(Un)Veiling Feminism

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Contrary to what the title of this essay may conjure, this essay is not about (un)veiling as a contemporary practice in Islamicate[1] societies—about which there is now a very lively and enormous literature. It is about how feminism itself may have worked as a veil, about the veiling work of feminism as a boundary marker for secularism of Iranian modernity. My hope in rethinking the history of feminism is to seek out possibilities for the present moment of Iranian politics. I mean to be provocative but not accusatory, seeking to unpack the implications of feminism's imbrication in secularism of modernity. By unfolding the veiling work of Iranian feminism in its past history, I hope to envisage possibilities for "building working alliances" in contemporary Iranian gender politics.[2]

Let me emphasize at the outset my refusal to generalize the ideas of this essay to all Islamicate societies. One of the problems with current discussions of Islam and feminism is ahistorical generalizations. These generalizations screen away vast historical and contemporary differences among countries as diverse as Algeria, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, to name just a few. My argument assumes historical specificity; it assumes that to understand what is going on in Iran today, we need to look at the specific contingent configurations of the politics of modernity in that country. What may or may not be generalizable cannot be known from what is assumed to be Islamic, modern, feminist, or secular by any prior definition of these terms. For instance, the configurations of Islam, feminism, nationalism, and secularism that are now unfolding in Iran have very much to do with the fact that an Islamic republic has been in power for the past twenty-one years, one that came out of a mass popular revolution. As a very hybridized phenomenon, these developments go beyond previously dominant and accepted political paradigms. We have an unshaped and fluid muddle with women as key producers of it! Two concepts, feminism and civil society, move through this complex reconfiguration and acquire new meanings, while crafting a discursive space more marked by opacity than transparency, thereby challenging our previous certainty about what divides Islam from un-Islam, secular from religious. Consider this: The editors of Iran's two most prominent feminist women's periodicals, *Zanan* [Women] and *Huquq-i zanan* [Women's rights], had previously been editors of *Zan-i ruz* [Today's woman], a women's weekly

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published by the Kayhan Institute. This institute is possibly the most ideologically and viciously rigid Islamist cultural organization in Iran (a self-conscious ideological state apparatus if there ever was one!), and it publishes a large number of dailies, weeklies, and other periodicals marketed to different segments of the population. How can we make sense of this bastion of Islamist hard-liners producing a lineage of feminist editors? What is the meaning of these emergences in the overall political mapping of contemporary Iran?

Woman and the Culture of Revolution

The legal and social restrictions that women have faced in Iran since the 1979 revolution are widely reported. Seemingly trivial matters, such as the shape and color of a woman's scarf or the thickness of her stockings, have been matters of public policy and disciplinary measures. Women are far from legal equals of men. Despite years of hard work by women activists, inside and outside the Parliament, many discriminatory laws passed within the first few months and years of the Islamic Republic remain on the books and in full force. Many secular feminists continue to feel silenced, if not repressed or exiled, by the dominant cultural and political climate.

Yet the past decade has also witnessed an incredible flourishing of women's intellectual and cultural production. Twenty-one years after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, not only have women not disappeared from public life, they have an unmistakably active and growing presence in practically every field of artistic creation, professional achievement, educational and industrial institutions, political participation, and even in sports activities. It would be tempting for a secular feminist, such as myself, to claim that Iranian women have achieved all this despite the Islamic Republic, against the Islamic Republic, and even against Islam as the dominant discourse.[3] Indeed, for some women it has been this deep existential sense of proving themselves against all odds that became the creative energy of their productions.

Yet it is not only oppositional energy that accounts for this creative outpouring. The rise of the Islamist movement in the 1970s in Iran signified the emergence of a new political sociability and the dominance of a new discourse, within which woman-as-culture occupied a central position. In this paradigm, imperialist domination of Islamicate societies was seen to have been achieved not through military or economic supremacy, as earlier generations of nationalists and socialists had argued, but through the undermining of religion and culture, mediated through woman. This centrality of gender to the construction of an Islamist political discourse

turned what had been marginal, postponed, and illegitimate into the central, immediate, and authentic. "The woman question" acquired immediacy and urgency, not only for the discontented but even more so for the supporters of the new order. In particular, female supporters of the Islamic Republic were placed in a position to take responsibility for its misogyny: to deny it, to justify it, to challenge it, to oppose it, but not to ignore it. Almost overnight, words such as *androcracy* (*mardsalari*) and *misogyny* (*zan'sitizi*) became common parlance. Moreover, the Islamist movements' and the Islamic Republic's claim of representing the ideal divine solution for all societal problems put them in continuous contestation with feminism as far as women's issues were concerned. Outright rejection of feminism gave way to a hybrid dynamic of outdoing and embracing feminism.

New configurations of Islam, revolution, and feminism have thus emerged. A recent women's publication has listed over forty women's organizations (many official and government-affiliated, but a substantial number nongovernmental) and ten women's periodicals of various political shades, including a daily, *Zan* [Woman], owned and directed by Fa'izah Hashemi Rafsanjani, a member of the Parliament from Tehran and a daughter of Hujjat al-Islam Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president of the country.[4] These numbers alone attest to the significance and complexities of these reconfigurations. A number of writers and publications speak in secular feminist language.[5] Others are activists and writers from within an Islamist discourse.[6] In its most radical tendency, as reflected in the pages of journals such as *Zanan* and *Huquq-i zanan*, it speaks as Muslim and feminist.[7] Although there is a history of reinterpretive endeavors, concerning women's rights, within Islam going back to the mid-nineteenth century, coemergent within the complex discourses of modernity, the recent efforts by many of these writers are novel in a number of important ways. For the purpose of my arguments here, the most significant difference is not only that women are prominent reinterpreters, but that these interpretative ventures are carried out in the printed pages of a women's journal, in a public space, rather than the private chambers of religious scholars. The authors are posed as "public intellectuals" rather than as private teachers and preachers. Their audience is other women (and men) as citizens, rather than theological students and other clerical commentators.[8] Not only have these openly feminist reinterpretive ventures produced a radical decentering of the clergy from the domain of interpretation, but by positioning women's needs as grounds for interpretation and women as public commentators of canonical and legal texts they promise that the political democratization currently unfolding in Iran would no longer be a "manly" preoccupation. Moreover, by declaring their inter-

pretive enterprise open to nonbelievers and non-Muslims, emphasizing expertise rather than faith, and by placing woman, in her contemporary social concreteness and her needs and choices, in the center of their arguments, they have opened up a productive space for conversations and alliances among feminists in Iran beyond previous divisions between secular and Islamist.

It is this kind of hybridization that has been received as a threat both by what are often referred to as "hard-line" Islamists and by some secular feminists. Both sides have translated these fears and apprehensions into demands on women's rights activists to "clarify" their position by drawing clear lines between Islam/un-Islam and theocracy/secularism.

Without implying any equation in terms of political power and repressive responsibility, I want to point out some of the shared grounds between these two responses, from two opposite corners of the Iranian political map. One is the issue of an Islamic versus secular divide. Both sides insist, although for completely different reasons and rationale, that this is a central issue that the middle ground dissidents and reformers must clarify.

Those activists working for change in an Islamic republic, however, have an interest in *not* defining what is secular and in resisting the urge to draw a line between what constitutes Islamic and un-Islamic. This is *not* an issue of compromise with a powerful and repressive state, though that would be reason enough. Nor is it necessarily a consciously formulated tactical concession. The Islamic government, not even in its totality but that faction of it currently identified with and coalesced around Ayatollah Khamenei (whose official title is supreme leader of the revolution), along with its popular and state-sponsored and -organized base (through the many state-financed social organizations) are the ones whose world outlook is centered around a secular/religious divide. 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. From satellite dishes to computer games, from newspapers to films, from the color and shape of a woman's scarf to what you name a child, every small or big matter is linked to the terms of a global culture war in which the fates of Islam and revolution are at stake. Those who resist and oppose this totalizing outlook have every stake in resisting not only the specific lines being drawn as to what constitutes Islam and what un-Islam, what is secular and what is religious, but the very notion of drawing any lines that would demarcate a religious domain from a secular domain.

The forces of resistance and reform emerging from within the Islamist movements as well as from outside all existing political formations among

a post-1979 generation (through new journals, student groups, local councils, grassroots organizations, including from within some government-initiated projects)[9] are formed around incremental, pragmatic, day-to-day issues with a resistance to allowing these issues to be pushed over one or the other side of the secular/theocratic line. Whether this is a tactically motivated screening and silence, or whether that very divide is now experienced as disabling to creating spaces of resistance and change, I cannot claim to know. Given where many are coming from (i.e., Islamist movements), I tend to think it is the latter. Whatever the answer to this query, it is this very resistance to drawing a secular/theocratic dividing line that has produced expanded space even for secular forces.

Contrary to initial fears, for instance, that the emergence of women's activist currents, including feminists, from Islamist ranks would further jeopardize the already precarious social space for secular feminism, their very existence and multiplication into many feminist and gender-activist voices over the past decade, by muddying the clear lines of what or who is Islamist, has enabled feminists who speak secularism to find more hospitable and growing cultural space. The resistance to drawing such clear lines has been exasperating to hard-line Islamists set on keeping these boundaries clear and patrolled. Unfortunately, it has also been received as unsettling and discomforting by some secular feminists who often demand that these women clarify their stance and draw this or that line, whether the line of separation of religion from government, or the line of autonomy from men. This is quite a dangerous move; for if it succeeds in forcing them "to choose" instead of keeping the ground muddled, fluid, and shifting, it will constrict the transformative possibilities of the present moment. The fear that this kind of vexed hybridization will further reduce a precarious space for feminism, like the alarming panic of "hard-line" Islamists, arises from the particular ways in which feminism has been historically imbricated in the production of secularism within Iranian modernity.

Rethinking Iranian Modernity and Secularism

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Iranian politics of modernity has been marked by the emergence of a spectrum of nationalist and Islamist discourses. Within that spectrum, one notion of Iranian modernity took Europe as its model of progress and civilization (*taraqqi va tamaddun*)—the two central terms of that discourse—and increasingly combined that urge with recovery of pre-Islamic Iranianism. Other trends sought to combine their nationalism, and the urge to catch up with Europe, not with a pre-Islamic recovery but with Islam, by projecting Shi'ism as Iranianiza-

If in this earlier period a diversity of women's rights discourses existed among activists, how did the conflation of modernist with non-Islamic and Islamic with tradition and antimodern come about?

tion of Islam in its early centuries.[10] I am emphatically putting the latter in the spectrum of modernity for two reasons: first, in order to distinguish it from countermodernist trends, such as that led in the Constitutional Revolution (1906–9) by Shaykh Fazl'allah Nuri; and second, because later twentieth-century developments largely led to ejection/abandonment of what may be called an Islamist nationalist modernist trend from the complex hybridity of Iranian modernity—until its reemergence in new configurations from the late 1980s. Until recently, it had been a commonly accepted notion that, since the nineteenth century, Iranian politics has been a battleground between modernity and tradition, with Islam always in the latter camp.

Early Iranian nationalism, unlike many anticolonial nationalisms, was more antidespotic and anti-religious-establishment than antiforeign—reflecting the fact that Iran was not colonized, though its modern fate was very much enmeshed in the world imperial mappings. In the course of the twentieth century, however, an increasingly antiforeign outlook took shape: anti-British in the movement for nationalization of the British-owned and -run oil industry in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and later anti-American with the emergence of the United States as the dominant economic and political power backing the Shah's regime in the 1960s and 1970s. This antiforeign emergence within Iranian nationalism was intimately linked with other developments. First, since the 1930s a growing chasm arose between the state and civil society, a virtual void between government and the majority of the population. Perhaps more important than the reality of disconnection between civil institutions and governmental structures were the cultural and political repercussions of making this void a sacred delineation for dissident politics, the weight of which was so heavy that any hint of a dissident coming anywhere close to someone with connections to the government was enough to mark that person as a traitor. Second, the modernist trends that had striven to combine nationalism and its quest for modernity with notions of Islam were virtually (d)ejected from the modernist camp, as the latter became increasingly identified with either the Pahlavi state or with the nationalist, socialist, and communist Left. Islam became consolidated with terms such as *tradition* and *regression*, marked as an impediment to modernity. Third, since the 1950s Islamism emerged first as a challenging and eventually as a dominant (in both senses of the word) mode of antistate politics.

The 1979 revolution not only marked the coming together of these trends, but also began their very unraveling. Once an antiforeign, antinationalist, antisecular Islam came to be consolidated within the first years of the revolution, the very exercises of state power, and other intervening his-

toric events such as the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, began to change all these terms. Twenty-one years later, a different nationalism and a different Islam, oppositional and now even semiofficial, have emerged, defined not necessarily or even primarily through any organized political or social movements but through many local micro displays and performances, which are not so much opposed to official state politics but in a sense going around it and through it, at times acting as if the state isn't there, at other times demanding that the state be there. This aspect of the new dissident Iranian politics is not simply a result of government restrictions and acts of repression, real as these are. These developments are in part also a legacy of the antistatism that had originally produced the 1979 revolution, with its sacred void between the state and the opposition; this void has since come to be seen as dangerous and futile, as undesirable politically and culturally. We are witnessing politics and culture with a difference in Iran.

Rethinking Iranian Feminism and Secularism

Similarly, the beginnings of Iranian feminism were not marked by a boundary, setting Islam to its beyond. Though there were debates among women on certain issues, these differences were not consolidated as incompatible and contradictory positions, one negating the other. Nor was Islam viewed as inherently antiwomen. Anticonstitutionalist forces, led by Shaykh Fazl'allah Nuri, grounded their political opposition to the constitution and to the reforms advocated by modernists in their interpretations of Islamic precepts. For instance, they argued that the establishment of new schools for girls was an example of abrogation of the laws of God. The advocates of the new girls' schools, however, also drew from the same sources to argue for female education. One woman, in an article addressed to Nuri, challenged his wisdom and authority:

> If by your statement you mean that womankind should not be educated at all and . . . that this is the word of God, then please write down where God and his appointed guardians have said these words. . . . If you are then proved right, then tell us what the reasons are for such disfavor of God, the prophets and the guardians toward womankind? . . .
>
> You may say that I have no right to dispute God's affairs. I humbly say to you that I am talking about the God that you have devised—a God free of justice and an oppressor of women. The God that we know and worship is far too elevated and great to intend such differences between men and women and command with no wisdom.

> Our revered prophet, exalted and glorious, has said that acquiring knowledge is obligatory upon all Muslim men and women; there is a very big difference between our God who makes acquiring knowledge obligatory for women, and yours who has made education for women forbidden and against religion.[11]

In other words, Nuri's clerical voice was not allowed to hold a monopoly of Islamic authority and truth. Women challenged him and his God, in their own language and in the name of their God.

The common issues of women's activism in this period were first and foremost women's education and next the reform of marriage and divorce laws. Women's rights activists diverged mostly on the issue of veiling, *hijab*. In the pages of the women's journal *Shukufah* (published from 1913 to 1916), for instance, some writers, such as Shahnaz Azad and Shams Kasma'i, wrote in favor of unveiling, while others, including the owner and editor of the journal, Muzayyan al-Saltanah, argued strongly against it. In other words, advocating or opposing unveiling was not the straightforward marker of modernity versus antimodernity that it later became. Within the ranks of women's rights activists themselves there was a divergence on this issue that had not translated itself into antagonistic positions of one camp marking the other as antimodern, antireform, or traditionalist.

If in this earlier period a diversity of women's rights discourses existed among activists, how did the conflation of modernist with non-Islamic and Islamic with tradition and antimodern come about?

A critical period for transformation of these diversities into opposing categories was the reign of Riza Shah Pahlavi (1925–41). One of the major issues with which Riza Shah's reign has been marked in Iranian historical memory is the unveiling of women, for both those who supported the measure and those who fought it. In its simplest form, the common narrative is that as part of his modernization measures, Riza Shah in 1936 ordered women's unveiling. For opponents of unveiling, the project has been seen not only as anti-Islamic but as part of a larger imperialist cultural offensive, with Riza Shah as an obedient pawn. Supporters of unveiling range from those who defend his methods (the scale of state coercion was unavoidable once several years of persuasion had not produced the desired result of mass voluntary unveiling by women) to critics who hold the brutality of the campaign responsible for its failure and what is perceived as the later Islamist backlash of the 1940s and eventually the Islamic Revolution of 1979.[12]

There are several problems with this account. For one thing, it ignores an actual shift in Riza Shah's policy on this issue. As late as fall 1932, the government was opposed to *bi'chaduri*, that is, replacing the

chadur with any other full-length outfit.[13] In a letter to *Shafaq-i surkh* [Red twilight] in 1930, Afzal Vaziri took the government to task on this issue:

> The police, with extreme severity, prevent girls from going to school without a chadur. . . . If a girl of seven or eight goes to school without a chadur, the headmistress, on the order of the director of the Board of General Education, will throw her out of school. . . . People should be left free to choose; don't command bi'chaduri, nor stop women who discard their chadur. . . . The government should simply take on the duty of defending order and protect women from men's harassment. It should write down and display the duties of men toward women in public places and buses, and the police should first of all behave accordingly and then enforce these regulations.[14]

When the second congress of Women of the East was held in Tehran (27 November–2 December 1932), Shaykh al-Mulk Awrang, a confidante of Riza Shah, spoke repeatedly and vociferously against unveiling as it was proposed by a number of women. Three years later, in February 1936, the same Mr. Awrang argued for the benefits of women's unveiling.[15] Something had changed between December 1932 and February 1936.

Second, in the current narrative, women are simply victims of Riza Shah's repressive policy of closing down all independent journals, unions, and political parties, including women's presses and associations. This account ignores that more than coercion was at work: women themselves were divided not only on the issue of unveiling, but also on how to relate to the increasingly centralized and autocratic government of Riza Shah. The differences on the (un)veiling question were voiced at length from the floor of the congress of Women of the East. A number of Iranian women spoke in favor of unveiling as a necessary step for women's progress. Others spoke for progress but in opposition to unveiling. The disagreements over how Iranian women's rights activists should relate to Riza Shah's government came to a head through the events of this congress.

The congress was hosted by the leading Tehran women's organization, Jam'iyat-i nisvan-i vatankhwah [Society of Patriotic Women, hereafter referred to as SPW]. The site of the congress was shifted from a private girls' school, 'Iffatiyah, where the first session was held, to the private residence of SPW's president, Masturah Afshar (sessions 2–5), and finally to the hall of the Ministry of Education for its sixth (and concluding) session. This shift in sites indicated the government's increasingly interventionist role, mediated through a section of SPW leadership that aimed at controlling women's activism. Awrang officially opened the congress on 27 November. Mrs. Afkhami, the associate director of the women's sec-

tion of the Red Lion and Sun (the Iranian equivalent of the Red Cross) and wife of Brigadier General ʻAbd al-Riza Afkhami (her full name is not given in the records), informed the congress that Princess Shams Pahlavi had agreed to act as the honorary president of the congress. She was followed by Masturah Afshar. According to Nur al-Hudá Manganah, one of the leading women's rights activists and a member of the board of directors of SPW, this lecture was not what had been planned by the society. She recalled bitterly:

> We had set up a number of commissions [within SPW to deal with organization of the Congress], but Masturah Khanum would negotiate matters in the absence of commissions [behind the scenes]. I reminded her several times, that she was carrying things out without consulting the commissions and without informing other women, and that all women, members of these commissions, are very upset at her behavior. . . . When the Congress was convened . . . Mrs. Masturah Afshar's report was not about the positive activities and achievements of Society of Patriotic Women. Members began to murmur their discontent, "This report had nothing to do with us; it was out of subject; why didn't she mention our activities and services; why didn't she honor the founders of our society such as Mrs. Iskandari and yourself (that is, me)?" After this untruthful report of Mrs. Masturah Afshar, the personal side of which overrode the general interests of the Society, all the hard-working members of the Society who were committed to general interests, including myself who had carried the heavy burden of the Society's work, lost heart and resigned. After that, there was no one to pursue the Society's goals with steadfastness and hard work and reestablish it on a firm and beneficial foundation. The Society fell apart.[16]

What was the content of the "untruthful report of Mrs. Masturah Afshar" that had caused such commotion and demoralization, leading to SPW ceasing all activity shortly after the congress? What had she said in place of reporting "the positive activities and achievements of SPW"? Afshar's lecture on the first day of the congress was filled with praise and appreciation of Riza Shah, favorably comparing the situation of Iranian women under Riza Shah to other women of the East, on the one hand, and to the pitiful state of Iranian women prior to the "shining dawn" of the Pahlavi era, on the other. While many Iranian women used the occasion of the congress as a platform from which to address the Iranian government critically and raise their demands, largely speaking to issues of women's concern, others were more interested in displaying the achievements of Riza Shah's government, expressing their thankful praises to him. When there were disagreements among Iranian women (such as on unveiling, or on whether they should demand that the government send

women abroad for higher education), Awrang would intervene to weigh the argument along governmental policy.[17]

If Awrang had failed to stop women from speaking for unveiling when it was not yet government policy, he had succeeded in bringing a wing of the movement under governmental mantle. Is it possible that the change of governmental policy on the issue of unveiling was in part a bargain that these women had struck? The current dissident historiography of women's organizations not only credits (blames) Riza Shah with the unveiling campaign, it often considers women such as Masturah Afshar, Hajir Tarbiat, and Sédighé Dolatabadi as traitors to the cause of an independent women's movement and as stooges of Riza Shah.[18] *Kanun-i banuvan* (Women's Center)—a women's organization established by the government in May 1935 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education to lead the educational and propaganda campaigns for unveiling and other policies concerning women—is considered a state organization that was formed on the dead bodies of all previous independent women's organizations. But a woman such as Dolatabadi could hardly be thought of as a stooge of the government. She had been active in Isfahan since the late 1910s in opening schools and publishing a women's journal. In 1923 she went to Europe to study, and she represented SPW at the 1926 congress of International Alliance for Women's Suffrage in Paris, and upon her return to Iran in 1927 she worked for girls' schools in Tehran—many years before Women's Center came on the scene. She continued to do much of the same after the 1941 abdication of Riza Shah until her death in 1961. To me a more persuasive account is that for a particular period her trajectory and that of the government coincided. Dolatabadi could be seen as using the government, as much as the government could be seen using Dolatabadi.[19]

Not only were Iranian women divided in the 1930s on how to relate to the increasingly autocratic government of Riza Shah, but on the issue of (un)veiling—unlike women's education and reform of marriage and divorce laws—there was a deep division among Iranian women themselves. I stress this division among women because after the official ban on the chadur was imposed in 1936, not only did state violence enter into this picture, but, more critically, an unbridgeable chasm opened up among women. Girls were withdrawn from schools and kept at home. Women teachers who did not want to unveil resigned from their jobs or were dismissed—which opened up room for the immediate promotion of other women.[20] Girls' schools that had been sites of women's public togetherness, with women acting not only as students and teachers but also as citizens, actively shaping "gender and patriotic sisterhood," now became

sites of division. As later recalled by women who accepted (or embraced) unveiling, schools suddenly "became empty." Becoming empty obviously cannot be taken literally, since the very women who narrate the emptiness of these spaces were there to observe and report that emptiness. They had become empty only of women who would not (or could not, if forbidden by fathers, brothers, or husbands) unveil. The emptiness experienced was their site of gender and national sisterhood being emptied of those "sisters-in-religion" who did not return to school. In this site, all women who had wanted modern education, who had wanted to refashion themselves as educated mothers and spouses, to escape marriage, or to become professional, all who had been advocating reforms of marriage and divorce laws in conformity with the reforming spirit of Islam, had crafted a space of solidarity and common activity. All these reforms were considered Islamicly acceptable. Not so with unveiling. The unveiling campaign as enforced by the government now expelled some from this common site. As with other measures taken by Riza Shah's government, modernization increasingly became conflated with only that modernity in which becoming modern was disaffiliated from Islam and made to coincide with pre-Islamic Iranianism. It is highly indicative of the stakes played out on women's dress code that official government memoranda of the 1930s repeatedly referred to the new dress code as *libas-i tajaddud-i nisvan* (clothes of modernity of women).[21] Those who had sought to combine their quest for modernity with a reconfiguration of Islam were unmistakably marked as traditional and antimodern—an identification that has only in the recent decade been reshaped. This process changed the meanings of modernity, Iranianism, and Islam. Iranian modernity increasingly took a non-Islamic (though not necessarily anti-Islamic) meaning. Iranian secularism and nationalism were critically reshaped through the expulsion of a different kind of modernity, one that had attempted to produce a different hybrid made of grafting Iranian nationalism with Shi'ism.

Current accounts of the period, by focusing on the issue of violence or on the issue of struggles between the state and clerical establishment over societal authority and power, occlude modernity's expulsion of part of its own spectrum to produce its secularism. Women activists and organizations themselves were critically involved in the production of these reconfigurations. In fact, feminism became a most privileged category marking Iranian secularism. Perhaps more than any other sociopolitical and cultural issue of contention, women's rights issues—as the expressions *clothes of modernity* and *clothes of civilization* best narrate it—became markers of secularism of modernity. Feminism became a screen category (a veil) occluding a historical process by which one kind of modernity was fashioned through the expulsion of Islam onto the beyond

of modernity, where backwardness and religion became conflated as secularism's abject other. It is this historical legacy that informs the current fears of contamination of secularism and feminism with religion.

One consequence of this process has been that women's issues, as symbolized by the (un)veiling controversy, proved impossible to build a consensus around. Not only did those opposed to giving up independent women's activities to state tutelage withdraw and become demoralized, those who did not want to unveil stayed or were driven home. This is a chasm that only recent developments have begun to challenge and change. There is a reemergence of conversation and cooperation between secular and Islamist women activists today. Islamist women activists of today's Iran are products of the previous era, not only sociologically, as many have observed, but also in that the terms of "the woman question" they have received bear the markings of decades of sociocultural transformations. They take issues as self-evidently Islamic that their mothers' generation thought of as un-Islamic.

The emergence of a vocal feminist position from within the ranks of the Islamist movement over the past decade in Iran constitutes an important break from the past positioning of all Islam to the beyond of the modern. By opening up the domain of Islamic interpretation to nonbelievers and non-Muslims, by insisting on the equality of women and men in all areas, by disconnecting the presumed natural or God-given differences between women and men from the cultural and social constructions of gender, these currents have opened up a space for dialogue and alliance between Islamist women activists and secular feminists, reversing a sixty-year-old rift in which each treated the other as antagonist.

Conclusion

The purpose of my historicization of secularism, nationalism, and feminism is not to evoke some golden age narrative in which women were united and then became divided, hoping that we could reenact some new moment of unity. But if *Islam*, *secularism*, *nationalism*, and *feminism* are historically defined and in changing relationship, there is no reason not to imagine reconfigurations of these terms.[22] Thinking of Islam as the antithesis of modernity and secularism forecloses the possibilities of recognizing these emergences and working for these reconfigurations; it blocks off formation of alliances; it continues to reproduce Islam as exclusive of secularism, democracy, and feminism, as a pollutant of these projects; and it continues the work of constituting each as the edge at which meaning would collapse for the other.

The points I have raised so far through a discussion of feminism and Islamism pertain to a reconsideration of Iranian nationalism and Islamism as well. Like many other modern nationalisms, the dominant concept of Iranian nationalism has demanded the assimilation of differences of religion, language, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality into a unitary notion of Iranianness. Citizenship seemed to require erasure of difference. But Iranianness achieved through such erasures could speak confidently its inclusivity only if Muslimness, Persianness, masculinity, and heterosexuality could be taken for granted. Iranians who could not take such privileges for granted had to masquerade as manly women, Persianized Turks, Islamicized non-Muslims, and heterosexualized subjects; in other words, keep silent—if not be silenced—on their language, gender and sexuality, and religious and ethnic differences.

If, however, we begin to reimagine an Iranianness that would entertain a different relationship between citizenship and difference, then the possibility that one can speak as Iranian and as Muslim, by explicitly marking Islam and Iran as separate domains, can make it more possible also to speak as Iranian and Jewish, as Iranian and Armenian—though it still remains tragically dangerous to try to speak as Iranian and Baha'i. To open up an explicit claim to Iranianness as Muslim and feminist could thus open up other speaking-as positions. Far from being threatening to secularism, feminism, or Iranianism, it could be promising of a different sense of Iranianness that allows new reconfigurations of these terms.

Notes

This essay draws on several talks and conversations: Brandeis University, 17 March 1998; Harvard University, 19 November 1998; and American Association of Religion, 23 November 1999. I would like to thank the organizers of each event for giving me the opportunity to present these ideas, and other panel participants and the audience for critical comments. Special thanks to Camron Amin, Janet Jakobsen, Irena Klepfisz, and Ann Pellegrini for many thoughtful conversations. My thanks also to Ghulamriza Salami for assistance in locating archival material.

1. The term *Islamicate* was introduced by Marshall G. S. Hodgson. Whereas *Islamic*, he suggested, would be used to mean "'of or pertaining to' Islam *in the proper, the religious, sense*, . . . 'Islamicate' would refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims." Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1, *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 59; emphasis in original. *Islamist* is used for contemporary movements and organizations that work for establishment of an Islamic government, however defined.

2. As I had begun thinking about this essay, I was coincidentally reading Janet Jakobsen's *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference: Diversity and Feminist Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), which deeply affected my thinking and writing of this essay.

3. See, for instance, Haideh Moghissi, *Populism and Feminism in Iran* (London: Macmillan, 1994); and Azar Nafisi, "The Veiled Threat: The Iranian Theocracy's Fear of Females," *New Republic*, 22 February 1999, 24–29.

4. Nooshin Ahmady Khorasany, ed., *Salnima-yi zanan, 1378* [Women's calendar, 1999–2000] (Tehran: Nashr-i tawsi'ah, 1999), 230–32. *Zan* began publication on 8 August 1998 and was shut down on 6 April 1999, because it had published excerpts from the Persian New Year message of Farah Diba, Iran's former empress, and because of a cartoon that was considered insulting to Islam. The cartoon depicted a husband and wife being held up by an armed thief, with the husband pointing to the wife saying, "Kill her; her blood money is less than mine!" Iranian criminal code specifies a woman's blood money as half that of a man.

5. Among them are Shahla Lahiji, writer and publisher; Merhangiz Kar, writer, lawyer, and activist; and Nooshin Ahmady Khorasany, writer, editor, and publisher.

6. For further elaboration on these tendencies see Ziba Mir Hosseini, "Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari'a in Post-Khomeini Iran," in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Mai Yamani (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 277–311; Ziba Mir Hosseini, *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Azadeh Kian, "Women and Politics in Post-Islamist Iran: The Gender-Conscious Drive to Change," Women Living under Muslim Laws, *Dossier* 21 (September 1998): 32–55; and Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Feminisms in an Islamic Republic: 'Years of Hardship, Years of Growth,'" in *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 59–84.

7. I am not using the commonly used designation for such currents, *Islamic feminism*. For one thing, none describes itself as such. Some, for example, the journal *Farzaneh*, explicitly disavow feminism. Others, such as *Zanan*, have referred to themselves as feminists, but do not use the combination *Islamic feminist*. This is because they take their Islam for granted and do not see a need to mark their feminism as distinct from other feminisms. Their endeavor, at least for now, is to claim a space for women's rights activism as feminist; they need to distinguish themselves as feminist within a site whose Islam is taken for granted. Many of these women had been activists of the Islamist movement that overthrew the Shah's regime. Subsequently, they became activists within the government (lobbying for women's rights, joining volunteer war-support efforts during the eight-year war with Iraq, etc.). Some joined government-affiliated cultural organizations, such as the Kayhan Institute. Others, whether secular or not, consider Islam as the given political-legal-constitutional frame within which they (have to) operate. The marking sign for them, too, is not Islam/un-Islam, but terms for women's activism, and more recently for democracy within the current civil society debates and struggles. See also Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

8. This new public space for interpretation of canonical theological texts is in part produced as an unintended consequence of Khomeini's doctrine of rulership of jurisprudence, which became encoded into the new Iranian constitution. Where the jurisprudent is granted the power of political rule and the constitution is said to be derived from canonical texts, every citizen by virtue of rights of citizenship becomes entitled to take charge of these texts and to exercise power of interpretation.

9. For an insightful analysis of possibilities of democratization dynamics developing out of some governmental projects see Homa Hoodfar, "Volunteer Health Workers in Iran as Social Activists: Can 'Governmental Non-Governmental Organisations' Be Agents of Democratization?" Women Living under Muslim Laws, Occasional Paper No. 10, December 1998.

10. The literature on the politics of Iranian modernity is enormous. I have found the following particularly insightful: Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985); Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Emergence of Two Revolutionary Discourses in Modern Iran* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1988); Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic, 1984).

11. For the full text see *Bibi Khanum Astarabadi and Khanum Afzal Vaziri: Pioneering Mother and Daughter for Women's Education and Rights in Iran*, ed. Mihrangiz Mallah and Afsaneh Najmabadi (in Persian) (New York: Nigarish va nigarish-i zan, 1996), 65–70; originally published in *Habl al-matin* (Tehran edition), 1 September 1907, 4–6.

12. In addition to several memoirs, two documentary collections of government decrees, memoranda, and reports related to the unveiling campaign have recently been published that make a more thorough historical reassessment possible. For a full documentation of sources see Camron Amin, *The Attentions of the Great Father: Reza Shah, "The Woman Question," and the Iranian Press, 1890–1946* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1996). As Amin has noted (270), these documents attest to the government's concern that local authorities should not act recklessly. In memorandum after memorandum, it is repeated that "utmost caution" must be exercised in implementing the campaign, that educational and demonstrative meetings must be held, that women should be persuaded through officials (that is, the officials' wives and other female relatives) setting an example for the larger population. Yet the pressure to produce quick results and the continuous reprimands and dismissals of officials in whose localities favorable outcomes could not be demonstrated produced a violent dynamic: where local authorities could not achieve central government orders through persuasion, they resorted to daily violence. This violence ranged from dismissing women who refused to unveil from their jobs, to pressuring local bath attendants to report on women who went to public baths veiled (sometimes through roof hopping), to instructing shopkeepers to refuse business and services to veiled customers, to tearing women's veils in public. The similarities between these measures and those undertaken by the Islamic Republic in the 1980s to achieve reimposition of veiling are truly astounding.

13. In the 1920s and early 1930s, an increasing number of urban middle-class women had discarded the face-veil. What had remained controversial was replacing the chadur with other full-length outfits, as advocated by women such as Afzal Vaziri and Sédighé Dolatabadi.

14. Afzal Vaziri, "Mardha khayli zirangi mi'kunand" [Men try to be clever], in Mallah and Najmabadi, *Bibi Khanum Astarabadi and Khanum Afzal Vaziri*, 94–95; originally published in *Shafaq-i surkh*, 18 August 1930, 3.

15. *Ittila'at*, 25 February 1936, 5.

16. Nur al-Hudá Manganah, *Divan* (Tehran: Ibn Sina, 1957), 15–16.

17. At one point several women objected to his interjections, saying that he had no right to speak at this congress; the congress had specified that only women could speak. At this point Awrang said that he was there on behalf of the SPW, and Masturah Afshar confirmed his statement. Note that at this stage not only could his presence and right to speak be challenged by Iranian women, he seemed to need to invoke SPW's authority, either because of the presence of international delegations or because the government's relation to women's organizations was not (yet?) of as secure and brutal a character as it is generally assumed to have been.

18. Hajir Tarbiat and Sédighé Dolatabadi served as the first and second presidents of Women's Center.

19. A similar process could be documented for many women activists of the 1950s through 1970s.

20. As my mother recalls her own instant promotion! Homa Hoodfar insightfully details how the imposition of the veil, contrary to dominant perceptions, did not translate into universal increased opportunity for women's education and work. For substantial layers of urban women, unwilling to venture out unveiled, the government measures resulted in restriction of their education, economic activities, and venues for socialization, making them more dependent on men of the household. See Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 248–79.

21. Alternatively *libas-i tamaddun* (clothes of civilization), was used. See Murtizá Ja'fari, Sughrá Isma'il'zadah, and Ma'sumah Farshchi, eds., *Vaqi'ah-'i kashf-i hijab* [The event of unveiling] (Tehran: Sazman-i madarik-i farhangi-i inqilab-i Islami, 1993), 105, 148.

22. It also brings to our attention the challenge of not reversing the bifurcation in the other direction, as it is already being attempted; namely, by considering Islamist feminism as the authentic voice of women's rights activism and secular feminism as some foreign importation. For one such attempt, see Anouar Majid, "The Politics of Feminism in Islam," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23 (winter 1998): 321–61.