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Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 15(0)

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Publication Date

1995

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Iranian Women Writers, Feminism, and Postmodernism: The Return of the Subject¹

JASAMIN ROSTAM-KOLAYI

FEMINISM AND POSTMODERNISM have emerged as two of the most important theoretical schools of the last few decades. The feminist critique now appears quite frequently in much of the work done on gender in the Middle East. Postmodernist trends, however, have yet to have a significant impact on the study of the Middle East, at least in relation to European and American works.² Just as rare are works that combine the two schools of feminism and postmodernism in writing about the Middle East.³ Such an endeavor may not necessarily be worthwhile given several problematic issues surrounding postmodern thought such as the role of agency and subjectivity as conceived by Foucault. What is the relevance of Foucault's work to the Middle East? In another direction, are feminism and Foucault's thought necessarily at odds with one another? Is Foucault's failure to grapple with feminist concerns and women's movements in his analysis of power an obstacle for feminist scholars seeking to incorporate elements of postmodernism in their own work? How can scholars come to terms with the tension between these two forms of analysis? If the subject is dead, how is Iranian women's literature a form of political resistance and opposition, and how are women writers and poets political actors? How faithful can a feminist historian be to her/his subject if she/he wholeheartedly embraces a postmodernist ethos?

Postmodernism and feminism are not necessarily entirely at odds. Both provide models for nonhierarchical relations that challenge existing modes of Western society. As Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby have written,

Both identify the body as a site of power. . . through which subjectivity is constituted. Both point to the local and intimate operations of power rather than focusing exclu-

sively on the supreme power of the state. Both bring to the fore the crucial role of discourse in its capacity to produce and sustain hegemonic power and emphasize the challenges contained within marginalized and/or unrecognized discourses and criticized the way in which Western humanism has privileged the experience of the Western masculine elite.⁴

Furthermore, Foucault's theoretical explanation of knowledge and power, if extended to feminist issues, can be compelling. The two are inextricably intertwined because in each there is a "regime of truth." In *Power/Knowledge* he offers five traits of a "political economy of truth":

"Truth" is centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement (the demand for truth, as much for economic production and political power); it is the object, under diverse forms, of immense diffusion and consumption (circulating through apparatuses of education and information whose extent is relatively broad. . .); it is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media); lastly, it is the issue of a whole political debate and social confrontation (ideological struggles).⁵

By insisting that truth is never "outside power, nor lacking in power," Foucault locates a complex network of disciplinary systems through which power operates in our modern era, particularly those of medicine, education, and psychology. The focus away from Western male elites and onto the workings of knowledge and power in a Third World context informs the relationship between women's writing and social reform in the Middle East.

The connection between women's literary culture and social transformation is significant in the history of early twentieth-century Iran, a turbulent period of constitutionalism, nationalism, and anti-colonialism. Iranian women's publications (newspapers, journals, and magazines, as well as published works of fiction and poetry) dealt with political, social, and economic issues conceptualized and addressed by women intellectuals and their elite reading audience. These thinkers established programs for reform and agendas for action. Following the popular pattern of forming associations, women formed their own political and social groups, held meetings, and raised funds for various educational projects for girls. Through patriotic and political activities women constructed a new social identity informed by literacy. In their publications, women writers demanded a socio-political space that they could occupy alongside their male compatriots as part of the nation. They were imagining another system,

creating public personas for women in business, publishing, public speaking and debate, and attempting to build a female reading audience. It is at this point where feminism and postmodernism, as theoretical constructs, inform the public actions of women.

The postmodern subversion of the subject as a focus of analysis has generated considerable debate in history and is pertinent to feminist concerns. Postmodern skeptics question the emphasis on a unified, coherent subject in the form of an individual. The postmodern death of the subject forms part of a larger critique of the Enlightenment, science, and liberating ideologies that uphold rationality, reason, and progress as ideals. Foucault suggests that the existence of a subject is present only in the archives of modernity as an illusion that is no longer possible in a postmodern context. With the focus on discourse, language, free-floating signs, symbols, readings, and interpretations, Foucault argues that the self and subject is only a creation of discourse.⁶ Structures and discourses subsume subjects and individuals. In this analysis, individuals themselves are incapable of constructing and deconstructing social processes in order to determine the conditions around them and to effect a political outcome. If subjects are implicated in dominant discourses, then how do they begin to chip away at the power relations that dominate them? According to this dictum, if we can never constitute an oppositional discourse, marginalized groups in society should relinquish any hope for a movement of struggle because imagining another system is tantamount to participating in the existing system of oppression.

For feminists, the demise of the subject threatens to diminish the lived reality of women's experiences. In Foucault's writings there is no attempt to incorporate the specificity of women's lives or desires as discussed by women themselves. As Nancy Hartsock writes, Foucault's postmodernism abolishes the subject at the very time that women and other marginal groups for the first time in history are seeing themselves as agents of change.⁷ If the subject is voiceless, there cannot be a history that grants special attention to women's experiences. Many postmodernists ignore questions of gender in their own supposedly "politicized" critiques of history, politics, and culture. Foucault mentions women as subjected or marginalized but as resistant to elements of dominant culture. While he orients us toward the minute, local, differentiated forms of events and power that constitute history and are well-suited for gender explorations, his narratives seem totally uninformed by feminist perspectives on sexuality and subjectivity, for example. This prohibition against subject-centered inquiry and theory depreciates the efforts of many women activists and intellectuals in Middle Eastern history who have written alternative narratives and undermines the

legitimacy of their broad-based, organized, or semi-organized movements.

If historical actors are not constituted as subjects who can resist without being part of the dominant discourse, then how can they effectively make change? How can historians conceive of people as constituting a different world rather than as just a disruptive discourse? Can those who live on the margins ever be able to escape from the margins? Inevitably this means that historians of Iran can only study the emergence of an Iranian feminist discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the context of how it colluded with other networks of power. Not considering the ways that an Iranian feminist discourse directly challenged modern notions of progress and modernity and read against Western positivist discourses would be misguided. If Iranian women writers of the twentieth century were only participating in the existing hierarchies and categories of oppression, how could they be agents of change? Historians need not adopt a modernist approach to writing about subjectivity. They can instead conceive of the subject in new ways, as acting within and outside of the structure. In studying a community of women writing, historians of women must salvage agency and the idea of struggle through reform and resistance. However, elements of constraint and repression co-exist side by side with the possibilities of free will and change.

Historians need not reestablish the subject-object distinction or revitalize modernism in order to give attention to the marginal, excluded, and new social movements. The renewed subject will not be the same subject that modernists created, one of single form and identity with a purposeful march toward progress, but a postmodern subject with an identity focused away from the "Great Men" of history toward daily life on the margins. The subject is decentered rather than completely disappearing. Subjects, as agents, can effect the structure by forming their own discourse or resisting various discourses, but they cannot act without the structure. A subject cannot be understood outside of a discourse but can certainly engage in the process of constructing and deconstructing the discourse.

Saving the subject from oblivion does not mean reviving the subject-object distinction. A refusal to honor those boundaries separating the "objective" from the "subjective" is an important contribution of some postmodernist currents. Donna Haraway writes about a feminist objectivity comprised of limited location and situated knowledge rather than transcendence and the splitting of the subject and object.⁸ Reciprocity between the subject and object, the informant and the historian, means that objects can affect subjects. The subject is represented in a space of time, making it acceptable in a familiar guise. Thus, the object, in the process of recreating and representing the subject from a previous

time and event, is participating in her/his own self-creation in time. The subject to be studied is in a position of equality with the historian and can overcome the subject-object power differentials that are inherent in the research process and the act of representing. Therefore, we can retain the subject in new forms while avoiding the pitfalls of the modernist approach to the subject-object issue.

The example of how two prominent contemporary Iranian women writers have conceived of themselves in relation to this issue of the destruction of the subject may offer a solution to this problem. Because women's writings in Iran emerged in the midst of a modernizing ethos in Iran and in the Middle East in general, much of their work reflects Western notions of progress and models of women's emancipation. Until the middle of the twentieth century, Western imperialism was a major vehicle for the project of modernism in the Middle East. After decolonization many Middle Eastern rulers became dedicated followers of the modernist ethos. Some saw the need for armed forces in order to protect their countries' independence. Recognition of the need for such military organization encouraged the early nineteenth-century modernization programs which established translation bureaus, Western education for select students, modern schools, and armament factories. Iran, however, had less commercial and colonial contact with the West than did Egypt and the Ottoman Empire, and it did not follow their lead until the late nineteenth century.⁹

The relationship between modernization and the emergence of women's published writings in Iran in the early and mid-twentieth century shows that women writers were addressing changing notions of the self, the other, gender, class, ethnicity, and nation brought about by contact with the West. Iranian women became increasingly self-conscious of their position in relation to Western women during this period. With references to Western women's rights movements, especially the British women's suffrage movement, some of these writers looked to the West for advice and counsel in their struggles at home. In Iran, as in other Asian and African countries, women's movements emerged during a period when precapitalist relations and feudal structures were being "modernized" and national liberation struggles were well underway. In modernist intellectual writings, women were touted as emblems of national identity, inverting hierarchical norms of gender, position, and rank. The veiled, secluded, and illiterate woman would no longer signal the backward past. The modern notion of *vatan* (homeland) was envisaged as female—as a beloved or as a mother.¹⁰ That these concepts of nation were constructed in gendered terms is particularly significant in that women came to embody the dreams and nightmares of the nation, personifying its modernization.

Modernization and the accompanying secularization were, in fact, liberating

for some women of privileged class and ethnic backgrounds. Some of these women took up the banner of feminism as a way to become “modern” women, developing their feminism in response to colonial definitions of the “backwardness” of the East and with the supposed freedom of Western women in mind and the desire to catch up with the “advanced” world. Many early Iranian feminist activists fought for their own rights as upper-middle and upper-class women, but Iranian society and women generally remained firmly committed to their Islamic roots despite the outward trappings of secularism of the early Pahlavi reforms in the 1930s and 1940s.

Several women writers of the Pahlavi period critically compare the modernization efforts of the state and Western notions of progress with its program of emancipation for women. In her 150 or so lyrical poems, the poet Farough Farrokhzad (1935-1967) comments upon universal themes of love and death and other issues such as women’s confinement and desires for emancipation that are inextricably tied to Iranian moments during the post-Mosaddeq, pre-Khomeini period from the fall of 1953 to the late 1960s. Her poetry evokes strong feelings of revulsion or attraction, seldom leaving its Iranian readers impartial. The novelist Simin Daneshvar (b. 1921) whose oeuvre is slim due to economic hardship, published her first novel, *Savushun*,¹¹ in 1969, when she was forty-eight years old. A best-seller for over two decades, by 1984 it had been republished fifteen times and had sold more copies than any other book in Iran.¹² In Daneshvar’s writing we encounter a wide range of female characters—educated and illiterate, rich and poor, exploitative and exploited—that transcend the clichéd idealizations or demonizations of women. Her fiction is set in a woman’s world, proving that the portrayal of women’s experiences, as opposed to masculine fantasies of womanhood, can be the subject of novels and short stories.

Both Farrokhzad and Daneshvar have expressed an aversion to party politics and to totalizing ideologies. Living in a milieu where it was considered a necessity to belong to a political group or party, they never belonged to one by choice. As Daneshvar wrote in the preface to her short story, “Narges,” “...desiring to be an artist, one has to be free—free from politics, free from the pressure of the politicians and the programs they arrange to produce artists according to their own models and then to seal their foreheads with the sign of their own fabric of idea.”¹³ Daneshvar’s stories do not offer romantic revolutionary endings where victory prevails but rather explore and even celebrate undramatic sustained efforts for change. Zari, the main protagonist of *Savushun*, seems to weave in and out of freedom and independence, constrained by her family, husband, and beautiful house that imprison her. She learns that an ideal wife and mother cannot

she speaks her mind even in the confines of her own home and she questions the institution of marriage. "For a split second she even thought that marriage is basically wrong. It is not right . . . for a woman to be so attached to a man and a few kids that she cannot take a free and deep breath."¹⁴ On the surface, she appears to be satisfied with her role as mother and wife, but she begins to resent the loss of control over her own life and self. Zari's personal transformation marks a gradual discovery of new dimensions of experience and autonomy, free from the submissiveness and acquiescence of women in marriage. Her transformation is not particularly glamorous, nor one heralded with great pomp, but runs in fits and starts toward a slow redefinition of her self.

Farrokhzad and Daneshvar's work, however, is still political. They critique modernist values such as industrialism, materialism, and secularism. They correctly identify the commonality between capitalism and socialism in terms of their commitment to economic growth and belief in the notions of progress. Stylistically, poet Farough Farrokhzad breaks completely with the conservative classical tradition that preceded her and even the more experimental modernist one contemporaneous with her. She engaged in blunt self-revelation, inserting herself and the men in her life directly into her poetry, writing boldly in the first person of failed love affairs and painful relationships. Farrokhzad defies feminine respectability by expressing female sexual desire. In the poem "I Sinned" she writes,

Beside a body, tremulous and dazed
 I sinned, I voluptuously sinned.
 Oh God! How could I know what I did
 in that dark retreat of silence? . . .

I whispered the tale of love in his ears:
 I want you, O sweetheart of mine
 I want you, O life-giving bosom
 I want you, O mad lover of mine.¹⁵

Farrokhzad did not subscribe to socialist ideas or to the political experimentation of the older generation of postwar Iranian intellectuals. In her poetry, she writes of the meaningless, empty world of homogeneity and rampant consumerism, of working-class Teheranis, and of women who are plagued by conflicts and contradictions as they attempt to become sexually liberated. She speaks directly to the failure of the promise of modernization to actually improve the lives of peasants, the urban poor, and women. Farrokhzad celebrates her sexual freedom and writes of women's sexual desires, but she hesitates to fully embrace

its implications. She vacillates between two sets of values, reminding us that a celebration of sexuality is not necessarily a liberating experience. She writes, "Bind my feet in chains again/ So that tricks and deceits won't make me fall/ So that colorful temptations/ Won't bind me with yet another chain."¹⁶

Both Daneshvar and Farrokhzad also address a deep sense of alienation, despair, and uncertainty in the collective plight of the majority of Iranians during the twentieth century. They both exemplify the fragmented postmodern subject who lacks a strong, singular identity. Where the modern subject is politically conscious, the postmodern subject is self-conscious. She emphasizes choice, free expression, personal liberation, and individual autonomy without any universalistic claims or totalizing ideology. Much like the postmodern individual, Farrokhzad and Daneshvar seek freedom from coercion by others and liberation from self-denial in their work. They have their own form of personalized politics, skeptical about the intentions and motivations of committed activists. They, however, affirm struggles against the state and its agencies, open to participation in various often contradictory causes and social movements. Consistent with postmodernism's anti-Enlightenment ethos, Farrokhzad and Daneshvar call for the end of certitude, modern rationality, and art subject to evaluation based on specified criteria.

Foucault would deny that "deep" subjectivity exists, since all experience is "put into" a person by the immediate practices and discourses of that person's culture, but Farrokhzad and Daneshvar, as women writing within a largely modernist tradition, assert language and authority which defy a singular, unified subjectivity. Many feminists are skeptical of the motives of those who deny the existence of subjectivity, or an outer reality constituted at least in part by nontextual relations of domination. The paradox stands, however, because as critics of the modernist tradition, the meaning of Farrokhzad and Daneshvar's work is dependent upon it. The social forces of their world are too powerful, too fragmented, too pervasive for their individual analyses to overcome. The existence of asymmetric gender relations enforces repression of aspects of desire, sexuality, and subjectivity. These forces cannot help but invade our conception of our selves. Just as Farrokhzad celebrates her sexuality, she halts to lament it. Just as Daneshvar upholds her right to an authorial voice that is unconnected to the grand narratives of male-dominated politics, she discusses personal, autobiographical issues under the protection of hidden, fictive identities.¹⁷

Women's studies and feminist scholars need not construct a positivist and inspirational history in order to counteract the implications of some of Foucault's thought. By discussing ways in which historical subjects act within and outside of dominant structures and by examining the complex relations between repression and change, feminist historians can salvage the subject, perhaps a bit

more constrained and decentered, but nevertheless an active participant in the construction of history.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. I would like to thank Joyce Appleby for reading several drafts of this paper and the teaching assistants and participants in the Mellon Seminar for their suggestions and shared knowledge. The responsibility for the views and any errors is solely mine.

NOTES

1. This paper was originally written for a Mellon Foundation sponsored seminar conducted at U.C.L.A., summer 1994.
2. The classic work in this area is Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). More recent publications include Akbar Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Ernest Gellner, *Islam and Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991); Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).
3. Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Veiled Discourse—Unveiled Bodies," *Feminist Studies* 19 (Fall 1993); and Mohamad Tavakoli Targhi, "Women of the West Imagined: The *Farangi* Other and the Emergence of the Woman Question in Iran," in Valentine Moghadam, ed. *Identity Politics and Women* (Boulder, CO.: Westview Press, 1994).
4. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, eds. *Feminism and Foucault* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), x.
5. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, Colin Gordon, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 131–32.
6. Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 13.
7. Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" in Linda J. Nicholson, ed. *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 163.
8. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, 14 (Fall 1993), 583.
9. Nikki Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 29.
10. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Veiled Discourse—Unveiled Bodies," 512.
11. Simin Daneshvar, *Savushun*, trans. M.R. Ghanoonparvar (Washington, D.C.: Mage Press, 1990).
12. Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voice of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 183.
13. Milani, *Veils and Words*, 188–89.
14. Daneshvar, *Savushun*, 132.
15. Milani, *Veils and Words*, 143.
16. Milani, *Veils and Words*, 146.
17. See Daneshvar, "Mar-o Mard," [The Snake and Man], in *Whom Should I Salute?*, (Teheran: Kharazmi, 1980), 117–182.