movements, seeking strategic solidarity with Muslim minority groups and communities of color (Maghbouleh 2017; Roodsaz 2020). The simultaneous existence of multiple pro-Western as well as the emerging anti-racist voices and sentiments is one of the important discursive contexts within which the Iranian Dutch accounts of sexuality and the self in this book should be understood. The negotiations involved in processes of self-fashioning via sexuality, I postulate, include reflections upon, (strategic) accommodations to, and (partial) resistance against what the research participants perceive as "Islam," "the West," "tradition," "modernity," and "liberalism." This discursive context thus, rather than a static external entity, is regarded as malleable, becoming constantly produced and reconstructed by participants, and available for creative or confirmatory intentional or unintentional utilization.

Sexuality and Gender among Iranian Immigrants in Western Societies

Several studies have taken issues of gender and family including reflections on sexuality among Iranian immigrants in Western countries as their main topic (Ahmadi 2003a, 2003b; Ahmadi Lewin 2001; Alinia 2004; Bauer 1994, 1985b, 2000; Darvishpour 1999; Farahani 2007, 2012, 2017; Khosravi 2009; Mahdi 1999, 2001; Moghissi 1999, 2005, 2007; Nassehi-Behnam 2010; Shahidian 1999; Shakhsari 2012). Some of these studies specifically focus on the Iranian diaspora's views on (often heterosexual) sexuality and gender relations, which points to gradual yet fundamental changes occurring in these communities.[10] Hammed Shahidian (1999), whose work concerns the Iranian immigrants in Canada, for instance, reports on "a fundamental change in reference from community to the individual" among his respondents as well as an increasing rejection of "Iranian patriarchal masculinity" accompa-

nied with a more equal division of paid and unpaid work between husbands and wives.

Another scholar, Nader Ahmadi, who studies the Iranian diaspora in Sweden, has come to comparable findings and analyses (2003a, 2003b). According to him, "the transition between two cultures" has significantly changed this group's ideas and understandings of sexuality. Being confronted with an "egalitarian Swedish sexual culture," these migrants from a "traditional Islamic society" have now become more individualized and less patriarchal in how they deal with sexual decision making. However, this transition, Ahmadi further explains, contains various difficulties. For instance, although a tendency towards an acceptance of premarital sex can be observed in this group, young women who have had various sexual relationship risk being called "impure," while boys who have engaged in the same kind of behavior are "irresponsible" (2003a: 694). The Iranian Swedish views on sexuality, as suggested in this study, have changed from traditional authoritarian and patriarchal to more liberal, individualized and egalitarian alternatives, although not always without difficulties.

In other research, Fataneh Farahani (2007) explores the negotiations, dilemmas, and coping tactics among Iranian Swedish women, focusing on the topics of virginity, first sexual experiences, marriage, veiling, and changing attitudes and values in a diasporic context. She analyzes how conflicting cultural norms inform these women's accounts of sexuality, and how they engage in power dynamics by challenging, accommodating, and shifting between available discursive axes. This enables Farahani to illustrate the multiplicity and contingency in these women's narrations of their heterosexuality. She, furthermore, states that these women communicated a sense of change in their relationship to sexuality during their stay in Sweden, including their attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding gender roles and their right to their bodies and sexualities. However, Farahani takes distance from linear modernist and essentialist approaches that dichotomize "traditional" Iranian culture vis-á-vis modern Swedish/Western culture. For instance, she criticizes simplistic associations between the high rate of divorce among Iranian immigrants and their migration from traditional to modern societies in the West, and she reminds us of similar transformations within Iranian society despite the limitations imposed by the Islamic republic.

The literature on gender and sexuality within the Iranian diaspora illustrates active engagement among these communities with cultural change through re-evaluations of previous sexual and gen-

dered norms and ideals and negotiations of alternative models. This book, however, takes a different perspective. Rather than whether and to what extent change is happening in the Iranian Dutch attitudes towards gender and sexuality, it investigates what stories of change within this community signify in terms of subjectivity. More specifically, whereas the analyses in the studies discussed in this section concern Iranians' perceptions of sexuality as such, in my research these perceptions are subsequently elucidated in terms of their enabling function in processes of self-fashioning. Accounts of sexuality presented in this book are seen as constitutive, rather than reflective of the self, rejecting the notion of an authentic or a pure self *behind* accounts of sexuality. Ethnographically, this means that accounts of sexuality are seen as fluid (contextual and changing), enabling processes of identity formation. This approach, I hope, helps us move beyond essentialist understandings of the self and culture in discussions on immigrants and sexuality.

Research Questions

In diasporic contexts, identities are constantly produced and reproduced anew, Stuart Hall states (1990: 235). The goal of this research is to investigate how sexuality is conceptualized by the Iranian Dutch research participants and how these conceptualizations enable the fashioning of a particular self. Sexuality here is regarded as a fluid field of "erotic sociabilities and sexual sensibilities," to borrow from the American-based Iranian historian Afsaneh Najmabadi (2006: 17). The self is understood as a continuous subjective process of sociocultural positioning. Analyzing the Iranian Dutch positions towards issues of sexuality, I will explore what discursive assumptions underlie those positions, what negotiations with sociocultural norms are involved in taking those positions, and what notions of the self are communicated through those positionings. To narrow in on the otherwise too broad field of sexuality, I have chosen three fields of contestation concerning the identity-migration-sexuality nexus, namely virginity, homosexuality, and nonmarital cohabitation, which I will discuss in the next section. The main question that this study aims to answer is: how do the Iranian Dutch deploy discourses on virginity, homosexuality, and nonmarital cohabitation in processes of self-fashioning?

The narrated experiences of the Iranian Dutch on the three topics of sexuality will be analyzed in order to understand how these

narratives enable the constructions of the self. This main question is divided into three sub-questions. To emphasize that sexuality, rather than a static entity, is a continuously changing field of cultural negotiations, the first sub-question is: what are the main points of *cultural contestation* in the participants' stories about virginity, homosexuality, and nonmarital cohabitation? The context of migration in which people tend to intensify their (re)evaluations of who they are, is taken as the basis for the second sub-question: what subjective notions of *change and development* are reflected in how the participants talk about virginity, homosexuality, and nonmarital cohabitation? Finally, the third sub-question aims at providing insight into the central points of discursive intersection between sexuality and subjectivity: what are the main *sociocultural intersections* between perceptions of virginity, homosexuality, and nonmarital cohabitation on the one hand and articulations of the self on the other hand?

Virginity, Homosexuality, and Nonmarital Cohabitation

The first of the three fields of sexuality to be discussed in this book is virginity. Both Shahidian (1999) and Ahmadi (2003a) report on the changing perceptions of virginity by Iranians living in Canada and Sweden. While the importance of women's purity and men's or family's honor are emphasized in relation to female virginity (Shahidian 1999: 208; Ahmadi 2003a: 694), overall, the authors observe a growing acceptance of premarital sexual engagements. Male virginity is not mentioned in these studies, which points at the significance of gender as an organizing principle of virginity's sociocultural meaning. Recalling bad memories, the parents often regret their lack of sexual experience and openness upon their own marriage and understand the need to change their attitude towards their children's sexuality. However, these parents remain ambiguous about how open or restrictive they should behave in this regard. In her study on diasporic sexualities among Iranian Swedish women, Farahani underlines the high sociocultural value of the "pure" female body symbolized by virginity among Iranians (2007). The importance of virginity is illustrated though its performativity and women acting as sexually ignorant regardless of actual sexual experience, which simultaneously provides opportunities for some women to "bargain with patriarchy" (Farahani 2007). Similarly, this book does not depart from a fixed understanding of virginity. Instead, I am in-

terested in how the research participants define virginity themselves in order to delve into its importance in relation to issues of gender and identity in everyday life. My goal is to investigate important cultural meanings given to virginity in the Iranian Dutch context, the sociocultural negotiations and considerations involved in formulating those meanings, and the practices of subjectivity which become possible along these discursive acts.

Homosexuality, the second sexual field of contestation in this research, has seldom been the topic of sociocultural studies on the perceptions of sexuality among Iranian Western diaspora. An exception is the work of Sima Shakhsari (2012) on the role of homosexuality in transnational cyberspace activities among Iranians. Shakhsari observes a considerable increase in the representations of queers in the Iranian diasporic circles in cyberspace, whereby "the rights of homosexuals" are defended by some Iranian human rights organizations, dissidents, and Iranian intellectuals outside of Iran. According to Shakhsari, whereas Iranian queers have previously been denied a legitimate space in Iranian diasporic imaginations of the nation tolerating and celebrating homosexuality, they have now become central in a "race toward a free and democratic Iran" in Iranian diasporic oppositional discourses (2012: 17). On the one hand, the post-9/11 "war on terror" logic has contributed to this intensified attention for the Iranian queers and their oppressed position in "the grand prison of Iran," as Shakhsari notices. On the other hand, she argues, a relatively recent shift from *exilic* sentiments, opposing the home (Iran) with the host (the West), to more transnational mobility-oriented *diasporic* understandings of Iranianness have seemingly led to the inclusion of homosexuality in the imagined democratic future of Iran. However, this inclusion, she further postulates, is normative in the sense that it applies only to what the advocates perceive as "natural" or "authentic" homosexuality. People who are not "essentially" homosexual and yet are engaged in homosexual activities are excluded from this celebrated category of homosexuality (ibid.: 15–29). Moreover, gay rights are sometimes instrumentalized, as for instance done by Iranian exilic leftist groups who use it as a political weapon against the Iranian regime, even though they used to dismiss gender and sexuality as serious political issues in the early post-revolutionary era. As Shakhsari's work illustrates, in Iranian Western cyberspace, homosexuality has increasingly become a powerful symbolic field in which notions about change and progress are articulated.

The third sexual field of contestation to be discussed in this book is nonmarital cohabitation. Although research on this specific phenomenon in the context of the Iranian Western diaspora seems scarce, related ideas about appropriate relationships and ideal childrearing in these groups have been discussed in several studies (Shahidian 1999; Darvishpour 1999). Shahidian, for instance, states that in cultural assumptions of middle- and upper-class Iranian immigrants in Western countries, there can only be "one true love" and that is in the context of marriage (1999: 216). Other experiences are, according to him, defined as "misguided feelings" and "hollow infatuations." Love and sexuality are to be level-headed issues, intricately linked with marital life. Another scholar, Mehrdad Darvishpour, whose research concerns Iranian immigrants in Sweden, reports that due to this group's cultural access to various forms of household formation in the Swedish context, building and maintaining a family in a traditional way has increasingly become an option instead of an obvious lifestyle (Darvishpour 1999: 31). This book aims to analyze the dialogues and discussions among the Iranian Dutch regarding relational commitment, ideal circumstances for childrearing, and understandings of love and romance as productive of subjectivity.

The three topics of virginity, homosexuality, and nonmarital cohabitation are simultaneously implicated in Dutch nation-building narratives. Virginity, for instance, is associated with gender- and homosexuality-related violence among Muslim communities (Van Eck 2001) in constructions of a backward Muslim Other and a Dutch civilized Us. The far more striking topic in Dutch national discussions of us-versus-them is homosexuality. Particularly in the 2000s, gay rights were mobilized to present the Dutch culture as liberal and gay friendly as opposed to the backward, traditional, and intolerant Islamic culture of Muslim immigrants (Mepschen 2009). After the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Moroccan Dutch Islamist in 2004, the entanglement between a gay rights discourse and anti-Islam politics became explicit (Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010). Nonmarital cohabitation, on the contrary, is the least explicitly discussed topic about Muslims in the Netherlands. However, when it comes to relationships, love, and Muslims, forced marriage and mock marriage are two of the recurring points of discussion in law and policies around migration marriage (Moors, De Koning, and Vroon-Najem 2018). In short, the stories of the Iranian Dutch about sexuality cannot be separated from these Dutch

discourses on gender, sexuality, and the relation to immigrants. Issues of belonging are, expectedly, played out in a field of power relations that is partly characterized by these discourses and notions of inclusion and exclusion in broader Dutch society.

The Iranian Dutch

The Iranian Dutch are part of a large worldwide Iranian diaspora with several waves of forced and voluntary migration. Although precise and reliable statistic are lacking, the number of Iranian migrants has been estimated between three and six million (Cohen and Yefet 2021). They have left their country for various reasons, including early post-revolutionary religious and political persecution, the human and economic consequences of the Iran-Iraq War, deteriorating political and economic conditions in the 1990s, the sanctions imposed on Iran by Western countries in the last decades, the contested presidential elections in 2009, and, most recently, the Aban movement in 2019 (Karim 2013; Khosravi 2018). Most of the well over thirty thousand Iranian Dutch stem from the middle class, urban, Farsi-speaking Iranians, with a high school degree at minimum (Hessels 2002: 17; Koser 1997: 595).

The Iranian Dutch are known as a remarkably fragmented group. According to the CBS, compared to other Dutch minority groups, they are the most spread out over the country (2012).[11] Furthermore, ideological differences and a general sense of political distrust have been indicated as the reasons for the poor participation of the Iranian Dutch in the few existing cultural and political Iranian organizations in the Netherlands (Hessels 2002: 24; Van den Tillaart et al. 2000: 88). The majority of the Iranian Dutch, especially those who came to the Netherlands in 1980s, are political refugees with different ideological affiliations (Ghorashi 2003: 141). This, to a certain extent, explains the lack of group formation or a sense of strong cohesion among this group. Another tendency observed in this group is that the higher educated members seem to prioritize mutual understanding and intellectual interests above ethnical or cultural similarities (Hessels 2002: 31–32). Ghorashi (2003), moreover, refers to a relatively homogenous, thick notion of Dutchness as part of a Calvinistic and strongly regulated Dutch lifestyle, which thereby leads to a lack of diversity and multiplicity in the Netherlands. This, in her view, leaves little room for multiple and hyphenated identities among immigrants such as the Iranian Dutch (ibid.: 232–33, 242).

Both internal division among the Iranian Dutch and certain socio-cultural characteristics of Dutch society are thus involved in the construction of a highly fragmented collective identity among the Iranian Dutch. The absence of a strong sense of collectivity suggests a relatively low level of social control and pressure, which might influence the way sexuality is employed in processes of self-fashioning in this group.

Methodological Approach

Using a qualitative approach, I was able to explore attitudes, interpretations, meanings, and understandings of issues related to both sexuality and subjectivity from an emic perspective (Mason 1996: 4). The holistic and flexible character of qualitative methods allowed me, furthermore, to include unexpected developments and findings during the research process (Schwandt 1997: 130). While I was interested in Iranian Dutch subjective experiences and individual narratives in relation to gender and sexuality, I simultaneously tried to look for the ways in which these micro-level phenomena intersected with broader collective concerns of migration (Barbour 2008: 25). Four methods were used: semi-structured in-depth interviewing (thirty participants), focus group discussion (five groups comprised of twenty-two participants), participant observation (numerous, eight selected for analysis), online text analysis (hundreds, sixty-five selected for analysis), and additionally text analysis of primary and secondary historical sources. Almost all of the conversations were in Farsi except in a few cases where the research participants, often those who came to the Netherlands at a very young age, preferred to speak in Dutch. In the empirical chapters I will pay specific attention to the importance of language in capturing (inter)cultural sensibilities.

As one of the methods of data gathering, thirty Iranian Dutch women and men (fifteen women and fifteen men) were interviewed in-depth for this research between 2010 and 2014. Initially, I used my own network and asked my friends and relatives to put me in contact with potential participants. Subsequently, through snowball sampling I was introduced to new people. At various moments during data-gathering and analyses, I specifically sought to include those participants who seemed underrepresented, notably people who identified as religious. A possible explanation for this is the general unpopularity of religion and religiosity among the Ira-

nian Dutch. A huge number has entered the Netherlands as political refugees and they criticize the Islamic regime's deeds, which they tend to attribute to its claims of Islamism. This has led to skepticism towards state religion and sometimes even a condemnation of religiosity in a broader sense. Emphasizing one's Islamic identity in the Iranian Dutch community, therefore, could be interpreted as having connections with the political authorities in Iran. Another possible explanation is that research on sexuality has a secular or even anti-Islam connotation in the context of Dutch discourses of gender, sexuality, and immigrants. It is imaginable that this secular connotation made the Iranian Dutch practicing Muslims hesitant to participate. Putting more effort into recruitment and emphasizing the importance of their voices as a minority within a minority, resulted in including the stories of a small group who identified as religious.

The interviewees were between twenty-five and fifty-four years old. They live in different regions of the Netherlands, some of them in larger cities, such as Amsterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague (seven women and seven men), others in medium size cities including Delft, Nijmegen, and Tilburg (four women and five men), and four women and three man came from a small town. They all were born, and almost everyone was raised, in Iran and had come to the Netherlands as adults. Seven women and one man identified themselves as religious, four participants (one woman and three men) presented themselves as moderately religious and eighteen (eight women and ten men) regarded themselves as nonreligious or atheists. The duration of the interviews varied between approximately one and five hours.

With the aim to explore group norms, social expectations, and ideals (Bloor and Wood 2006: 88) as well as negotiations between different collective meanings (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, and Futing Liao 2004: 391), five focus groups were held. Next to the thirty in-depth interviews, twenty-two Iranian Dutch participated in five focus group discussions (eight men and fifteen women). The interactions between the participants and the group dynamics were the most important dimensions of this method with a limited role for me as the researcher during the conversations. In this way, I try to encourage more spontaneous and animated exchanges. This resulted in expressing unanticipated yet highly relevant collective concerns. Simultaneously, group discussions were revealing for shared norms that appeared uncontested.

Attempting to gain a more intimate understanding of ongoing discussions and dialogues (Het Hart et al., 2001), I also used the

method of participant observation. Participant observation increases the opportunities for having "small talk" in the field, based on which the information obtained by other techniques can be corrected (Driessen and Jansen, 2013: 250) and expanded. Small talk was helpful in revealing underlying tensions, hierarchies, and conflicts within the community. Moreover, as I met a large number of Iranian Dutch by using this method, I explored and checked for accounts that were potentially left out in other methods of data gathering. I went to various meetings during the research project and chose eight settings for analysis: a birthday party; a long-weekend trip; an Iranian New Year's celebration two gatherings at Mezrab, a cultural center in Amsterdam, a public outdoor party; a book club meeting; and a wedding. Mezrab became an important space in this project as a group of young research participants were more or less closely connected to this cultural center. The cultural activities in Mezrab, varying from storytelling to music gatherings, drawing lessons, public discussions, and film evenings, as such, reflected a shared interest of this network of research participants. A more detailed reflection on Mezrab will be presented in Chapter 4.

The rapid growth of the number of publications on sexuality issues in Iranian mass media outside Iran has been remarkable. During my project, I was astonished by the increasing attention paid to sexuality in popular news websites, online opinion pieces, and in the form of confessional stories, especially on women's sexuality and homosexuality. I decided to follow all relevant discussions on sexuality issued by Radio Zamaneh (particularly the *degar-bash* page) and BBC Persian (particularly the *nobat-e shoma* page) in 2010 and 2011. Given that Iranians both inside and outside the Netherlands were able participate in these online discussions, the data collection was limited to those who presented themselves as Dutch residents. Nevertheless, the contribution of the Iranian Dutch participants to these discussions should be seen as connected to transnational developments and thus exceeding the Dutch context.

Furthermore, occasionally, I traced and gathered online discussions on sexuality and identity among my Iranian Dutch "Facebook friends." This group of people consisted of (young) adults, with different ethnic, educational, and occupational backgrounds. When Facebook discussions were used for analysis, I obtained permission from the individuals to include their posts in the research project and have protected their identities. In this sense, I sometimes made use of my own network quite directly, which may have led to biased accounts. Within the limits of privacy protection, I have tried

to present each participant as accurately as possible to provide the reader with the necessary information to be able to position the participant in a larger sociocultural context. Altogether, a total number of sixty-five online discussions were chosen for analysis.

Finally, for Chapter 1, which deals with an intersection of sexuality and modernity in projects of collective self-fashioning in recent Iranian history, various primary and secondary sources were analyzed. To get access to important, relevant texts, I traveled to Los Angeles and regularly visited the central library of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) during a two-months stay in 2012. Likely owing to the considerable Iranian community in Los Angeles, UCLA's central library consists of a large collection of books and other texts on Iranian culture and history, in Persian, English, and a few other languages. I started my search by studying a few currently well-known historical overviews of sexuality in different Iranian historical periods[12] to gain a sense of important primary and secondary works in this field and made a list accordingly. This process was repeated a few times by tracing the references in the newly found sources, resulting in a tree diagram of relevant texts.

Given my interest in the relation between sexuality and subjectivity, in the analyses of the data, I systematically traced the way notions of sexuality were "framed" by the Iranian Dutch. A system of coding was employed, through which words and expressions that the participants used were categorized in order to position their beliefs, ideas, and notions of sexuality. Simultaneously, this technique of coding was used for a cross-sectional thematic analysis, while particular attention was paid to conceptions of cultural belonging and boundaries. In later stages an in-depth sociocultural analysis of individual cases was carried out before presenting the data in this book. Based on this, a pattern was found in the way discourses of sexuality enabled claims of subjectivity by the research participants. Specifically, three major accounts are identified with respect to the way sexuality was deployed as the means to self-fashioning. These will be discussed in the ethnography in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

To protect the privacy of all research participants in accordance with the assessment criteria of the ethical committee of the Radboud University Nijmegen consent was sought verbally and the narratives are pseudonymized and anonymized by mentioning only strictly relevant characteristics. Given the relatively small size of the Iranian Dutch community and the sensitivity of the discussions, less relevant personal characteristics are deliberately changed to make the identity of the person as untraceable as possible. Only two research participants made use of the possibility to read the transcripts of the

interviews before I used them for analysis. Others were mostly interested in the outcomes, which I discussed at small and informal occasions and a few larger organized meetings. The audience was often interested in discussing *what to do* in order to liberalize and modernize the Iranian Dutch sexual culture and therefore slightly disappointed by my merely observational-analytical academic approach. Even though I felt embarrassed about falling short of their expectations, this response made me even more aware of the larger significance of sexuality among this group and the critical disjunction between academic endeavors and real-life concerns and interests of the people we write about.

Before continuing with a discussion of sexual storytelling and rhetoric to further explain this study's approach to narrated experiences of sexuality, a reflection on the reference to "the Iranian Dutch" seems appropriate. All of the participants in this research as well as their parents were born in Iran, where almost all of them also grew up. At the same time, they all regarded the Netherlands as their current home, even though the majority of them identified as *Iranian*. "The Iranian Dutch" sounded unfamiliar to some of them, as they perceived themselves mostly as "Iranians living in the Netherlands." The Dutchness implied by "the Iranian Dutch" raised uncomfortable feelings among some of the participants, even though they generally felt satisfied about their life in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, being aware of the ongoing political and societal sensitivity regarding issues of citizenship, especially in relation to immigrants with an Islamic background in Western societies, I chose to use the reference "the Iranian Dutch" to recognize their Dutch citizenship in a political context where immigrants, especially those with an Islamic background, are repeatedly Othered. As a researcher, I believe, such imperfect choices are inevitable, attesting to how one constantly navigates between different audiences and concerns (Narayan 2003; Farahani 2010). Furthermore, although this community still forms a relatively "new" group of migrants in the Netherlands, as time passes the category of the Iranian Dutch will expectedly transform through intermarriage and the offspring of Iranians and non-Iranians, making ethnicity-based categorizations even more complicated.

Sexual Storytelling and Rhetoric

Storytelling in general and sexual storytelling in particular carry the connotation of being mere fantasies, made up narratives, and

not quite reflective of the world of truth. The sociologist Kenneth Plummer has urged instead regarding sexual stories as socially constructed, in the sense that they are meaningful in a certain social context, are read and interpreted in a particular social setting, tend to transform historically, and are part of a sociopolitical argument (1995: 167–68). Rather than being concerned with storytelling as a matter of truth, he suggests, we should pay attention to their social consequences. He, in other words, proposes to examine the power of storytelling in everyday lives. He argues that we tell stories "in order to constitute ourselves" so storytelling is "a major clue to understanding identity" (ibid.: 172). By telling sexual stories in particular, people assemble a sense of self and lay down routes to a coherent past, mark off boundaries and contrast in the present, and provide both a channel and a shelter for the future. Talking about sexuality, as assumed by Plummer, enables the fashioning of the self in relation to a coherent past, helps to draw identity boundaries in the present and reflects anticipations of the future. In this book, what the Iranian Dutch participants will express about issues of sexuality are taken as clues to how they fashion a self in relation to a coherent past and an ideal future, while drawing various cultural boundaries between "us" and "them."

In particular, this book intends to analyze the participants' rhetorical moves to construct an intelligible self in relation to more general social considerations connected to dominant discourses of sexuality—such as the notions of citizenship and "integration" associated with a liberal attitude towards sexuality in the Dutch context (see Introduction). Rhetoric, I assume, is an important aspect of sexual storytelling. In this regard, the work of James Farrer is inspiring for its employment of the concept of rhetoric in relation to the broader sexuality-related cultural and social setting (2002, 2013). Analyzing the sexual culture in Shanghai since China's shift to a more market-based economy in his book *Opening Up*, Farrer traces the basic elements in "talking" about sex and sexuality (2002). This approach enables him to see how the Chinese imagine and understand themselves in the wake of increased globalization through the lens of sexuality and, as he argues, it is exactly such imagination and understanding that give meaning to globalization in the context of Shanghai. In another work, he illustrates how personal narratives of Shanghainese women dating foreign men serve to portray them as cosmopolitan, concluding that "such sexual stories are simultaneously personal but collective products with both aesthetic and political dimensions" (2013: 12). A character of a cosmopolitan woman

becomes established, he argues, via stories about personal sexual experiences. Studying what people say about sex and sexuality is here connected to how this talking functions as a tool for practices of subjectivity. There are two aspects of Farrer's approach that I find particularly helpful for this book. First, in his study the sexual stories told by research participants are not analyzed in terms of their factual accuracy or regarded as separate entities that indicate something about the people telling them, that is, to what extent they are really cosmopolitan. Rather the rhetorical aspects of those stories are focused on, which goes beyond a discussion of fixed identity categories and at the same time regards discourse as a political field where "saying" becomes "doing." The acts of speaking constitute the subject and vice versa. This approach elevates discourse to the level of practice. Secondly, the connection between sexuality and subjectivity is analyzed in relation to the broader sociocultural context. This context informs the political dimension of personal sexual stories. Following Farrer, I will treat personal accounts as enabling the reconstruction of this broader context, instead of attributing an objective character to "the context." Neither the personal narratives, nor the broader context are fixed. However, imbalances in power relations underlying the dominant discourses which determine how "the context" is perceived should not be neglected. Analyses of the Iranian Dutch interviewees' ideas about sexuality thus provide access to how they perceive, organize, and negotiate their social life and constitute a sense of self.

A Reflection on My Role as a Researcher

My own role as researcher matters in several other ways. The qualitative approach and methods for collecting data in this project makes me the main research instrument (Salamone 1979: 51) and the interaction between the researcher and the research participants the method (Cassell 1980: 36). The reality is not simply "out there" to be grasped but is constantly created by both parties. Fieldwork, then, becomes an intersubjective process itself (Sultana 2007), and in my case, emerging from a dynamic and hybrid insider-outside positionality (Carling, Bivand Erdal, and Ezzati 2014).

Having been born and raised in Iran until the age of fifteen, I had the privileges of an "insider" in different ways. The shared cultural and historical background and shared native language creates a bond and a sense of mutual trust (Clifford 1986: 9). Approaching people

felt "natural," while my personal network provided relatively easy access to the research group. When approaching potential participants, the majority seemed quite enthusiastic about participation. Some of them expressed their respect and admiration for my "educational success" as a fellow Iranian in the Netherlands and were eager to contribute. Others felt the need for research on sexuality, as they regarded this issue to be "the real problem" which the Iranian culture is facing and applauded me for putting my finger on this "salient point."

At the same time, though, the position of an "insider" and the assumed familiarity with the participants could block information which would catch the attention of an "outsider" as being significant (Rubel and Rosman 1994: 339). In other words, due to a potential cultural bias, discovering the obvious could be a problem, since only the "outsider" would possess the necessary (emotional) distance to do so (Styles 1979: 148). More importantly, other axes of difference such as class, education, age, and religiosity can still create distance and misunderstandings between the researcher and the research participants. I reckon that I may have been less approachable for committed Muslim Iranian Dutch as my research topic already puts me in the secular/anti-religious "camp" or that my academic background may have been experienced as intimidating to those who do not consider themselves articulate enough to discuss sexuality with me.

As a researcher working in academia one can never be fully an insider, for at various moments, I made decisions regarding how to present stories and which parts to highlight or exclude, which implies asymmetrical power relations as well as responsibility for transparency and substantiating those decisions. Although avoiding biases and presenting truthful accounts are not achievable goals in an absolute manner, at numerous meetings I discussed the interviews and my analyses with my supervisors and other colleagues to challenge and re-evaluate my interpretations. At the same time, my work as presented here should be understood as a dialogical account between the participants and myself, rather than an attempt to expose the "real truth" or construct a single true story about sexuality among the Iranian Dutch. Through a dialogic approach, James Farrer argues, "parallel narratives and multiple truth claims co-exist and productively interact" (2013: 13). Even though I have aimed at accuracy and transparency, for instance through extensive use of quotes and multiple retrospections of original conversations during the writing process, what is being presented in this book is

necessarily produced in an interaction between a scholar's and the participants' representations. As such I see my account as socially constructed, partial (Geertz 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986), and situated (Abu-Lughod 1991; Clifford 1986; Haraway 2003; Rosaldo 1989).

Sexuality is often understood to be a sensitive theme for the researcher and the participants to talk about, as it concerns private spheres and issues that usually are not discussed publicly (Lee and Renzetti 1990: 513). Having this in mind and to allow for a sense of mutual comfort to grow (Van Eerdewijk 2007: 56), I chose to start the conversations with the research topics which I considered least sensitive, such as the general well-being of the participants as immigrants in the Netherlands. However, as mentioned previously, a significant number of the participants were eager to talk about sexuality. This suggests that they might have perceived the conversations as a site where they could perform as "liberal," "modern," or "open-minded" individuals who are able to openly discuss sexuality-related issues. Instead of regarding this more or less strategic approach by the participants as "impure" and thus problematic, I actually turned those strategies into an advantage by making it the topic of research. This means that despite the participants' possible presupposition that my research is—and therefore as a researcher I am—to be located in modernity, their accounts can still be treated as relevant articulations in which collective concerns and anxieties are reflected.

Overview of the Book

Having briefly introduced the research project underlying this book, in Chapter 1, I will reflect on the role of sexuality and modernity in processes of collective self-fashioning in the specific historical context of Iran. Focusing on three different episodes from Iranian recent history (starting from the end of nineteenth century up to the present), I will discuss male homoerotic activities, ideal womanhood and family, and "artificial" virginity as converging points of various ideas about a national or cultural Iranian "us." The goal here is to present a historical contextualization of the present-day discursive entanglement between modernity and sexuality among the Iranian Dutch.

The embodied and discursive entanglement between modernity and sexuality in the Iranian Dutch context will be presented

in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, using ethnographic data. The majority of the Iranian Dutch research participants took "modernity" as an ideal upon which the sexual culture should be built (Chapter 2), a smaller group rejects this idea of modernity and instead appropriates a distinguishing religious morality (Chapter 3), and yet another small group tries to overcome restrictive, including modern norms altogether (Chapter 4). I will argue that through these positionings the research participants are enabled to claim respectively: a *conditional modern self*, an *authenticated self*, and a *transgressive self*. These practices of self-fashioning, however, should not be understood as a typology assuming immutable or fixed group characteristics of the Iranian Dutch. They, rather, indicate multiplicity and heterogeneity in the strategies of the participants in how they deploy sexuality in processes of self-fashioning. Furthermore, the internal complexities and divergence in each constructed self will attest to the ambiguous, multilayered, and continuous nature of self-fashioning. Each of these three empirical chapters is organized along the contested sexual fields of virginity, homosexuality, and nonmarital cohabitation.

In the Conclusion, I will reflect on the embodied and discursive entanglement between sexuality and subjectivity. More specifically, the intersection between gender and religion on the one hand and sexuality on the other hand will be discussed. Also, a retrospect on modernity as a central concept in the participants' accounts as well as some of the limitations of the study will be provided.

Notes

1. For an inclusive discussion of *Submission Part One*, see "Please, Go Wake Up!: Submission, Hirsi Ali, and the 'War on Terror' in the Netherlands" (De Leeuw and Van Wichelen 2005).
2. Although, using the concept of "integration" in Dutch national discussions on the position of minorities started already in the 1980s (Prins 1997: 115), the intensity of this topic has increased substantially after the attacks on the World Trade centre in New York on 11 September 2001.
3. For more exhaustive discussions on the role of sexuality and gender in Dutch integration policies, see Mepschen 2009; Roggeband and Verloo 2007; and De Koning, Bartels, and Storms 2011. It should be mentioned that the othering of Muslims via notions of gender and sexuality is not limited to the Dutch situation and includes a broader Western context (Jansen 1993b; Fassin 2010; Scott 2012).

4. https://www.parlementairemonitor.nl/9353000/1/j9tvgajcor7dxyk_j9vvij5epmj1ey0/vi3akta35fu7, Accessed 15 April 2021.
5. https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-32824-1.html, Accessed 15 April 2021.
6. From the Dutch newspaper *Volkskrant*, "Afshin Ellian: Het is mijn (nood)lot de Islam op de operatietafel van de rede te leggen" [Afshin Ellian: It Is My Fate to Lay Islam on the Operation Table of Reason], 2 November 2012.
7. Soorehhera.com, accessed 15 April 2021.
8. From Dutch news program NOVA, aired 2 May 2007.
9. See for example, Ghorashi and Brinkgreve 2010; Ghorashi 2001, 2004 and Ghorashi and Vieten 2013.
10. An exception is the work of the sociologist Haideh Moghissi (1999), in which she identifies a strengthening of Iranian patriarchal norms and gender inequality among Iranian Canadian immigrants. Marginalization and exclusion as experienced in the host society, Moghissi states, has resulted in the tendency to hold onto Iranian traditional family values among Iranian Canadian men. However, the fact that this study is mainly based on observations among "Persian-speaking abused women in Toronto" might explain such exceptional conclusions.
11. From "Jaarrapport integratie 2012," Annual Report Integration 2012: Jaarrapport Integratie 2012, cbs.nl, accessed 15 April 2021.
12. The works of Janet Afary (2009a, 1996), Willem Floor (2008), and Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) were especially helpful in this regard.