

Book Reviews

Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Post-Modern Analysis,

by Haideh Moghissi, London: Zed Books, 2002. ix + 166 pages. Chapter endnotes, bibliography, index. Pb.

REVIEWED BY JEAN SAID MAKDISI

The basic argument of Haideh Moghissi's book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* is that the stereotypical, orientalist view of women in Islam, used by nineteenth century colonialists and contemporary neo-imperialists alike to argue for the imposition of policy changes and even military interventions in the countries of Islam ostensibly for the protection of its oppressed women, has been countered by arguments cloaked in a romantic nostalgia of an invented past, which show that women, far from being oppressed and discriminated against in Muslim society, are actually better off than they are elsewhere. Though she energetically denounces the orientalist vision, she has even harsher words for the responsive arguments, which she traces to what she regards as the dangerous post-modern idea of cultural relativism. As she sees it, this notion has served to protect from the harsh judgement of history's oppressive regimes and systems which continue to persecute women, by refusing to censor them according to a universal standard of human rights.

It seems to me that there is a certain, though limited, merit to Moghissi's primary claim. Modern Arab or Muslim feminists do indeed face a double-bind: if they denounce the situation of women in Islam, they are in danger of being complicit with the Orientalist cultural attack on the Muslim world, which in its turn serves as the basis of military and political action against it. If on the other hand they defend Islam from the Orientalist attack, they are in danger of becoming complicit with those laws and customs that are precisely the objects of their hostility.

This is, however, a subject that some Arab feminists, including this writer, have already dealt with, but have emerged from in refusing the rigid polarity of the trap. Quite the contrary, in recognizing the danger of both stands, they have deliberately eschewed them as elements of analysis: the first because they, as members of Arab/Muslim society, under no illusion as to what are the orientalist intentions in their regard, see themselves as much threatened by the latter's attacks on their culture as does any other segment of society, and the second because, refusing absolutist claims, they do not see themselves as singled out for oppression by a society totally devoted to the well-being of men, but tend to identify with the universal struggle towards equal rights for all. Indeed it is the absolutist aspect of Moghissi's arguments, as well as her insistence on a series of dichotomies that stopped me on almost every page, and that I found not only false, but entirely counter-productive to an argument meant, I suppose, to gather up feminist strength in the Middle East.

The first polarity that she creates, and which permeates her arguments, is that which opposes "Islam" with what she calls "the West," and their relative merits as regards women and modernity. Now while it is true that Islam regards itself as governing *deen wa dunya* (religion and the world) and Islamic *sharia*, derived directly from religious texts, governs the private as well as the public worlds of women (and men, for that matter), it is surely not true that the correct counterpart of Islam is "the West." The counterpart should be Christianity, or Judaism, whose laws are as rigid, and as oppressive

to women, if not more so, than the Muslim ones. But of course when she writes of “the West” she means secular democratic society, which has eschewed religious law altogether. It would therefore have been more correct to create polarity of opposites between religious or theocratic societies on the one hand, and secular on the other. And as secular societies she would have had to include such countries, Muslim in religion and culture, but secular in political terms, such as Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, or Iraq (before its devastation).

Furthermore, when she writes about Islam, does she mean Muslim society? Law? Culture? Religion, including rites and practices (prayer, *haji*, etc)? All of the above? Are all Muslim societies the same? Do all Muslim countries apply *sharia* in the same way or to the same degree or with identical interpretations? Are there no class or political differences that beg the question as to which is the true ‘Muslim society’, even in those countries that are governed by a theocracy? And similarly are all Western countries equally secular? Equally ‘modern’? Is there no oppression in “the West”? And though Moghissi often has the Iranian model in mind when she writes of fundamentalism, she does not discuss the radical and inimical differences between the various groups: Hamas and Hizbullah, which are basically national liberation movements, the separatist Abu Safyan in the Philippines, the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Qaida, and the Taliban, each of which has entirely different sets of histories and motivations, and many others as well.

And amazingly Moghissi writes of Israel as secular, ignoring not only the fact that its very existence is based on religious claims, but also the terrific oppression of Palestinian Christians and Muslims, the increasing influence of fundamentalist Orthodox religious authority on state policy, especially as apply to the colonies, as well as to women, and the fact that many Muslim fundamentalist groups rose as a direct consequence of Israeli policy.

Another, more dangerous and even less acceptable dichotomy is the one she sets up - and which unfortunately she is not the only one to use - that opposes Islam to modernity, which is represented as an entirely Western fabrication. That there is a structural incompatibility between Islam and modernity (as opposed to other religions, that is) seems to me not only an absurd thing to say, but demonstrably untrue, as is the assumption that Arabs and Muslims of other cultures can lay no claim to their own forms of modernity. If Arab or Muslim modernity does not always resemble the ‘western’ model, which includes industrialization, capitalism, urbanism, and liberal sexual morals, then it is up to us to locate and define the different forms that modernity does indeed take in the Arab/Muslim worlds: these would certainly include - among many others - resistance, whether armed or intellectual, to all forms of colonialism and imperialism, and a profound consciousness of history, which is constantly being reinvestigated and discussed, however imperfectly. It would also include the conscious adaptation of ways of life to stimuli provided by the totally unjust policies and hypocritical double standards of Europe and the USA. The adoption of *hijab*, for instance, by millions of young women, far from being a purely religious, anti-modern phenomenon, as Moghissi and so many others see it is, I believe, at the crux of modernity, as it implies a deliberate and self-conscious effort at self-description and identification. For many years I have not had any patience with the tradition-modernity dichotomy, in which Arab/Muslim women seem always to be implicated by those who write about them, and which I have more than once labelled a ‘red herring’.

Moghissi falls into other intellectual traps that I found frankly stunning. “The systematic, vigorous, and often violent opposition to change,” she writes, “is a grim reality in many Islamic societies” (p. 19). Is fundamentalism itself, the subject of her investigation, not one of the most remarkable symbols of change in our era? Is it not dedicated precisely to changing the structures of society?

The last chapter of her book Moghissi devotes to Islamic feminism, which to her is a contradiction in terms. Because of the discriminatory nature of so many aspects of *sharia* and even of the religious texts themselves, she cannot conceive of women defining themselves as both Muslim and feminist. Those who do, she claims, form an elitist group; she claims it is precisely “the populist concern for

'rehabilitating' oneself in the 'eyes of the masses' which has throttled radical intellectuals and caused initiatives to halt the march of fundamentalism to dry out" (p. 137). Muslim feminists, she continues, "privilege the voice of religion and celebrate 'Islamic feminism' thus [highlighting] only one of the many forms of identity available to Middle Eastern women, obscuring ways that identity is asserted or reclaimed, overshadowing forms of struggle outside religious practices and silencing the secular voices which are still raised against the region's stifling Islamification policies" (pp. 137-138). She speaks with particular bitterness of those Muslim women scholars who, living in the safety of the West, and protected by its liberal society, still identify themselves with Islam. These women, she says, "exoticize difference, turning grim political reality at home into what seems a merely playful intellectual exercise" (p. 139).

While there may be elements of truth in her accusations, certainly as applied to some writers, it seems to me that she misses a dramatically important point. She herself privileges fundamentalist Islam over the practice of their religion by millions, nay, hundreds of millions of Muslim women who live and work like women anywhere else in the modern world. And even more importantly, her accusations against fundamentalist regimes – justified though they may be – blind her to the fact that these regimes are in their very nature oppressive, not just to women, but to all who challenge their authority and its philosophical basis, including in many cases radical fundamentalist groups. This is the real problem with Moghissi's book, which otherwise makes some interesting points and valid criticisms.

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