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Article Review 5

“(Un)Veiling Feminism”

<http://muse.jhu.edu.jproxy.lib.ecu.edu/journals/social_text/v018/18.3najmabadi.pdf>

Afsaneh Najmabadi summarizes her article by stating that feminism was a type of veil between secularism and modernization of Iran (2000:29). She further states that feminism and civil society’s definitions have changed over time to classify what is Islamic and what is secular (Najmabadi 2000:29). Examples of this shift in ideology are editors who previously worked with an institute that was strictly Islamic and then later edited for pro-feminist writings (Najmabadi 2000:30). Laws officially implemented on women’s rights mainly began since the Iranian revolution in 1979 which stress public women’s clothing and if opposed could result in legal penalty (Najmabadi 2000:30). These laws however only strengthened the resolve of Iranian women as they became more involved in Iran in several areas which was their driving force to prove they will not be silenced without a fight (Najmabadi 2000:30). Najmabadi mentions that by these efforts of publishing articles for the general public which targets women and men readers, is different from preachers who teach in private (Najmabadi 2000:31). This subtle contribution from women indicates that Iranian women will not be silenced by politics that is dominated by men (Najmabadi 2000:31). Another advantage working in favor of Iranian women is the support of nonbelievers and non-muslims (Najmabadi 2000:32). The reason for differences of viewpoints lies in what is labeled as religious and what is labeled as secular (Najmabadi 2000:32). Yet, the difference within this classification is that feminists would rather focus on what is Islamic and not Islamic instead of attributing ideas to secularism (Najmabadi 2000:32). On the other hand, the secular vs. religious split is mainly promoted by the government as well as those who rally around Ayatollah Khomeini as their “supreme leader” (Najmabadi 2000:32). (Najmabadi says, “They cultivate this divide by ascribing global meaning to every small or large issue that they conceive as a potential challenge to their rule. This is particularly so on issues broadly named cultural. They see themselves truly engaged in a culture war” (2000:32). Historically Iran since the middle of the 19th century looked to Europe as the peak of modernization (Najmabadi 2000:33). Iran went through a political clash in the 20th century with a disdain to foreign rule since Britain had a hand in Iran’s oil industry from 1940’s to early 1950’s, and this attitude also extended to America as it supported the Shah in the 1960’s and 1970’s (Najmabadi 2000:34). As Iran went through a political change, women activists focused on the veil (Najmabadi 2000:36). Earlier Shahs in the 1930’s were opposed to religion and promoted a message of not to wear the veil in which police would physically prevent female students from going to school wearing the veil (Najmabadi 2000:37). An official governmental ban on the chador was issued in 1936 by the Shah, and as a result some veiled students and teachers stayed at home or were fired from their positions (Najmabadi 2000:39). As time went on, modernization changed in meaning and favored a non-islamic outlook (Najmabadi 2000:40).

The change in the political climate is evident in understanding attitudes to religion vs. secularism in Iran. Politics seem to play a central role in the views on the veil that affect women. In 1936, the chador was banned yet under the Iranian revolution in 1979 emphasized the chador or the veil that must be worn in public. The earlier ban on the veil in 1936 was a law enforced by the Iranian government that would prevent students from learning and teachers were fired. Similarly on the opposite spectrum, today if Iranian women are seen in public without their veil they would be subject to arrests, fines, or imprisonment. The parallel between the two different laws is that whoever is in power will reinforce their political aims with laws and penalties.

Najmabadi, Afsaneh. 2000. “(Un)Veiling Feminism.” *Social Text* 18 (3): 29-45.