

ROUNDTABLE: WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM: REFLECTIONS ON AN ENDURING CRISIS

Woman, Life, Freedom, and the Question of Multiculturalism in Iranian Studies

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The vast uprisings across Iranian cities in the fall of 2022 caught many of Iranian studies scholars and academic feminists in the diaspora off guard. My first confrontation was with trauma. Like many others, I worried about the lives and safety of my loved ones, political dissidents and prisoners from different ethnic backgrounds, feminists and queer activists on the ground, and, of course, the millennials and Gen Z, who unexpectedly emerged as the new revolutionaries. However, with the first wave of emotional encounters settled, the uprising unlocked another level of cognitive puzzlement critical to my academic life. I struggled to find comprehensive theoretical frameworks and supporting scholarship within Iranian studies or Iranian academic feminism to help my media and scholarly audiences grasp what was unfolding. In this reflective piece, I discuss how the scholarship of Iranian studies and feminism/s formulated the question of gender in liberal and radical essentialist multiculturalism and argue that *Woman, Life, Freedom (Zan, Zendegi, Azadi; WLF)* urges us to adopt an antiracist and radical democratic approach, deconstructing the imagined Iran in the scholarship, and reconstructing it as a welcoming and inclusive discursive space for racialized and queer Iranians.

Before dipping into my reflections, as the feminist tradition of locating oneself recommends, I would like to share that I am a cisgender Iranian woman who has spent most of her life in Iran as “white” and privileged, with multiple academic degrees completed there. Like some other transnational feminists, I came to identify as a woman of color in US academia. In the past three years, I have worked as a faculty member on a predominantly white campus in a Midwestern town. I am an aspiring DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) worker and constantly finding myself in conversation with the literature of critical race theory in education and Black and Indigenous feminism/s. What I plan to do here is inspired by my personal history of immigration and intellectual trajectories.

My understanding is that both Iranian studies literature and Iranian diasporic feminism have adopted different themes of gender questions with various levels of multiculturalism to study women's histories, movements, and lived experiences. Therefore, “Black Studies, Multiculturalism, and the Future of American Education,” guides this reflection.¹ In this respect, Manning Marable starts our discussion by pointing out that the existing definitions of multiculturalism are paradoxical. He introduces four levels of multiculturalism within the United States: corporate, liberal, radical essentialist, and radical democratic. Whereas corporate multiculturalism seeks to highlight the cultural and social diversity of America's corporations, liberal multiculturalism investigates educational institutions, as they have a

¹ Manning Marable, “Black Studies, Multiculturalism, and the Future of American Education,” *Items* (1995): 49–56.

powerful social responsibility to deconstruct the ideology of human inequality. Radical essentialist multiculturalism admires the aesthetics, cultures, norms, and values of non-Western cultures, and radical democratic multiculturalism puts the experience of race in a transnational perspective, deconstructs the concept of race, and makes parallels between the oppressions of Black people in America with the conditions of other oppressed groups.

Two primary areas within Iranian studies and Iranian diasporic feminism/s examine the formation of gender and gendered citizenship. Both locate Iranian women's experiences and movements and differentiate them from other dominant feminisms. In doing so, the question of gender has been framed in relationship to the Iranian state's modernization and Islamification projects, or to the formation of the gender binary.² Kumari Jayawardena was among the first feminist scholars who claimed Iranian feminism had come out of the Iranian nationalist movement in the early 1980s.³ Her argument has been supported by historical works in the field, such as Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet's study of the concept of "patriotic womanhood," Afsaneh Najmabadi's investigations of the concept of "women of the nation" and the "erotic homeland," Camron Amin's study of "Mother Iran," and Mohammad Tavakoli Targhi's contributions to gendering mother-Iran and the consequences to gendering of male and female citizens.⁴

On the one hand, and possibly because of this relationship between nationalism and feminism discourses, a unifying nationality-based approach adopted by diasporic Iranian scholars analyzes Iranian history as one land, a harmonious entity, and citizens as defined by their demographic characteristics. On the other hand, and in contrast, I interpret generalized concepts such as "Iranian women's history," "Iranian feminism," and "women's questions" with an essentialist multiculturalist approach.

The literatures of Iranian studies and Iranian diasporic feminism have become metaphorically the "bridge called my back" for so many of us: diasporic, academic, Iranian scholars.⁵ However, some of the studies in the field of either Iranian studies or Iranian diasporic feminism have overlooked different experiences of ethnic and sexual minorities within their canons. Published works in these fields exclusively addressed questions of race and sexuality through a liberal or radical, essentialist, multiculturalist approaches. In contrast, one way I

² Haideh Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran: Women's Struggle in a Male-Defined Revolutionary Movement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Haleh Afshar, *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case-Study* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); Ziba Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000); Mino Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Cameron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865-1946* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005); Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Nina Ansary, *Jewels of Allah: The Untold Story of Women in Iran* (Los Angeles, CA: Revela Press, 2015).

³ Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (Zed Books, 1985).

⁴ Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Zanha-Yi Millat: Women or Wives of the Nation?" *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1/2 (1993): 51-71; Afsaneh Najmabadi, "The Erotic Vatan [Homeland] as Beloved and Mother: To Love, to Possess, and to Protect," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 3 (1997): 442-67; Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "Hallmarks of Humanism: Hygiene and Love of Homeland in Qajar Iran," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 (2000): 1171-1203, doi: 10.2307/2651407; Camron Michael Amin, "Selling and Saving 'Mother Iran': Gender and the Iranian Press in the 1940s," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33, no. 3 (2001): 335-61; Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "From Patriotism to Matriotism: A Tropolological Study of Iranian Nationalism, 1870-1909," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002): 217-38, doi: 10.1017/S0020743802002040; Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "Patriotic Womanhood: The Culture of Feminism in Modern Iran, 1900-1941," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 32, no. 1 (2005): 29-46.

⁵ Cherríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Toni Cade Bambara, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 2nd ed. (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983). This anthology provides a frame for women of color feminism. I use it here to claim that the literature of Iranian academic feminism in diaspora has done the same for graduate students and junior scholars who aim to connect their disciplinary knowledge with the social and historical elements of Iran.

understand WLF is as marginalized groups and intersectional identities reclaiming their place in the center of academic genres, and through a radical democratic and transnational approach to these focal questions.

The question of race has surfaced as a salient topic and has been explored in fascinating ways through cultural critiques of Iranian society.⁶ I rely on theories of race and ethnicity to explain how Kurdish, Arab, and Baloch activists address their insufficient and broken relationship with the nation–state, and I add to this how the citizenship of the queer community, as conditional and arbitrary, is challenged.

In my experience, the intersectionality of Mahsa (Zhina) Amini’s identity— her gender, ethnicity (Kurdish), and religion (Sunni)—opened conversations on many different levels in feminist spaces. For example, in November 2022, when I attended the National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) conference, the largest feminist convention in the US, in addition to meeting with Iranian feminists, many transnational, Muslim, Middle Eastern, Black, and Indigenous feminists reached out to me (and I am sure to other Iranian feminists) and asked about the importance of race in police brutality and Mahsa’s death. Of course, I had no proof of what exactly happened to Mahsa, but I responded based on my understanding and experiences as a middle-class, Fars, Tehrani woman. Like Mahsa, I have walked without proper hijab in the streets of Tehran, worn too much makeup, thereby declaring “lipstick jihad” against the Islamic State, and enjoyed the dream of a “passionate uprising” that has touched more privileged communities since the beginning of the reformist movement.⁷ Even though I was stopped by the morality police and disrespected verbally, I have never been physically touched, even by female police officers.⁸ Unlike Mahsa, I survived my encounter. As much as writing these lines pains me, I am here to testify against the package of privilege that has constantly kept me safe. The lack of that same privilege cost a young Kurdish Sunni woman her precious life.

My second example is a short audio clip in Persian from an Arab woman, recorded during a more limited uprising that resulted in a mass shooting and the loss of lives among the community of Arab Iranians in Mahshahr in November 2019. In the approximately one-minute audio recording, the Arab woman challenges a soldier by yelling,

Hey! It is a peaceful demonstration (*mozāherāt salmīyah*)! Why do you fire? Why do you shoot? Listen! You haven’t lost your water; your land hasn’t been taken away. Listen!

The audio stops here. The question, however, continues to linger: Is an anticolonial struggle for land ownership part of the history of Iranian women’s struggles and feminism/s? If so, in what piece of scholarship have we ever talked about that? Most of us who follow the news have knowledge of the upcoming water wars; we also learned that the Islamic state has moved water from southern provinces, such as from Khuzestan with an Arab minority, to Qom and Isfahan, for the more privileged citizens.⁹ This transfer has devastated farmers

⁶ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, “Colorblind or Blinded by Color? Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in Iran,” in *Sites of Pluralism: Community Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Firat Oruç (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 153–80; Parisa Vaziri, “Thaumaturgic, Cartoon Blackface” *Lateral* 10, no. 1 (2021), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48671622>; Beeta Baghoolizadeh, “The Myths of Haji Firuz: The Racist Contours of the Iranian Minstrel,” *Lateral* 10, no.1 (2021), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48671624>.

⁷ Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs, 2006); Pardis Mahdavi, *Passionate Uprisings: Iran’s Sexual Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁸ Michele Goodwin, Yalda Nafiseh Hamidi, and Parmis Khatibi, “68. Women, Life, Freedom: The Iranian Feminist Revolution,” *Ms. magazine*, 21 November 2022, <https://msmagazine.com/podcast/68-women-life-freedom-the-iranian-feminist-revolution-with-dr-yalda-hamidi-and-dr-parmis-khatibi>.

⁹ Elham Hoominfar, “The Marketization of Water: Environmental Movements’ Narratives and Common Experiences on Water Transfer Projects in Colorado and Western Iran,” *Water International* 48, no. 4 (2023), doi: 10.1080/02508060.2023.2213001.

in the southern provinces, imposing even more challenges to making a livelihood in an already difficult environment. The woman in the recording voices the frustration and outrage with the imposed challenge. Only through the rhetoric of Indigenous feminism, not Iranian studies scholarship, can I make sense of what has happened. This woman's voice leaves me questioning the colonial nature of the state: Is it a nation-state or an occupying force? I guess it depends on who is asking.

One traumatizing case of government brutality against the Baloch community that stood out during the protests concerned a young Baloch man, Khodanour Lajaei, who participated in a demonstration on October 1, in the city of Zahedan. Khodanour was arrested, tortured, and murdered. Government forces tied him to a flagpole after wounding him; they left him alone for several hours, with a cup of water just beyond his reach, so he slowly bled to death. Khodanour became one of the symbols of WLF revolution.¹⁰ In his story are horrifying details of racially profiled lives: they are figuratively tied to the idea of Iranian nationality yet left to hemorrhage and die, their genders (here masculinity) unsupported by the hegemonic masculine state.

In the stories of Mahsa's, Khodanour's, and others' mourning mothers of the movement, we can easily observe the absolute void of reproductive justice for mothers of ethnic minorities. Their children have been exposed to police brutality amid the movement, or even in their everyday lives, when they pursue marginalized economies of smuggling fuels (*sukht-bari*) or merchandise (*kulbari*) to sustain their precarious families.

On higher levels, such as surveillance, Baloch activists have protested that thousands of members of their community do not have access to ID cards, and hundreds have lost their lives over the past year.¹¹ Desgoهران, a group of Baloch women activists, issued three statements in the months after WLF emerged, and highlighted intersectional systems of tribalism, patriarchy, and of course, the Iranian government's militarized discrimination against this ethnic minority.¹²

One other reflection that comes to mind concerns the racialization of the religious minorities in Iran. This reflection is inspired by the work of scholars such as Sahar Aziz, who discusses the racialization of Muslims in the US after 9/11.¹³ I think it makes sense to compare the racial profiling of the Baha'i, Jewish, and to a lesser extent Sunni communities in Iran for the similar reasons.¹⁴ The fact that we have not heard much from these communities during WLF is an indicator of their ghostly presence, and lack of proper inclusion in the idea of the nation.

The last major question that I would like to borrow from the streets of resistance is the question of sexuality, which has been addressed in liberal or radical essentialist multiculturalist fashion. For example, Afsaneh Najmabadi's series of articles and books discusses the formation of Iranian heteronormativity in the name of nation and progress, and the effect of the shaming gaze of European travelers in the process.¹⁵ In *Professing Selves*, she offers a

¹⁰ "Khodanour Lajaei: Icon for a Revolution," Global Voices, 2 December 2022, <https://globalvoices.org/2022/12/02/khodanour-lajaei-icon-for-a-revolution>.

¹¹ Fazel Hawramy, "Thousands Left Stateless in Iran amid ID Card Limbo," Al-Monitor, 22 August 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/08/iran-baloch-stateless-id-cards-shenasnameh-limbo-services.html>; Rudam Azad, "Iran's Security Services Target Baloch Women," Middle East Media Research Institute, accessed 10 June 2023, <https://www.memri.org/reports/irans-security-services-target-baloch-women>; Roghayeh Rezaei, "Hundreds Of Ethnic Baluch Killed in Iran over Past Year, Group Says," IranWire, 30 March 2023, <https://iranwire.com/en/news/115106-hundreds-of-ethnic-baluch-killed-in-iran-over-past-year-group-says>.

¹² "We Are Desgoهران: The Voice of Baluch Women; Second Statement," Slingers.Collective, 14 October 2022, <http://slingerscollective.net/we-are-desgoهران-the-voice-of-baluch-women-second-statement>.

¹³ Sahar Aziz, *Racial Muslim* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021).

¹⁴ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "Sunnis in Iran: Protesting against Decades of Discrimination and Repression," Washington Institute, Fikra Forum, 21 November 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sunnis-iran-protesting-against-decades-discrimination-and-repression>.

¹⁵ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Transing and Transpassing across

multimethodological investigation of phenomena she carefully calls “same-sex desire” and “trans-sexuality” in Iran.¹⁶ Najmabadi’s research follows the radical essentialist approach that identifies distinctive, non-Western ways of queerness, and builds a base for addressing the politics of sexuality in Iranian communities. Specifically, in the last chapter of *Professing Selves*, she relies on a Foucauldian frame to theorize Iranian selves, the ones who do not necessarily choose to “come out” to reveal their sexual identities.

Nevertheless, streets filled with WLF protesters provided space for various queer representations, proving the limits of this scholarship. For example, a picture from Iran, taken near Qom, the center for religious power, shows a queer person raising a rainbow flag over their head. In multiple photos from inside Iran the rainbow flag appears to testify to the desire of Iranian queer communities to come out to the nation and be included in freedom conversations, including the government-supported demonstration of 22 Bahman, the anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution. This desire for coming out, through carrying the rainbow flag, has been regarded as something “Western” in some of the literature, maybe because of the “homeroeticism of exile” that considers Iranian queers to be those who have been exposed to homosexuality outside of Iranian national borders.¹⁷ I see a lot of parallels between viewing both the desire to come out in the queer community and that for unveiling by Iranian women as foreign and “Western.”

In another iconic diasporic scene, recorded in front of the Iranian Embassy in Ecuador, two queer-identifying persons vogue.¹⁸ Near their performance scene, on the embassy walls, flyers read “Queer, Life, Freedom” (*Kuyīr, Zindigī, Rahāyī* in Farsi). The activism of the Iranian queer community has been constantly criticized by postcolonial scholars who worry too much about the authentic sexualities of Iranians. Here voguing, as the expression of queerness, ties this scene to the struggles of queers of color against intersectional systems of oppression. As a longtime follower of many members of the Iranian queer community from inside Iran and in the diaspora on social media, this scene does not surprise me. It only enhances my observations of the keen anti-racist and transnational awareness of some of the members of this community of the oppressed, and their vanguard role in calling out the oppression.

I want to wrap up by noting that “Iran” as imagined, studied, and addressed in the scholarship of both Iranian studies and Iranian diasporic feminism/s is devoid of the existence and experiences of some Iranians. What I suggest, based on listening to the voices and activism of groups I consider either racialized or queer of color Iranians, is to deconstruct Iran, and rebuild it through scholarship in radical democratic, antiracist, and inclusive ways.

Sex-Gender Walls in Iran,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3/4 (2008): 23–42; Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Verdicts of Science, Rulings of Faith: Transgender/Sexuality in Contemporary Iran,” *Social Research* 78, no. 2 (2011): 533–56.

¹⁶ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves: Transsexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Contemporary Iran* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Sima Shakhsari, “From Homoerotics of Exile to Homopolitics of Diaspora: Cyberspace, the War on Terror, and the Hypervisible Iranian Queer,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 8, no. 3 (2012): 24, doi: 10.2979/jmiddeastwomstud.8.3.14.

¹⁸ Voguing is a specific way of expressive and resistant dancing for queer of color that was invented during 1980s, and was shown in the documentary *Paris Is Burning* (dir. Jennie Livingston, 1990).