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Book Review: Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran

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Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran. 2007. Nima Naghibi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 232 pp. (Incl. index). \$22.50 (Paperback).

Reviewed by Melissa Autumn White¹

Nima Naghibi's *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* is a timely and thoughtful contribution to critical postcolonial and transnational feminist studies. Drawing on a rich archive of materials and spanning from the late nineteenth century to the contemporary period, Naghibi observes the West observing Iran through the eyes of "intrepid [Christian] adventuresses" and well-known US second wave feminists, and the responses to this gaze through contemporary Iranian cinema. Taking the work of representation as materially important, Naghibi's study advances on the work of Michel Foucault and Edward Said to explore how discourses of the abject veiled Iranian Muslim woman have been—and continue to be—co-constituted with those of the modern Western liberal feminist in service of both cultural and economic imperialism.

While some critics may be skeptical of the application of a postcolonial feminist theoretical lens to a republic that has never formally been colonized, Naghibi argues that such a framework is crucial to the work of decolonizing the representation of Iranian women in Western discourses (152, note 1). Indeed, such a decolonization is urgently required in the present moment given the intensification of the West's paranoid fascination with Iran as US led war on/of terror continues throughout the Islamic world. What Naghibi's book offers to us today is a partial genealogy of the (im)possibilities of transnational feminist solidarities across borders of political, religious and cultural differences. Her richly researched studies open up a multitude of questions that are urgent to consider as Islamophobic discourses continue to gain ground across the political spectrum in the West.

Naghibi's introduction is a particularly strong theoretical grounding to her further four chapters, each of which is a kind of "case study" of a particular structure of representation in historical context. Weaving together the contributions of a number of influential postcolonial and transnational theorists, she situates her project at "the confluence of the discourses of modernity and global sisterhood, as well as the mobilization of the figure of the subjugated Persian woman in the works of Western and Pahlavi feminists" (xxvii).²

Chapter 1, "Enlightening the Other: Christian Sisters and Intrepid Adventuresses" examines US and British women's investments in Persia at the turn of the 20th century through the diaries of Presbyterian and Anglican missionaries and independent travelers. Drawing on this captivating archive of material, Naghibi advances a highly nuanced consideration of how it is that certain discourses—e.g. the "truth" of the subjugated, oppressed Persian woman—become dominant despite the fact that part of what her archive demonstrates are rich moments of mutual recognition and political solidarity among British suffragettes and Persian political activist women.

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² By "Pahlavi feminist", Naghibi refers to state sponsored, pre-revolutionary Iranian feminists (xvii).

The second chapter, “Scophophilic Desires: Unveiling Iranian Women” continues to unpack dominant discourses through a focus on the privileged place that the veiled Muslim woman has occupied in the Western literary and cultural imaginary (35). As Fanon puts it, “This woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer. There is no reciprocity. She does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself” (1959: 44; as cited in Naghibi, 50). On the other hand, the veil figures as a potent site of national and cultural honor for non-Western men (Naghibi, 50). Framing this chapter between two significant political “moments” in Iranian history—Pahlavi’s “Unveiling Act” of 1936 and Khomeini’s “Veiling Act of 1983— allows Naghibi to foreground both “the inadequacies of definitive postulations on the veil in patriarchal nationalist and contemporary feminist discourses” (38).

Chapter 3 turns to a more direct study of discourses of “global sisterhood” advanced by prominent second wave feminists—among them Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Germaine Greer—in the years leading up to and during the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In this chapter Naghibi carefully explores how Western liberal (and “radical”) feminism became associated with upper-middle class Pahlavi feminism in Iran in such a way as to ultimately undermine anti-imperialist and working class feminist potential in the revolutionary period. In a very complex way then the participation of Western feminism at this crucial political juncture in Iran had unwitting but undeniably negative consequences for the Iranian feminist movement.

Finally, Chapter four, “Female Homosocial Communities in Iranian Feminist Film” offers a provocative study of the ways that Iranian women are using film to challenge gender roles imposed not only within Iran but also, crucially, through the Western gaze. Naghibi argues that Iranian cinema has become an important contemporary site of political engagement. Her study of *The Ladies Room*, *Divorce Iranian Style*, *Runaway*, considers the portrayal of women’s segregated spaces and homosocial (as opposed to heterosocial—or “mixed company”) relations in the films as potent sites of political subversion. As she puts it, “these films disclose a model of women’s liberation that has the potential to undermine the very patriarchy (the *ghiyrat* or male honor) that informs Iranian cultural and political traditions, and the state that sustains it and is sustained by it” (138).

I find Naghibi’s work in this book to be highly productive in opening up new spaces for critical discussions on the various forms oppositional and feminist politics that might take shape, and for imagining futures of cross-borders solidarities across differences that become reified through dominant representational modes. Her work highlights the ambivalences of anything like a global feminism while still maintaining a vision of transnational possibilities for more socially just futures.

Based on her PhD dissertation, Naghibi’s *Rethinking Global Sisterhood* is a carefully researched and well argued piece of critical feminist scholarship. This book is highly recommended reading for feminist and postcolonial scholars as well as for historians and sociologists focusing on Iranian, Persian and Middle Eastern studies. While Naghibi’s work is theoretically sophisticated her writing is fabulously lucid and adept, and the non-academic reader is sure to find this book fresh and accessible. Suitable for third or fourth year undergraduate women’s studies, sociology, or cultural studies courses, this book has much to contribute to the production of decolonizing transnational feminist pedagogies and practices.