

b o o k r e v i e w s

The books reviewed in this section explore feminist politics in a global frame. We aim not just to include writings in feminist international relations, but also to feature multi-disciplinary scholarship pertaining to global gender relations. The section is usually made up of a combination of several distinct elements: Rethinking the Canon, Feminist Classics/Many Voices, review essays and book reviews. 'Rethinking the Canon' gives space for an individual to reflect on one text that they feel ought to be essential reading for feminists working on global issues, but which is likely to be marginalized by existing disciplinary boundaries: they are invited to bring the text to our attention and to explain why it is essential reading. 'Feminist Classics/Many Voices', by contrast, includes several short appraisals of a book already widely considered a classic for feminists working on global issues. Reviewers draw on their distinct disciplinary, geographical and personal locations to offer diverse readings of the classic text. Review essays survey several texts on a single theme, aiming either to explore a recent debate that has generated a range of new publications or to survey the best of the literature covering a more established area of research. The book reviews provide brief introductions to, and evaluations of, as broad a range of new publications as space allows. Anyone with suggestions for texts to be reviewed, or requests to contribute to the section, is encouraged to contact the Reviews Editor, Juanita Elias, Juanita.elias@adelaide.edu.au at School of Politics and History, Napier Building, The University of Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia.

Review Essay

FEMINISM AND THE RULE OF FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson. *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*. Chicago, IL & London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. ISBN 0-226-00786-3.

Minoo Moallem. *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran*. Berkeley, CA & London: University of California Press, 2005. ISBN 0-520-24345-5.

Lois Beck and Guity Nashat (eds). *Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004. ISBN 0-252-02937-2.

In the recent history of feminist scholarship on women in the Middle East, we have seen numerous publications in the USA and elsewhere as well. Several issue-areas, such as Middle Eastern Women's history with an emphasis on the early Islamic era, continue to be in popular demand. There are books concerning the roles of Muslim women and the family in the Arab and Turkish provinces under the Ottoman Empire, Turkish and Turko-Mongol areas under Safavid Iran and Mamluks in Egypt. With regard to scholarly material on the subject of Muslim/Middle Eastern women in the modern era, we have a wealth of information that includes cultural and socioeconomic studies, as well as a large number of biographical sketches dealing with the issues of feminism, politics and women's movements and, most recently, women in popular religious culture. Additionally, we are witnessing the popularity of published materials in the area of progressive Islam, with a significant focus on Muslim women living in western societies. In what follows, I devote my attention to three recent publications on the subject of women in Iran. All three books speak of the Islamic Revolution of Iran (1979) and its subsequent effect on the lives of women.

Women in Iran from 1800 to the Islamic Republic, by Lois Beck and Guity Nashat, is an edited anthology of ten essays whose aim is to sketch the lives of women and the women's movement in Iran from 1794 to the early twenty-first century. Much emphasis is paid to the regime of the Pahlavi dynasty, 1925-79, and the lives of women before and after the revolution of 1979, which marked the birth of the Islamic Republic. This volume is an extension of an earlier published collaborative work by the same authors with the title *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800* (Beck and Nashat 2003). The current volume, despite being more historical than analytical, not only highlights the many problems facing the fight for women's rights in Iran, but also focuses on the progress that has been achieved due to Iranian women's efforts. The life of women is traced by examining their role in Iran's politics and economy – areas that are presented as key to solving the general social problems facing Iranian women of various social and economic statuses.

Guity Nashat's chapter in this volume focuses on the institution of marriage among the ruling elite in the Qajar period (1781-1925). According to Nashat, women's status and wealth were usually enhanced enormously by marriage in this period. Most marriages occurred between relatives in order to keep the ancestral property within the family while adhering to Islamic inheritance law. Women, however, had control over their inheritance and bride wealth and gained prestige through acquisition of wealth. Marriage, sometimes, was the only way for women to move up the social ladder. At the same time, elite women born into wealthy and well-known families had the advantage

over the rest and could exercise considerable degrees of independence (including the decision not to marry at all).

Shireen Mahdavi's chapter discusses the gap between the perceptions that nineteenth-century women in the East and the West held about each other and the reality of their lives on the ground. According to Mahdavi, western women's discourse on Iranian women reflected an assumed superiority of their own western culture as opposed to others. And yet, Mahdavi presents examples of several elite Iranian women who exerted influence over their husbands and played a substantial role in the 1906 revolution. Interestingly, the same theme of superiority is repeated in the book by Minoo Moallem in which she draws attention to the regime of "othering" as a key factor to colonial modernity and post coloniality and [how] all "forms of otherness" and "we-ness" have relied on gender and sexuality as makers of Westernization or anti-West oppositional identities' (p. 35).

Chapters by Mansoureh Ettehadieh and Mahnaz Afkhami in the Beck and Nashat volume build on the existing literature on Iranian women's political participation (a theme also picked up in the title by Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson (pp. 72–4)). Ettehadieh's contribution traces the origins of the women's movement since the constitutional revolution of 1906. Women actively participated in this revolution and organized several political organizations, and women as a social class found their voices for the first time. Gradually, their focus changed from constitutionalism to women's affairs. Education for women was one of their foremost demands and was met with lukewarm interest by the Government. Women's ceaseless fight for education is stressed throughout the book and their success is also well documented. Haleh Esfandiari discusses the role played by women deputies in the lower house of the Parliament and the senate from 1963–71 and after the formation of the Islamic Republic. Among the most valuable achievements was the passage of the Family Protection Law in 1967. During the 1970s, the women's movement shifted from the Parliament to the Women's Organization of Iran. The progress achieved by these women was all but reversed after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The last two chapters in this book, by Erika Friedl and Lois Beck, reveal the life of rural and tribal women of Iran who are active and productive members of their society. The chapters provide a contrast to the notion that rural women are more suppressed than urban women in Iranian society. This book illustrates how, throughout history, Iranian women have voiced their opinion against the patriarchal power and resisted patriarchal interpretations of religion and unequal status in their society.

Reading *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Afary and Anderson), and *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Moallem), in general I found more common themes and similarities between these two books, although the titles may seem to be very different at first glance. The most significant commonality is the focus on the formation

of the Islamic Republic and subsequent events. The research done by Afary and Anderson examines the writings and visits of Foucault to Iran before and after the Islamic Republic was established, and the book includes Foucault's actual writing expressing his admiration and praise of Islamic fundamentalists who were anti-West and anti-modernity. The Islamist movement Foucault saw as 'an "irreducible" form of resistance to Western hegemony' (pp. 14–15). Foucault was attracted to the anti-modernist Islamist radicals of the Iranian Revolution because he himself had rejected modern western Enlightenment values. He was interested in a new kind of 'spiritual politics' that, among other things, rejected modern materialism. Afary and Anderson suggest that Foucault, along with the Islamist radicals, had an idealized notion of pre-modern social orders and was interested in 'oriental forms of ascetic speculation' (p. 13). Furthermore, they suggest that 'Foucault may have exoticized and admired the East from afar, while remaining a Westerner in his own life' (p. 17).

Minoo Moallem notes that it is ironic to see how the modernization of Iran and westernization of the Iranian people under the Pahlavi regime (1925–79) neither changed nor challenged Iranian patriarchy. In her book, Moallem historicizes the notion of Islamic fundamentalism and the notion of Iranian identity. She argues that Islamic fundamentalism is a by-product of colonial modernity and the process of westernization (p. 9). If we accept Moallem's notion of Islamic fundamentalism as a by-product of the West, then one can claim that there is something of a contradiction between Khomeini's anti-western ideology and the concept of fundamentalism.

Foucault, however, was much impressed by fundamentalism in Iran at the beginning of the Islamic Republic. Although Foucault was largely ignorant of Shi-ism in Iran, his journalistic writings and personal interviews are important for the analysis of the events of 1978–9. Apparently, Foucault was not aware of a number of Iranian historical grass-roots councils throughout the country with 'an authoritarian and intolerant interpretation of Islam' (Afary and Anderson, p. 78). Foucault also failed to see that what clerics were presenting in their sermons during 1978 was nothing except propaganda. Afary and Anderson emphasize Foucault's lack of knowledge on the history of Shi'ism and its imposition during the Safavid era in the sixteenth century.

Afary and Anderson's criticism of Foucault is especially interesting in regard to the issue of feminism (p. 26). Little of Foucault's work relates to women's rights, but his writings have influenced many feminists. The authors point out that Foucault's work is criticized 'for its factual inaccuracies on gender in modern Europe and for its disregard of feminist concerns, especially on issues such as pedophilia, rape, and monogamous marriage' (p. 27). The authors conclude that Foucault was naively fascinated by the East.

The two books also raise interesting themes about the relationship between the Revolution and popular culture. Moallem explains that prior to the Revolution there was a large division caused by a widening of the gap between the pro-western culture of local elites and the anti-westernism of

mass-based Iranian popular culture. Further, she notes that this popular culture was ambiguous and contradictory because it served as a source of inspiration for other classes of people, including local elites who 'tried to encourage the production of a high-culture version of popular culture for consumption in national ceremonies and opera and theater houses. However, the same cultural practices increasingly became sources of political empowerment for the masses' (p. 67). In addition to a fascination with eastern sexuality, apparently Foucault was also impressed with the Shi'i rituals of passion plays or *ta'zieh*, which is the popular Shi'i performance of historical tragedy, of Karbala and the rituals of the month of Muharram.¹ Such performances were outlawed by the Shah's regime labeled as a 'sign of traditionality and fanaticism' (p. 67). However, this popular ritual practice was politicized and the masses allowed for its return as a protest against the Shah in the 1970s. The 'spiritual politics' that Foucault was impressed with is staged against this theme of martyrdom, the tragedy of Karbala and the motifs of *ta'zieh* characters.

I now turn to assess the contribution of these three texts to scholarship on women in Iran. Moallem's work is written patiently from years of experience, drawing upon her academic scholarship as well as her own personal experiences as an Iranian woman who decided to leave her native country during the change of government from an imperial kingdom to an Islamic Republic ruled by a religious theocracy. In her book, Moallem expresses her disappointments over the way the Islamic Republic became even more tyrannical than the regime of the deposed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. She has used a large collection of sources for this project. A significant proportion of Moallem's material in this book has already been published earlier in various chapters or journal articles. An update of some of her original sources with more recent academic scholarship would have been helpful.

Among the most interesting sections of Moallem's book is chapter four, 'The Sacralization of Politics and Desacralization of Religion' (pp. 119–53). Here she argues that Islamic 'nationalism and transnationalism are products of modernity and postmodernity rather than of religious or cultural traditions as such' (p. 120). In the same chapter, she analyzes writings of various male reformists in Iran commenting about religious scholars focused on 'the women question' (*masaleh zanan*) (p. 122). Moallem's chapter on 'Mediatization, Visual Technology, and Filmic Reflection' (pp. 126–32) is also a good discussion of how, in Iran, visual media and popular and mass media have been a vital channel for revolutionary purposes. This is an original work in which Moallem examines the limits and boundaries of the definition of fundamentalism in contemporary Iranian society.

The edited volume by Beck and Nashat is a historical overview of Iranian women's participation in politics and resistance to patriarchal forces imposed on them by the culture and tradition under the disguise of Islam. The book starts with a very useful Chronology (pp. xi–xiii) identifying three historical time eras in this volume: the Qajar Dynasty, 1794–1925; the

Pahlavi Dynasty, 1925–79; and the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979–present. Nashat, in her introductory chapter, reminds us all how women's roles during the revolution and later on in the wake of the gender-related policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran created a genre of indigenous, scholarly and journalistic writings on the woman question. Each contributing author writes on a specific time and subject. In this collection there has been an effort on the part of the editors to devote two chapters out of a total of ten to rural women in Iran, namely, the Qashqa'i and Boir Ahmad. I enjoyed reading these essays – perhaps for the simple reason of the sheer scarcity of rural feminist writings in Iran in comparison to urban women. One shortcoming in this well-researched collection is that the book fails to provide us with a plausible explanation of why women, especially of the lower and middle classes, were opposed to the policy of unveiling and why so many of them resumed the practice of veiling after the fall of Reza Shah. The opportunity is not taken to discuss issues concerning the average woman who did not participate in Iranian politics.

Foucault and the Iranian Revolution contains the most diverse material in comparison to the other manuscripts reviewed. The uniqueness of this book is that it incorporates the first full translations of Foucault's writings on the Iranian revolution and, additionally, Afary and Anderson's comments on the writings. At times it is difficult to fully comprehend what Foucault truly meant without studying his other philosophical writings to which the authors refer. For example, Foucault's writings on 'practices of the self' (p. 38) in early Christian communities informed his understanding of the Iranian Revolution – especially the Islamists' utilization of Shi'i practices. Foucault and the Islamist movement are shown to share three passions in common: (1) opposition to imperialist/colonialist policies of the West; (2) rejection of cultural/social aspects of modernity that changed gender roles/hierarchies in East and West; and (3) fascination with the discourse of death as a path toward authenticity and salvation, which aimed to refashion the self.

Afary and Anderson rightly recognize how Foucault failed to understand the clerics' interpretations of Islam or to notice how Khomeini's 'anti-modernist' stance used innovations and inventions of tradition. Foucault compared Shi'i rituals in Revolution to European Christian rites of penitence, specifically called *exomologesis*, 'a public manifestation of penitence, which involved fasting, wearing tattered clothes, baring the chest, heaping ashes on one's head, and scarring the body' (p. 51). He particularly liked the festive manifestations of rituals of mourning and healing power, martyrdom and 'political spirituality'. Another of Foucault's fascinations with the Shi'i rituals was the way that death and martyrdom were celebrated rather than mourned. Thus, he criticized the West for treating death as the end, whereas in the Revolution, death was 'one more stage in the drama of life' (p. 50). He also criticized the West for not incorporating the principle of 'sacrifice of the self', instead the West incorporates 'emergence of the self' (pp. 52–3).

Afary and Anderson comment that Foucault was wrong to assume that the Islamist discourse employed in the Revolution was not 'an ideology, that it did not "mask contradictions". Nor was it a constructed "sacred union" of "divergent political interests"' (p. 51). He also failed to see that the rituals of - Muharram are about having an enemy (Sunnis), the same way Christian passion plays demonize the Jews, and about obedience to higher religious authorities (pp. 54-5). Foucault was aware of how fascist movements utilized Christian rituals of martyrdom and passion plays and should have incorporated this knowledge in his account of Christian and Muslim rituals. Overall, this is a fascinating account of the writings of one of the most famous and respected western philosophers of our contemporary time who 'naively' supported and was fascinated by a revolutionary movement that adopted the trope of religious motifs and ritualistic themes of an historical event and was able to successfully unite masses under the assumption of an *Ummat* or religious community in which the rights of women as equals were removed. One of the most interesting aspects of this book is when Afary and Anderson speak of the 'women question' in relation to Foucault. It is important to note that he remained mostly silent on that issue. Ultimately, Foucault's support for the Islamic Revolution and his writings on the subject undercut his reputation in France.

The three volumes under review have similarities and differences in content, which makes them appealing to different students with different interests. They are all recommended by the author of this review essay as a welcome addition to scholarly work on Iranian contemporary history, popular culture, political science, sociology, gender and women's studies. Each volume adds a unique dimension to our understanding of feminism in Iran and the rule of fundamentalism in the making of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Faegheh Shirazi © 2007
University of Texas at Austin, USA

Note

- 1 Muharram is the month with which the Muslims begin their lunar *Hijrah* Calendar. For the Shi'is this is the important month of mourning for Imam Hossain and his fallen supporters at the battle of Karbala. It is also known as the month of Martyrdom.

Reference

- Beck, L. and Nashat, G. (eds). 2003. *Women in Iran from the Rise of Islam to 1800*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.