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Introduction Marginalisation of gender and approaches to women in Middle Eastern studies

The aim of this introductory chapter is to place the subject matter of the book, that is women in Iranian political discourses, within the wider context of the Middle Eastern and North African women's studies. A survey of relevant literature on women in these regions will be presented to help explain the conceptual framework and the main themes of this book.

The study of women that is before you is an interdisciplinary one, and one of the disciplines that it refers to is history. It would be useful, therefore, to adopt a historical approach in surveying the relevant interdisciplinary literature to present the academic context for each of the historical conjunctures that will be examined in the following chapters.

In surveying the literature on Middle Eastern and North African women, a critical approach will be adopted to clarify the conceptual framework and theoretical approach of this book. The following selective survey of the literature will identify some of the inadequacies of conventional Middle East studies, and examine the ways in which they have influenced the analysis of women in the Middle East. Two major issues will be at the heart of my criticism of the conventional Middle Eastern and North African studies (hereafter Middle Eastern studies for short). First, the marginalisation of gender and women's issues in the twentieth-century studies of the region. Second, the analyses of Muslim women within the framework of inadequate general theories.

Marginalisation of gender

One of the main shortcomings of the Middle Eastern studies has been the marginalisation of gender, that is the politics of male-female relations in the society. Until recently, marginalisation of gender relations was symptomatic of most areas of social sciences. But the field of Middle Eastern studies is still one of the less developed ones in relation to the integration of gender relations into the wider social studies. Despite the growing academic interest in the 1980s in the contemporary political

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history of the region, gender issues do not feature except marginally in scholarly works. The mainstream or rather 'malestream' Middle Eastern studies, as some feminists may prefer to describe it, has continued to adopt a gender-blind methodology. The position(s) occupied by women in the family and society at large are central to the definition(s) of gender relations in any society. In talking about marginalisation of gender relations, the emphasis in this book will be on the position(s) of women and issues of concern to women, while acknowledging the wider meanings and implications of gender relations for women, men and society as a whole.

A major symptom of gender marginalisation in studying the political history of the Middle East has been the persistence of certain assumptions about Muslim women and their roles in society. Such assumptions, it must be said, have been shared across the board by Western and Middle Eastern male and female scholars. One widespread assumption is that the only political and economic domains worth studying in Muslim societies are the formal ones, and Muslim women are unimportant or at best marginal to these domains because they have few formal political and economic rights and make a limited contribution to formal domains. Women's activities and contributions to national processes are thus ignored in a number of ways. On the one hand, the non-formal spheres of politics and economy in which women have traditionally been more active are undervalued (Tucker, 1983). On the other hand, women's existing roles within the formal domains of politics and economy are ignored (Beck & Keddie, 1978). Moreover, women's activities are seen as separate and at best complementary, but not as an integral constituent of the social system (Rassam, 1984, pp. 122–3).

The operation of these assumptions have no doubt adversely affected the development of the field of Middle Eastern political history. The quality of the literature is affected because of its failure to fully appreciate and establish the links between gender, politics and society. As will be demonstrated in the following chapters in relation to Iran, the question of women is far from an optional extra in analysing Iranian political history. On the contrary, the study of Iranian political discourses shows that gender relations and women's positions are situated at the heart of these discourses. Women's issues have not arisen in twentieth-century Iran merely because of the openmindedness and progressive policies of our revolutionaries and statesmen, as is often assumed. They have become the burning issues of this century in Iran because any discourse which has addressed the question of political and social reorganisation of Iranian society has necessarily entailed a redefinition of gender relations and as part of that the reorganisation of women's positions. To marginalise the

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relevance of women's issues to national processes is to misunderstand the political history of Iran and other Middle Eastern societies which have revolved around the question of development and change in this century (Kandiyoti, 1991a).

Another effect of the operation of inaccurate assumptions about women's activities manifests itself in the unevenness and quality of information and research on women. A vicious circle is created in the sense that the more gender issues are treated as isolated the less new information and data become available on women, which then prohibits development of further integrated research and analysis. Adoption of gender-blind methodology has prevented many mainstream scholars from recognising and utilising historical and contemporary material on gender relations when they come across them (Keddie, 1979). The unevenness of data and information has been further exacerbated by the resource-led nature of much of the gender research. Government and private funding agencies have tended to fund certain types of research as a result of their own particular misconceptions about Muslim women and their roles and activities. In relation to the Middle East, research on health and family planning have tended to have a higher profile than any other areas of women's involvement in Middle Eastern societies, especially in comparison with women's activities within the formal and non-formal spheres of politics and economy (Van Dusen, 1979; Baffoun, 1984).

The problem of marginalisation of women's issues has been responded to in recent years by a growing body of Middle Eastern women's studies. This recent development has been encouraged by the success of Western women's studies in establishing the point that women's absence in academic literature is not a true reflection of women's actual place in society, but a symptom of social researchers' misconceived assumptions about them. Recent studies of Middle Eastern women have argued that women constitute the backbone of social systems such as the family and the community and play an important role in sustaining and changing them (Ferne, 1985; Agarwal, 1988). Numerous research undertaken on women's history to remedy the undervaluing of women's traditional productive roles have also shown their important contributions to family subsistence and demonstrated the ways in which they have sustained the informal economic sector (Gran, 1977; Afshar, 1985; Tucker, 1986). Women have also participated in the formal economy as workers and professionals, where they have sustained the service sector, especially education, health and welfare (Hijab, 1988; Moghadam, 1990).

Women's contribution to the sphere of formal politics in Middle Eastern countries has also attracted increasing attention. The present

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study is an addition to the increasing volume of research and analysis on women's participation in national processes. Women have taken part in the complex process of the formation of the state and state policy as political actors and contributors to public opinion and popular culture. They have participated in nationalist movements, anti-colonial uprisings and armed conflicts and have formed pressure groups and women's movements for the advancement of their rights and interests (Fluer-Lobban, 1980; Jayawardena, 1986; Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989). In short, the Middle Eastern women's studies has begun to make the case for the centrality of gender relations to the political, economic and social organisation of these societies (Van Dusen, 1979). It has also acquired a political dimension by providing the conceptual tools for the development of Middle Eastern women's movements (Mernissi, 1988).

Approaches to women in Middle Eastern studies

Another major problem which was quite widespread within Middle Eastern studies until the early 1980s, was the adoption of general theories as a tool for the explanation of women's position. This problem was rooted in conventional Middle Eastern studies which was dominated by a variety of development theories for most of this century. These development theories were variations on the theme of 'modernity' as an evolutionary model of universal progress.

The terms 'modernity' or 'modern condition' have been used to define, broadly speaking, the global social and political forces unleashed in the post-Enlightenment era by the industrial revolution and the French revolution – these forces flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and became institutionalised in the Europe and North America of post World War II (Berman, 1982). The process of modernisation entailed establishment of nation state, new forms of power and class structures, citizenship, democracy, civil society, individualism, economic development, industrialisation, world market urbanisation, population growth, new systems of communication, and so forth. The advent of modernity in the shape of capitalist industrialism in the West also relied upon a colonialist and imperialist expansion that subjugated large sections of the non-Western world.

The conviction was that societies move, albeit at a different pace, towards a common form of social and political existence, and modernity is the trajectory for this historical shift which has continued since the Enlightenment. The most powerful modern development theory conceptualised Western societies as the vanguard of modernity and hence universal development and progress, and all other societies were thought

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to eventually follow in the same direction (Harrison, 1988). The dominance of this development theory was rooted in several centuries of Christian expansionism and intrusion into non-Western societies on the basis of the desire to spread modern Western civilisation to all humanity.

In the field of Middle East studies, the universality of the Western model of development and modernity was represented in a variety of forms which included Orientalism, Islamism and the modernisation theory. These constituted the theoretical vehicle for the study of Muslim women within conventional Middle Eastern studies. With the development of feminism and the establishment of Middle Eastern women's studies as a field of enquiry in its own right, new approaches towards Muslim women appeared. Radical feminism, Marxist feminism and Islamic feminism all attempted to identify and analyse the factors which accounted for Muslim women's situation. But despite the search for new understanding, many of the underlying assumptions of conventional Middle East studies crept into the feminist analyses of Muslim women.

Orientalism

One of the most influential of conventional theoretical approaches to the Middle East was Orientalism, which has been subjected to frequent and vigorous criticism since the 1970s (Said, 1978). I will raise those aspects of Orientalism which were applied to women in the context of twentieth-century political processes in the Middle East. At the core of Orientalism as a theoretical approach lay a particular conception of Islam and its place in Middle Eastern societies. Orientalism believed in the essentiality of cultures and in the case of these societies considered Islam as the factor which distinguished it from the West. Orientalist scholars regarded Islam as the sole designator of Middle Eastern society and as such the main determinant of women's position. The Orientalist analysis of political change as it affected women was built upon the above premise and consisted of at least three dimensions. First, the notion of Muslim women as oppressed; second, the construction of oppositional dichotomies of tradition and modernity to explain political change; and third, essentialisation and reification of women's history.

Orientalism propagated the notion of Muslim women as slaves. An assortment of missionaries, travellers and scholars, sometimes all in one, set out to explore the conditions of Muslim societies and peoples around the turn of the century. In relation to women, the following plea made by Christian missionaries was typical: 'No one can study the tragic story of women under the Muslim faith without an earnest longing and prayer that something may be done by the united Church of Christ to meet this

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need. We think with pity and sorrow of the veiled women of Islam' (Zwemer & Zwemer, 1926, p. 5).

Similar accounts of women's lives in the Middle East were provided by Western women travellers. The writings of Isabella Bird, Lady Anne Blunt and Gertrude Bell portrayed misery, suffocation, lack of autonomy and powerlessness because they saw Muslim women being caught in a system of seclusion and polygamy (Baron, 1982, p. 31). These images were complemented by the obsessive attention paid to royal *harems* by Western explorers of Eastern cultures. Lack of access to the *harem* did not prevent male writers from describing it simultaneously as fascinating and revolting (Ahmed, 1982). The negative image of Muslim women was occasionally challenged in favour of more heterogeneous images which showed women's strengths as well as weaknesses (Baron, 1982). But whether uniform or heterogeneous, the image of the Muslim woman was engraved in a concept of society as synonymous with Islam and tradition.

Having constructed Muslim women as oppressed and Islam as their oppressor, Orientalist observers turned their attention to the possibility of change in the position of Muslim women (Rice, 1923). The early twentieth-century period was one of great political change and an unprecedented surge towards modernity in the Middle East. In Iran, the Revolution of 1905–11 established a constitutional monarchy and a limited form of parliamentary democracy. This was followed by the collapse of the Qajar dynasty and the establishment of the modernist and autocratic rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi. Other Middle Eastern societies experienced similar tremors. The political scene in Turkey was dominated by a nationalist movement which, having gone through different phases since the Tanzimat period of reform in the nineteenth century, resulted in the dissolution of the Ottoman empire after the First World War and the establishment of a republic under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In Egypt the movement for independence from British rule, which had been recurring since 1882, erupted into a revolution in 1919 and resulted in the Constitution of 1923 which established parliamentary democracy. In Afghanistan, Amanollah Khan's success in seizing the throne in 1919 ended decades of tribal feuds and foreign power rivalries between the British, Russians, Turks and Iranians.

The Orientalist understanding of these events and their implications for women, was based on the construction of the oppositional dichotomies of tradition and modernity. The clash between these dichotomies was considered as the motor of change in the Middle East, particularly so in relation to women. Muslim societies were depicted as inherently traditional, and traditionalism was associated with stagnation and backwardness. This was juxtaposed with modernity which was associated

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with dynamism and progress, and was considered to be Western in origin. Traditionalism, being defined as a static and indigenous condition, meant that Muslim women were seen to be doomed to an unchanging condition in the absence of a Western challenge to Islam (Tucker, 1983). The following excerpt is a good example of the application of the dichotomy of 'tradition versus modernity' to the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11 in Iran:

In nineteen hundred and five the Persian lay asleep by the wayside. It was no afternoon nap he was taking but the heavy sleep of centuries of stupid indifference. A closely woven mantle of traditions and customs was thrown over his head to keep out the light. It kept out the air too, but he only slept more soundly, all unconscious of the dogs fighting around his head or the donkeys and mules that nearly walked over his feet. One day something happened. The Idea of constitutional government came that way, saw the sleeping Persian, seized him, shook him, stood him on his feet, faced towards the light, and sped away. The Persian rubbed his eyes, dazed by the brightness, stretched himself and said, 'Ya Allah.' But he did not lie down again, the Idea had given him a too thorough shaking. Instead, he walked to the public square and made a speech. He did not know the meaning of all he said, but the words which most often came to his lips were, Constitution, Freedom, Progress, Education. When he went home he found the Idea had come into the *andarun* and the women were talking of the same great subjects, though they comprehended even less of what it all meant. From that day to this the Persian has never been the same . . . They [Persian women] are adopting our dress, they will get our education in a measure, perhaps our freedom to a certain extent. Shall they have our Christ? (Woodman Stocking, 1912, pp. 367, 372).

Having taken 'Islam' and 'society' as identical and having defined Islam as static, the changing position of women could only be explained in terms of the declining hold of Islam and the increasing impact of Christianity. In this scheme of things, men and women were no more than passive and confused victims of tradition and recipients of modernity.

The third dimension of the Orientalist analysis of political change was its essentialisation and reification of women's history. Orientalism resorted to Islamic doctrine to explain the position of women, taking what was prescribed in the *Qoran*, *hadith* and *shariat* as historical fact (Keddie, 1979). While the history of women in the West was regarded as the product of complex economic and social development, Middle Eastern women's history was considered to be the product of the 'traditional Muslim view' seen 'as an inherited given' (Tucker, 1983). As a result, the process of historical change was often bypassed by Orientalist observers and countless essays on 'women in Islam' did little to explain the development of women's positions in various Middle Eastern societies and the differences which existed in Muslim women's histories within the region.

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In short, the Orientalist approach to the question of women and political change suffered from endemic essentialisation, ethnocentrism and stereotyping. Nevertheless, despite vigorous criticism of these inadequacies, the influence of Orientalism within the field was neither confined to the past nor specific to Western scholars (Sayigh, 1981). Its influence may have been more subtle and refined within the contemporary literature, but the field of Middle Eastern women's studies was yet to be totally liberated from it even in the 1970s (Hammam, 1981; Abu-Lughod, 1981). Orientalist assumptions infiltrated a wide variety of often opposing schools of thought, ranging from modernisation theory to feminism.

Modernisation theory

Western domination of the Middle East in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries acquired many dimensions: the mission to 'civilise' Islamic societies through Christianity constituted its moral dimension; direct and indirect colonisation constituted its political and economic dimensions; and Orientalism constituted its social and cultural dimension. With the rise of nation states and independence movements in the Middle East in the early and mid-twentieth century, all three dimensions of Western domination evolved and changed. Islam developed and asserted itself as a political force and met the challenge of Christianity head on. Nationalist movements managed to change Western foreign policies from direct colonisation of the region to a more indirect protection of Western interests through modernisation of the region. Orientalism gave way to modernisation theory in the 1950s and 1960s as a new social science framework for the study of the region. The latter inherited many characteristics of the former.

The affinity between modernisation theory and Western foreign policy was as close, at least initially, as that between Orientalism and colonialism. With the replacement of Britain by the United States as the main foreign influence in the region, American political science gained analytical dominance within the field of Middle East studies. Modernisation theory associated 'modernism' with 'Westernism' and turned 'modernity' as a process into 'Westernisation' as the end result. This was based on the idea of 'the passing of traditional society' through state modernisation (Lerner, 1958; Halpern, 1963). With the consolidation of pro-Western states in some Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, the West found an indigenous ally in its battle for the salvation of Muslim societies from the stronghold of tradition and Islam. The effort of the modernising state to transform backward 'Muslim' society in the image of the modern West dominated the literature. The obsession with Islam as

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the 'cause' of society's backwardness and women's oppression was matched with a preoccupation with the state as the sole instrument and agent of social change. The main contradiction within Middle Eastern societies was now considered to be the resistance by traditional forces such as the Islamic clergy to state modernisation (Woodsmall, 1936).

The cornerstone of modernisation theory was the conviction that the implantation of Western institutions in backward countries would create the same effects there as in the West (Benard & Khalilzad, 1984, pp. 1–24). The state as the agent of modernisation, or Westernisation, was expected to introduce Western institutions in the Middle East, and by overcoming the forces of tradition reverse the state of backwardness and create a duplicate Western society in this region. What was being introduced as modernity entailed a number of processes such as secularisation, industrialisation, urbanisation, nuclearisation of the family, education, paid employment and so on. The success or failure of the modernisation process was gauged by the replacement of 'traditional' sources of identity such as ethnicity and religion with ones based on modern institutions. Modernisation theory conceptualised the position of women within these parameters. Women's oppression was firmly placed in the sphere of traditional Islam and their emancipation was defined in terms of their acquisition of appropriate roles within modern institutions. The transition from the former to the latter was supposed to be achieved through state policy. The state and its gender policies were conceptualised as unified, and modernisation was seen as a homogeneous and coherent process, affecting women's position in a total and consistent way (Patai, 1967).

The modernisation literature monitored women's transition from tradition to modernity and discussed the effects of modernisation on women. Ruth Woodsmall surveyed women's entry into education and employment and their participation in social and political affairs (Woodsmall, 1960). A growing volume of sociological and anthropological literature collected and tested data on whether modern institutions were changing women's position in conformity with Western patterns. Let us examine some of the literature on Iran, a country seen at the time to conform to the expected course of modernisation and to lead other Middle Eastern countries in this respect.

'Modernisation' was found to have contributed to the decline of polygamy in Iran (Momeni, 1975), changed the pattern of fertility of Shirazi women (Paydarfar & Sarram 1970) and altered the status of urban women in the same direction as in the West (Touba, 1972). Modernisation proved not to have had any influence on household size (Paydarfar, 1975), sex-role differentiation in the family (Touba, 1975) and the

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domestic environment of women in Esfahan (Gulick & Gulick, 1976 and 1978). Where such close proximity in the pattern of change in the position of women in Iran and the West did not occur, the difference was explained in relation to economic or cultural factors. Keller and Mandelson concluded that the family remained a relatively unchanged institution in Iran and found 'the basic difference between Iran and the West' in this respect in 'different levels of industrialisation' (Keller & Mandelson, 1971, p. 10). Sedghi and Ashraf regarded it as their 'main assumption' that 'modernisation of Iran has changed the position of women in society', but introduced the 'role of the Islamic culture' as 'the determining influence in the creation of an environment in which the role of male dominance has been tightly interwoven with social relations' (Sedghi & Ashraf, 1976, pp. 201–2). Behnaz Pakizegi pointed to the large gap between 'Westernised law on women' and 'social customs' (Pakizegi, 1978). Shahla Haeri concluded that 'Westernised legal code' did not achieve the intended reform because it 'bypassed the inner dynamics of [the Iranian] culture' (Haeri, 1981, p. 230). Michael Fischer defined the main underlying contradiction in Iranian society as a 'confrontation between conservative Muslim leaders and an aggressive modernising state' and introduced the concept of 'social value' and its correspondence to economic classes and political forces as the key to the understanding of the position of women (Fischer, 1978, p. 190).

What these studies established was that the modernisation route in Iran, as the leading modernist country in the Middle East, did not necessarily move in the anticipated direction. This was the beginning of the demise of modernisation theory because it proved to be inadequate within its own terms. The process of demise was accelerated because of the failure of modernisation theory to take into account social and historical processes which were being raised as important issues by other theories. Modernisation theory was criticised for ignoring the indigenous and exogenous political processes which played important roles in the formation of the nation state and secured its continuance (Sayigh, 1981). These processes were not problematised and defined in relation to the state, and in that sense the modernising state was assumed to be above the internal and international relations of its time. In the case of Iran, lack of interest by modernisation literature in the effects of internal political repression and Iran's position within international alliances, which tied it to some of the most reactionary regimes in the world, was raised as a criticism. This brought into question the political credibility of modernisation policy (Nirumand, 1969).

Furthermore, the conceptualisation of tradition and modernity as fixed oppositional categories, which modernisation theory inherited from