

Title—Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and The Politics of Patriarchy in Iran

Author—Minoo Moallem

Year—2005

Categories: Islam, Theory, Fundamentalism, Gender, Politics

Place: Iran

Time: 1870-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Moallem's book utilizes a transnational framework to analyze racial, sexual, and gender formations in the context of Iranian modernity and postmodernity. She argues that the signifier of Muslim women cannot be truly examined without stepping outside the limitations of civilizational thinking. She is concerned with the way colonial modernity has defined the Persian diaspora through a framework of cultural and racial humiliation. In particular, Moallem is concerned with the gendered discourse of fundamentalism and modernization in the specific Iranian context. She looks at fundamentalism as a crisis of modernity, rationality, and gender, rather than simply one of tradition. Moallem reveals how her own displacement from Iran underscored the role of modernization as a process of racialization in which the local is rejected and the West declared superior.

The book is divided into four periods: the late eighteenth century through the early twentieth century, 1921-1953 containing the first and second coup of Reza Shah Pahlavi, after the coup of 1953 through 1979, and the revolution through the present. In the almost decade long guerilla war in the leadup to the Iranian Revolution in 1979, women were both object and subject of this war—women were called to be sisters to brothers in an emerging imagined community, the Islamic ummat. This call divided the generation of women, with some staying in the homeland and others, like Moallem, becoming diasporic. The revolution stands as a turning point in terms of representations of Islamic fundamentalism outside of Iran. Her central intent is to historicize what is becoming fixed in the notion of Islamic fundamentalism and Iranian identity. She defines fundamentalism as a regime of truth based on discourses identified with or ordained by God, which binds observers to it.

She argues that the Shah's government in Iran was intent on modernizing and the cleansing of religion was high in priority to achieve this goal. Moallem argues that Western logic dictates that to be modern one must reject one's tradition—given this logic, the return of Islam is doomed to be seen negatively in the West. However, a particular kind of Western tradition is reserved for the West, while the 'rest' are told to abandon their own traditions as quickly as possible. This representation reinvents new religious identities by attributing barbarism and otherness to Islam and Muslims. Islamic fundamentalism, in particular, has been portrayed as belonging to an archaic and traditional world of Islam and Muslims, but she argues that applying the concept in general is problematic because of its origins in a Christian context. In the Iranian context, she argues that the convergence of feminism and fundamentalism has brought forth fundamentalist feminism and feminist fundamentalism.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Concept of fundamentalism is problematic because it remains tied to religion and to the history of Christianity in particular
- Borders of barbarism and civilization are drawn on women's bodies, signifying their association with either a civilized or a barbaric community of men
- Transnational notions of citizenship are central for an understanding of Islamic nationalism and fundamentalism