

Power, Institutionalisation, and Religion: Gender-Washing as a Tool of Autocratic Control

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on Rola El-Husseini's critique of the Western double standards concerning women's rights and religious freedom in her work "Double Standards and Dissonance: Women's Rights and Freedom of Religion in the Global North." It expands on the concept of "gender-washing," illustrating how both left- and right-wing authoritarian regimes exploit gender equality rhetoric for political gains without genuine efforts toward equality. Through examples from Czechoslovakia and contemporary India, the article explores how different ideologies – from Marxism-Leninism to religious nationalism – use women's rights as a façade while maintaining autocratic control. It also engages with postcolonial feminist critiques of Western universalism.

KEYWORDS power, religion, institutions, islam, freedom, post-colonialism

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INTRODUCTION

In her article “Double Standards and Dissonance: Women’s Rights and Freedom of Religion in the Global North”, Rola El-Husseini articulates the following main theses: First, the adoption of affirmations like quotas in politics for the representation of women may not necessarily reflect a genuine effort to reach gender equality but may just formally pretend it, and rather use or misuse this agenda as an alibi to create an image of a focus on human rights and even to cover the autocratic character of particular regimes. Second, the author applies a post-colonial critique to disclose the double standards and hypocrisy of the so-called West (meaning here, more specifically, the U.S. and also the EU, particularly France, which is mentioned briefly) in its criticism of discrimination of women in the countries of the global South and/or from other religious and cultural backgrounds, while not reflecting upon gender inequalities in their own countries.

The aim of this commentary is to develop the concept of gender washing on more examples, emphasizing the perspective of autocracy as a global phenomenon not bound with a particular ideology – it can be declaratively right wing or left wing, religious or atheist. That’s why this text refers in its first part to autocratic regimes of state socialism (focusing on Czechoslovakia) and then also briefly points to parliamentary regimes of South Asia (particularly contemporary India), where a significant rise of autocratic tendencies based on religious nationalism can be noticed. The second emphasis of this text touches upon the on-going discussions on the cultural relativist critique, which also resounds in El-Husseini’s article. I try to distinguish between the “double standard” approach of European or American critics who focus on encroaching on human rights in other countries besides their own – on that point I am in full agreement with El-Husseini – and the question of whether a critique of violations of human rights anywhere can be justified if coming from a different cultural background. I do not claim to give a solution to that complex issue, but just find it important to mention that dilemma in this context.

As an example of the first case, characterised in the article as “autocratic gender washing”¹, the text mentions the recent changes in Saudi Arabia in the area of women’s rights. It rightfully points out that mere quantitative changes do not guarantee actual gender equality. They rather

serve as an alibi for autocratic regimes or politics of religious nationalism. Such regimes could thus, to some extent, successfully pretend a change in their attitude to human rights and turn international attention away from their otherwise oppressive politics. Examples of this lip service to the idea of human rights could be found in various types of autocratic regimes or ideologies. The one-party systems (though some of them were or are formally multi-party) of state socialism in China or the satellites of the Soviet Union in the second half of the 20th century could be brought up as particularly eloquent examples of this.

FEMINISM IN AUTHORITARIAN CZECHOSLOVAK STATE SOCIALISM

Czech feminist scholars, especially Hana Havelková, coined a very fitting term for using the discourse of women's emancipation as this type of alibi cover in Czechoslovakia between the communist putsch in 1948 and the fall of the totalitarian regime in 1989 – the expropriated voice (SEE HAVELKOVÁ – OATES-INDRUCHOVÁ 2015). While feminism was successfully developing in Czechoslovakia as a movement within the civic society between the two world wars, its spontaneous development from below was suppressed after 1948. The topic of female emancipation was expropriated by the official political rhetoric of class struggle, one of its symbols being the socialist woman-builder, or rather super-woman, for whom the labour market became open. However, that was not a matter of free choice. The socialist woman, like every citizen in state socialism, had to be an employee of the state or otherwise would have faced legal punishment. Also, an important insight into gender relations and their specifics during that period was introduced by Jiřina Šiklová, who was articulating and developing feminist issues and ideas in the Czechoslovak dissent (SEE ŠIKLOVÁ 2016).

Moreover, feminists of the post-communist countries in the 1990s articulated the concept of the double burden – the workload at one's job and the unpaid labour for one's family and household, which remained on the shoulders of women (SEE, E.G., ŠIKLOVÁ 1998).

Last but not least, women in the state socialist countries did not break the “glass ceiling” to reach the most lucrative and powerful positions in politics and the economy (which were closely interconnected) either.

So for these authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, emancipation and the rights of women were rather just one of the political slogans for covering up their undemocratic character. This hypocrisy was not connected with religion in politics, as in the example used in El-Husseini's article, but with a particular type of Marxist-Leninist ideology which endorsed atheism. Autocratic gender washing can be used or misused by religion if politicized as an ideology or by other ideologies supporting an autocratic political power, no matter if the regime declares itself to be right-wing or left-wing.

So as El-Husseini maintains, *"policies or rhetoric that appear positive on the surface may simply be a way for regimes to consolidate and justify their control of society"* (EL-HUSSEINI 2024: 5). This can also be found in countries with democratic regimes where, however, there are strong discussions about the danger of autocratic tendencies. One such example can be India under the BJP government, i.e. a party following the ideology of Hindu nationalism.

In many ways, India cannot be treated as a parallel to the other discussed examples, as India has never become an autocratic state, and though Hindu nationalism has been the ideology of the government party since 2014, the political system has remained democratic. Hindu nationalism has been criticized by Indian feminists as androcentric and as supporting gender hierarchy (CF. E.G. BACCHETA 2004, MUKHERJEE 1999). Despite some internal discussions on the issue, some authors who declare themselves feminists (though for others, they represent a "conservative" form of feminism) also emphasize that some interpretations of the key classical Hindu ethical codes (*dharmashastras*) like the *Manavadharmashastra* and *Manu's Laws*, are actually misinterpretations and should be analyzed carefully to avoid critical interpretations on purpose (CF. PADIA 2002). So Padia, who presents herself as a feminist, is rather careful in discussing the radical criticism of these traditional scriptures by some Indian feminist theorists (e.g. Prabhati Mukherjee), and compared to them, her standpoint is, to some extent, apologetic. This example, however, is about a religious ideology, and not so much about autocratic political praxis.

POSTCOLONIAL CRITIQUE OF DOUBLE STANDARDS

The main critical concept of El-Husseini's text lies in her identification of double standards in the (so-called) West's approach to religious freedoms

and women's rights, both within its own countries and in the Global South. El-Husseini is right in pointing to the campaigns using Christian fundamentalist or nationalist rhetoric against abortion, or even contraception, not only in some states of the U.S. (we could add Nicaragua, Ireland till 2020 or Poland under the last conservative government as cases of this), whose participants are mainly conservative Catholics. Still, these advocates of restriction of women's rights in their own societies often sharply criticize violations of women's rights in countries of the global South, especially in particular Muslim countries.

Regarding veiling in Muslim countries, the critique obviously corresponds to Chandra Talpade Mohanty's famous essay "Under Western Eyes" (MOHANTY 2003/1984). Building on Said's concept of Orientalism as a colonial discourse, she enriches it with a gender aspect. Mohanty criticizes the simplified generalizations which occur when one comments on phenomena from different cultural backgrounds, while ignoring the local contexts and universalizing interpretations which are not, in fact, universal but West-centric. She also accuses many European and American feminists of a colonial approach when they construct the general category of 'third world women' as oppressed victims of patriarchy, while not specifying what type of patriarchy they speak about. Mohanty maintains that there is no 'universal' patriarchy. Rather, it must always be described and analysed in a particular context.

These discussions go back to the tensions between universalism and cultural relativism. However, the feminist standpoint within them may not always be one-sided and unequivocal. For postcolonial feminism, the position of cultural relativism may be closer, as postcolonial feminists primarily criticize Western-centric universalism. On the other hand, feminist critics of cultural relativism like Susan Moller Okin (SEE OKIN 1997, 1998) openly support promoting human rights and the cultural rights of minorities. In this respect, she emphasizes that if we gave up on calling out discrimination in cultures other than our own, it would mean the practical impossibility of anti-discriminatory political movements across state borders.

This, however, is clearly not what El-Husseini means. She focuses on the hypocrisy of some European and US human rights commentators, speaking about "*double standards of judgement that the West applies to 'pariah*

states' such as Iran vs. 'good states' such as France[which] is a common topic of derision in social media discourse". She further states, "It would benefit advocates in the West to attend more to their own laws and societies in this regard before lecturing others..." (p. 11).

This line of critiquing is heavily represented in much of the critical postcolonial literature on European governments' approaches to their domestic Muslim communities too (BEHIERY 2013). The increasingly frequent banning of religious garments in schools and other public institutions is a case in point here. The decisions of women and girl students to veil themselves are often understood in the governmental justifications as a symbol of their forced indoctrination rather than their own conscious decisions (SYED – PIO 2010). Understandably, El-Husseini and other postcolonial authors perceive this as *"instrumentalizing women's rights"* (p. 1) – a colonial practice of state interference in cultural and family matters that prevents Muslim women from exercising their free will (SEE ALSO MARTINO – REZAI-RASHTI 2008). Yet the question of whether the decision to veil oneself is a question of free will is not as straightforward as it may seem.

Indeed, El-Husseini and other critical postcolonial authors correctly point out that the secular state increasingly interferes in religious and cultural affairs previously governed by churches – a practice that has been targeted not only towards Islam but towards other religions as well (KRATOCHVÍL 2023). But is veiling a free, conscious decision by Muslim girls and women, or is it a historically and culturally derived dictate perpetuated by a patriarchal society and patriarchal family structures? And who bears the costs of breaking the increasingly tight anti-religious laws across Europe – does it not primarily fall on those most vulnerable, who are caught between the grinding mills of family education, social customs and governmental prerogatives? (GOLNARAGHI – DYE 2016) Indeed, this is a complex discussion and there are no easy answers. Yet, the discussion which El-Husseini raises hits at the core of the problem and requires further input.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the basic ideas about religion and its institutionalization. El-Husseini (p. 2) correctly argues that the West's *"locus of rationality, enlightenment and moral authority is manifest in its treatment of women's rights and religious rights."* Yet, I believe that institutionalization by any types of power (religious or other) plays a large

part in defining how it is used and to what extent it supports or suppresses human rights. Religion may be institutionalized as a state doctrine and political ideology, and as such, it is very close to becoming oppressive, no matter in which part of the world it works. It can be institutionalized as a community doctrine, which can also be oppressive (let's just remember the history of authoritarian sects and their criminal leaders – e.g. Nexium in the U.S.A., where women were kept as sexual slaves, or Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, which committed a terrorist attack in the Tokyo underground.) (SEE MURPHY 2011). Here, El-Husseini's criticism is fit and apt.

But religion can also be supportive or dissident – and the Eastern European experience with communism has shown us what role various church communities can play in the struggle against oppression (URSU 2024). Religion may also be understood as a belief or, more broadly, a spiritual journey – it is individual or social when its role is positive and should be respected. These cases can be more or less found within nearly all the religious systems. There are feminist and progressive streams of religion which highlight ideas of equality, justice and loving solidarity in various religions, no matter if it is Hinduism (PADIA 2022), Buddhism (GROSS 1993), Islam (HASSAN 2001), Judaism (PLASKOW 2005), or Christianity (SÖLLE 1997). These examples show that religion, in its very substance, is non-patriarchal, non-discriminatory and emancipated from any type of inequality or violence. And yet, this does not mean that El-Husseini's words are wrong. To the contrary, it only makes the double standards of Western governments ever more visible.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *"The emerging norms around using women's rights to justify political and military power allowed these autocratic Arab regimes to similarly 'weaponize' rights rhetoric to support their continued rule. This is a form of what the French scholar Amélie Le Renard has called 'women's rights washing' and what the Swedish scholars Pär Zetterberg and Elin Bjarnegård have described as 'autocratic gender-washing.' Its primary goal was to encourage Western powers, donor organizations, and domestic progressives to believe that continued autocracy was in the citizens' best interest."* See El-Husseini, p. 2.

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