

Knowledge Politics of the American Academia on Women's Citizenship in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Islamoromic vs. Islamoveritic Understandings

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Abstract

Islam's view on the status of women has been among the controversial topics in the American universities in recent decades. The rise of the political Islam and its embodiment in the Islamic Republic of Iran is considered by many critics as the turning point in the making of the Muslim women as an analytical category for the Western observers. This study focuses on Muslim women's citizenship as a modern concern, and analyzes two major American academic approaches to the quality of Iranian women's citizenship under the Islamic Republic. It addresses two textbooks, *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) and *An Enchanted Modern* (2006), which represent the most frequently addressed textbooks in the course syllabi used at the top twenty American universities in the academic year 2014-2015. The present paper, then, exploits Saied R. Ameli's classification of discourse to compare the two prevalent discourses of Islamoromia and Islamoverita in the mentioned textbooks. Islamoromia indicates that Muslim women's citizenship under the Islamic-oriented government is frequently put against the secular "normal" form of the state when the latter is given discursive advantage. However, an emerging voice of Muslim women about the enabling capacity of the Islamic Republic, on the Islamoveritic side, is recognized as a promising changing narrative.

Keywords: Knowledge politics, Women's citizenship, Islamic Republic of Iran, American academia.

Introduction

Gender is “one of modalities through which modernity is imagined and desired” (Rofel, 1999, p. 19); “being modern” cannot be approved as long as one’s position towards gender as a “basic component” of modernity is not identified (Deeb, 2006, p. 29). Gender is simultaneously a historical element of the West’s imperial dominance over the East. As Edward Said proposes in his pivotal work *Orientalism* (1979), the West’s imperial colonialism has been a “gendered” project through which the West’s white “masculine, rational and active power” penetrates and possesses the “feminine, irrational, and passive” status of the East (Said, 1979, p. 6). In other words, gendering the colonial narratives bestows on the imperial West a “male power fantasy” to dominate the “feminized Orient” as the “Oriental feminine” (Said, 1979, p. 6).

The Orient has not remained a homogeneous phenomenon for Western observers. The West provides an internal “racialization” and “sexualization” of morality, which juxtaposes the “bad Orient” and the “good Orient”. Compared to its competing Oriental religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, Islam has always been regarded as the last and the loser (Le Espiritu, 2003, p. 164; Said, 1979, p. 99). Accordingly, the feminization of Islam as a “backward civilization since the time of Muhammad [pbuh]” (Salama, 2011, p. 37) has been the easy game for the West.

The colonialization for Muslim women, thus, has been twofold: Muslim women as a victim of misogynist Islam homogenized under a uniform category of the oppressed “Muslimwoman” (Badran, *Between Muslim Women and Muslimwoman*, 2008). The status of Muslim women was the “centerpiece of the Western narrative of Islam” in the colonial discourse of the 19th century, and it predominates again on the threshold of the 21st century (Ahmed, 1992, pp. 150-151).

The “Muslim woman” category today has shifted into an “archetypal paradigm” that reflects the ebb and flow of the political discourse between the West and the Islamic world (Zine, 2002). The typical evidence is the four-decade concentration of the American media and academic circles on the status of women in Iran since the onset of the 1979 Revolution. The long lasting demonization and the stereotypical representation of the Iranian woman by Americans has gone so far that Lila Abu Lughod (2013), a prominent scholar on feminism in Islamic countries, questions,

It is not clear whether and in what ways women have made gains and whether the great increases in literacy, decreases in birthrates, presence of women in the professions and government, and a feminist flourishing in cultural fields like writing and filmmaking are despite or because of the establishment of an Islamic Republic (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 44).

The present paper assumes the likelihood of achieving an epistemological emancipation and a possibility of thinking about the Iranian women in a different mode, this time embedded in the American neo-imperialism. This is while the American neo-imperialism is exercised in an encompassing venue “in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and in so many other aspects of our modern experience” as Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007, p. 243) puts it.

The researcher(s) has/have chosen to work on the academic textbooks that are normally regarded as the “delivery systems of ‘facts’” when they actually convey “profound political, economic, and cultural relations and histories” (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991, p. 4). To seize the complex interlink of knowledge and power in numerous textbooks on the status of women in the Islamic

Republic of Iran, a sample of two textbooks is selected from a list of six,¹ which have been included in more than 50 percent of course syllabi in the departments of Women's and Gender Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and Iranian Studies on the subject of the Muslim/Iranian women in the top twenty universities in the United States² during the academic year 2014/15. The entire list has been obtained through a long process of exchanging 287 emails with professors in the mentioned departments. Based on the mentioned correspondences, two textbooks, *Women and Gender in Islam*³ and *An Enchanted Modern*⁴, have been selected and examined for dedicating significant records and investigations on the gender politics and the status of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran. A

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1. Abu-Lughod, L. (2013). *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Massachusetts: Harvard University press.
 Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
 Badran, M. (1995). *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
 Deeb, L. (2006). *An Enchanted Modern. Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
 Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
 Najmabadi, A. (2014). *Professing selves: Transsexuality and same-sex desire in contemporary Iran*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
 2. Princeton University, Harvard University, Yale University, Columbia University, Stanford University, University of Chicago, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Duke University, University of Pennsylvania, Johns Hopkins University, Dartmouth College, Northwestern University, Brown University, Cornell University, Vanderbilt University, Washington University in St. Louis, Rice University, University of Notre Dame, University of California-Berkeley. California Institute of Technology (10th in ranking) doesn't hold humanities and social sciences at all.
 3. Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
 4. Deeb, L. (2006). *An Enchanted Modern. Gender and Public Piety in Shi'i Lebanon*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

third book, *Professing Selves* (2014) by Afsaneh Najmabadi also focuses on Iran, but is excluded from the present study since it investigates the situation of the so-called sexual minorities, females and males, rather than general women's status under the Islamic Republic.

The establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran is generally examined by American academic sources as a unique challenging circumstance for a modern normal citizenship for women. They, however, use various representational strategies and patterns of rationalization to problematize the Islamization of the role of women by way of the family institution or through socio-political rules and regulations. This paper addresses "the abject misogyny" portrayed by Leila Ahmed (1992), which strongly represents the dominant literature on Muslim women in the United States' academia. It simultaneously examines the alternative narrative or voice that is used by Lara Deeb (2006) to seize the changing trends of the future.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This article focuses on two American academic textbooks, *Women and Gender in Islam* (Ahmed, 1992) and *An Enchanted Modern* (Deeb, 2006), selected from a list of sampled textbooks used in most university courses in the United States during the academic year 2014-2015. Both textbooks are written by women originally from the Middle East, who enjoy an advantaged position as an insider from the region. However, both are raised in an American tradition of scholarship and have passed all or part of their studies and professional experience in the American academic system. Both textbooks are published by internationally recognized American publishers including Yale University Press and Princeton University Press.

As the entire structure and trends of the U.S. academia are hosting the liberal feminist readings of Islam for decades, the present study attempts to capture the existing dichotomy of approaches that builds up two different forms of knowledge and image of the Islamic Republic and the status of its women citizens.

The present study exploits Saied R. Ameli's theory and classification of discourse, as illustrated in his book *Bibliographical Discourse Analysis; The Western Academic Perspective on Islam, Muslims and Islamic Countries* (2012). His model of classification is developed embracing an extensive body of academic works to investigate the major trends of knowledge production in the West toward Islam and the Islamic societies between 1949 and 2009. He provides a flexible model that mainly includes a) Islamoromia, b) Islamophobia, c) Islamoverita, and d) Islamphilia.

Islamoromia is a term coined by Ameli, combining the two terms of Islam and Romia, the Esperanto term for Rome (2012, p. 49). In his view, the discourse of Islamoromia prevails when Islam is frequently put beside the West, comparing "Islamic ethos with Western values" (Ameli, 2012, p. 49). In this comparison and contrast approach, the Western side is taken for granted to be superior, practical, rational, masculine and reliable, as opposed to the inferior, undeveloped, backward and feminized Islam (Ameli, 2012, p. 49). The present study explores Islamoromia not necessarily as a constructed reality somewhere outside, but a sub-conscious internalized belief among scholars with Islamic origins who reside in the west.

Iranophobia is the byproduct of taking an Islamoromic stance regarding Iranian women. It stands on a confrontational framework of "us vs. them" where Islam is portrayed by means of prejudiced

stereotypes, racist discriminatory interpretations, and its past disadvantage in the West (Ameli, 2012, pp. 45-46). Regarding gender issues, then, the Islamic Republic as an Islamic-oriented form of state is particularly considered as “a distant ‘other’” that is “barbaric, irrational, primitive and sexist inferior of the West” (Ameli, 2012, pp. 45-46). Ameli argues that in Western Orientalist literature, Muslim women are prescribed to surrender against the white normative feminism as the liberatory ideology; otherwise, they are excluded from the international “mainstream” and deserve abjectness and submission for their “intolerance” of modern standards (Ameli, 2012, pp. 45-46).

In reverse, the present study acknowledges a recent trend with the capacity of Islamoverita that implies at least the scholarly attempts that “intend to avoid stereotyping Islam or Muslims” as the researcher, Lara Deeb here, outdoes the conventional assumptions and puts her efforts to prevent generalizations and simplifications (Ameli, 2012, p. 54). Islamoverita entails an academic experimentalism that addresses Muslim societies in their “diverse historical, social, cultural, political and economic contexts” (Ameli, 2012, p. 55). Here, Islamoverita becomes the prelude to enter a potential Iranophilia that stands as the antithesis of Islamophobia, based on a “less biased”, less “generalized”, and more positive view on its “peaceful” nature. Iranophilia represents here a promised discourse rather than an achieved one.

At the level of methodology, the present study takes the same approach as Ameli's approach on discourse analysis; it takes textbooks as units of analysis and seeks to grasp their dominant order of discourse by discovering their central signs and the specific composition of discursive nodes. The principal themes are finally extracted to unveil different construed portraits of being a woman citizen in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The Islamic Revolution of Iran: A New Gender Discourse

The Iranian Islamic Revolution can be conceived as a turning point in creating a new gender discourse. The “new Islamic political paradigm”, as Afsaneh Najmabadi (Najmabadi, *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, 1998, p. 60) calls it, contrary to its precedent nationalist or socialist contenders, raised the belief that the imperialist domination of Muslim societies has not been necessarily achieved through military or economic rule, but through the undermining of their religion and culture. Appropriately, it was in this new political “sociability” that Iranian “women [who] stood for culture, occup[ied] a central position” (Najmabadi, 1998, p. 60). In other words, through the Islamic Revolution, “the centrality of gender to the construction of an Islamic political discourse ... changed that which had been marginal, secondary, postponed, illegitimate, and discredited into that which was to be central, primary, immediate, and authentic” (Najmabadi, 1998, p. 60).

Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder and the former supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, addressed women as follows:

We are proud of our women. What pride is higher than this that our honorable women stood against the oppressive regime of the shah, and after his defeat, against the super-powers and their allies, at the first front, they revealed an unprecedented struggle and resistance that had never been historically recorded by men (Khomeini, (1361 [1982 A.D] a) pp. 125-219).

This new vision and the vital role of women in the cultural confrontation against the imperial spirit of the West are properly articulated in Islamic Republic founding fathers’ thoughts and discourses. Women were fully given citizenship rights, as marked in the Constitution: “Members of the nation, whether man or woman, are equally protected by the law. They enjoy all the

human, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that are in compliance with the Islamic criteria” (Article 20). Nonetheless, the Constitution has not fully discussed how assuming the Rule of God’s law and the meta position of the Islamic rules and standards (Assembly of Experts for Constitution, 2018, p. Principle 4) would influence, or even be influenced by, the modern existence of Iranian women with their emerging demands.

The avalanche of publications that came from the Western, specifically American, academic publishers since 1979 unveils the appealing position of the Iranian women as a common category of analysis. The question of agency through the interplay between tradition and modernity and the discursive dynamism, which was inserted into the international gender discourse by the Islamic Republic, becomes the subject of theorization and debate for a considerable number of scholars (Ahmed, 1992; Arat, 1998; Wiseman, 2008; Badran, 1995; Badran, 2013). The present study, explores the sampled academic textbooks of the highest circulations in American academia to grasp part of this larger puzzle.

The Islamic Republic of Iran: A Misogynist or Moderate Role Model

The establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran is generally looked upon through a feminist prism that prioritizes women’s rights in its modern conception of gender equality and individual autonomy under a secular state. The sampled textbooks portray the position of women in Islam and explore the gender history, modernization and civil demands of change in Muslim countries, specifically the Arab states. The status of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran absorbs the authors as a distinct subject matter: it is discussed in various parts of the sampled textbooks as a non-Arab Islamic-oriented form of state that serves simultaneously as a

type of deviation and abnormality against the modern gender discourse. The present study pursues a path that avoids halting in such phobic portrayal of Iran; it illustrates how the dominance of Islamoromia vs. Islamoverita may offer two absolutely different worlds of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the international readership of the American textbooks. Islamoromic and Islamoveritic readings of the status of women in Iran are actually taken into consideration as two dichotomous and contesting orders of discourse to underline this point of divergence.

Women's Citizenship in the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Islamoromic Approach

The status of the Iranian women, a record of their suffering and despondency, is given a detailed description by Ahmed (1992) as she approaches their rights and liberties in post Islamic Revolution. Ahmed raises the example of the Islamic Republic when she abruptly shifts from the Arab world and the development of gender requirements there, picking "countries outside the Arab Middle East" to enlighten her audience about the gloomy fate of women governed by the "Islamic groups" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 232). Appropriately, this can raise the question why she did not seize the more straightforward example of Saudi Arabia under the Wahhabi fundamentalism and its strict restrictions on women's civil and political rights as consistent with the nature of her pivotal research that remains much concentrated on the Arab world.

Ahmed signifies the Islamic Republic as the archetype of the "Establishment Islam": for her (Ahmed, 1992, p. 232), the "establishment Islam" serves as an "authoritarian" "powerful" political system that socially institutionalizes and legally imposes its interpretation of Islam as the "sole legitimate" one on its citizens, in particular women. "Establishment Islam" subsequently remains definitely detached from the ethical voice of Islam

(Ahmed, 1992, pp. 225-239). The “Islamization” of rules and regulations, according to Ahmed, equals “controls on women, the limitations on their participation in the economy, their exclusion from many fields of activity in their society, including politics, their subjection to a code of law with fundamental inequalities and, worse, systematic cruelty” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 231).

The Islamic verdicts on women and their position against their husbands within the family institution and in the social sphere has only one equivalent to compare and contrast. The 50/50 model of modernity is supposed by Ahmed as the only standard based on which the Islamic Republic's laws and principles are repetitively thought, evaluated and compared. Appropriately, as Ameli indicates, such frequent comparison between the Islamic ethos in Iran and the western values and norms of gender equality and women's empowerment preserves the superiority for the latter (Ameli, 2012, p. 49).

The advent of the Islamic Revolution of Iran(1979) is conceived by Ahmed (1992) in a context of full regional tension and unrest, when instable states were toppled down through coup d'états or general revolutions. The Islamic Republic is repeatedly framed as equivalent to Zia ul-Haq's post-coup regime in terms of the “devastatingly negative impact on women” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 231).

Whether the Islamic Republic deserves being condemned for the massive violation of women's human rights and their censorship and intimidation, or it qualifies to be pictured as women's heaven on earth, the present study is not in the position to provide a definite answer. Rather, it argues that Ahmed's (1992) judgement based on a broad generalization of observations of diverse societies of Saudi Arabia, Libya, Egypt, Pakistan and Iran, being ruled under various “Islamist groups” (1992, p. 217 & 233) - that she believes have taken precedence in the Middle East in 1970s- is not

appropriate and convincing. A serious knowledge gap is the minimum adverse effect of such homogenization: Ahmed avoids the least enabling knowledge of its readers to differentiate between the extremes of broad oppositional tendencies and ideologies like Wahhabism based in Saudi Arabia and Shi'ism in Iran.

As Ameli's theory of Islamoromia implies, the persistence in homogenizing and unifying a group of Islamic nations accused of patriarchy and androcentrism by Ahmed serves the conventional Orientalist view that fortifies a homogenized stigma on the patriarchal Islam and the urgency of a liberating the West to save Muslim women (Ameli, 2012, p. 51).

The other considerable aspect of Ahmed's approach is her myth of a misogynist Islamic Republic in Iran by looking upon it as a location of trans-historicity, where a universal timeless patriarchy dominates. There is no evidence of recognizing and acknowledging, even partially, the active roles of the Iranian women as they are considered void of agency and are consistently represented as an unchanging and passive category of analysis.

By contrast, the historical evidences about the emergence of the Islamic Republic contain realities other than Ahmed's assumptions and conclusions:

First, what Ahmed explores as the "plight of the Iranian women" in post-Revolutionary Iran has happened when the victory of the Islamic Revolution was impossible without women's participation. As Hamid Algar (2015) asserts:

Iranian women together with Iranian men played a very important role in furthering the aims of the revolution. They participated massively in all the important demonstrations. They suffered torture, imprisonment, and abuse. Since the triumph of the revolution, they have continued to play an important role (p. 19).

Second, women's choice of participation in Revolution becomes more meaningful considering that the Shah had already inaugurated phases of development: the middle classes had augmented and the expansion of compulsory education had heightened the opportunity of women beside men to receive a proper education. Health corps had started to give services even in rural areas, and the industrialization and the expansion of transportation were creating new jobs (Mashayekhi, 2015, pp. 115-116; Bahramitash, Sadegh, A., & Sattari, 2018, p. 23). Therefore, as Amuzegar (1991) identifies, if the women's only objective was gaining economic prosperity or material welfare, there actually was no need for a revolution (p. 305).

Third, women's active participation in the national development persists responsibly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, according to Bahramitash et al. (2018), as Ayatollah Khomeini's call for the social movement for literacy and health was well received by the majority of "not only religious, but also middle-upper-class, secular women" (p. 23).

Fourth, the Islamic Republic as a political system was established on May 2nd, 1979 based on a national referendum in which both women and men participated, and for which 98.2 percent of those eligible voted. From 1979 to 2018, the Islamic Republic has held 32 elections, presidential, parliamentary, urban and rural councils and assembly of experts, with high rates of participation of women and men alike.

These facts are expressing the ignored part of Ahmed's puzzle of women's status in Iran that would be the "epistemic revolution" or "political awakening" that, as Anoushirvan Ehteshami and Zweiri (2012) reveal, had been developing since the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1907) in Iran and was only ripened decades later in the Islamic Revolution (p.18). This "intellectual nourishment",

as the Revolution's great ideologue Morteza Motahari suggests, mobilized the Iranian nation to "return to [themselves]" and their indigenous Islamic culture (1989/1368, p. 122). This spiritual condition, nevertheless, hardly corresponds to the Western socio-political and humanitarian standards.

The humiliation of women and their disgraced position within the family institution in post Revolutionary Iran is expressed by Ahmed (1992) with respect to the reduced marriage age for girls, women's lost rights to divorce and custody, and the epidemic spread of polygamy (p. 233). She also provides a long list of atrocities committed by the Islamic Republic, giving direct quotes from Haleh Afshar, such as requiring women "to do the Islamic hijab, covering them from top to toe, and to return to home" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 233), and perceiving women's characters so untrustworthy and untruthful that "Women judges were dismissed and women barred from attending law schools" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 233).

Throughout the pages in which Ahmed depicts the horrible status of women in the Islamic Republic, her primary and key reference is an article written by Haleh Afshar, entitled *Women, State and Ideology in Iran*¹, published in the *Third World Quarterly* in 1985. However, While Afshar is bestowed authenticity as an insider, in reality she left Iran decades before the Islamic Revolution, when she was a child and has lived almost all her adult life in Britain as a British citizen.

After a quarter of a century, Ahmed's book, *Women and Gender in Islam*, published by Yale University Press, enjoys heavy citation as a reference book and its paperback version has been reprinted 18

1. Afshar, H. (1985). Women, State and Ideology in Iran. *Third World Quarterly*, 7(2), pp. 256-278.

times, the last time in February 2017, following its first hardcover publication in 1992 (Buhler, Personal Communication, September 29th, 2017). Its online downloads by the international audience make its measure of circulation even broader. The power of circulation and reproduction of the present form of knowledge in the absence of any alternative or rivaling narrative is hard to imagine.

Not bothering to double check her information, Afshar is cited by Ahmed who condemns Ayatollah Khomeini for running a “campaign”, “Immediately upon taking power”, to “drive women back into the sphere of domesticity” as “unequal”, “impetuous” and “biologically and naturally inferior” creatures (Ahmed, 1992, p. 232). The contradiction between the distorted image that one finds in Ahmed’s representation of the inferior and submissive Iranian woman where the reality in action is hardly deciphered.

Currently in Iran, Literacy Gender Parity Index¹ has increased to 99.30% (The Vice Presidency for Women & Family Affairs, 2015), 57 percent of students who passed the university entrance exam in 2016 have been women (IRNA, (29/06/1395 [19/09/2016 A.D])). The proportion of Iranian women active in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) has improved as the number of women who started their higher education in these courses in 2018 was 234.838 women comparing 174.515 men (Mehr News Agency, (20/06/1397 [September 11, 2018 A.D])). In addition, the higher education has directed Iranian youths’ zeal for development towards civil engagement in non-governmental organizations and only women’s NGOs have grown 103 folds, from 55 in 1996 to 5711 in 2016, covering a wide range of activities in women’s economic empowerment, their health and

1. Ratio of literate women to men aged 15–24 years

education, environment preservation, etc. (ISNA, (13/06/1395 [03/09/2016 A.D])).

Regarding the health sector, the same development is noticeably achieved. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), women's life expectancy at birth has increased from 63 years in 1991 to more than 77 years in 2015 (compared to 74 years for men) (WHO, 2017). A high rate of pregnant women (95.3 percent) have gained access to safe delivery in hospitals as the maternal death rate has reduced to less than 19 per 100.000 live births (Iran's Ministry of Health and Medical Education, (15/02/1395 [04/05/2016]))

The number of centers for young girls' vocational training has grown four folds from 1996 to 2011. Today, the Iranian young girls and women access 784 different vocational majors in various sectors including agriculture, industry and services; among these are also mechanics, computer sciences, electronics, IT, ICT, etc. (Interactive Dialogue - Commission on the Status of Women (CSW61), 13-24 March 2017, 4th meeting, 2017). Iranian women enjoy a comprehensive access to internet according to the Ministry of Communications. In cities and rural areas, the ratio of internet access for women and men is respectively 50/50 and 40/60. This access facilitates numerous startups and empowering workshops on e-trade and e-marketing in cities and villages (Interactive Dialogue - Commission on the Status of Women (CSW61), 13-24 March 2017, 4th meeting, 2017).

The socio-political participation of women can be the other element to indicate the improving status of Iranian women. Ayatollah Khomeini unfailingly acknowledged, women's "great contribution to this Islamic movement"; he remarked on women's political support as "the back of [the] country in the future" (Khomeini, (1361 [1982 A.D] b) p. 521). The gradual development

in this respect can be explored in most recent elections such as in City and Village Councils, where from 12000 women candidates who participated nationwide 6000 were elected (Beiranvand & Farahani, (25/01/1396 [14/04/2017 A.D])). In addition, interestingly, the province of Sistan and Baluchestan, known for its rather traditional style of life, hosts 415 women council candidates, marking a historic moment of improving women's image in rural areas (ISNA, (30/02/1396[20/05/2017 A.D])).

However, facts and figures simply approve the developing socio-economic participation of women after the Revolution; authors such as Afshar and Ahmed can be questioned in their historical conception of "domesticity" as a symbol of misogyny. Their approach to domesticity can be compared and contrasted with Amy Kaplan's, in her article *Manifest Domesticity* (1998). Kaplan indicates American domesticity as a driving engine of production for Americans during the 19th century. Even beyond, she unveils the way domesticity became an influential ideology, parallel to *Manifest Destiny*, which served American imperialism to confront the Indians, Mexicans and European Empires. Insufficient depth of knowledge sometimes makes the scholarly works suffer negligence: domesticity for Iranian revolutionaries never carried an imperial spirit like for Americans; still, the Iranian culture's prevalence of women's voluntarism and holiness of domesticity as their vision of dynamism in domesticity is completely ignored.

The statistics reviewed hereby, obtained from the UN literature, contradict with Ahmed's abhorrent representation of the situation of Iranian women in the post-Revolutionary Iran. As an Islamoromic approach requires, the Islamic Republic is defined in terms of a "gendered Islam" (Ameli, 2012) that subjugates women and because of the lack of "humanism, democracy, and liberalism" leaves them "in need of ... liberation and support" by Western

values of gender equality and women's rights (p. 51). What Ameli implies by coining "Islamoromia" is revealing the "strategic inclusion" of Muslim women such as Leila Ahmed by the American academia in order to take advantage of their vantage position as insiders, and appropriate the legitimacy for the re-contextualization of Islam through a modern lens (2012, p. 53). The immediate consequence of the Islamoromic representation of the Islamic Republic as a true representative of the Orient, then, would be the imbalanced image of an exotic and irrational religion-driven form of state against the rational and normal state, which is known to be a secular one. A simple search in the contemporary American academic literature indicates that Ahmed's voice is the most heard and influential.

The present study will further discuss the narrow space preserved by American academicians for Muslim women, such as the Shia women in Lebanon, as recorded by Lara Deeb in her ethnographic project, which unlike Ahmad, assumes absolutely different perceptions of the Islamic Republic as a role model and its enabling and empowering role for the modern pious woman.

B) Women's Citizenship in the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Islamoverita Approach

Leila Ahmed's depiction in *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) of the absolute absence of individual and civil rights and liberties for women after the Islamic Revolution in Iran can at best be half-truth. In her book *An Enchanted Modern* (2006), Lara Deeb offers the viewpoint of Shia women in Lebanon and the different perceptions of women and the issue of citizenship in the Islamic Republic. She argues that these women feel proud of the establishment of an Islamic state, which regards Islam as a "powerful worldview able to act as a counter narrative to ideas

about western modernity” (Deeb, 2006, p. 75). In their eyes, the Islamic Republic becomes the source of authority for Muslims since it serves to “respond to frustrated desires” of independence and self-determination, even “restructures” their willpower for the spiritual along with the material development (Deeb, 2006, p. 75).

Lara Deeb's ethnography of Lebanese women is examined here as an instance of Islamoverita discourse. As theorized by Ameli (2012), Islamoverita occurs when an academician opens up a space for dialogue with Muslims in order to “understand Islamic values and tenets” (p.48); it occurs when a researcher steps forward despite his/her background in different intellectual traditions or diverse systems of value. Islamoverita for Ameli happens at the conjuncture of objectivity and subjectivity of the researcher, as he believes that these two are not “irreconcilable” (Deeb, 2006, p. 54).

Islamoverita is applicable for *An Enchanted Modern* (2006) since Lara Deeb, who gives quick indications of her intellectual belonging to the secular state as the superior model of pluralism, gender equality and women's rights, has put her efforts to seize Muslim women's viewpoints on an Islamic-oriented state with the democratic qualifications of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and this, despite the pertinent stereotypes and clichés on the religious form of government in Western academic literature.

The establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran for Shia Lebanese women embodies “the inseparability of religion, politics, and social responsibility in the pious modern [way of conduct]” (Deeb, 2006, p. 231). This achievement is the fruit of a strong leadership that has retrieved the sense of collective self-esteem among Muslims. Ayatollah Khomeini, then, is glorified and given a highly respectful position for his leadership:

“[It] demonstrated that it was possible for a people to overcome and be victorious, that it was possible for a

people to challenge oppressors... that Iranians were able to successfully overthrow the biggest imperial power in the world... A person living in a small poor simple room was able to change society and the world... [This] power ... comes from Islam” (Deeb, 2006, p. 80).

The “visibility” is the key concept to understand Muslim women’s sense of pride toward the Islamic Republic after a history of frustration and ignorance. They receive the Islamic Republic as a “new visibility of religion and publicly performed piety” (Deeb, 2006, p. 34) that consequently elevates the visibility and agency of the pious women in modern public spaces and in professional milieus. In fact, the Islamic Republic provides a role model of “public piety” with its sample mechanisms and internal drives: it is an unprecedented form of government that embodies the “visible [socio-political] commitment to ‘authenticated’ Islam” (Deeb, 2006, p. 180).

Contrary to Islamoromia and its criticisms on “Islamization” for “overt masculine sexuality” and “victimizing veiled women” as Ameli contends (Ameli, 2012, p. 52), Shia Lebanese idealize the Islamic Republic with emphasis on its “commitment” or “iltizam” to the “authenticated Islam”. The Islamic Republic national records, thus, is associated with the “authenticated Islam” or its art of applying “those interpretations of Islam that are considered most trustworthy and legitimate” (Deeb, 2006, p. 20 & 34).

To reach this point, the Islamic Republic is believed to have successfully thwarted an ontological dilemma: starting from the moment of “uncertainty”, the “authenticated Islam” motivates and pushes women to frequently question the existing system of “belief and knowledge” and highly value the “correct” one (Deeb, 2006, pp. 35-36). This rigorous revisionism or the status of betterment toward the “authenticated Islam” enables Muslim women to

differentiate between their different beings: they are empowered to travel from the “traditional” or “eastern” (sharqi) being to become a real “religious” and transcend the current “ignorance” (Deeb, 2006, p. 116 & 212).

The Islamic Republic, like Japan, represents the modernization independence from the western models and Lebanese Shia women prefer such an alternative. However, it is not expected that the Shia Lebanese' way of development be simply a mimicry of the Iranian one due to their distinct local patterns; they assertively prefer to take a similar approach to the “authenticated Islam” based on “reason, understanding, [and] mind,” as Iranians had already done (Deeb, 2006, p. 20). In fact, Lebanese Shia women's aspirations and ideals appear very familiar to their Iranian counterparts:

a) To stand against the absolute materialism of Western modernity and preserve the “spiritual progress” by transcending the embedded “ignorance, immorality, and emptiness” in Western culture (Deeb, 2006, p. 23);

b) To save women from westernization that makes a woman “selfish, materialistic, and obsessed with her appearance and social status” (Deeb, 2006, p. 30).

The most significant familiarity between Shia women in Lebanon and Iran, though, is their firm belief in “Piety” not only as a personal issue, but rather as a moving energy that “spills out from individuals into the public realm” (Deeb, 2006, p. 128). At odds with the secular modern thought, these Shia women believe in a kind of religious piety that feeds the social capital and voluntarism and inspires women citizens to “Get up, help others. Get up and see the corruption, get up and see the oppression, be mindful of [their] society, take care of it, become aware of it, of [themselves], of other people” (Deeb, 2006, p. 164 & 214).

The climax of the public piety for women appears in the “gender

jihad” or “women’s jihad” that puts a “particular responsibility” on the pious Shia women. Jihad for Shia women pushes them to take the responsibility and realize “modern-ness” (Deeb, 2006, p. 204): they are expected to remain pious, educated, visible, “strong and outspoken” (Deeb, 2006, p. 1530) while at the same time remaining “committed to faith, family and community” (Deeb, 2006, p. 217).

Drawing the original narrative of these Shia women, Deeb has provided a platform for nurturing a new form of knowledge about the unheard voices of the Muslim women. As Ameli’s *Islamoverita* (2012) suggests, to “demythologize Islam as inherently backward and anti-modern” is an academic achievement in itself (p. 49). Deeb also paves the way for a “productive dialogue” whose minimum fruit is expressed in her words as “dislodg[ing]” two conventional assumptions that “Islamism is static and monolithic, and that Islam and modernity are incompatible” (Deeb, 2006, p. 4). Therefore, in terms of her *Islamoverita* approach, she finally decides that “other moderns ...remain to be imagined” (Deeb, 2006, p. 232).

Conclusion

During the past four decades, the Islamic Republic in Iran (1979) has usually been represented by the western academia as an unprecedented and exceptional form of state. As a political system, the Islamic Republic normally stands for saying no to the secular state that simply separates religion from the political arena. Secularism, however, is the dominant assumption that is taken for granted in the modern liberal democracy and the Islamic Republic has “baffled scholars and politicians alike” as an “unthinkable”, “enigma”, “puzzle”, “paradox”, and “at war with history” (Matin, 2013, p. 1).

The Islamic Republic, this study suggests, is otherized as a typical Orient in western resources over different terms such as dictatorship, backwardness, irrationality, etc. The abhorrent submission and the tragic status of women, however, is counted to be a key trope to prove the abnormality of the Islamic Republic. The present paper chooses to work on two academic textbooks that are normally acknowledged for their objectivity and neutrality and proposes that, quite contrary to their granted position, they are profoundly politically loaded by unbalanced power structures. The sampled textbooks, *Women and Gender in Islam* (Ahmed, 1992) and *An Enchanted Modern* (Deeb, 2006), are selected from a larger list of textbooks with the highest circulation in the syllabi used in the departments of Women's and Gender Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and Iranian Studies in the top twenty American universities during the academic year of 2014/15. These books are chosen for their detailed investigation and openness to comprehend the status of women in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The present study exploits Saeid Reza Ameli's theory and classification of discourse to unveil the existing dichotomy between the two approaches of knowledge production namely Islaoromia and Islamoverita. *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) is identified in this paper with Islamoromic orientation, which portrays the Islamic Republic as an alien Orient against the modern secular "normal" form of state. It is located in a historical context, which is acknowledged with the rise of the "Islamic modernism" and "secular nationalism" in the region, where Muslim women are inevitably choosing to "reconceptualize" Islam in a nascent modern and thereby secular system of thought. Therefore, the Islamic Republic as a religion-oriented state is primarily represented as a source of instability and a symbol of deviation from the normal process of modernization. It is also regarded as the culmination for androcentrism and misogyny in terms of "savage injustice and

inhumanity” and legalization of women’s imprisonment at home, enforced veil, seclusion, male control and harassment over women, etc.

Islamoromia is heavily perceived Ahmed’s narrative as she frequently puts the Islamic Republic and its politics of “Islamization” in contrast with the secular and modern discourses of gender equality and women’s rights. In such an imbalanced image, Ahmed represents the Islamic Republic as irrational and misogynist vis a vis the superiority of the rational and practical modern states.

The post-Revolutionary Iran and its attributed dominant ideology of the “Establishment Islam”, hence, is framed by Leila Ahmed (1992) in a vague formulation beside Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, Libyan resurgent “fundamentalists”, and Zia ul-Haq’s military coup regime in Pakistan. Generalization and trans-historicity to umbrella the various so-called “Islamists,” who she claims have taken over the region, Iran included, are among the major characteristics of Ahmed’s narrative. Her lack of differentiation between various readings of Islam becomes a caricature when a simple examination on the Shia Islam in Iran and Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia can break up the world into two distinct substances.

The inexplicable limitedness of the reliable references to feed the researcher is the other major deficiency characteristic of the Islamoromia discourse. Ahmed highly depends on scholars such as Haleh Afshar to judge the Islamic Republic, while Afshar, who is regarded as a legitimate insider to speak for the Iranian women, has lived abroad as a British citizen for decades with no direct involvement or observation of women’s roles and problems in post-revolutionary Iran.

Ahmed's Islamoromia implies Iranian women to deserve abjectness and submission as they are maintained absolutely passive with no normal human insight of resistance. Considering the Shia jurisprudence, the dominant ideology in the Islamic Republic, again Islamoromia brings silence about its capacity for mutability compatible with the changing requirements of women. Ahmed's audience, thus, receives no hints of comparing and contrasting the various theories of Islamic scholars in different schools, and debating over meanings and significations of concepts.

Beyond the prevalence of Islamoromia in Ahmed's reading of the Islamic Republic and taking Ameli's flexible spectrum of discourses, the present research also considers alternative approaches such as Lara Deeb's ethnography of Shia women in Lebanon, as reflected in her book *An Encjanted Modern* (2006). For the historically marginalized Shia women in Lebanon, the advent of the Islamic Republic is inspiring and liberating. It is conceived as a moderate role model that encourages Muslim women's epistemological emancipation from the westernized standards of womanhood. The Islamic Republic has also served Muslim women by giving rise to the "public piety" that enables them to stand socially and politically "visible" and achieve "self-betterment". The Islamic Republic's pragmatist approach toward the "authenticated Islam" has become an inspiring source for Muslim women to responsibly attempt for "modern-ness" in an alternative nonwestern manner: think reasonably, preserve their piety, and stay committed to their society.

In spite of the fact that Deeb personally remains non-sympathetic to such narratives of Muslim women and gives frequent reflections on her devotion to the secular form of state as the legitimate and citizen-based worldview, she steps forward to open up a dialogue with Muslim women and highlight how various kinds of modernity can be imagined. Islamoverita in this sense

prevails her work as she explores Muslims in their own contexts of diverse historical, social, cultural, political, and economic realms (Deeb, 2006, p. 55). The least function of Deeb’s Islamoverita is developing a more realistic image of the Islamic Republic of Iran, even from the viewpoint of the minority Shia Muslim women in Lebanon. This viewpoint is expected to be “less biased” and less “generalized” according to Ameli’s theory of Ismoverita (2012, p. 47). Allowing such accessibility, Ameli remarks (Ameli, 2012, p. 48), the prospect of higher degrees of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence worldwide is no longer out of sight.

The results of the present study regarding the discursive dichotomy in American academic textbooks on the subject of women’s status and their citizenship in the Islamic Republic of Iran can be sketched as follows:

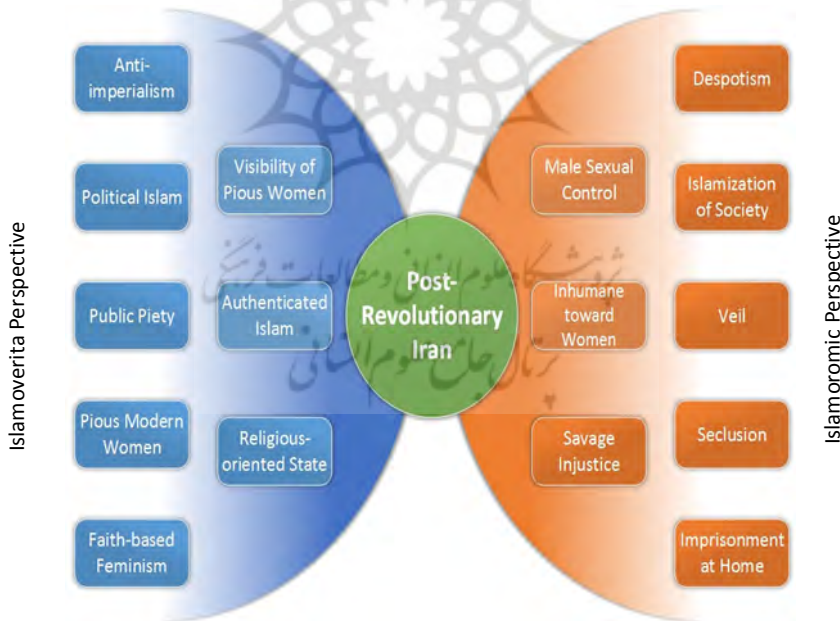


Figure 1: Dichotomy of Islamoromic and Islamoveritic Perspectives on Post-Revolutionary Iran

source: authors

Ultimately, the present study is an attempt to unveil the fact that epistemological emancipation is not easy to achieve for Muslim women. It seems that their nonwestern alternatives for modern-ness have failed in gaining legitimacy, maybe because their identity has already been discursively determined. The Iranian women's participation in the Islamic Revolution and their role in the Islamic Republic to define their rights and liberties is usually simplified and ignored by their Western observers, even the academic ones. This study attempts to capture these complexities and reveal the complications and heterogeneity of possible academic discourses on this subject, as it values even clues of change and innovation as promising for the academic "objectivity" and inclusiveness toward the status of the Iranian women in an undetermined future.

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