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Iranian Women's Uprising: Lessons for Euro-American Academic Feminism

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Abstract

This paper reflects on representations of the convergence of Islam and feminism in light of the recent uprising of Iranian women. Most of the existing literature discussing Muslim women's rights are locked in a dichotomy of approaches, one being prejudicial and the other apologetic. The prejudicial approach is a (neo-)Orientalist one. It understands Muslim societies as backward and their redemption in abandoning Islam and following the lead of the "West." The apologetic approach is a multiculturalist one, advocating most prominently by academic feminists based in Europe and United States. In trying to reclaim agency for Muslim women, this approach denies real oppressions happening in Muslim societies, and as a result of Islamic practices. Inspired by Iranian women's fight for freedom, this paper challenges the aforementioned dichotomy, and instead calls for a third approach that begins with, and responds to, the lived experiences of women living in Muslim societies.

In September 2022, an Iranian woman, Mahsa "Jina" Amini, was detained by Iran's Morality Police[1] for allegedly not properly observing the Islamic dress code enforced in Iran. She was taken by force to a detention center where she collapsed and was subsequently transferred to a hospital. After being in a coma for three days, Jina passed away. Despite the Iranian authorities' denials, the cause of her death is believed to have been injuries to the head. Witnesses, including other women who were detained with Jina, reported brutal beatings of her at the hands of the police. At the time of her death, Jina was 22 years old. News of Jina's detention and hospitalization spread quickly through social media. Her death triggered the most widespread protests against the Iranian government since the Revolution in 1979. The regime responded with internet blackouts, tear gas, gunfire, arrests, imprisonments, torture, rape, and execution of the protesters.

Iran has seen many uprisings in recent years: in 2009, in protest of a fraudulent presidential election, in 2017–18 for economic dissatisfaction and political opposition to the country's leaders, and again, in 2019–20 with more explicit calls for the overthrow of the government and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iranian women have always been

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part of these protests. But the uprising that erupted in the aftermath of Jina's death is undeniably led by Iranian women and girls. Women removed their hijabs and cut their hair in protest. They burned their headscarves and posted pictures and videos of it on social media. The Kurdish slogan "*Jin, Jiyan, Azadi*," which translates as "Woman, Life, Freedom," became the rallying cry of the uprising.

What does the world see when looking at pictures of Middle Eastern women burning headscarves? What do American and European feminist scholars see?

In the spring of 2015, I was auditing a course on "Islam and Gender" at the University of Oregon. In one class the discussion turned to what people in the Global North can do to help women living in Muslim countries. An American student was defending her position that *we*—in the Global North—have a duty to help Muslim women, to provide them, for instance, with education. The professor asked, "What if they don't want education?" In response to which the student said, "then *we* will give them whatever it is that they want." To this day, I do not know which annoyed me more: the student's patronizing view of Muslim women waiting for their supposed American saviors; or the professor's question intended to challenge the student's beliefs, but at the same time implying that Muslim women's wants—by virtue of them being Muslim, presumably—are so different from people in the US that they might not even want education.

The problematic dichotomy of approach in that class discussion happens to be representative of most of the literature on the convergence of feminism and Islam produced in America and Europe. First, there is the prejudicial approach, based on Orientalism, a Euro-American-centric worldview, which sees Asian, North African, and Middle Eastern countries as the "Other." Edward Said (1978) employed the term to analyze the relationship between the West and Muslim-majority societies based on the purported superiority of the former over the latter. This notion has been often used to justify the domination and imperial conquest of non-Western countries. The term neo-Orientalism became popular post-9/11 in describing a development in constructions of the Muslim "Other" as not only inferior, but also violent and dangerous.[2] Muslim women, in this view, are oppressed victims of their patriarchal societies with no agency of their own. Correspondingly, the excuse of "saving" Muslim women has notoriously been used to justify violent interventions in the affairs of Muslim-majority countries, in particular, throughout United States' War on Terror. The second approach is an apologetic one, advocated most prominently by academic feminists who seek to correct the notion that Islam and Islamic practices are inherently oppressive by reclaiming agency on behalf of Muslim women and finding expressions of it in religious traditions, most notably the practice of veiling.[3] The relatively recent construct of Islamic feminism has gained much support among the proponents of this approach as it advocates for Muslim women's rights within an Islamic framework and with reference to Islamic foundational texts and practices.

But what to do with the local dissident? What of the secular feminist living in a Muslim-majority society? How to understand the images of Iranian women burning their headscarves? Clearly, one runs into a problem explaining such phenomena if, per the prejudicial approach, one's framework does not account for the agency of women in Muslim-majority societies. On the other hand, the apologetic approach often ignores the very real oppressions that women face in Muslim-majority societies and as a result of Islamic practices, disregarding the objections of native women. Marnia Lazreg, a US-based scholar who grew up in a Muslim family in Algeria, notes that the local women who are critical of their societies' practices are frequently dismissed as being "Westernized," "elite," and "upper class" (2009, 6). While it is true that many native

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critics of Islamic practices are from middle and upper classes, it is not the case that they are the only dissenters. In fact, many influential participants in the recent uprising in Iran are working class. In 2012, Sattar Beheshti, an Iranian blogger and laborer from a working-class family, was arrested by the Iranian Cyber Police for his criticisms of the government and the Supreme Leader. While in prison Sattar made an official complaint of being tortured. A few days later, his family was informed of his death. Sattar's mother, Gohar Eshghi, brought this to the attention of the media and has been calling for justice for her son's death ever since. Gohar is one of the many women whose children were killed by the agents of the Islamic Republic for participating in anti-government protests in Iran. They call themselves *Madaran-e-Dadkhah* which translates as "Mothers Seeking Justice." These women—many of whom belong to the working class—openly call for the overthrow of the Iranian regime. They have been arrested, their homes raided, and their family members threatened and imprisoned, and still they fight. In October 2022, in a video shared on social media, Gohar Eshghi, who had always appeared with her hair covered, removed her headscarf in support of Iranian women's movement, saying "For our youth, after 80 years, because of a religion that kills people, I'm removing this hijab" (Iranwire 2022).

But why is there such a disconnect between the realities of Muslim societies and the theories on them? It is worth noting that much of the literature available in the US and Europe on feminism in Muslim-majority societies is produced by academics who write their theories from a distance, and mostly for a Western audience. These are diasporic scholars based in Europe or the United States, with origins in Muslim-majority countries, as well as scholars from non-Muslim ones. It is no surprise that location should influence theorizing. Let us return to the practice of veiling: wearing a hijab in Europe or America is very different from wearing one in a Muslim-majority country. In the post-9/11 era and in response to the growing Islamophobia, many Muslim women in the US and Europe saw the wearing of hijab as an act of resistance and of reclaiming their identity against the dominant culture. Some celebrate 1 February as "Hijab Day," when women of all religions and backgrounds are encouraged "to wear and experience the hijab" for a day (worldhijabday.com). In 2023, a 16ft steel statue of a woman wearing a traditional Muslim head covering, called *Strength of the Hijab*, was commissioned and made in the UK (BBC News 2023). In Euro-American academia, hijab has become unquestionable. Any criticism of it results in accusations of intolerance, even when it comes from women who have lived or are living in Muslim-majority societies. Yet the very same people who dismiss the objections of native women to the practice of veiling uncritically accept veiled women's stated reasons for taking up the hijab. Their understanding is that, when women choose to veil, whatever their motivations and rationalizations for doing so may be, it is an exercise of their agency and as such cannot be challenged. This approach reduces the discourse on hijab to its rationale, offered by the women who have taken up the practice or the scholars who study them.

Lazreg argues that while women's rationale for wearing hijab cannot be simply dismissed as false consciousness, it is not, as a matter of course, an expression of agency either. Furthermore, she writes, "agency is not a free-floating capacity independent of the social framework within which it expresses itself; neither is it above questioning" (2009, 9–10). Lazreg argues that veiling is not just a discourse but also a practice which cannot be understood in isolation from its history (11). Let us not forget that veiling is and has been a practice reserved for Muslim women when they are in the presence of men and is historically tied to women's exclusion from the public arena. As such, any woman's act of veiling is inevitably performed within the context of this history. No

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matter the veiled women's stated rationalizations, the history of hijab as it has been practiced cannot be simply put aside. Lazreg notes that understanding the practice of veiling as history helps us avoid conceiving of it as a "fixture of the Muslim landscape, instead of an evolving phenomenon" (7), arguing, "[c]onflating discourse and practice naturalizes veiling by making it appear normative and immutable" (11).

Thus, while attempting to distance themselves from the Othering processes of Orientalism which sees people from Muslim-majority countries as inferior, many academics have brought about another kind of Othering that is just as problematic. For instance, one of the main points of discussion offered by scholars who advocate for Islamic feminism and seek to show the practice of veiling as empowering for women in Muslim-majority societies centers around the purported role hijab has played in facilitating women's access to the public sphere and combating sexual harassment. They argue that, as veiling protects women's modesty and honor—at least in the eyes of traditionalists—its practice leads to an increase in women's participation and involvement in public life and politics.[4] Arguments that associate sexual harassment with how women dress have been heavily criticized by Euro-American feminists. Yet veiling in Muslim-majority societies for the above reasons is not only considered by many as tolerable but is seen by some as proof of efficacy of Islamic feminism. Such discussions inevitably distract from the truly feminist arguments for women' rights to access the public arena and to not be harassed regardless of their clothes, religion, or the society they live in. As this example shows, Islamic feminism imposes questionable limits on women's rights. Euro-American feminists' acceptance of such limits for Muslim women—that they would surely see as unacceptable for non-Muslim women—exposes a very problematic double standard.

This double standard can be better understood in terms of what Uma Narayan calls "cultural essentialism." In "Essence of culture and a sense of history" (1998), Narayan explains that feminist efforts to avoid gender essentialism and to attend to differences among women, sometimes result in essentialist notions of "culture" which pose difficulties for feminist agendas in the global south. Cultural essentialism, she writes, "endorses and replicates problematic and colonialist assumptions about the cultural differences between 'Western culture' and 'Non-western cultures' and the women who inhabit them" (87). Consequently, the universal and essentialist category of "woman" is replaced by culture-specific—but still essentialist—categories such as "Western women," "Third World women," "Muslim women."

What comes to your mind when you think about Muslim women? What comes to your mind when you think about Iranian women? My mind is filled with images of brave girls and women who have fought and keep fighting for their freedom during the recent uprisings in Iran. I would like to share some of these images with you:

> A teenage girl asking her friends not to laugh at her as she sings. Nika was 16 when she was killed.
> A 22-year-old woman on the streets without a headscarf, tying her hair into a ponytail before joining the protests. Hadis was shot at least six times.
> A teenage YouTuber, who in one of her videos says, "nothing feels better than freedom" after she is done with her finals. Sarina was beaten to death with a baton.
> Schoolgirls standing in front of a blackboard with anti-government messages written on it. Their backs to the camera, their headscarves removed in protest.

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These images are far from common representations of Muslim women in Western media, even those that align with the political left. "Muslim woman" has become an essentialized concept. Muslim women's identities are reduced to them being Muslims, even if they are not practicing Muslims. If their Muslimness is what defines them, if that one aspect of their identity is taken out of all proportion, to make them so different from the "Western woman," is it any wonder then that one would assume they are so different from Americans and Europeans that they do not value education? Is it any wonder then that, despite its questionable relation to gender equality, Islamic feminism is claimed to be the *only* suitable theory for Muslim women who are fighting for their rights?

Indeed, the increasing popularity of Islamic feminism among both diasporic feminists hailing from Muslim-majority societies as well as American and European feminists can be understood in terms of essentializing concepts of Muslim women. Islamic feminism, particularly as it is presented as the only framework that is viable for advocating for women's rights in Muslim-majority societies, relies on and reproduces essentializing conceptions of Muslim women. Once again, as Narayan argued, in the course of acknowledging the differences between women from Muslim-majority societies and those from non-Muslim societies, the first group are represented as homogeneous and identified merely by their culture and religion, which obscures other aspects of their identities that are widely diverse. Just like how gender essentialism assumes a sharp gender binary, "cultural essentialism assumes and constructs sharp binaries between 'Western culture' and 'Non-western cultures' or between 'Western culture' and particular 'Other' cultures" (Narayan 1998, 88).

This binary between Western and non-Western cultures is sometimes justified by what Narayan calls progressive versions of cultural essentialism. Here, the legitimacy of employing Euro-American cultural values to judge the institutions of other cultures is called into question, such that notions like equality and human rights are understood as "Western" values, and their use in non-Western contexts as imperialist. In response, Narayan points out that these concepts are not entirely "products of Western imperialism," as concepts such as equality were often developed through the struggles of the marginalized and the colonized "against Western imperialism" (1998, 97). Further, she argues, notions like equality are contested in both the global north and south, as there is no unified and unchallenged sense of them anywhere. So, instead of an outright denunciation of the application of these notions to non-Western contexts, it would be more productive to discuss the particular ways in which some interpretations of rights or equality might be inappropriate or inadequate in some contexts compared to others (99).

What causes the problem of cultural essentialism is a deficient understanding of the process of cultural imperialism. Narayan explains that cultural imperialism is often understood to be the result of imposing "sameness" on a divergent population. In the case of gender essentialism, it leads to cultural imperialism when some socially dominant group of women "construct their 'cultural Others' in their own image," assuming the issues and interests of every woman to be the same as their own (1998, 89). This account of cultural essentialism obscures the ways in which cultural imperialism also occurs by an imposition of "difference," and "by a projection of Imaginary 'differences' that constitute one's Others as Other" (Narayan 1998, 89). Narayan notes that essentialist representations of cultural differences were employed during colonialism by both sides: by the colonizers to justify their colonial conquest and rule, and by nationalist movements that resisted that rule. As a way of political resistance, nationalist and fundamentalist movements in Third World countries

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embraced and continue to embrace essentialist renditions of their own culture—parts of which are harmful to the interests of women. In what parallels accusations of the academic apologetics against the local dissenters, internal feminist challenges to the harmful societal practices in Third World countries are frequently called "cultural betrayals" by those countries' fundamentalists (91).

Thus, while at first glance it may seem that the prejudicial and apologetic approaches are polar opposites—with the former presuming all aspects of Muslim cultures as inferior to the Western ones, and the latter uncritically accepting of Islamic practices—in fact, they are two sides of the same coin, both relying on essentialist and sharply contrasting representations of cultural differences between Western and Muslim cultures. Lazreg explains that there is continuity between the apologetic and the Orientalist approaches by arguing that they both use a "religious paradigm" that relies on the concept of Islam "as the bedrock of societies in which Islam is practiced." Whether women are seen as "helpless victims"—per the prejudicial approach—or as embodying the "gender liberating potential" of Islam—per the apologetic approach—their identity is reduced to an "instance of a religion" ([1994] 2019, 7–14).

Counter to the academically prevalent apologetical approach, there is a smaller body of literature which rebukes that approach and its uncritical espousal of Islamic feminism. For example, Leila Mouri and Kristin Soraya Batmanghelichi argue that "the figure of 'Islamic feminist' is a contentious one; not only because its origins and applicability are questioned, but also because it has uncritically become the central protagonist and spokesperson to describe what is, in actuality, a hybrid movement of secularists, feminists, and the religiously devout, among many other characters and strains" (2015, 333–34). Feminist activities in Muslim-majority societies are being more and more analyzed within the framework of Islamic feminism, regardless of whether those local scholars and activists identify their own work as such. Indeed, some even object to being called Islamic feminists, having a problem with either the "Islamic" part of the term or the "feminist" part. Improvements in the situation of women in Muslim-majority societies are taken as confirmation of the effectiveness of Islamic feminism, regardless of whether those improvements have been achieved as a result of any activity that is based in Islamic principles or practices. Narratives that analyze the Iranian women's movement exclusively within an Islamic feminist framework, for instance, often ignore the fact that many changes in Iran came about through secular activists' resistance against Islamization policies. Thus, Mouri and Batmanghelichi argue that the domination of Islamic feminism in discussions of women's rights in Iran "has resulted in a political and epistemic violence, silencing the speech and actions of Iran's secular feminists and women's rights defenders" (2015, 334).

Among other Iranian scholars who have questioned the application of Islamic feminism to the Iranian context specifically, is Haideh Moghissi who criticizes the "cultural relativist" academic feminists who view "Islamic feminism as the only homegrown, locally produced, and hence culturally suitable project for changing the lot of women … in Muslim-majority countries" (2011, 76). Denouncing the advocates of Islamic feminism for their refusal to engage in any critical analysis of it, Moghissi contends that such "uncritical acceptance of Islamic feminism as a new liberatory project in Islamic societies is not in the service of women's cause" (77). Moreover, Moghissi argues, the avid promotion of Islamic feminism in recent years has had "an intimidating and silencing effect" on any discussions of the possibilities of different feminist projects for Muslim-majority societies (77). Moghissi explains the cause of popularity of Islamic feminism among diasporic and Euro-American academic feminists to be the perception

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of "the West [of] Middle Easterners as faceless, thoughtless crowds of Muslims, at the grips of a strange and unknowable religion," which makes plausible any theory that explains the projects of these people in terms of their religion. Accordingly, Moghissi argues, there is "a market in the West" for Islamic feminism "as the Middle Eastern version of liberation theology" (67).

Like Moghissi, Shahrzad Mojab criticizes the claim that Islamic feminism is the only "authentic, indigenous road to gender equality and justice" in Muslim societies (2001, 130). She criticizes supporters of Islamic feminism for essentializing "women of Islamic countries into religious beings" (142). According to Mojab, proponents of Islamic feminism attribute patriarchal Islamic practices to history and tradition in Muslim societies rather than Islamic law itself. As such, they are optimistic that a reinterpretation of Islamic texts can support efforts in granting women equal rights with men. Mojab notes, however, that while "[i]t is true that patriarchy cannot be reduced to religion, . . . it is equally true that Islam cannot be degenderized into a neutral observer of gender relations" (137). Adhering to the Islamic framework leads to defending Islam taking precedent over women's rights, which significantly limits the project of Islamic feminism both in theory and in practice. Hence, Mojab observes, "feminists who have worked hard to construct 'Muslim women identities' and 'Islamic feminisms' lag behind developments in the gender conflict in Iran" (142).

Despite these accounts, the majority of the literature on feminism in Muslim societies remains locked in the prejudicial versus the apologetical narratives. The Iranian women's uprising exposes the deficiency of these accounts and calls for a third approach. This third account is not a median between the two above approaches. Rather, it is a complete departure from essentializing concepts of women in Muslim-majority societies and from seeing them as an "instance of a religion." To achieve this, the new approach should begin with, and respond to, the lived experiences of women in Muslim-majority societies. Accounts, such as that of Lazreg, that centralize experiences of women in Muslim-majority societies and present a non-reductive, critical feminist view are scarce. To fill this gap in the literature, let us allow the lived experiences of women from Muslim-majority societies, instead of essentialized accounts of them, to guide our course. Let us not just watch but also *learn* from the brave Iranian women and girls who have sacrificed so much fighting for their rights. Neither the state-controlled Iranian media nor the accounts produced in America and Europe that continue the practice of Othering women in Muslim-majority countries give us an accurate picture. Let us, instead, listen to and hear what actual women living in these societies tell us themselves. Iranian women have taken pains to share their ordeals with the world. As news agencies are controlled by the government in Iran, social media has played a significant role not only in organizing but also circulating the news of anti-government protests. For this reason, government forces specifically target people who are recording the protests. In September 2022, Ghazaleh Chalabi, a 33-year-old woman, was filming a protesting crowd, likely to later share it on social media. Ghazaleh was shot in the head. Both the video of her death, caught by another protester's phone camera, and the video she was filming when she was killed, were later released on social media. Voices of people chanting the widely used slogan "don't be afraid, we are united" can be heard in the background of the videos.

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Iranian women have spoken. Loudly and clearly. And they have paid a heavy price to do so. Will you hear their words?

Woman.
Life.
Freedom.

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Notes

1 Morality police or Guidance Patrol is a kind of official vice squad police force in the Islamic Republic of Iran, established in 2005 with the task enforce the Islamic law, including Islamic dress code. They frequently arrest people (mainly women) who they deem improperly dressed according to this dress code.

2 See, e.g., Tuastad 2003; Spellberg 2009; Samiei 2010.

3 See, e.g., Hoodfar 1991; Hessini 1994; Badran 1999; Afshar 2000; Cooke 2001; Mir-Hosseini 2004.

4 See, e.g., MacLeod 1991; Mir-Hosseini 1999; Bullock 2003.

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