

**Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister:
Islamic Fundamentalism and the
Politics of Patriarchy in Iran**

Minoo Moallem

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This book examines the construction of gender and patriarchy in Iran during the onset of modernity, the Islamic revolution of 1979, and the post-revolution era. Among the many works published by prominent scholars of Islam and Iranian women's studies, Minoo Moallem's investigation of the construction of gender by neo-colonial modernity and political movements of a nationalist or fundamentalist orientation deserves special attention.

Inspired by Michel Foucault as well as Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, Moallem incorporates a post-modern and a transnational feminist approach by arguing that post-modernity should be used as a framework to study the growth of modernity (p. 20). Challenging the popular belief that fundamentalism is a return to the roots and early periods of a tradition or a culture, she finds it "in dialogue with modernity" (p. 13) and thus argues that the Islamic fundamentalism observed in the twentieth century is a post-modernization phenomenon; in her words, "a by-product of the process of modernization" (ibid.). Nevertheless, she does not actually consider fundamentalism to be a truly post-modern phenomenon, since it does not respect the "concept of difference," as is the case with nationalism.

Moallem questions the stereotypes presented by the travelers and foreign diplomats of the late-eighteenth to early-twentieth centuries concerning the harem, the veil, women, and so on. She challenges their vantage point in creating "otherness" and portraying Islam as barbaric. Although many works deal with women, patriarchy, and the construction of gender under the Pahlavis, the author offers a new reading and shows how the two rulers' forceful steps in the name of modernization and progress led to the establishment of a nation-state in which each individual – man or woman – was socialized to perform his/her role according to the "natural and social division of labour" (p. 74).

Her work is timely, especially now when *Islamic fundamentalism* is defined and analyzed by the politics of power through the global media. In the case of jihad, for instance, the author states that for fundamentalists, and more specifically in Ayatullah Khomeini's view, there are two types of jihad:

the major jihad (each Muslim's effort to follow Allah's path and resist personal temptations) and the lesser jihad (the revolt against "*taghut* [idolatry])" (p. 100). But she fails to mention that Khomeini derived his view from Qur'an 22:78, 29:6 and 69, and 2:190-91, respectively.

The author examines the contribution of popular culture and Shi'ite ritual to the construction of revolutionary gendered individuals – sisters and brothers. She deconstructs the role of these factors in the revolution's success and the subsequent establishment of an Islamic nation-state (*ummah*) with the warrior brothers and veiled sisters. What makes her work unique is her portrayal of how culture (i.e., such rituals as Syavashun [Siavash's mourning]) and religion (i.e., rituals of Muharam and Imam Husain's martyrdom) contribute to constructing gender identity. Moreover, she clearly demonstrates the relationship of these constructed gender identities with sexuality and martyrdom as well as with what is considered masculine and feminine. Moallem argues that although many women and men were willing to die for the revolution's success as it was unfolding, and although such enthusiasm knew no gender, after its success "martyrdom" became a symbol of masculinity while women were relegated to the roles of a martyr's mother, sister, or wife (pp. 106-07).

The author states that post-revolution Iran is a forum for debate not only on Islam and its relations with the state, democracy, and social justice, but also on what role women should play and what rights they should enjoy in the private and public spheres. Moreover, she explores how magazines, movies, and popular culture at large address these questions. Although Shirin Ebadi, Mehrangiz Kaar, and other Iranian women have voiced their opinions on these issues, Moallem classifies them as "feminist legal scholars" (p. 180) and mentions them only in passing (pp. 150 and 180).

As for the contribution of movies to these debates, Moallem presents the perspectives of three male filmmakers and three female movie directors. The question remains, however, whose knowledge and perspectives ought to be presented. She relies heavily on Zahra Rahnavard's works and statements, but does not provide a critical forum for differing voices, such as those of Nooshin Ahmadi Khorasani, Qazinur, Mansureh Etehadieh, and Haji-zadeh. These women, as well as Kaar and Ebadi, have also expressed their views and, again, mainly within Islamic premises concerning women in the academic sphere as well as in popular culture (e.g., novels). Their works cannot be classified under the author's two categories of "Western egalitarian feminism"; nor can they be considered as "feminist fundamentalists" or "fundamentalist feminists." In fact, even Rahnavard falls outside of these

categories since she strongly rejects feminism in her 1992 article “*Zan, Islam va Feminism*” (“Woman, Islam and Feminism”).

Her work opens up a forum for serious questions: Why is Iran’s Islamic revolution considered a fundamentalist movement and a “by-product of modernity,” given that the fundamentalist/reformist debate began after Ayatullah Khomeini’s death? The author also evokes the roles played by “cultural essentialism and racism” (p. 161) when depicting the Taliban’s fundamentalism as barbaric. One then should ask: Where does she place the Taliban’s rule vis-à-vis fundamentalism and modernity? If their ascent to power was due to the Soviet occupation, then are we to understand that the territorial or ideological occupation of nations will inevitably yield such by-products as fundamentalism?

On the whole, in this carefully researched five-chapter book, Moallem presents several arguments critically and convincingly. In fact, she boldly crosses the lines of much of the established dichotomized scholarship on fundamentalism, Iranian women’s studies, and the concept of citizenship and identity in Iran before and after the revolution. This book will certainly attract the attention of those in Islamic and especially Iranian studies, women’s studies, and sociology. It will also provide fertile ground for new and important research questions.

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