

“Islamic feminism” Encounters “Western Feminism”: Towards An Indigenous Alternative?

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Hammed Shahidian

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Sociology/Anthropology, BRK 313
University of Illinois at Springfield
P. O. Box 19243
Springfield, IL 62794-9243
USA

Office Tel: (217)786-7582

Office Fax: (217)786-7188

Home Phone & Fax: (217)483-7800

E-mail: shahidia@uis.edu

Many non-Western advocates of women's rights have had an ambivalent relationship with Western feminisms. On the one hand, commonality of problems and similarity of aspirations bind those activists with these ideologies. On the other, imperatives of socio-cultural traditions different from those of the birth place of Western feminism challenge the applicability of many aspects of feminist theories. Throughout the world, these concerns have led many to question the universality and relevance of such pivotal feminist concepts as patriarchy and male domination.

In Iran, women's rights activists' encounter with Western feminism has also been influenced by this ambivalence. Ever since the turn of the century, Iranian activists have been both inspired by feminism and damned because of the identification that feminism has with the West. Since the revolution of 1979,

women's fundamental rights in public, familial, and personal domains have been undermined under the aegis of "returning to ourselves" and "reviving an authentic national identity." At the same time, many have fought these incursions on the basis of the universality of human rights and opposition to patriarchal domination.

As the Islamic government consolidated its rule, rhetoric of universality of women's rights were dismissed by Iranian authorities as a decadent, Western argument. Islam, and only Islam, was proposed to have the interest of Muslim Iranian women at heart. Yet the developments of post-revolutionary Iran have made it difficult even for the most ardent believers of Islam to completely sever ties with Western feminism. Many believers have realized a discrepancy between the promises and practices of the Islamic government. To understand the causes of this discrepancy, and to buttress their claim for a revised Islamic notion of gender relations, many have found it necessary to rely on the accomplishments of the women's movement throughout the world, including the West. At the same time, as believers, they cannot question the relevance of Islam or call for its substitution with secular, Western feminism. Other activists rejecting the relevance of Islam for contemporary Iranian women face a similar dilemma. What they find illuminating in feminism must go through the filters of the Islamic government's cultural politics to be tolerated.

My presentation will focus on the representation of Western feminism in the ongoing debates in Iran. I will also discuss the

implications of this representation for the emerging agenda of "Islamic feminism." Though the "Islamic feminists'" turn to "Western" feminism aims to improve some discriminatory aspects of the law and social policies, I believe that several pivotal aspects of feminism, such as women's control over their bodies and separation of religion and politics, remain intact.

Turning to Western Feminism

A major obstacle before Iranian women has been the absence of a general knowledge of feminism and women's movements around the world. In her assessment of the first year of the publication of *Zanan*, Shahla Sherkat comments about ignorant hostility towards feminism among some segments of the society. They refer to feminism as "a deviation from women's nature." She writes that the long domination of patriarchy has led to a lack of awareness about feminism. "And if there is any reference or analysis to feminism, it is mixed with negative convictions" (Sherkat 1993a: 2). Feminism, she goes on, is mistakenly identified in Iran as endorsing a shunning of responsibility towards men and family members, and carelessly seeking occupation and social life. The same people, she points out, deny the depth of "the well of ignorance and darkness they have created for women" (: 2). This denial, she concludes, serves as a basis for these men to deny women the legitimacy of their actions to gain their rights. Citing a few examples of the deprivation of Iranian women, Sherkat questions rhetorically

Can we still consider the awakening of Iranian woman and her struggle a deviation, an imitation of the decadent (!) Western woman? Is it not true

that until there is injustice, there will be struggle? Struggle against inequality, not against men. As men, too, have been raised by unaware mothers who accepted injustice. That is why we believe the real solution is in enlightening women (: 2-3).

Some discussions about the term "feminism" and women's movements in the West have been translated. These include a few pages from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*; Jill Stephenson's entry on "Feminism" in the *Dictionary of Modern Political Ideologies*; and short excerpts from Allison Jaggar's *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*. Several research articles also cite the works of Western feminist scholars.

Many authors believe there is a need to transcend national boundaries and to establish a dialogue with other cultures. Several articles in *Zanan* deal with women's access to legal rights, education, employment, and politics in industrial and underdeveloped societies. Regular news items about women across the world in *Zanan* and other publications also keep women up to date about developments in women's lives cross-nationally. Interaction with women's movements around the world performs several functions for "Islamic feminists." It provides moral support; helps to create continuity between Iranian women's efforts and their sisters across the globe; the intellectual exchange offers them a context for formulating their ideas and demands; and it strengthens their position in the face of adversaries by locating their grievances in the context of a worldwide cry for justice. Thus, Iranians are warned that in order to survive in the "global village," it is vital to rethink assumptions governing gender dynamics in the Islamic Republic,

including adapting a more relaxed attitude towards interaction between the sexes (see Shambayaty 1993).

Interface is not limited to the levels of ideology and action; daily experiences of women and men in the West are also scrutinized towards formulating solutions to the challenges of daily life amidst changing gender relations. Articles from popular Western magazines (sources are mostly unidentified, but authors' names are included) on topics like blended families, child rearing, dealing with stress, being a working mother, and how to deal with marital disputes, appear in translation in issues of *Zanan* or among the lists of self-improvement publications. *Today's Woman, Yesterday's Man*, for instance, suggests that when husbands are late, instead of greeting them with fury, women should avoid unnecessary tension by showing concern for his well-being:

Westerners have a pleasant custom for situations like this and we could benefit from following them here. If her husband is late, a Western woman does not confront him by 'I am so angry that you're late.' She would ask 'Something wrong?' or 'What happened to you?' This way, she shows to her husband that she was worried for him (Keyhannia 1996: 71).

Western Feminism in the Mirror of "Islamic feminism"

"Islamic feminists'" treatment of Western feminism is important not just because of its meaning for how people in this trend view "Western woman," but also because *what* they see is indicative of their understanding of women's rights, of what they consider appropriate for an "Iranian feminism." The recognition of "Western women," the legitimation of Western women and their movement for sexual equality, is undoubtedly a step forward in

comparison with more conservative Islamic literature that basically dismisses Western women and the women's movement in the West as misguided, worthless, and even corrupt. At the same time, however, one cannot overestimate this approach since such tactics have been used before by other "modernist" Islamic writers such as Ali Shariati who paid homage to Western women scientists, artists, and professionals, while remaining enamoured with an ideal, authentic, Muslim, Iranian woman.

Under the Islamic Republic, recognition of Western women's struggle for sexual equality lends legitimacy to the "Islamic feminist" call for sexual equality. This is an antidote to the conservative claim that exposure to the West has a detrimental impact on Iranian women. In the orthodoxy of the Islamic state, women who criticize the status quo are easily associated with the occidental enemy, and the sharper their criticism, the harsher the accusation. The problem is further complicated by the fact that the IRI claims legitimacy on the ground that it is an authentic, Islamic national state. Thus, contenders do not have much chance to compete. In pre-revolutionary Iran, one could claim "authenticity" by adhering to Islam. In the government of Islam, however, "authenticity" means adherence to the Islamic state. The trap of authenticity makes it difficult, if not impossible, for women to challenge the state without being accused of being "Westernized." "Islamic feminists" discuss Western feminism to buttress their own grievances against patriarchy. In so doing, they also portray Western women as substantially less malignant than Muslim fundamentalists would

argue. At the same time, however, they dissociate themselves from the "misguided radicalism" of Western feminism in order to protect themselves against potential charges of "guilt by association."

How "Islamic feminists" assess Western feminism and Western women is more significant than their mere recognition of the contribution of Western feminism. Here one should constantly beware of censored and distorted translations. In the Persian translation of Marilyn French's *The War Against Women*, for instance, the section entitled "Religious Wars against Women" appears in Persian as "The War of the *Church* against Women" and more than three-quarter of that section is cut out. Early in her book, French writes: "Women possessed almost no human rights—to a political voice, to inherit, to own property, or to do business on their own. **They even lacked rights over their own bodies**" (French 1992: 3). The last sentence is non-existence in the Persian version.

From this vantage point, we can observe that in fact sharp edges of Western feminism are dulled in the "Islamic feminist" rendition. A feminist critique of Western society is presented, but feminist proposals for abolishing patriarchal gender roles are regarded with suspicion. In her "Feminism in Iran: In Search of an Indigenous Approach," Motiee criticizes Western feminists for considering "complete similarity between women and men." This emphasis, she argues, has caused women and men to become similar, but, since masculine culture is dominant in a patriarchal system, it was mainly women who have become like men

(1997a: 24). "The growing likeness of women to men implies a grand revolution in values that has led to such developments as homosexuality, bisexuality, and the destruction of family" (: 24). Instead of this dangerous path, Motiee recommends that an indigenous Iranian women's movement promote

a change in the way we value traditional roles. In other words, we should equally value the emotional and instrumental roles that women and men play. In this respect, it is helpful to refer to Islamic values that consider equality between women's and men's emotional and instrumental roles (: 24).

Feminist analysis of domesticity criticizes this aspect of patriarchy for diminishing women's socio-economic power, for limiting women's options in life to domestic roles of wives and mothering. That Motiee fails to make this pivotal distinction between the institution of domesticity and the housewife is no accident. To her, women's confinement to domesticity is not the problem. What she objects is that their work is not appreciated.

Ebtekar also proposes that Iranian women undertake a "balanced approach, exactly the opposite of the speedy way in the West" where "the movement to ameliorate women's social status has led to tension and conflict between women and men" (*Zanan* 1997f: 5).

Western Feminism and the "Indigenous" Movement of "Islamic feminists"

"Islamic feminists" have a push-pull relationship with non-Muslims. On the one hand, they distinguish themselves from non-believers in order to justify their claim for authenticity. On the other, they are attracted to non-believers for support and intellectual inspiration. In effect, they need to establish

their legitimacy on two grounds: both for the believing defenders of the IRI and those critical of the regime. On both grounds, they have to smooth the tension that currently exists between Iran and Islam. This measure conceals the role of both Islam and the Islamic state as constitutive elements of the patriarchal structure in Iran. One can consider, for instance, some "Islamic feminists'" promotion of the chador as a national dress. In a similar vein, Fai'zih Hashemi comments in an interview with *Zanan* that she considers the Shah's cultural policies his worst sin:

The fabric of our society is traditional-religious, aside from that minute percentage who probably liked things like unveiling of women and following Western models, or considered such acts as women's liberation. I do not agree with that since to me, freedom is rendered meaningful in the context of culture. That freedom was only for a few people (*Zanan* 1996a: 13).

She thusly delegitimizes opponents of Iran's "traditional-religious" fabric as non-Iranian in essence. Also, by qualifying freedom with culture, by limiting freedom to specific socio-cultural contexts, she immunizes Islam against criticism on grounds of cultural relativism.

"Islamic feminists" propose that critiques of Islam as a patriarchal ideology are only relevant to a particular, albeit dominant, interpretation of Islam. Rejecting a monolithic interpretation of Islam, "Islamic feminists" set out to provide an alternative to the oppression of women in a cultural context with which Iranian women and men are familiar. Foreign and native observers alike are instructed that "Islamic feminism" may not appease *their* notions of feminism, but it is congruent with Iranian women's cultural background. Non-Muslim critics are charged with inadequate familiarity with Middle Eastern cultures,

orientalist orientations, lack of respect for cultural diversity, or, more seriously, outright racism.

This analysis is also reflected in the writings of some Iranian and other Muslim feminist scholars in Western academia. Homa Hoodfar (1993) sees a link between Western racism and criticism of the veil. Riffat Hassan, the Pakistani scholar of theology, similarly expresses astonishment about "the outpouring of so much sympathy in, and by, the West toward Muslim women" appearing in the midst of Western hatred toward the World of Islam. "Few of us," she emphasizes, "can forget the brutal burning of Turkish Muslim girls by German gangsters or the ruthless rape of Bosnian Muslim women by Serbian soldiers" (1996: 64).

No one could condone such inhuman behavior; racism must be condemned in all forms. Yet I wonder if by the same token one could dismiss Islam and the Islamic approach to women because of the Islamists' abhorrent treatment of women, non-Muslims like Bahaiis, and secularists in Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Egypt, and Algeria? Moreover, clearly not everyone who criticizes Islam and its treatment of women is a racist, nor are they necessarily culpable for the crimes committed against Muslims around the world.

Both "Islamic feminists" in Iran (as elsewhere in the Middle East) and their defenders in the West have founded their arguments on cultural relativism. The fundamental assumption of cultural relativism is that different cultures provide indigenous answers to their social problems that should be judged in the

context of their own environment. On the basis of this argument, Islamists and "Islamic feminists" propose that any universal criterion for assessing sexual oppression is invalid. Kia Tabatabaie, a senior political officer in the IRI's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, writes:

The effective enjoyment of human rights for men and women alike requires that these rights be defined and explained in the context of the basic cultural and religious mores of each society. Particularly since religious values in themselves constitute a system of rights which apply to individuals, family and social spheres of life (Tabatabaie 1995-1996: 87).

Another author states in an interview that such factors as literacy and health are not good indicators of women's well-being.

There are other things that are more determining of a woman's happiness. We consider, for instance, the stability of the family an indicator of development. We say in societies where the family has a strong foundation, women are happier. Where the family is unstable, women feel more unprotected and miserable. These issues are not among the indicators suggested by the UN (Abbas-Gholizadeh 1995-1996b: 143).

On the same basis, defenders of "Islamic feminism" question the validity of the argument that Islam's treatment of women is unjust. To them, if women themselves define Islamic edicts such as hijab and hetero-marital sexuality as liberating, there is really little for others to critique. This approach has led some scholars to refrain from supporting women's anti-hijab demonstration in March 1978 (Higgins 1983; Higgins 1987). In the late 1990s, the cultural relativist stance is embracing a patriarchal ideology on a similar ground.

If by feminism is meant easing patriarchal pressures on women, making patriarchy less appalling, "Islamic feminism" is certainly a trend in the global quest for sexual equality. But

if feminism is a movement to abolish patriarchy, to protect human beings from being prisoners of fixed identities, to contribute towards a society in which individuals can fashion their lives free from economic, political, social, and cultural constraints, then "Islamic feminism" proves considerably inadequate.

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