

## WESTERN VIEWS OF IRANIAN WOMEN:

### A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Up until recent times and even today in many cases, the male experience was considered the universal one and the female version would only be a specific within that larger universal. Outstanding behaviour or nonconformity would be classified as deviational. As a rule, women were not an independent topic of study up until the early twentieth century in the West, and their behaviour, as worthy of attention and investigation on its own inherent merit, only attracted scholars through the initial formation of 'Women's Studies' (and this in the United States) by way of an interdisciplinary approach. Several different fields are now granting independent status to the study of women, and scholars have come to recognize the female experience as an entity apart, with its own related problems and characteristics, not in the manner of an aberration or eccentricity, but as a subject which requires sensitivity and insight if the rich complexity of society is to be understood. This is not to deny that sometimes women's lives may mirror, as in a microcosm, the lives of men, and in turn their larger social structures. But to reduce and limit women in any field to a mere unworthy detail is to condemn them to invisibility, to limit the understanding of human behaviour and disregard their contributions over time.

Turning to the study of women in Iran, women cannot be divorced from other aspects of society and with regard to Western Orientalism, have been a silent and vulnerable target for the perpetration of fallacies and injudicious statements.

There are several factors contributing to this misrepresentation in the past. The first is geographical. Earlier in the century Iran did not conveniently fall into the popular and

specific designations of what Said calls 'imaginative geography'.<sup>1</sup> It was wedged between 'Arabia' (the Arab world), and the Indian subcontinent; it did not conjure up a particular and separate image - the sort of thing that is nowadays ambiguously called a 'culture area'. There was no precise classification of the Iranian people within an identifying and illuminating category apart from the too general term 'Near East'. Notions of Ottoman Turkey or Arab invaders only added to the confusion. Thus up until the oil-boom when a great many of these misunderstandings were hastily rectified, Iran remained a cultural and geographical misfit.

The second relates to the travellers who visited the country early in the nineteenth century. None had been trained to assimilate and analyse their findings and observations. If we are to reckon that modern anthropology began with Durkheim and Malinowski, we realize that the bulk of the turn-of-the-century writings on Iran predate the existence of a satisfactory anthropological methodology. Historians of the time were uninterested in women and concentrated either on the classical period or on aspects of events relating to the West. Iran was far from the mainstream of European thought, and even when the tide of interest turned later in the century, the nation was not immune to the insensitive schematizations and learned disquisitions of Western Orientalism. The threat and spread of Islam had imprinted a latent image of Mohammad as heretic and imposter on the Western mind, and his doctrine was considered to be unacceptably discriminatory to women. A host of missionaries were thus driven to wage individual crusades against this contagious evil. Nevertheless, the bulk of writings concentrated on other aspects of politics and society, and where women do appear, they are incidental. An effort was never made to translate existing Persian documents; only recently, for instance, was the extensive role of women in the Tobacco Uprising of 1892 investigated, and that by a female anthropologist. It can be said, therefore, that the nineteenth or early twentieth century account may be more interesting for the light it shed on the 'expert-adventurer-eccentric' himself, than for the accurate image it would give of Iran. While for one the harem was a 'hell of intrigues and violence', for another it was a '*vrai paradis terrestre*',<sup>2</sup> a haven of erotic promises. This line of thinking evolved, through the process of what Said calls 'intertextuality' or inbred cross-referencing, to persistent modern day fallacies. Penzer, in his classic work on the harem, describes some of these problems in the following way:

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London etc: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Gaspard Drouville, *Voyage en Perse 1812-1813*, Vols. I-II, Pluchart 1819.

There are perhaps two main reasons why such false ideas have lingered so long in the Western mind. In the first place, so great has been the secrecy which has always surrounded the Imperial 'harem' that first-hand and reliable information was seldom forthcoming. In the second place, the dividing line between fact and fiction, as far as the 'harem' was concerned, was very thin and ill-defined. After all, it had only been popularised in Western Europe early in the eighteenth century, when Antoine Galland first published the *Arabian Nights*, and the public were much too intrigued by the novelty and fascination of the tales themselves to entertain any desire to question the 'mise en scene' or seek to dissipate the clouds of romance and hyperbole that hung so heavily over this newly discovered creation of the Orient.

The vague, and sometimes conflicting, descriptions of travellers that followed, the meagre accounts of English governesses and companions, the letters and diaries of ambassadors' wives or secretaries, were the sole source of information. But even so the number of the intelligent reading public was small, while many of the more important first-hand accounts still remained in manuscript, and had long since found their resting-place amid a host of dusty archives or on the shelves of some State library uncatalogued and forgotten. Thus all kinds of misunderstandings, exaggerations, distortions, and occasionally deliberate fabrications, have merely tended to add confusion to the indifferent and scanty accounts of the 'harem' already existing.<sup>3</sup>

Penzer's criticism may very well seem outdated in the present context (he did write in 1936), but he is nevertheless accurate on the nature of the Western literary and documentary legacy, strains of which have permeated the works of some modern scholars.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that the training of Middle East historians in social theory and methods is an almost exclusively post-World War II phenomenon. Be that as it may, it would seem that the methodological difficulties have been nowhere near so great as the attitudinal ones. To demonstrate the point in question, I refer to an article by Nikki Keddie on 'Problems in the Study of Middle Eastern Women'<sup>4</sup> as well as her recent book, *Women in the Muslim World*.<sup>5</sup> The first is a summary of gaps in methodology in the works of social scientists, and the second is a collection of essays in which the author feels she has overcome

<sup>3</sup> N.M. Penzer, *The Harem*, London: Spring Books 1936, pp. 13.

<sup>4</sup> *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, No. X. 1979.

<sup>5</sup> N. Keddie and L. Beck (eds.), *Women in the Muslim World*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press 1978.

some of those shortcomings. My aim is to point out a few of the discrepancies between what is held in theory and what is actually produced, thereby indicating a further underlying set of problems.

One of the main objections to the generic term 'Muslim women' or 'Muslim World' is that they are, like the term Orient, vague, evocative of monolithic images, and unsatisfactory. This is perhaps a modern version of the older 'imaginative geography', an extension of past inability to come to terms with the diversity and multiplicity of alien cultures. But in the present context of sophisticated scholarship, the term is rather a source of confusion. One wonders where exactly this 'Muslim world' is situated, and which countries are considered Islamic? If the official religion of a nation is the criterion by which the selection is made, then why are Muslim populations of India, the Soviet Union, Zanzibar and its neighbouring islands - to mention but a few neglected groups - not included in most studies? Furthermore, if the title of a book such as the one in question centers on the word 'Muslim', is it not natural to assume that many, or all of the conditions described are directly attributable to Islam? Where, then, is the place for customary law, departures from Islamic law itself, ethnic and local variations, and a host of other factors which go to make up the social fabric? While similarities undoubtedly exist between these groups, it is helpful to remember that the problem stems from reductive categorization as a consequence of careless attempts to find common, binding laws, not from the reality of the similarities themselves.

For instance, while Keddie cautions in her article against neglecting the consideration of all factors influencing a woman's status, she proceeds to give in her book a composite description of what she calls, 'an "ideal typical" picture of the Muslim Middle East - not an exact description of any group but a distillation of a number of studies which often reveal remarkably similar patterns...'<sup>6</sup> One wonders what could be the use of such an exercise if not to encourage the very same categorization which she has warned us against.

Another contradiction arises from the issue of whether westernization along with modernization has been of benefit to Middle Eastern women. The author's own unspoken assumption is that it has, but the matter is presented in an ambivalent way. In the article she says, 'Imperialists use historical arguments to try to show that women's position in the Middle East was dreadful until these areas came under Western tutelage...'<sup>7</sup> a stance which she decries, while she observes in the book that:

...we get a complex picture whereby upper and upper middle class groups closely tied to the West materially and

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Keddie, op. cit. (1979), p.226.

ideologically have taken important steps to improve the status of women (Turkey, Kuwait and Iran could be added to the relevant countries here) whereas less well off anti-imperialist groups, whose material and cultural interests are often hurt by Western incursions, may become defensive about traditional ways, and seek security in a return to tradition and preservation of male domination.<sup>8</sup>

Later on in her article, Keddie describes this as a 'two-culture' phenomenon, where class and urban-rural gaps are increased, with the benefits mainly affecting the urban upper-classes, with no evidence of a 'trickle down effect'. Keddie does not question this exacerbation of differences as a greater (or at least equal) evil than the progress of materialism and westernization for a limited group of people. Meanwhile, she ignores the fact that there is no real evidence to suggest that Muslim women are any worse off than their sisters in Latin America, Greece, Japan or non-Muslim African countries.

She then proceeds, having diagnosed the problem, to prescribe the usual solutions of legal reform, literacy programs, urbanization, industrialization, extension programs, vocational training, demand for labour and so forth, all of which appear desirable on a theoretical level. Nevertheless no recent empirical evidence from studies carried on in Third World countries necessarily indicates betterment of the woman's lot through these measures. Conditions are steadily worsening for lower-class, working women who at best may have literacy or education without any social options, who are overpowered by the force of religious or customary law in the face of 'legal reforms', who are exploited as cheap labour, dispossessed through industrialization, capitalist penetration, or socialist land reform, and oppressed through class stratification. These are merely a few consequences of imposed measures without a sympathetic appreciation of these women's condition - women who are rarely consulted about what they feel or would wish for themselves.

In her emphasis on methodology, Keddie advocates the use of the 'best social and economic theory of contemporary anthropology', a point which would be well taken were it not for the fact that in the past it has often led to a disregard of cultural attitudes and symbolic and traditional values. As an example, I point out a common misconception regarding marriage customs in the East: earlier on, the exchange of money in the marriage contract had a much greater symbolic connotation than social scientists ever came to understand. The term 'chattel' was a Western invention, and it took years before it was accepted that the exchange of cattle for a woman was not necessarily a demeaning thing - wife-givers have a higher status generally, than wife-receivers. Again, with regard to inheritance, the socio-economic analytic

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<sup>8</sup> Keddie, op. cit. (1978), p. 234.

attitude has been to consider this as all-important, whereas in reality among many Middle Eastern societies, women often willingly forego their rights and through that act obtain the life-time protection of their male agnates. Clearly, these practices break down with the onset of industrialization and they are no longer a reality outside the context of the traditional society of which they are a part. However, the symbolism and attitudes persist, and it is useful to consider these points when writing social history, and when choosing the socio-economic approach.

In her assessment of modern problems regarding the study of women and feminist movements in the East and West, Keddie mentions two important points: ideology and analysis. With respect to ideology, while undoubtedly nationalism or cultural biases are deterrants to the full understanding of history, one must also remember that in many previously colonized countries, nationalism was inextricably tied to women's movements. It is difficult to divorce Huda Sharawi from the Egyptian nationalist movement, or to ignore the greater public role of women during the Constitutional Revolution in Iran for example. In fact, nationalism has been one of the main motives for self-generated female emancipation. This understanding becomes doubly important in understanding the 'backsliding' of a situation like that in Algeria, which is a result of resistance to Western influences through the emphasis of traditional customs and institutions. This would seem obvious enough, were it not for the fact that in Keddie's book, many of her contributors grieve the relapse of Algeria, or Turkey after Attaturk much as a mother would worry over a recovering child, without seeming to comprehend the underlying social and historical factors.

In fact, most of the writers have taken themselves to be the self-appointed judges of a competitive race for a group of 'backward' countries towards the ideals of Western feminism, the most unfortunate aspect of this being that the Middle Eastern women among them are participating in their own 'misrepresentation'. Iran is quoted as having done 'better than' Algeria, and Tunisia is 'the next best' in terms of legal reform etc. In engaging in this race, Middle Eastern feminists have neglected to create their own models, and have propagated beliefs which most often only succeed in dismantling traditional ways without replacing them with viable alternatives. To cite an example, no serious studies have been done of the means of power at the disposal of women in traditional Islamic societies. In the case of Iran, no reference has been made to the practice of 'bast neshestan' (a form of striking, loosely translated), or 'khahar khandegi' (sisterhood-by-oath), decision-making within the domestic unit, resorting to one's own kin (particularly the much feared 'madar-zan' or wife's mother), and the concept of the 'lioness'. The following paragraph by Louise Sweet is illuminating, but is an attitude which has not found favour amongst most feminist scholars:

Nothing seems to be more difficult than to persuade the commercial Western world that Middle Eastern women were

never powerless or oppressed or subordinated *as women* any more than their brothers in traditional Arab, Kurdish, Persian or Turkish society or in tribal nomads' camps, in peasant villages, or in urban communities and whether Christian or Muslim. Many of those activities which once were performed by women *within* a distinctive lineage-based householding political economy, with a strong, complementary division of responsibilities between men and women, now have become 'public' professions and occupations. When, as in the past, the 'domestic sphere' of social life is the center of resource control, then indeed the place of women is important.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, Keddie emphasizes in her article, the need for more anthropological studies on sexual habits as an enlightening avenue to the understanding of women's status, and with this in mind, she recommends Paul Vieille's essay in her own book.<sup>10</sup> Although the truth of this statement cannot be contested, Vieille's statistically-oriented study of 150 households (he does not say where in Iran), with its unsubstantiated syllogistic thinking, falls far short of the mark. He clearly uses his own experience as a reference point, and does not give any information at all as to his methodology, or to the shortcomings or problems encountered in gathering data for such a sensitive subject, proceeding to apply his limited findings to the whole of rural Iran. He refers to popular myths regarding the Orient (Flaubert?) when he claims that the East is 'bathed in a diffuse eroticism', and that sexual politics in Iran have given rise to a 'culture of injury': 'the woman takes pride in her deprivation, she refuses to demand anything of her husband.' For those interested, it is instructive to compare these findings with Fatima Mernissi's detailed study of male-female dynamics where she clearly perceives the female as aggressor and power-figure in Islamic societies.<sup>11</sup>

To summarize briefly, it can be said that current scholarship favours women as an independent topic of study and there is much to be done with regard to the history of women in the Middle East. The greatest problems encountered by Western scholars are not necessarily methodological ones. Greater familiarity with culture and symbolism, as well as attention to the multiplicity of factors which contribute to the composition of the social fabric, should guard against hasty and reductionist conclusions about the nature of Islamic societies. Lastly, an awareness of possible bias due to left-over monolithic images from an older Orientalism may prove invaluable in the understanding of women who have rarely been able to represent their own realities so far.

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<sup>9</sup> L. Sweet, *Many Sisters*, Glencoe: Free Press 1974, p. 379.

<sup>10</sup> P. Vieille 'Iranian Women in Family Alliance and Sexual Politics' in Keddie and Beck, op. cit. (1978).

<sup>11</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, New York and London: John Wiley & Sons 1975.