

## Book Review: Theorizing Iranian Women: Feminism, Islam and Critical Scholarship

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second is his treatment of power, which leaves his work at times overly deterministic, and at others overly optimistic (p. 135)

In conclusion, Janice McLaughlin's review of feminist social and political theory provides a solid base from which students can gain a broad understanding of feminist scholarship. The book is well structured and presented, offering readers a clear and concise background to a wide range of arguments. I highly recommend it for students seeking insight into current feminist theory.

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#### THEORIZING IRANIAN WOMEN: FEMINISM, ISLAM AND CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Hammed Shahidian

*Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic*

Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002, ix + 304 pp., ISBN 0-313-31476-4

Hammed Shahidian

*Women in Iran: Emerging Voices in the Women's Movement*

Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002, vii + 213 pp., ISBN 0-313-32345-3

These two publications discuss gender relations and women's movements in Iran. *Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic* provides the historical background in a discussion of gender relations in Iran from the 1960s onwards. *Emerging Voices in the Women's Movement* further details women's strategies for resistance in response to the gender policies of the Islamic Republic following the Revolution of 1979. The books are subsequently referred to here as (2002a) and (2002b), respectively.

Shahidian begins his discussion of gender relations in Iran with the Shah's 'White Revolution' (1962 onwards), which included the enfranchisement of women (1963), as well as educational, labour and legal reforms. Women's increased access to education and paid work and their 'token' presence in politics did not include a radical shift in gender roles however, and women remained responsible for household chores, often working a 'double-shift' (2002a: 50). The Family Protection Law of 1967, modified in 1975, restricted polygyny and reformed divorce and custody laws. It also increased the role of civil courts, thereby contributing to the marginalization of the clergy from the legislative system.

Shahidian argues that these measures 'brought family relations more under the control of the state' and that women were thereby subjected to 'new forms of patriarchal control' (2002a: 36; emphasis in original). He draws here on Walby's theory of private vs public patriarchy.

In private patriarchy, women are primarily confined to domestic production and controlled by specific men. Women's seclusion in the private sphere is replaced by their segregation in certain fields and levels of social activity in a public patriarchy. Male control over women is exerted not only through individual men, but, more importantly, through such public channels as the state or the media (2002a: 30).

Furthermore, only women's organizations sanctioned by the government were allowed, preventing the formation of 'genuine, grassroots women's organizations' (2002a: 44). Shahidian argues that the Pahlavi era's women-friendly reforms never

had full legitimacy due to their top-down implementation and to the weakness of civil society.

The reforms in family law and the marginalization of clerics led to a vocal Islamist opposition, and Shahidian illustrates 'the sense of urgency in Islamic texts' (2002a: 69) with excerpts of writings by Shariati, Motahari and others. These writings were highly critical of western influences, disparagingly referred to as '*qarbzadegi*' or 'Westoxication' following the influential work of Al-e Ahmad. Western cultural imperialism is particularly blamed for encouraging conspicuous consumption and promoting loose moral standards, especially through the medium of women. Islamists associated women with two forms of danger: first as sexual creatures who had to be controlled to preserve social order, as Mernissi and others have also discussed, and second as the primary targets, and subsequently agents, of western imperialism.

Shahidian then discusses the coalition that led to the success of the Revolution of 1979 and the end of the Pahlavi era. While many women had benefited, at least partly, from the reforms implemented under the Pahlavis, the generally corrupt regime lacked legitimacy on all fronts. Leftist organizations attributed women's oppression to the capitalist system and to western cultural imperialism, and gender issues were considered secondary to 'socialist priorities' (2002a: 156). The alliance of secular and Islamist forces included a large number of women, mostly from 'traditional or modern middle-class urban families' (2002a: 121).

The creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 led to serious setbacks in women's rights. Shahidian states that the Islamic government 'sought to revive private patriarchy in all its tyrannical forms' (2002a: 3). The Family Protection Law was abrogated, family planning was abolished, the age of marriage was lowered and temporary marriage was reinstated together with men's unilateral divorce and custody rights. Early marriage was once again encouraged and the role of women as wives and mothers was eulogized. Women were barred from many professions and fields of study. Finally, the *hejâb* (veil) was imposed and gender segregation enforced in many public spaces. Over the two decades following the Revolution, women's determined resistance, together with the socioeconomic realities of the country, led the government to reconsider some of these measures, leading Shahidian to characterize the current state of affairs as patriarchy 'vacillating' between private and public (2002b: 113).

Women's struggles for gender equality are further detailed and evaluated in *Emerging Voices in the Women's Movement*. Shahidian argues that the coercive measures of the Islamic Republic have led to a 'dual society' that maintains a fine line between abiding by and subverting enforced rules. He characterizes as 'weapons of the weak' oppositional strategies that include creative uses of the *hejâb*, of make-up and of other bodily adornments, as well as the persistence of private jokes, of underground literature, and of behaviour in private that is frowned upon by the regime. He then discusses the emergence of 'Islamist women's reformism', which he has previously introduced, somewhat disparagingly, as 'gender politicking in the context of Islam and the Islamic state's teaching and laws' (2002a: 3). He argues that the reformists' efforts to challenge traditional and patriarchal views of Islam and of the Shari'a (Islamic law) with alternative, women-centred interpretations do not challenge the Islamic framework. The reformists engage in a 'new patriarchal bargain [that] leads to a shift from private to public patriarchy' (2002b: 102), and they thereby undermine the efforts of secular feminists to radically alter the nature of gender relations in Iran. Moreover, Shahidian argues that categorizing '*Iranian women . . . as Islamic women*' (2002b: 25; emphasis in the original) is an ideological move that hides the diversity of

women's beliefs. It obfuscates the existence and rights of ethnic and religious minorities, together with atheists or any other group that may not recognize itself in that category. Shahidian further claims that the reformists 'have espoused an agenda that reflects the interests of middle- and upper-class, professional, gainfully employed, heterosexual (Muslim) women' (2002a: 4).

Shahidian acknowledges that secular feminists are weaker in terms of organization and that they lack cohesion. After the Revolution, leftist organizations initially maintained a conciliatory attitude towards the Islamic Republic's gender policies and did not actively challenge these in order to safeguard their own 'share of power' (2002a: 133). They were later decimated in brutal purges during the 1980s. Other secular activists face rigid censorship, and harsh punishments are meted out to anyone who dares to radically question the structure of the Islamic government or its policies. Despite these constraints and the high personal risks involved, secular activists, notably women activist lawyers like Kar and Ebadi, have managed to produce some minor revisions in family law. Most importantly, the Islamic Republic's emphasis on gender issues has heightened gender awareness among the population and led to women's increased involvement in politics.

Both volumes are in dire need of rigorous editorial work. They are highly repetitive, cover much of the same ground, and would have profited from extensive cuts. Chapter titles are vague and unhelpful (e.g. 'Gender Crisis: Preventing the Future', or 'Gender in Revolution: "Shrouding Freedom"'). Careless mistakes abound, such as 'mediated through the media [*sic*]' (2002a: 94), or 'Islamists embarked on an elaborate program of reconstructing private property [*sic*]' (2002a: 121) presumably meaning 'private patriarchy'. Incomplete quotes are not signalled: a quote from Kandiyoti (1991: 35) says 'contradictory positions' (2002b: 10) instead of the actual 'contradictory ideological positions'. The frequent use of the passive voice, of nebulous generalizations (e.g. 'culture is neither indifferent nor benign', 2002b: 5) and an overabundant use of words in quotation marks to signal irony further add to the confusion.

The text is often unclear and makes for arduous and frustrating reading. To illustrate, the following excerpt provides a definition of the author's distinction between 'dominant' and 'hegemonic' culture.

While hegemony involves consent, dominance is achieved through overt and covert coercion. To be sure, just as hegemony entails force, dominance also relies on popular beliefs. Yet it also forces cultural patterns that differ or oppose popular consensus. Though cultural dominance depends on force, it may not withstand popular resistance. On the other hand, dominance can also be prolonged through hegemony by resignation – giving up the search for alternative social orders. (2002a: 29)

Another passage elaborates on the 'deceiving' claims of public patriarchy:

[Public patriarchy] does not openly endorse men's unequivocal rule, condemns brutality, and even enjoins men to be kind. Nor does it denigrate women to a reproductive machine [*sic*]. It claims great respect for women; indeed, cries incompleteness [*sic*], even total failure in her [*sic*] absence.

Such mechanisms create the impression that male domination is an ugly remnant of the past, that though 'some people' may cherish antediluvian values, 'society', by and large, is dedicated to eradicating gender inequality. Patriarchy thusly [*sic*] becomes a relic, a free-floating anomaly – as if not reproduced in our daily practices. (2002b: 11)

Finally, a glossary would have been helpful, as Persian and Arabic terms are not systematically translated or explained.

In terms of the structure of the argument, the books suffer from the author's lack of engagement with the theories he draws on. In his introduction to both volumes, Shahidian stresses the role of 'culture' and the social construction of gender. He argues that 'movements must be concerned not only with political processes, but also with language, common beliefs, and values – in a word, culture' (2002a: 29) and his ambitious goal is 'to obliterate gender distinctions altogether' (2002a: 8). The author provides ample evidence of patriarchal notions in Islamic texts and in the policies of the Islamic Republic. It is tempting therefore to infer that Islam and culture are synonymous in Iran, a move that ignores non-Muslims, and to equate patriarchal ideology with religion. Yet, ironically, Shahidian's reliance on Walby's model, which is based on the study of women in modern western countries, demonstrates that patriarchy and Islam cannot be readily equated. Moreover, Shahidian draws on Walby's theory of private vs public patriarchy but concedes that he does not intend 'to present a systematic discussion of Iranian patriarchy', nor does he wish to 'follow the specific structures identified by Walby' (2002a: 35). The question therefore arises as to the precise manner in which Walby's theory applies to the Iranian context.

Most importantly, the author does not adequately support his primary claims, namely that Islam is essentially and irremediably patriarchal, and that Islamic feminists only perpetuate Islamic patriarchy and undermine the efforts of secular feminists. The first claim has been contested before by prominent scholars who have argued against Orientalist views that reify and homogenize Islam, thereby erasing geographical and historical variations. Some of the gender policies implemented by the Islamic Republic that Shahidian highlights as most representative of Islam, such as veiling and segregation, were developed in the pre-Islamic Near East (Keddie, 1991). Similarly, Moghadam (1993) notes that the ideological emphasis on the division of gender roles rooted in biological sex differences, and the corollary identification of femininity with motherhood, are not the prerogatives of Muslim societies, but rather pertain to conservative ideologies across cultures. She also warns against overemphasizing the importance of religion and culture without a concurrent analysis of social-structural and developmental terms. To summarize, many of the criticisms that Shahidian levels against Islam could be more fruitfully directed towards the specific structure and policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, within the context of global history and politics.

Shahidian's claim that Islamic feminists undermine the efforts of secular feminists is based on two principal grounds. First and most importantly, he argues that Islamic feminists remain within, and further support, an essentially patriarchal Islamic framework. While the first part of the argument is true, the second is at least disputable. One could argue instead that the alternative interpretations increasingly offered by Islamic feminists and other reformists undermine the notion of a monolithic and ahistorical Islam and Shari'a, while emphasizing the sociohistorical and political context of differing interpretations. The real difficulty lies in the off-hand dismissal of oppositional views as 'yet another interpretation', further exacerbated by the minority position of the activists who must face forces that rely on centuries of patriarchal rule and interpretations.

Shahidian's second argument against Islamic feminists consists of the notion that they only support 'middle- and upper-class, professional, gainfully employed' women. It is hard to reconcile this assessment with Islamic feminists' demands for justice and equality. While they may not have addressed many issues pertaining more specifically to class and labour, Islamic feminists' emphasis on the

egalitarian spirit of Islam supports both men and women regardless of class and occupation.

To conclude, secular forces, instead of being weakened by Islamic feminists as Shahidian argues, can in fact draw on their arguments to question the absolutist base of religious rulings and to highlight the limitations of a legal system based in religion. They can also point to the factional differences within the Islamic Republic and use these as evidence that political power undermines the authority and legitimacy of religion, thereby strengthening their demands for the separation of religion from the state, and for equal rights for all citizens, regardless of religious belief.

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## LOOKING AT SIBLINGS IS LOOKING ANEW AT SEX AND VIOLENCE

Juliet Mitchell  
*Siblings: Sex and Violence*  
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003, 252 pp., ISBN 0-7456-3221-1

Juliet Mitchell's theme is the importance of sibling relationships, not just for social and interpersonal relations but for their influence in the development of our subjectivities, including gendered subjectivities. She is writing against the psychoanalytic perspective in which 'the Oedipus complex and preOedipal mother-infant relationship are presented as the only nexuses that link the internal world of unconscious thought processes and affects with the external social world' (p. 190). The book pursues the argument that sibling relationships are an equally important nexus of linkage between psychic and social worlds and finds a startling and important range of implications. If internalized social relationships are the major elements of the psyche (p. 1), then sibling relationships deserve a central place in our thinking. On the face of it, Mitchell's thesis might not seem as momentous as I believe it is. By the time that she has followed through the implications of her arguments, it looks not only as if psychoanalysis needs as radical an overhaul as it has already undergone (not least through the influence of feminists like Mitchell) but that feminist theory could find insights here that transform its understanding of sexual and gender difference. Her thesis has implications for a broad and politically relevant array of social issues: