



When my virtue defends your borders: Political justification of nation and order through the rhetorical production of womanhood in the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran

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SYNOPSIS

A qualitative content analysis of writings and speeches of Khomeini – the leader of Iran's Islamic revolution of 1979 – illustrates a symbolic disposition of gender within his political Islamist narratives. Westernizing agendas of the Pahlavi's state, and its symbolic use of unveiled women to model the modern nation, gave rise to an oppositional anti-imperial force that equally placed women at the center of its nation building project. As one of those oppositional forces, Khomeini positions gender within his nationalist, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist narratives and suggests that changes in traditional gender relations have originated from imperialist schemes and are threatening to the order of society. According to these narratives, femininity and gender “ideals” such as chastity and devotional motherhood are pivotal to the protection of the nation, its independence and its future. This study also provides an example of how, in the times of rapid social change, moral panics around changes in traditional gender relations are created to justify political organization and mobilization.

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Introduction

This article examines gendered political narratives of the leader of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution–Ayatollah Khomeini–as these narratives form his anti-imperialist, nationalist and anti-capitalist rhetoric in the midst and after the revolution. Political narratives, especially those uttered and framed during contentious historical periods, provide a valuable case for studying how gender plays a role both in nation-building discourses as well as in the creation of moral and sex panics. By using the method of qualitative content analysis, this paper illustrates how gender discourses and female body become utilized in conservative political narratives to suggest a return to past traditions. It also examines social, political and economic changes that shape and change the ways by which gender discourses appear in political narratives. This study demonstrates by example that the symbolic disposition of gender within nationalist and anti-imperialist discourses can

serve to draw individuals to participate in conservative social movements.

The significance of the application of the concept of gender within nationalist, post-colonial and anti-imperialist narratives has been demonstrated in various social contexts (Gopinath, 2003; Heng & Devan, 1997; Stoler, 2002). Scholars have illustrated the effect of colonial processes and neo-colonial globalization on the construction of women's bodies as the symbolic sites of nation-building projects (Dewey, 2008; Hoang, 2011; Mani, 1998; Morcillo, 2000). In nationalist discourses women are depicted as guardians of the nation since they are understood to be the careers of tradition through motherhood (Alexander, 1991; Chatterjee, 1990; Hansen, 1992; McClintock, 1995). Furthermore, ideological representation of women at a symbolic level intensifies in times of rapid social change when there is a quest for achieving a post-colonial national identity (Gal & Kligman, 2000; Innes, 1994; Jayawardena, 1986; Stoler, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 1997). In the times of rapid social change, when the values and norms of one society become questioned or dismantled, society's foundations become replaced by “cultural bases expressed symbolically” (Cohen, 1995:81; Shahidian,

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2002). “Gender becomes a major element of contestation at times of rapid change. As groups side with or against change, changing gender relations becomes the sign of progress or the symbol of demon” (Shahidian: 68). The “natural” appearance of sex categories and the performativity of gender reinforce the idea of its essentialism (Butler, 2004; Crawley, Foley, & Shehan, 2008). Changes in traditional gender relations, therefore, appear to change the “natural” order of the universe and to subvert the order of society. Gender, in consequence, becomes the battleground of divergent politicking (Shahidian, 2002).

It is not uncommon for conservative leaders and religious organizations to create moral panics out of changes in gender relations in order to compel people to support their objectives (Herdt, 2009). According to Rubin (1993) “moral panics are the ‘political moment’ of sex, in which diffuse attitudes are channeled into political action and from there into social change” (P. 25). Creating panic out of easy to perceive changes in the “natural” division of labor between the sexes has been a practical strategy for religious and conservative leaders to condemn the existing patterns of change in one society. Thus, it is important to locate the role of gender in political narratives, especially in the midst of a social movement, to investigate the ways by which gender is utilized as a symbol for legitimizing a leader's political objectives, on one hand, and preserving patriarchal relations, on the other.

It is also important to include religious ideology to this mix of equation. Since gender is teleologically defined within discourses, individuals are believed to merely act out who they are supposed to be, and to fulfill their supernatural, natural, or ideological tasks. Examining gender in any social system, thus, requires studying that system's proposals about the nature and dynamics of the ideal order (Shahidian, 2002). However, Islamic ideology, similar to all other religious ideologies, is prone to varying interpretations and such interpretations differ according to political, economic, ideological and spatial dynamics of different societies and different social groups. While Islamic fundamentalists, such as Khomeini, provide an oppressive interpretation of Islam with regard to women, other groups such as Islamic feminists do not find Islam as inherently patriarchal and advocate for gender equality grounded in an Islamic framework.

Nevertheless, the religion and culture of Muslim societies have been “reactively homogenized” as the result of Western hegemony and as a legacy of colonialism (Spivak, 1988). Thus, my study of Khomeini's Islamic gender ideology is to question such monolithic reading of Islam, to, instead, place this research within the larger feminist analyses that suggest oppressive gender ideologies are often reconstructed in revolutionary and nationalist movements whether religious or not (Heng & Devan, 1997; Herdt, 2009; Yuval-Davis, 1997). By doing so, I suggest that Khomeini's reading of Islam and his changing interpretations of Islamic gender ideology should be read within the political and revolutionary context of the time. Furthermore, despite my vast emphasis on examining dominance, I do not wish to undermine the history of resistance and struggles of various feminist and oppositional groups. In fact, my study of power and dominance is grounded in the understanding that “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1978: 95) and so the Iranian people's struggle to read hegemonic discourses in subversive ways has existed alongside and within dominant discourses.

In this article, I analyze Khomeini's account of Islamic gender ideology and the way gender, as a symbolic discourse, is constructed and employed in his political narratives. I do so not because this ideology mirrors the realities of Iranian people's lives or minds, but because it delineates the context of gender policies in the Islamic state of Iran. Only by understanding the background of an ideology and its advocates can we realize how this ideology can affect or be affected by daily experiences of Iranians. The post-revolutionary state of Iran and other fundamentalist Islamic groups in the region continue to invoke and utilize femininity as central to their political agendas. This political utilization of Islam and gender, however, should be understood as reactionary responses to a history of gendered and sexual imperial manipulations of the region by Western colonial powers. I analyze Khomeini's narratives within their historical context to illustrate the interconnection between the political and cultural imperialisms of the West and the emergence of radical Islamic ideology that, similar to imperial endeavors, places gender at the center of its agendas. A detailed and elaborate examination of gendered speeches of an Islamist political leader, such as Khomeini, is helpful in recognizing such dynamics and the variety of ways by which women's rights can be negotiated in political narratives.

Imperialism, nationalism and the symbolic role of gender: a brief history of the last century Iran

The Iranian women's movement first emerged some time after the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906. When Iranian women became aware of women's conditions and educational opportunities in Western countries, their first demand and concern were around women's education. Subsequently new schools were established for young girls. From 1914 to 1925, women's publications expanded beyond discussions of education onto subjects such as child marriage, economic empowerment, and the rights and legal status of women (Bharier, 1977). Women's movement pioneers in Iran established societies and organizations as well as newspapers and magazines for the purpose of consciousness raising and reaching their voices to officials and the masses. In the late 1960s, the women's movement had many achievements as suffrage was gained and women could finally enter the male dominated spheres of judiciary and police force. They were able to enter the diplomatic corps and the revolutionary service corps such as those constructed around education, health and development.

The reforms regarding women's rights, however, only affected the minority of middle-class women and barely affected the lives of the majority of rural women and working class women in urban areas, who remained poor or unpaid and illiterate family workers (Poya, 1999). At the same time, such reforms in women's status were made possible because of the modernizing, secularizing and westernizing agendas of the Pahlavi state that wanted Iran to simulate the West. In 1925, when Reza Khan overthrew the Qajar Dynasty, he became the Shah of Iran and initiated industrialization, establishment of national education system, modernization and secularism. After Reza Shah, his son, Mohammad Reza Shah rapidly modernized Iranian infrastructure but simultaneously, similar to his father, crushed all forms of political

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