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Dissenting Voice of a Muslim Feminist : A Critical Study of Shirin Ebadi's *Iran Awakening*

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Abstract. When a theocratic state represses women in the name of following religious dictates, the agency of the women comes in conflict with the state. If they assert their agency by defying the oppressive norms and policies, they are often branded as 'cultural traitors'. Iranian women rights activist, Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel peace laureate of 2003 is a case in point. An account of her confrontation with the state due to her work as an activist and the state's retaliatory action against her to paralyze her activism, is penned in her memoir, Iran Awakening (2006). Studying this memoir, this article has investigated how Ebadi, a feminist and a practicing Muslim woman, managed to reconcile herself with her religion, Islam even when Islamic policies enacted by the state stripped Iranian women of most of their rights.

Keywords : Feminism; Islam; authoritarianism; women; activism

Democracy and freedom of expression including the right to voice dissent against the authority figures, are complementary to each other. The right to dissent is, in fact, integral to the proper functioning of democracy in a given state as dissent is what keeps in check the authoritarian impulses of the people in power. That is why authoritarian forces attempt to leave no room for dissent when they are able to seize power in a country. The circumstances in such societies where dissent is stifled by the forces of authoritarianism, are no longer conducive to the freedom of thought and speech of its citizens. In a fast-moving global context, such totalitarian societies become politically and culturally stagnant losing dynamism with the authority figures resorting to violence and oppression to perpetuate their positions of power. The Islamic Republic of Iran that came into existence after the 1979 Iranian Revolution is one instance of such societies. It should be noted here that after the 1979 mass revolution which produced high hopes for positive changes for the common Iranians, one dictator was simply replaced with another. The only difference was that under the rule of the former, the monarch, Reza Shah, Iranians were subject to a secular dictatorship. But after 1979, under the new Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, they came under a clerical

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dictatorship. Iranians witnessed the circular motion of history when the new regime deployed similar mechanism of repression as did the former Shah for rooting out political dissent. Dissent, in fact, was criminalized. Just like the former regime, the new government also opted for incarceration, torture and assassination of dissidents and intellectuals who opposed the regime, to consolidate its rule.

While in terms of human rights abuse and repression of dissenters, the new regime proved to be as notorious as the former one, the clerical regime showed itself to be especially oppressive against women under the garb of following Islamic principles. Instead of the Shah's secular legal system, the theocratic state enforced a rigid interpretation of Sharia law i.e. Islamic jurisprudence derived from the interpretation of the Islamic scriptures, particularly *the Quran and the Hadith*. Under the new law, it became obligatory for all Iranian women to observe veiling in public. Morality squads began patrolling the streets of Iran to monitor if women were adequately veiled. Owing to the lack of proper veiling, a woman could have ended up in jail or with a punishment of up to seventy-four lashes. The new law also permitted men to have up to four wives and as many temporary wives as they wished and in case of divorce men were allowed to have full custody of the children. For a time, the permissible age of marriage for a girl was lowered from eighteen to nine. Men got the right to divorce their wives at will but if a woman wanted divorce, she had to secure her husband's approval even to initiate the process; besides, she could no longer retain the custody of her children. At the universities, male and female students were segregated and women were barred from entering seventy-seven fields of study, which were deemed by the authority as unsuitable for women. The domestic space was considered by the regime as the legitimate place for women who, the regime believed, should not work outside the home. If they were to work, women were required to take their husband's permission. Written permission of her husband was also needed for a married woman to travel. The draconian laws deprived Iranian women, as the British-Iranian political commentator, Haleh Afshar observed, "…of most of their hard-earned civil rights and reduced them to the status of privatized sex objects required by the new religious order to be at the disposal of their husbands at all times" (258). The compensation money for a woman's life became half of a man's. In legal matters also, the value of a woman's testimony was regarded only half compared to that of a man's. Besides, the state

decreed that women could no longer serve as judges because, according to the clerical authority, women were emotional creatures who lacked in intellectual and rational capabilities.

One outcome of this decree of barring women from judgeship was that Dr. Shirin Ebadi who was serving as the chief justice of Tehran city court at the time of the revolution and who later received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2003 for her efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Iran, was stripped of her judgeship and demoted to the position of a clerk in the very court where she presided over as the judge.Later in the 1990s, she was allowed to practice as a lawyer when the government had no other option but to integrate women back into the work-force due to the scarcity of human-resources, that resulted from the eight year long, devastatingIran-Iraq war. Since that time up until when Ebadi was forced to become an exile in the United Kingdom owing to government persecution with the hard-liner president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009, she provided pro bono legal services to the common Iranians, especially to the families of the political prisoners who were often left defenseless in the face of the severe authoritarianism of the state. Additionally, she continued her work as a human rights activist through the organization, Defenders of Human Rights Center that she founded to promote the legal and human rights of the Iranian citizens. This paper will study her memoir, *Iran Awakening*(2006) which focused on the Islamic revolution of 1979 and its legacy on the lives of the Iranian common people.

A trend can be perceived among the research works done in the area of Middle Eastern women's life writing under the category of which falls the memoir under discussion. In these works,the researchers try to prove the point that the memoirs have been written from an orientalist and Islamophobic perspective.The various researchers' argument is that Middle Eastern Muslim women's life narratives are fraught with Orientalist stereotypes which assisted Western imperial agents to bolster Islamophobia and Orientalism and thus to promote the idea that Western imperialist intervention in those countries was necessary in order to fight Islamic terrorism and to save the Muslim women from their own men.In other words, the idea is that these life narratives, through their representation of the oppression Muslim women face under the Islamic regimes, reproduce the stereotype of the subjugated Muslim woman, which is then manipulated by the West to meet their political demands in the

respective homelands of the women writers. Contesting the existing researches, my paper has contended that Ebadi's memoir delves deeper than simply Orientalizing her culture in her memoir. I have argued that, what Ebadi does is that she problematizes the complex dynamics between loyalty towards her homeland and its culture on the one hand and retaining agency on her life on the other hand. I have asked the following questions:if loyalty to the homeland comes at the cost of a woman's agency and if critiquing her country becomes synonymous with Orientalizing her culture and inviting imperialist intervention from the West, how does Ebadi resolve this dilemma in her memoir? Does she, following the orientalist fashion, portray Islam as a uniformly violent religion and Iranian Muslim culture as cruel, primitive, barbaric in order to present Western culture as benevolent, modern and civilized? And finally, how could she reconcile herself with the religion of Islam especially when state-administered Islamic policies are said to be at the root of the oppression Iranian women are subject to?

In this paper, I have studied the memoir under discussion through the theoretical framework of Miriam Cooke's concept of 'multiple critique', that Cooke has discussed in her book, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (2000) and her article, "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies" (2000). To elaborate the concept of multiple critique, it needs to be pointed out that, throughout one's lifetime one is confronted with multiple identities, one of which takes precedence above the others as per the demand of specific moments. But what instigates this multiplicity or fragmentation of identity in the first place? People, as social creatures, are needed to adopt different community-identity according to what serves their interests at a particular time. In Spivak's words, 'there are many subject positions that one must inhabit' and this results in the fragmentation or plurality of identity. One can be an Iranian, a Muslim, a woman and a feminist but which of these identities will be predominant above the others will depend on what the subject's priority is at a given time. The subject's multiple identities lead her to develop multiple consciousness which enables her to practice what Miriam Cooke has termed 'multiple critique' which is in Cooke's view 'a fluid discursive strategy taken up from multiple speaking positions' (113). Exercising 'multiple critique', an Iranian, observant Muslim woman such as Ebadi, can, therefore, embrace her feminist identity when she wants to subvert the patriarchal values in Iranian culture; she can identify with her

Iranian heritage when she wants to condemn the increased bigotry against the Middle-Eastern Muslims and the racial profiling of them in the West in the post-Gulf war and post-9/11 era; and she can adopt her Muslim identity to fight Islamophobia and to highlight the ethical and humanitarian message of Islam.

Cooke's study of the efficacy of multiple critique in building resistance to different forms of marginalization is grounded in the context of her discussion of the Islamic Feminists. Knowledge of the term Islamic Feminism will further shed light on the functionality of multiple critique. Islamic Feminism is a discourse which espouses that gender-equality can be achieved within an Islamic framework. According to Margot Badran, Islamic Feminism,

> is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence…the basic argument of Islamic Feminism is that the Quran affirms the principle of equality of all human beings but that the practice of equality of women and men…has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas and practices (242).

Islamic Feminists are, therefore, those practicing Muslim women who seek to achieve gender equality through an engagement with Islamic epistemology. It can be argued that, in their endeavour to bring about a just and egalitarian social-order, Islamic feminists are, in fact, more radical than the secular feminists in the sense that, secular Muslim feminists, for the most part, do not interfere with religion; they often share the popular belief that Islam endorses male-supremacy and so they exclude religion from their feminist agenda but Islamic feminists daringly claim even the domain of religion insisting that women's equality is to be observed even in the religious sphere alongside all the other social spheres. Islamic feminism is particularly useful in the Islamic theocracies because Muslim patriarchy is compelled to listen when feminist agenda is articulated within the ambit of Islam.

Ebadi's memoir revealed that, like most Iranians, she was also against the autocratic rule of the Iranian monarch, Reza Shah. The clergy's involvement under the leadership of Khomeini in the politics of Iran as opponents to the Shah did not appear as an anomaly to the memoirist either, because historical sources verify that in the past the clergy often intervened in Iranian politics in favour of the common people. For instance, it was the religious clerics who orchestrated the Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which forced the ruling dynasty to decree a constitution that was largely in alignment with democratic ideals and minimized, to a great extent, the power of the royalty. The memoirist, therefore, especially welcomed a revolution that was engineered by a cleric, under the assumption that the clergy-led government would bring an end to the corrupt and totalitarian regime of the Shah. Not only did she lend her support to the revolution but actively participated in it:

> The unfolding revolution hypnotized me…That day [the day celebrated as the date of the victory of the revolution], a feeling of pride washed over me that in hindsight makes me laugh. I felt that I too had won, alongside the victorious revolution. It took scarcely a month for me to realize that, in fact, I had willingly and enthusiastically participated in my own demise. I was a woman, and this revolution's victory demanded my defeat. (*Iran Awakening,* 35)

Once the authority started to enforce the discriminatory laws against women including that of mandatory veiling, she became disillusioned with the clerical government.Through her argument she made the point that the ultimate end of constantly harassing women in the public arena was to instill fear in them so thoroughly that they did not dare to appear in public and remain cloistered inside their homes which the regime believed was the legitimate place for women.Her outrage at the newly enacted misogynist policies and the government's repressive activities like creating the morality squad that enforced the veiling law and continuously persecuted women in the streets on the charge of inadequate veiling, pervaded the memoir. A close reading of the text, however, reveals that the memoirist is not against the veil itself. What she is against is the imposition of the veil upon women i.e. when a woman's choice to veil

herself or not is taken away by the state authority. Cooke observed, reflecting on the symbolic significance of the veil,

> For the outsider, it is the emblem of Muslim women's oppression and marginalization. While this may be accurate in the cases where women did not choose to veil, it is not necessarily true for those who have chosen to mark themselves out religiously. For many of these women, the veil can be empowering (103).

The veil is, in fact, invested with political significance in the global context. It can be liberating and it can be confining. Donning the veil can be a voluntary religio-political decision marking defiance on the part of a Muslim woman when there is a deliberate attack on her faith from the society in which she is situated. But this sameveil can be circumscribing when it is imposed on women against their choice by the authority figures as part of some regulatory processconcerningthe Islamization of a society.

The subtitle of one of the editions of Ebadi's memoir is *One Woman's Journey to Reclaim her Life and Country*. The memoir is a testimony to her efforts of achieving this goal. Soon after she started working as a lawyer, she took exclusively pro bono cases through which, she argued, she 'could at least showcase the injustice of the Islamic Republic's laws. It was a system whose laws needed to go on trial before they could be changed' (111). Her determination to provide legal help to those families persecuted by the prevailing laws can be seen especially in her decision to ground all her points within an Islamic paradigm so that the Islamic court was forced to listen:

> We lived under an Islamic Republic that was neither going anywhere nor inclined to recast its governing ethos as secular; the legal system was underpinned by Islamic law…If we wanted to make a tangible difference in the lives of the women around us, we had no choice but to advocate for female equality in an Islamic framework…If I'm forced to ferret through musty books of Islamic

> jurisprudence and rely on sources that stress the egalitarian ethics of Islam, then so be it. (121-122)

Besides, she continued her humanitarian work through her NGO alongside her legal career. Her reputation in the international community, that slowly accrued on account of her work, might have been one reason why the state authority could not do away with her as they did with many of its other opponents. Owing to her activism, the memoirist, however, was sentenced by the government to serve a prison-term. Despite her harrowing experiences in the jail, she refused to be deterred from pursuing her humanitarian work and fighting the unjust laws.

Ebadi had been accused by the Iranian government and its supporters of being a heretic and of committing cultural treason because she contested 'Islamic' laws and also because she exposed the inside activities of the Islamic Republic to the outside world. In her memoir, the narrator did not just critique the authoritarian ways of the government but in the process, problematized the question of loyalty to that tradition of the homeland that dehumanized its citizens, women in particular and that brutally suppressed dissent. She was, however, neither against Islam nor did she commit 'cultural treason' by fueling Islamophobia. Rather, she took up the strategy of multiple critique which, to quote Cooke, 'allows for identitarian contradictions that respond to others' silencing moves' (113). Muslim and feminist identity are often regarded as mutually exclusive but through the practice of multiple critique, the memoirist could identify with different dimensions of her identity and thus could reconcile her apparently contradictory identities. Embracing her feminist identity, she criticized sexism and totalitarianism in her homeland while upholding her identity as a Muslim, she explained the ethical message of Islam and, thereby, countered Islamophobia on the other hand.

Since Ebadi introduced herself as a practicing Muslim in her memoirbut foughtas well against the state's misogynistic policies against women, the memoirist could be called an Islamic feminist.The term, Islamic feminist could be ascribed to her also because she believed in that version of Islam that accommodated gender-equality. Her religiosity was one reason that ledher to support the Islamic revolution which she believed to be in close connection with the reality of common Iranians likeherself, in the lives of whom religious 'faith occupied a central role, though in a quiet, private way' (*Iran Awakening*, 33). While she knew

that a gender-egalitarian interpretation of the Islamic texts was possible, she was also conscious about the contingent nature of interpretation, "Fundamentally, Islam, like any religion is subject to interpretation. It can be interpreted to oppress women or interpreted to liberate them" (122). Zine also says that interpretations of the Islamic texts are "shaped and informed by the social, political, moral and gendered location of the interpreter" (114).Islamic interpretation is, therefore, risky because it can grant patriarchal rulers an advantage of exploiting women by interpreting Islam in a patriarchal way. The memoirist argued:

> It means that patriarchal men and powerful authoritarian regimes who repress in the name of Islam can interpret Islam in the regressive, unforgiving manner that suits their sensibilities and political agendas …This does not mean that Islam and equal rights for women are incompatible; it means that invoking Islam in a theocracy refracts the religion through a kaleidoscope, with interpretations perpetually shifting and mingling and the vantage of the most powerful prevailing. (191-192)

What the author argued can be understood when one considers the fact that the journal, *Zanan* which was founded by one of Ebadi's friends and which offered Islamic readings of gender-equality from *the Quran and the Hadith*, was closed down by the Iranian government in 2008. The journal posed a particular threat to the ruling clerics because in the journal, their authority was being undermined by the Islamic feminists through the same weapon that the clerics themselves used to exercise authority; the weapon is Islamic hermeneutics. The memoir also contended that the notion of Islamic tradition was being used by the rulers not for the sake of creating a just society but to exert authoritarian power and to perpetuate the hegemonic patriarchal power-structures. Bhabha's comment is particularly significant in this regard:

> It is the problem of how, in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful

> sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic (34-35).

The memoirist, however, asserted her religious identity throughout her memoir and emphasized that her faith in Islam, specifically in a positive interpretation of Islam, was an indispensable part of her life. On the flight back to Tehran after receiving the Nobel Prize, she pondered:

> In the last twenty-three years, from the day I was stripped of my judgeship to the years doing battle in the revolutionary courts of Tehran, I had repeated one refrain: an interpretation of Islam that is in harmony with equality and democracy is an authentic expression of faith. It is not religion that binds women, but the selective dictates of those who wish them cloistered… When I heard the statement of the prize read aloud, heard my religion mentioned specifically alongside my work defending Iranians' rights, I knew at that moment what was being recognized: the belief in a positive interpretation of Islam, and the power of that belief to aid Iranians who aspire to peacefully transform their country. (*Iran Awakening,* 204)

Even her decision to write her memoir was partly motivated by her intention to challenge Western stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women, "I wanted to write a book that would help correct Western stereotypes of Islam, especially the image of Muslim women as docile, forlorn creatures" (210). It can be said that Ebadi mapped a new space for Muslim identity in her memoir. As an Islamic feminist, she could cherish and uphold her religious identity but she could also be critical of the negative practices Muslim patriarchy associated with Islam.The Islamic feminism she practices, is, in fact a response to both Islamic fundamentalism which is oppressive against women and to Western white feminism that racializes Islam and portrays it as a monolithic and uniformly violent religion. The rigid, dogmatic secularism that mainstream Western liberal feminism advocates is also undemocratic in nature since

it gives no room for the believers who, without affecting others, might consider their personal religious belief as essential to their sense of well-being; to the believer religion might be a source of comfort, sustenance and empowerment. Bruce Baum remarks, "it is a mistake to see religious and cultural norms, practices and identities as nothing more than expressions of oppressive power, discounting the meaning that these phenomena have for the agents who enact them" (1077).

However, the memoirist, in the text under discussion, disrupts the dominant view both in the West and in some Islamic discourse that one would be either in support of Islam or against it. She demonstrates that it is possible for someone to cherish her Muslim identity while being critical of the negative elements associated with it. Her attachment to Islam, thus, did not prevent her from having a rationality-based worldview, which could be seen when she pointed out in her memoir the temporality of Islamic hermeneutics on the one hand, and on the other hand, critiqued the fundamentalists who insisted that Islamic interpretations made in the ancient times are eternally binding. Her memoir, in this way,revealed that critiquing the Islamic system is not equivalent with pandering to Islamophobia and adhering to Islam does not signify blindness to its flaws. Her practice of the strategy of multiple critique, thus, enabled her to talk critically about the different issues of authoritarianism, Islamic extremism and Islamophobia. By adopting this strategy she could also reconcile her various identities—that of a woman, a feminist, an Iranian and a Muslim—all of which she cherished and all of which she considered essential for her individuality and agency.

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