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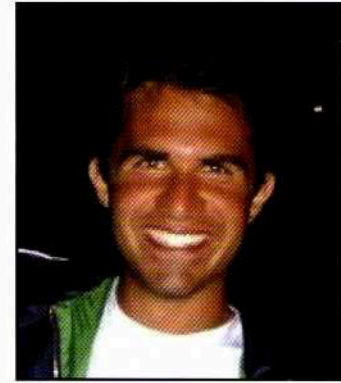
SYMBOLIC ORIGINS OF SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITY: WOMEN AND MODERN IRAN

ABSTRACT

The perpetuation of socioeconomic gender disparities within present-day Iran is typically explained by citing lingering conflicts from the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Historical evidence and argument provides a generally acceptable corroboration for such a belief but inadequately addresses the roots of this conflict and the essence of its perpetuation. This paper readdresses the problem by evaluating it with a philosophical paradigm of mutual recognition, which readdresses the events prior to, of, and following the Iranian Revolution, enabling scholars to understand gender disparities in a new light that is compatible with and supportive of existing perspectives yet insightful on its own merits. Reanalysis of the conflict within the parameters of this new paradigm allows scholars to understand Iranian conflicts in the context of a larger sexual-symbolic conflict which plays out unconsciously and cyclically, habituated as a result of objectifying legal changes that Khomeini instated and sustained for one generation. The sexual-symbolic conflict, which originally reflected confusion about the roles of Iranian women in a modernizing society, now represents the sexual oppression of women achieved through imperious and corrupt interpretations of a woman's symbolic role within Islamic culture. Habituated repetition of this conflict helps to clarify why such disparities remain difficult to address within Iranian culture. Existing statistical, historical and philosophical literature further corroborates this paper's suggestion that Iranian socioeconomic disparities between men and women are strongly linked to the sexual-symbolic conflicts which this paper identifies.

INTRODUCTION

An interpretative theory of mutual recognition is a paradigm which proposes a basis for and then grants insight into human experience while simultaneously surpassing perceived epistemic limitations without sacrifice of scholarly objectivity. Particularly useful to the historian and the sociologist, one can use such a theory to reveal and understand the symbolic aspects of historical or sociological phenomena. Scholars of conflict especially benefit from such theories, as they capably grant nuanced, subjective insight into the causes of and nature of conflict that other forms of analysis cannot produce. A reconstitution of such a theory followed by an application of that theory to a complex conflict, such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its long-term



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impacts on women, will sequentially reveal both the opportunity for newfound intellectual insight these theories offer as well as provide novel insight into the experience of womanhood and femininity within Iran during and following the era of Khomeini. Analysis of the causes of, history of, and participants in the Iranian Revolution reveals that lingering discrepancies within sociological standards from the Iranian Revolution between women in "modernized" countries and women in present-day Iran can be explained by the sustained sexual-symbolic conflict playing out as a function of the Iranian conflict cycle, enslaving and disempowering women by inflicting the symbolic qualities of sexual object and child bearer upon them. This symbolic image continues to perpetuate itself throughout Iranian culture in subtle and insidious ways, preventing closure of the socioeconomic disparity gap between men and women in Iran.

APPROACH

The philosophical strategy that leads to these new insights does not require that existing paradigms be supplanted. Perhaps the greatest virtue of a theory of mutual recognition is that the paradigm can be constructed to be compatibly enabling; in other words, it supports and reinforces existing paradigms instead of overthrowing them. The establishment of the theory of mutual recognition is premised on the observations of Paul Ricoeur within *Fallible Man*, especially rooted within his extended account of freedom. Arguing that the conflicts between the finite dimension of human experience (location in time and space, progress through life) and the infinite dimension of human experience (the capacity to grasp universals and categories) are the basis upon which a person develops their identity, Ricoeur is able to advance the proposition that all people have a different finite dimension. This is the basis of identity. As it can only be understood by comparison with other human beings, and given that such comparisons occur without regulation, Ricoeur is able to argue in favor of human freedom. This freedom to communicate is a crucial feature of the theory of mutual recognition because it prompts Ricoeur to conclude that humanity is by definition united with the imperative, inalienable purpose of understanding one another. "Man is this plural and collective unity," he writes, "...[which is] to be understood through each other." (Ricoeur, *Fallible Man* 138) In essence, humans are mutually interlocked with all other humans; understood through each person's recognition of

another. By default, human beings recognize each other as human beings.

This theory at first glance appears incapable of serving scholars of violence or conflict. If indeed humans are free on the basis of difference and conflicts arise out of different categories of humans evidently opposed to recognition of one another, it appears to suggest that the theory of recognition is without use in this environment; there is no account of what Ricoeur describes as bad will. Ricoeur anticipates such reactions, and they consequently motivate a philosophical transition to exploring fault in place of fallibility. To achieve such a transition, Ricoeur deconstructs original sin and mythology. Ricoeur adopts a definition of myth consistent with his theory of mutual recognition: "a traditional narration... which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men today, and... [establishes] all the forms of action and thought by which a man understands himself..." (Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* 5) What is especially critical for understanding the link between human capacity for bad will and symbol while remaining consistent within Ricoeur's philosophical framework is viewing that mythological narration, especially myths of evil, as what Ricoeur entitles a language of confession. What is being confessed? The exact notion that one wishes to understand: fault. Ricoeur soon apprehends this point, concluding that "...myth makes the experience of fault the center of a whole, the center of a world: the world of fault." (Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* 162-163)

Earlier, it was established that this specific theory of recognition was specifically interpretative. An interpretative paradigm offers scholars the advantages of comparison and conjecture; when combined with the previously defined theory, interpretation enables one to incisively differentiate between thought and thinker. This is particularly important within religious cultures such as Iran, which will soon be analyzed under the rigors of this framework. It is crucial to understand that comparison, in this case, does not refer to a critique of Islam against another religion or against its own supposed merits and flaws but instead denotes a deconstruction of applied Islamic thought (especially as such thought impacts women) in the symbolic context provided by Ricoeur's theory. Within *Religious Worlds*, William Paden provides us with a four-point scheme for evaluating a religious totality, describing how a religious reality is comprised of "mythic language ... ritual times ... engaging of gods ... and the distinction

between pure and profane behavior.” (Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* 7-8) The purpose of the interpretative comparison, in this case, is to determine the extent to which religion creates the symbolized world of fault that Ricoeur describes, as this will comment most incisively on the conflict. Paden elsewhere describes how religion construes the world by assigning value and meaning “...in terms of mythic language and prototypes.” (Paden, *Interpreting the Sacred: Ways of Viewing Religion* 70) This point will likewise guide interpretation by being repeatedly demonstrated to adequately depict schemes of mutual recognition prescribed by authorities within Iran. Specifically, readers will observe a demonstrated absence of recognition directed towards women created by a set of symbolic properties that are inflicted upon them. Following an analysis of the history of Iran, which likewise echoes with remnants of Persian mythology, these properties prove very difficult to overcome because of how deeply they are inculcated into the fabric of Iranian culture.

BACKGROUND

The historical background for Khomeini’s rise to power is likewise crucial for understanding both the sociological and symbolic aspects of his rule and its impact on women, because the cycle of conflict between the secular and religious orthodoxy began well before Khomeini’s rule. Further mythologizing the conflict, the events that led to the Iranian Revolution were, in many ways, a macrocosm of Khomeini’s personal conflict with political nemesis Reza Pahlavi, the ruling Shah who preceded Khomeini. Khomeini, a cleric and a lifelong proponent of religious orthodoxy, first implicitly takes issue with Reza Pahlavi during the rise to power of his father, Reza Khan Mirpanj, who earned the title of Sar-dar Sepah (grand marshal of the army) following a successful coup d’etat in 1921. (Hoveyda 5) Pahlavi’s father advocated western modernization for Iran, an idea which infuriated clergymen like Khomeini around the country. Pahlavi’s father received the title of Shahinshah (King of Kings) in 1925. What would soon be known as the “White Revolution” had just begun in Iran, ensuring prolonged conflict between the secularists and the orthodox for decades and decades to come.

Khomeini was urged, like many other clergymen of the era, to resist any temptation to react to the perceived threat of modernization. Still angry, Khomeini bid his time and awaited a chance to strike out at the changes and ideas

that offended him so deeply. He prepared for battle relentlessly and pursued his goals through acquisition of religious titles and credentials. By the early 1930s, Khomeini was entitled *hojat-ol-Islam* (a middle rank cleric) and by forty years of age, Khomeini had established a reputation for himself as a stern and unyielding religious figure. (Hoveyda 12-13) Pahlavi likewise continued his advancement, and was named Shah in 1941. An unassertive leader, Pahlavi was criticized heavily during the period following his ascent both for his “White Revolution” and for his political weakness. Under the first five years of Pahlavi’s rule, Iran was occupied by Allied forces. In an attempt to calm his society, Pahlavi begrudgingly enacted policies that would improve the relationships with religious leaders. Unfortunately for Pahlavi, the only religious authority that remained within Iran was Ayatollah Boroujerdi - a religious leader who would become a mentor for Pahlavi’s future nemesis.

Khomeini progressed as a religious personality, although this progress was not denoted in title. When Boroujerdi passed away, Khomeini was not selected as his successor, in spite of his dutiful efforts sustained for many years. Though frustrating for the future Ayatollah, Khomeini ultimately benefited as a lack of government attention allowed his ambition and zealotry to remain unchecked. By this point in time, 1961, Khomeini’s renown as a teacher of theology was quite considerable - and his presence was so refined and intense that the entourages he would gather entitled him Ayatollah out of respect. In the wake of his failure, Khomeini withdrew into over a year of long, intense meditation, emerging in 1963 to vigorously lead riots meticulously planned to incense clergymen so much that they would want to break entirely from the Iranian government. Warning that “Islam [was] in danger,” Khomeini intensified the conflict between clergy and government. (Moin 87-90) For this, Khomeini was arrested and exiled by order of the Shah. Consequently, Khomeini’s name became distinctly and permanently political. Likewise, the conflict between the secularists and religious orthodoxy was established as a major feature of Iranian politics and history.

The Shah’s image deteriorated between 1965 and 1975 as Pahlavi was seized by bouts of narcissism which grew in frequency and intensity as time progressed. By 1970, Pahlavi’s sense of grandiosity had been further inflated by Iranian success in the oil market. Pahlavi remained psychologically overinvested in his White Revolution plan

and further extended it to position Iran as one of five technological world superpowers. Narcissistic delusions were expressed through Pahlavi's exaltation of monarchy and hero-worship of his father, who Pahlavi often saw himself as or becoming like. Pahlavi's speech frequently included mythological reference. In his narcissism, Pahlavi often compared himself, his actions, and the progress of Iran to the triumphs of figures from Persian myths. (Hoveyda 23-26) Corruption surged within Pahlavi's royal family and the upper echelons of his government as his already tenuous grip on reality and the state of affairs within his country loosened further. By 1977, U.S. President Jimmy Carter perceived Pahlavi to be a liability and desired an overhaul of the Iranian government.

Khomeini returned to Iran as a conquering hero on February 1, 1979, following the Shah's permanent departure from his country motivated by his implicit admission of political failure only a few weeks prior. Khomeini was now viewed by many as a messianic figure who would restore spirituality to Iran and a leader who could bring freedom and justice into the country with him. (Moin 199) Upon his arrival, Khomeini delivered an emphatic speech wherein he expressed satisfaction with the nation's attainment of unity of purpose. Sternly, Khomeini here invoked the first of many symbolic images to appear during his rule: "Let us not lose [unity of purpose] by permitting demons ... to create dissension in our ranks." (Khomeini 253)

DISCUSSION

Khomeini's proclamation reminded his attendees that Islamic faith is not derived from interpretation. This is a critical feature of Islam as virtually all worshipers practice with this critical concept in mind. As Bouhdiba reminds his readers within *Sexuality in Islam*, "The Quran is the divine word, kalāmu Allah, the universal logos, pure idea." Departure from the text's traditions constitutes direct defiance of God in the eyes of other practitioners. "... the ideal behavior ... conforms to the sacred Word." Understanding Islam requires that one understand how its internal function is a manifestation of orthodoxy. Regression towards prevailing cultural rules is therefore a consequence of typical Islamic operation, and is not limited to special variants of fundamentalist Islam. (Bouhdiba 1) To grasp what Khomeini is suggesting, one must necessarily reason symbolically and understand how and why Pahlavi may justifiably be viewed as a demonic disruptor of cultural unity. This is unambiguously an exercise in creating

a totality of fault, and it distinctly satisfies the four necessary conditions established by Paden, which justifies describing Khomeini's world as a religious one. This totality of fault would soon be inflicted upon the women of Iran. Khomeini's proclamation therefore represents an end for cultural recognition of Iranian women and the beginning of an objectifying rule that would perpetuate socioeconomic disparity for decades.

These cultural rules impose many regulations upon worshipers, but perhaps no life is more influenced than the life of a woman. And indeed, Khomeini's revolution sought ought and often achieved maximum adherence to the holy Word. For example, women of Khomeini's era experienced marked changes in legal rights with regards to marriage. Addressing women within days of becoming the supreme leader of Iran, Khomeini himself describes the necessary conditions for justifying divorce. "A woman can stipulate that if her future husband turns out to be of corrupt moral character, or if he mistreats her, she would possess the right to execute a divorce." He continues: "Similarly, [Islam has granted the right to divorce] to women, on condition that parties stipulate at the time of marriage." (Khomeini 264) Perhaps most insidious of all, Khomeini describes the loss of rights to these women in a deceitful way, as though he were proposing a generous, altruistic expansion of rights. In reality, these rights are inaccessible without prescience or before suffering at least one bout of abuse.

Khomeini reversed many of the Iranian social reforms enacted by Shah Pahlavi. For example, Khomeini prohibited women from becoming judges. Opportunities for women to find other work were likewise drastically reduced. He imposed laws which prohibited married women from attending universities while simultaneously reducing the minimum age for marriage eligibility to thirteen. Mandatory observance of the dress code was likewise strictly enforced. Leila Badawi reminds us that "the relationship between Muslim society and Muslim law ... is complex and subtle." Muslim laws adapt to best endorse the atmosphere of the immediate culture or society in which they are used. The Quran guides legal theory, but does not express or define it directly in the same way it rigidly defines Islamic practice, faith, and ritual. (Holm and Bowker 108-110) Definitions and rules are created on the basis of cultural conditions and desires. It is therefore unsurprising that Khomeini's religiously orthodox and totalitarian administration endorsed and enforced each of these extreme changes. What is surprising is that Khomeini's legal phi-

osophy existed openly in direct defiance of a fundamental tenet of Islam: that all men and women are equal before God. Even this outright blasphemy in a religious society was met with virtually no resistance, suggesting that Khomeini was successful in his efforts to restrict women to lives of sexual service and childbearing.

Khomeini's life came to an end in 1989. He was succeeded by Ali Khamenehi, whose rule is described by Mehdi Moslem as "modest in significance at best." (Moslem 88) The absence of a charismatic and forceful figure like Khomeini from Iran's supreme office changed the political dynamic of the country, and arguably for the better. A future leader, President Rafsanjani, capably minimized the impact and influence of extremism within Iran during the nineties. Rafsanjani earned great internal acclaim for his success with "economic liberalization" policies and achievement of relative balance of power across the major factions of Iran within political offices. (Moslem 142-143) By the turn of the millennium, factional struggles were reduced to "power struggle[s] among competing ideological blocs" - not ideal, but certainly preferable compared to another Iranian Revolution. Unfortunately, these political and economic improvements have yet to make a broad impact upon the gender inequities of Iran. In the course of twenty years - one generation - we still observe that certain categories of gender inequities in Iran are surprisingly unresponsive to the political and economic environment. The presence of this generation gap implies that the default mode of recognition, mutual recognition, has been replaced with a different default perspective of what and who a woman is.

It isn't easy to detect this problem. At first glance, statistics appear to be a pleasant surprise. Joni Seager's *Penguin Atlas Of Women In The World*, a recent and comprehensive statistical survey of women's rights, appears to suggest considerable improvement for Iran within the last twenty years. Particularly impressive are Iran's achievements in education: twenty years ago, Ayatollah Khomeini strongly discouraged schooling for women. Presently, 95% of women attend primary school. More surprising and commendable is that roughly half of all Iranian university students are women. Not only does this suggest balance within the educational system, but it also depicts a strong educational infrastructure ranging from primary school through (at least) undergrad. (Seager) Although overall literacy is not ideal, recall that Khomeini vowed to radicalize Iranian schools with what he deemed proper Islamic

traditions less than thirty years ago. All of this education leads to work that is adequate, but not especially lucrative: about 35% of women in Iran are employed, and they earn roughly 80% of the salary a man in the same position earns. (Seager) In this regard, we can see that educational, and to a lesser extent, professional concerns of women are very responsive to economic success and neutralization of extremism.

CONCLUSIONS

The historical review of Iranian politics, legal practice, and sociology presented within this paper enable one to conclude that Iran is a continuous participant in its own two-faction civil war which rages on within a symbolic dimension, even when guns are silent. Orthodoxy and secularism have been locked into battle for nearly one hundred years of Iran's recent history, expressing themselves through the conflicts of leaders (Khomeini versus Pahlavi) and the power struggles of post-revolutionary factions (guardians versus progressives). Political and economic instability exacerbate this problem considerably. Even a ruling party that adopts beneficial, well-planned, and favorable policy may be overthrown by an unforeseen economic calamity. As a country, Iran struggles to remain internally stable, economically solvent, and politically consistent. Even though Iran has managed national conflicts admirably within the past five years, ideological discrepancies on the local level continue to pose a threat. Some Iranians resist additional attempts at "white revolutions" while other Iranians support unrelenting modernization. Sustained symbolic conflict has obscured Iranian cultural identity.

Women of Iran are in a unique position because they unwillingly mediate this symbolic conflict. Islamic faith at its core explicitly and literally describes men and women as equal before God. Women are easily understood to be at the foundation of Islam: primarily in a mythological or religious sense, but to only a lesser extent based upon the societal improvements Seager's data reflects. Marriages, as well as sexuality within marriage, are considered noble pursuits within Islam. "The best way of realizing the harmony intended by God," explains Bouhdiba, "is for a man to assume his full masculinity and for a woman to assume her full femininity." (Bouhdiba 30) Legally speaking, sex is condemned within Islam when it occurs out of marriage. A yet more noble pursuit within Islam is motherhood. Mothers, especially mythological mothers identified in primary texts like the Quran, are the subject of immense

reverence. Obviously, this particular type of reverence is reserved for women exclusively. Even the word Allah is grammatically understood to be simultaneously masculine and feminine to suggest deific transcendence. By making either sex inferior, the glory of such transcendence would be lost. By Badawi's account, no primary Islamic text identifies any sex as inferior.

These descriptors could reasonably be seen as the defining essence of womanhood within the Islamic totality, especially during Khomeini's Revolution. Indeed, women are understood symbolically as lovers and mothers by conventional Islam. Tragically, while these symbols are designed to exalt women, Islamic laws were subverted such that the symbols appear to be implemented only to objectify women. The equality and symmetry between sexes advocated by the Quran is unquestionably overlooked in favor of a simpler approach which habituates the recognition of women as sexual objects.

Statistics support this thesis. Motherhood statistics report a low value of 2.1 childbirths per mother. Contraceptive usage nears 75% in Iran, which is innocuous in its own right... until one considers that Iran has neither signed nor ratified the CEDAW bill, imposes restrictions on how women move and dress, refuses to report or collect rape statistics, and describes honor killings as a "regular occurrence". Taken into consideration alongside the fact that Iran reports one of the lowest average ages for marriage - between 20 and 23 years old - it becomes empirically obvious that freedoms or purposes outside of what are understood to be a woman's symbolic purposes are almost entirely illusory. (Seager) Iran's increased success in educating and employing women effectively casts a smoke-screen over an insidiously abusive and theologically empowered patriarchal tyranny which continuously improves its capacity to systematically rob women of their rights. This tyranny is not a component of any one regime, revolution, or dictatorship, but is instead a byproduct of perpetuated conflicts in Iran which force, among other things, characteristics of Islamic culture to fight to survive. Each

battle won strengthens the grasp these abusive cultures have on society. And as Khomeini proved to Iran as he returned in 1979, no defeat is necessarily permanent. Unfortunately for these women, a change in government will probably never imply a change in attitude or perspective.

Describing the net effect of these statistics as a trivialization of the feminine, Bouhdiba observes that the derealization of female status within Islamic cultures constructs for women a "double role as objects of pleasure and of producers of children." (Bouhdiba 214) Within his speeches and legal policy, scholars can easily observe Khomeini's willingness and eagerness to implement laws in such a way that they force women to be trapped in the symbols ascribed to them. The damage done by this corruption has already been computed by Seager and many other sociologists; it goes without saying, but the costs to women are immense and nearly defy imagination.

Although Paul Ricoeur claims that the symbol gives rise to thought, the symbolic dimensions of feminine conflicts in Iran offer a fascinating counterexample. In many ways it can be observed that the symbolic essences of femininity have been repeatedly used against the women of Iran, particularly since Khomeini's revolution. The symbol is effectively implemented opposite as to how it might naturally be employed: now existing instead to promote the disintegration of mutual recognition. Loss of mutual recognition implies a very specific sort of dehumanization and loss of freedom, one which renders woman into an object which exists for primary functions of sex and childbirth and one which is so sufficiently objectified that the woman loses her identity and is thoughtlessly ascribed a purpose. For feminine conflicts within Iran to achieve genuine resolution, women will need to safeguard and empower their capacity for mutual recognition as part of a larger project of reclaiming their symbolic essence from a society which wields it like a weapon against them. Within the religious totality produced by Iran's endless conflicts, rising to this challenge may take generations of struggle.

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