

"MUSLIM" WOMEN AND "WESTERN" FEMINISTS: THE DEBATE ON PARTICULARS AND UNIVERSALS

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In the last two decades, a host of theoretical positions-cultural relativism, identity politics, postmodernism-have emphasized the *differences* that divide human beings and cultures. For these particularist theories, commonality, solidarity, and internationalism represent "grand narratives", "universalism", "totalization", or "essentialism", all of which are, it seems, inherently oppressive, Eurocentric, and imperialist. Politically, these types of particularism imply either passivism of fragmented and localized micro-initiatives.

My purpose here is to challenge the theory and politics of particularism by examining its approach to gender relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This example will illustrate how, now that women's organized resistance against patriarchal oppression is spreading throughout the world, particularists are damaging the cause of women's emancipation by overemphasizing the uniqueness and localism of each and every feminist movement, and opening up great divides among women according to their religion, ethnicity, race, nationality, culture, and geographic location. This politics, of course, denies the universal significance of the theoretical and practical gains won by two centuries of feminist movements in the West. But, in the guise of respect for other cultures, it also inescapably endorses the suppression of women's demands for freedom and their subordination to the imperatives of religious, ethnic, and national traditions of patriarchy.

The Construction of the Muslim Woman

The consequences of this particularistic approach can be illustrated by looking at one important aspect of women's lives in Islamic societies, the covering of their bodies, which has been a major locus of male and state power in these societies.¹ The veil has been not only a symbol of male domination and state power but a site of theoretical and political struggles within the feminist movements and women's studies. Many feminists in the West, of course, regard the veil as an oppressive manifestation of patriarchal domination. But some postmodern feminists, or what I am calling particularists, sometimes defend the use of veiling as an authentic expression of a particular culture and the "lived experience" of Muslim women, denouncing critics of the veil as "Eurocentric" and imperialist.² So let us consider what is involved in the particularist view that Western critics of the veil are denying the integrity of Islamic culture as well as the "lived experience" and agency of Muslim women.

The first problem is the very idea of "Muslim women". Postmodernist relativists reject dichotomies or "binary oppositions" such as universal versus particular, yet their own theories are often based on

just such mechanistic and simplistic oppositions. For instance, those who attack the critics of the veil on the grounds that they deny the "lived experience" and agency of "Muslim women" are taking an extremely diverse population of women and turning it into a single category. The notion "Muslim women" ignores the heterogeneity of women in Islamic societies and constructs them into a universal category shaped by one particular characteristic, a common religion, Islam. The imagined Muslim woman is so unique that she cannot share anything-demands, rights, politics, ideals-with Western women. Differences are turned into a universal and unbridgeable divide. This universalization of difference produces two separate types of human beings, and two women's movements. As Kipling said, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.

But the history of "Muslim women" and the veil presents a much more complicated picture than this simple dichotomy suggests. Covering the female body is a major component of the exercise of power by Islamic theocracies, from Iran to Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia. In Iran, for instance, this symbol of male domination has been central to the state power of the theocratic regime which replaced the Pahlavi monarchy in 1979. The control of women, who had emerged as a new social force demanding the democratization of gender relations, had been essential to the state-building projects of the monarchy (1925-79). When that monarchy was overthrown, women, mostly urban but both religious and secular, actively participated in the revolution, although they were by no means united in their vision of the future state and society. When Muslim leaders led by Ayatollah Khomeini assumed state power in Iran in February 1979, immediately initiating a project of Islamizing the state and society, women were the main vehicle and target of Islamization. Not surprisingly, the first Islamization measure was Khomeini's call on women (March 6, 1979) to put on the Islamic veil. Equally significant, the first major resistance to the Islamic regime erupted on March 8, International Women's Day, when tens of thousands of women and men marched against the imposing of veiling.

The veil has had multiple and changing meanings throughout history. One of the myths about veiling is that it is worn by the majority of Muslim women. It is often ignored, both in the West and in Iran, that most women, Muslims and non-Muslims, have never put the Islamic veil on their faces and bodies. Women, with and without the cover, lived side by side for centuries, and the clergy either failed or did not care to impose it on all women.

The covering of women's body became thoroughly politicized when the first Pahlavi monarch, Reza Shah (1925-41), unleashed a modernization campaign, and used coercion in order to unveil

women in 1936. Contrary to widespread claims, the majority of women were not wearing the veil when the government launched the unveiling campaign. Confidential documents of the pahlavi state, recently published by the Islamic government, reveal that women in rural and tribal areas, forming about eighty percent of the population, did not need to be unveiled because they never used the cover in the first place.³ The last Pahlavi monarch adopted a more relaxed policy about (un)covering women's bodies. By the time the Islamic regime came to power in 1979, the majority of Iranian women were, as in the past, non-veiled.

It is not difficult, then to see that an essential "Muslim woman" at home in her veil is largely a construction of relativists and Islamic ideologists. Ignoring the history of veiling in Iran, they take the lived experience of the veiled women who have constituted only a minority and universalize it into the experience of all Muslim women.

Just as Reza Shah forcibly removed the veil, the Islamic state has used extreme forms of coercion in order to impose it on all women, Muslim and non-Muslim. Disciplining the woman's body through dress codes is now a priority of the state inside and outside Iran. Using diplomatic power, the Islamic regime promotes the veil globally, from the Olympic games to UNESCO. Imposed through state violence, the veil has turned into a means of sexual apartheid. If the use of hijab (head cover for women) signified anti-monarchist action for some Muslim women in 1979 Iran, today resistance to theocratic despotism takes the form of refusing the veil.

It is true that in Turkey, Egypt, or Algeria veiling is, for some women, one site of resistance against the secular state, but particularists confuse this anti-state struggle with resistance to patriarchy. By contrast, state-imposed veiling in Iran is clearly an instrument of sexual apartheid, and feminine, if not feminist, consciousness is expressed in resistance against it. The Islamic state has developed a whole discourse of repression, which identifies various levels of violation of the official codes of covering the body: bi-hijabi (non-veiling), nim-hijabi (half-veiling), and bad-hijabi (improper veiling). Each form of resistance invites a certain level of punishment-physical, financial, social, and psychological. Women defy the state by violating all the official dress codes including a ban on bright colors, the use of buttons, and the official shape of the veil.

There has, in fact, been a long tradition of struggle against the body cover, which is rooted in more than a century of democratic revolutionary movements. In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, the Babi movement called for the reform of religion and of the harsh treatment of women. One of the leaders, the female poet Tahereh Qurrat al-Ain who lived in 1814-1854, discarded the veil.⁴ Although the movement was brutally suppressed, it continued to influence many intellectuals who "wrote against women's subjugation in family and society and condemned the practice of veiling."⁵ Women participated in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911, which aimed at the establishment of a democratic and independent political system. Some of the targets of the women's liberation movement of the early twentieth century were veiling, polygyny, and restrictions against women's right to education. By the early

1920s, the Iranian poet Mirzade-ye Eshqi (1894-1924), in one of his best known poems, "The Black Shroud" ("kafan-e siyah"), denounced the chador.

There is, in fact, no single universal Islamic view on strict dress codes and sexual segregation. Many theologians, religious leaders, and whole Islamic movements reject such codes. Even the Iran Liberation Movement, whose late leader, Mehdi Bazargan, became the first prime minister of the Islamic Republic, advocates a much more relaxed regulation of gender relations. Faced with persistent resistance against the veil, even some of the factions sharing power in the government choose not to strictly implement dress codes.

Moreover, the country is religiously heterogeneous. The dominant religion, Islam, itself is not homogeneous. Most of the kurds, the Baluch people, the Turkmans, and some populations along the Persian Gulf are Sunni Muslims of different denominations. There are also minorities such as Baha'is, Isma'ilis, and Ahl-e Haqq who distinguish themselves from the Muslims and whose religions are not recognized by the state. Even the official brand of Islam, the Twelver Imam Shi'ism, is not unified as we can readily see from the suppression of the clergymen who are labeled as believers in liberal or American Islam.

The category "Muslim women" constructs a unidimensional woman whose consciousness or identity is shaped by one factor only-religion. An Iranian woman's identity is, however, a changing mix of nationality (Baluch, Kurd, Persian, Turk, etc.), ethnicity (Armenian, Assyrian, Jew, etc.), religion (Baha'i, Christianity, Islam, etc.), language (Arabic, Baluchi, Kurdish, Persian, Turkish, etc.), social class (based on sharp socio-economic cleavages), urban/rural background, education (in a half-illiterate society), political affiliation, physical shape, culture, and so on. The universalization of religion as the determining factor in the identity of Iranian women is, obviously, consistent with the policy and practice of the Islamic state, and shares the so-called Orientalist world view, a view adopted by many Western commentators which, among other things, depicts the world's Muslim population as obedient followers of their religion. It is as if societies and women of the West were identified as simply "Christian".

By universalizing the culture of a minority, anthropologists such as Homa Hoodfar and Patricia Higgins ironically deny the authenticity of the culture of non-veiling practiced by the majority of Iranian women, the culture of anti-veiling, the feminist and secular traditions of Iranians, and ignore the demands of non-Muslim Iranians.

And, finally, to create a particular Muslim woman by universalizing the culture of a minority is not only empirically and theoretically untenable but also politically questionable. It means remaining silent about the anti-democratic nature of forced veiling and other restrictions on non-Muslim women, who together with men are treated as *zimmi* in the laws of the Islamic Republic. Under conditions of legal and coercive imposition by the Islamic state, veiling cannot be reduced to a cultural expression.⁶ It is, rather, an integral part of the exercise of power by a misogynist theocratic state.

Constructing Western Feminism as the Adversary

Particularists single out the differences between Muslim and Western women and universalize them into a great divide. Most colonialists, travellers, and other Westerners who have visited Islamic countries have contrasted the segregation and subordination of the Muslim woman with the integrated or liberated Western women. Today, feminist anthropologists such as Patricia Higgins, an American specializing in Iranian culture, deny the legitimacy of any comparison between the two cases. Her views are succinctly stated in her review of the book *Going to Iran* (1982) by Kate Millett, an internationalist feminist who was convinced of the contemporary universality of patriarchy and of the need for a women's movement that ignores national boundaries.⁷

Millett is criticized for treating equal education, equal pay, equal opportunity, access to abortion, contraception, sex education, and childcare facilities as the universal minimal conditions of sexual equality. Higgins argues that Millett was proposing a model for sexual equality which was Western and could not apply to Iran or other non-Western cultures. Addressing the question Millett had raised in her book, "How can we help [the women of Iran]?", Higgins answered: Perhaps we cannot.⁸

But the demands that Higgins treats as particularly Western have been on the agenda of Iranian women throughout the twentieth century. It is indeed difficult to imagine how working women, often ruthlessly exploited, in Iran or in any other society would *not* demand equal pay, equal opportunity, or childcare facilities. Even if childcare facilities emerged first in the West, how is it possible to brand their adoption (and even the need or demand for them) as foreign (Western) when it occurs in the megacities of Tehran, Cairo, or Istanbul? In fact, since Higgins declared contraception to be a Western feminist demand, the Islamic state itself has promoted it.⁹

Particularists not only construct a "Muslim woman" but separate Muslim and Western women by constructing a universal "West" with its own unique women and feminism. The West, like the Muslim woman, is constructed into a monolithic world. There is much talk of the "Western world", the dominant "Western culture", "Western feminists" and how they "construct" "Muslim" women and their use of the veil. For instance, "Western feminists, it is argued, perpetuate racist myths by assuming that veiling is a uniformly oppressive practice. Western feminists, therefore, are supposedly compelling Muslim women to choose between fighting racism and fighting sexism: in order to resist patriarchal oppression, they must accept the superiority of the West."¹⁰

Several objections to this claim are in order. First, the West is as diverse as any other part of the world. Nor is it appropriate to label all Western critics as clients of colonialism and racism. Such a claim, widely diffused by the Islamic state, is not shared by many Iranian women and men who have been inspired, since the 1789 French revolution, by Western people's struggles for freedom, democracy, and socialism. In North America, for instance, resistance against racism is much more advanced than it is in any Islamic country.¹¹

Second, Western feminist criticism of the veil and the sexual apartheid policies of the Islamic regime cannot be equated with the positions of western states and mainstream media. Many feminists are inspired by a deep commitment to the democratization of life, particularly a radical transformation of unequal gender relations. Contrary to particularists, it would be appropriate to criticize the veil even if all Muslim women voluntarily used it. There is nothing sacred about veiling, Islamic or non-Islamic. Indeed, feminists in the West have not outdone Iranian women and men who have denounced the hijab and chador throughout this century.

Third, to claim that Muslim women are, in effect, being forced by "Western feminism" to choose between fighting racism and fighting sexism seriously underestimates their intellectual ability to distinguish between racism/colonialism and feminism. To put it another way, the implication is that Muslim women must reject Western feminism in order to fight their own oppression. This is a mirror image of a major propaganda line promoted by the Islamic state, which equates Western peoples with their governments, and denounces the entire non-Muslim world as either communist or imperialist. That xenophobic policy is highlighted in the official slogan, "Neither the East [communism] nor the West, the Islamic Republic".

But women in Islamic countries do not have to choose between racism and sexism, nor do "Western" criticisms of veiling imply that they do. Relying on Iranian women's experience as well as the rich theory and practice of the world feminist movement, they can resist the racism of both Western states and the media as well as the racism and xenophobia promoted by Islamic leaders. Muslim women can easily discern, for example, the united platform of the Vatican and the Islamic Republic against women's rights.¹²

An Alternative Approach

I have tried to demonstrate that postmodernists/relativists support Islam-based patriarchal gender relations by identifying a sizeable population of the women of the world simply as Muslim, and celebrating their particularism. In doing so, these theorists work, mechanistically, within the framework of the particular/universal dichotomy. Failing to grasp that particularism and universalism are closely intertwined and, at the same time, conflictual, they make arbitrary and a historical claims about the uniqueness of Muslim women and their demands for equality and justice.

In spite of their proclamation of the collapse of binary oppositions such as West and East, tradition and modernity, agency and structure, religious and secular, particularists eliminate, or rather deny, one side of the opposition and celebrate the other.¹³ The century-long secular feminist movements in Islamic countries are branded as Western, and Islamic patriarchal relations are hailed as authentic cultural formations.

We can, instead, adopt a dialectical approach which recognizes the individuality and particularity of each woman and each feminist movement, each within its specific historical context, but at the same time acknowledges that, even in their uniqueness, they share

common struggles against capitalist and precapitalist patriarchy. We can respect the voluntary choice of any woman to wear the veil, and we can oppose forcible unveiling (e.g., in Iran in 1936-41), yet we can at the same time criticize veiling or any segregation of human beings along sex lines.

To take another example, let us look at the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, issued in 1990 by the Organization of Islamic States. The declaration announced that all rights were subject to Islamic law, and made no provisions for granting women equal rights with men.¹⁴ One commentator has remarked about this documents that particularisms such as Islamic claims about gender relations are nothing more than disguises for the universal male determination to cling to power and privilege. Islamic particularism is simply an expression of a universal claim for the subordinate status of women.¹⁵

Particularized approaches also ignore the unity and conflict of agency/structure by eliminating one side-structure. But agency and structure are inseparable, always united and always in conflict. There is no agency or identity outside the complex web of social-structural relations-relations that are increasingly becoming global while remaining local. At the same time, identity agency both change and are capable of challenging structural constraints. Muslim women should not be held hostage to their Islamic identity or agency, nor should Western women be confined to their religion, race, or geographic location. Certainly, resisting patriarchy in its Islamic local forms is primarily the project of women and men in Islamic countries. But feminists in the West are also capable of solidarity with the struggle against sexual apartheid practiced in Islamic countries.

It is obvious that Western feminists themselves have not turned the world upside down. Patriarchy is still in place in Europe and North America, and new forms of male domination emerge and coexist with old traditions of oppression. But feminists in the West have made great strides in democratizing gender relations in the classroom, the work place, in parliament, even in the church, and in language. These achievements are the result of intellectual and theoretical as well as political resistance to patriarchy. Western feminism is, therefore, in a good position to contribute to the struggle of Muslim women for equality. This has happened, to some extent, since late nineteenth-century women in Islamic societies relied on the experience of Western feminists in their struggle for universal suffrage and other rights. Here is the dialectic of particular and universal: the struggle for suffrage rights and inclusive language—a struggle based on universalistic principles—emerged in particular, Western, feminist movements. Or, to put it another way, the particulars of Western feminist struggles can turn into universals when taken on by other, non-Western, women's movements, just as Western women can draw universal lessons from the particular experience of women elsewhere.

The record of the feminist movement worldwide shows that the struggle for liberation is multidimensional, with numerous platforms and strategies. Moreover, this struggle is intertwined with other movements which aim at the democratization of society-

movements of the working classes, ethnic groups, race groups, etc. A dialectical perspective unity and solidarity in this diversity. It will not optimistically look for a universal alliance among all human beings. But it assumes that there is no insurmountable divide separating the women of the world. No doubt there are different meanings or expectations of freedom, democracy, and socialism, but alliances can be and are being made among those who share a common understanding of liberation. The world is divided, for example, on who should decide women's reproductive choices. Women unite or divide on this issue regardless of their location or religion. In the Beijing conference, the Vatican and the Islamic Republic united on strategies for the control of women, while women of different cultures, colors, and religious canons united against the conservative front.

Postmodernism treats universalistic principles as inherently oppressive, even totalitarian. But the equation of the universal and the global with "totalization" or, more particularly, with totalitarianism is at simplistic. Totalitarianism as a political phenomenon has nothing to do with the scope of generalization. Just as universalistic principles can be liberating, small-scale narratives can be extremely oppressive. Nor is totalitarianism related to size or geography. It can appear in small-size locations such as a family, a court, a classroom, a village, no less than in large-size spaces as a city, a country or a whole region of the world.

The feminist movement does not become totalitarian simply by forging alliances on the national, regional or global levels. Such alliances are not incompatible with mutual respect for cultural differences, and the cause of liberation is better served if our practice is not constrained by theoretical positions that fragment and weaken our agency. Stoning a woman to death in Bangladesh should and can be seen as an assault against women everywhere, and it should and can spur us to think and act in North America.

Notes

1. I use terms like "Islamic societies", "Islamic countries", and "Muslim women" very reluctantly, for reasons that will be clear in what follows. For a similar criticism of this usage, see Sami Zubaida, "Is there a Muslim society? Ernest Gellner's sociology of Islam", *Economy and Society* 24 (2), 1995.

2. See, for example, Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women", *Resources for Feminist Research*, 22 (3/4) 1994.

3. Iran National Archives, *Khoshunul va farhang: Asnad-e mahraman-e-ye kashf-e hejab 1313-1332 (Violence and culture: Confidential records about the abolition of hijab 1313-1322)*. Tehran: Sazman-e Asnad-e Melli-ye Iran, 1992, pp. 47, 48, 240.

4. See, among others, Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989, pp. 295-331.

5. Janet Afary, "The Debate on Women's Liberation in the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911," *Expanding the Boundaries of Women's History; Essays on Women in the Third World* ed. Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 104.

6. The word *zimmi* (the Persian variant of the Arabic *dhimmi*), was used in early Islam to refer to a non-Muslim subject who paid capital tax to the Muslim ruler in exchange for protection and safety. Iranian laws are based on this anti-democratic distinction between Muslims and zimmi. For instance, articles 209 and 210 of the 'Islamic Penal Code' clearly distinguish between Muslims and "zimmi infidels" (*kafar-e zimmi*).

7. Patricia Higgins, review of Kate Millett, *Going to Iran* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1982) in *Signs*, Autumn 1983, p. 155.

8. *ibid.*, p. 156.

9. See, for instance, Homa Hoodfar, "Devices and Desires: Population Policy and Gender Roles in the Islamic Republic", *Middle East Report*, September-October, 1994, pp. 11-17.

10. Hoodfar 1994, p.16.

11. In the West, a rich and growing body of antiracist theory and practice has developed over the decades largely as a result of the struggle of black and native peoples, immigrants, ethnic groups, as well as whites. However, in multinational and multilingual Iranian society where Persian language and culture are official and dominant, non-Persian peoples such as the Turks, Kurds, Arabs, and Jews are subject to harsh racism in both the state sphere and civil society

(to the extent that it exists). In a country where only half the people are native speakers of the Persian Language, non-Persian peoples are constitutionally denied the right to education in their native languages. The Islamic state has refused to implement Article 15 of its constitution which allows the teaching of the literature of "ethnic and local languages." Racism of the anti-Semitic type, for example, is rampant in modern Persian literature (see Z. Pirnazar, "The face of the Jew in the works of three modernist Iranian writers", *Iran Nameh: A Persian Journal of Iranian Studies*, no. 13 (1995) for a brief survey). My own experience indicates the existence, among Iranian immigrants in North America, of extensive racist attitudes towards Black and Aboriginal peoples. Many Iranians deny the existence of racism within Iranian society.

12. See Michael Bronski, "Pope to Jews, Women, Queers-"Drop Dead"", *Z Magazine*, 1994 pp. 14-17 on the Vatican, Iran, and the Beijing Conference.

13. On the collapse of such binary oppositions, see N. Tohidi, "Islamic Feminism: A Democratic Challenge or a Theocratic Reaction", in *Kankash: A Persian Journal of History, Culture, and Politics*, no. 13, (Winter 1977) p. 98.

14. Ann Elizabeth Mayer, "Universal versus Islamic Human Rights: A Clash of Cultures or a Clash with a Construct?" *Michigan Journal of International Law*, Vol. 15, (1994) pp. 307-404.

15. Ann Elizabeth Mayer, "Cultural Particularism as a Bar to Women's Rights: Reflections on the Middle Eastern Experience in Women's Rights", *Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Julie Peters and Andrea Wolper, (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 185.

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JUDICIAL HANGINGS

Judicial hangings are one of the few horrors that our country has been spared during the past nineteen years, and I cannot credit that the government would now restore them. Nor do I believe that an informed public opinion-and here an enlightened government has a crucial role to play-would wish this.

We must certainly be concerned about crime control and law enforcement. But the death penalty is no answer. Nowhere in the world has it been shown to have any special effect in reducing crime. If we now hang a few convicts it might create a superficial impression in some minds that the government has taken "bold" action against crime, while the real problems remain unaddressed. These are not only deep-rooted social issues, but also the painstaking, difficult and undramatic task of improving our investigative and other law enforcement machinery at all levels. "The greatest deterrence to crime is the likelihood that offenders will be apprehended, convicted and punished. It is that which is lacking in our criminal justice system" (South African judgement of 6 June 1995 holding the death penalty unconstitutional as constituting cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment).

The death penalty is irreversible; miscarriages of justice (of which the poor and the disadvantaged are the most likely victims) can never be rectified. Executing murderers means that society, in a chillingly systematic and calculated manner, kills people to teach people that killing people is wrong. The restoration of hangings would degrade us all.

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