

On the Characteristics of Islamic Feminism in Persepolis

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ABSTRACT. Taking *Persepolis* as an example, from the perspective of Islamic feminism, this paper analyzes the characteristics of feminism in the Middle East and in the context of historical roots, political tendencies and fighting methods, in order to express the universal appeal for the independent personality and independent social status of women.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Islamic state, *Persepolis*

1. Introduction

“Feminism” originally referred to the so-called “Women’s Movement” that emerged in the United States in the 19th century, which is a collection of groups and organizations with a variety of goals. With the pursuits developing from gender equality to gender rights equality to today’s gender identity, the voices of feminism have been rising and falling in the English and American academic community. Their tones are not always in harmony with each other, but often on the contrary. However, because of the same concerned object and theme, they can become a new enlightening force even if they have different views and theoretical strategies. The hot upsurge of the study in western countries has been sweeping the world, especially in the Islamic world, which is often regarded as “*misogynistic*”. Because of its unique historical background, political climate, social structure and cultural values, it has nurtured the middle-eastern feminism that is different from the “*west-centered theory*”.

Persepolis is adapted from the autobiographical comic of the same name by *Marjane Satrapi*. It tells the story of *Marjane’s* 15 years of life from the age of 9 to 24, with three different perspective: the girl’s personal experience in the social and historical upheaval in Iran, the identity crisis in facing western culture alone, complex inner feelings such as confusion, loss and depression in her own growth. Through the simple black and white lines, *Persepolis* bears the complex war, death, political persecution, parting pain and so on. Meanwhile, it explores the human rights demands of female intellectuals in the Middle East from the interactive among three women-*Marjane*, *Marjane’s* mother and *Marjane’s* grandmother.

2. Nationalist Feminism

Marx said that the United Kingdom had a twofold mission in India: a destructive mission which aimed to destroy the old Asian society; the other constructive one which aimed to lay the material foundation for western-style societies in Asia. As in India, the colonial experience has spread the effects of colonialism to the political, economic, social, ideological and cultural aspects of the Middle East. Marx's dual mission doctrine of "destructive" and "*constructive*" is also reflected in feminism. Under the specific historical and cultural environment of being colonized and enslaved, passively receiving the modern thoughts, feminism is naturally different from that of western countries. It contains special contents that western feminism does not have. The first is the affinity with nationalism.

The beginning of *Persepolis* is the White Revolution in Iran. At that time, *Marjane* is just an innocent listener, from whose point of view the audience receive background information through a series of listening to the story process about communism, her grandpa arrested, her uncle released and her uncle's revolutionary experience. The positive impact of the bloody sacrifice and unyielding faith in the story of the revolution is undoubtedly breathtaking, while at the same time from the subtle words between *Marjane's* mother and grandmother we can see their expectation for gender rights equality. However, this expectation is explicitly based on the success of the revolution and national liberation. That is to say, only national independence can lead to democracy and peace. Feminist liberation and equality are contained in nationalism, or even attached to it

In the face of the colonial historical environment in the Middle East, women, like all men in the Middle East, are suffered from the same national disaster and oppression, sometimes even more. In this case, national independence is the common aspiration of colonial men and women, regardless of the gender. Therefore, women closely associate national independence with women's liberation to form a two-stage theory of "*national independence first, women's liberation later*". They internalize national independence into their own code of conduct and way of thinking, and have unlimited illusions about it. Nationalism is the due meaning of Middle-Eastern feminism, and Middle-Eastern feminism should belong to the category of "*nationalist feminism*".

3. National Feminism

Feminism is regarded as the forerunner of civilization in western society and an indispensable part of modern thoughts. For the Middle-East, which has a long colonial history, women's issues are naturally endowed with important symbolic significance of modernization and national culture, and also the key to building national culture and democratic values. In the Middle-East, where religion has a particularly strong influence, women's liberation and state machinery are firmly integrated based on political considerations and social realities, leaving no room for independent women's rights movements. National feminism, which is completely attached to national politics, uses the means of registration to control and regulate

NGOs, and even induces women to set the target of the political party as their own target. As a result, women have no clear gender consciousness and the concept of power struggle, and then lose their independent feminist consciousness. This kind of “*national feminism*” is the backward product of civilization made up by autocracy in the appearance of democratic liberation.

Marjane's youth in the film is mainly divided into two parts--the Iran-Iraq war and the school years in Europe. The Iran-Iraq war is clearly defined as “*meaningless*” in the film, which is the most repressive and confining period for Iran's internal and external troubles and social turmoil. No drinking, no exposure to western culture, not even a Michael Jackson badge on a little girl's dress, which is nominally democratic. It is warmhearted that three old women set *Marjane* free for a lie of being punished by her step-mother, showing the bright side of humanity. But the expression of disgust on their face when asking about the Michael Jackson badge naturally carries a radical patriotism which is incited to form. “*The result of the feminist movement expressing itself within the framework of the national movement*” is that the independent and liberated feminism has been completely distorted into a tool to serve the national regime.

4. Mild Feminism

The fruitful achievements of the western women's rights movement not only derive from its complete and systematic theoretical foundation, but also from its bold and flexible fighting methods. As firstly for the issue of equality and rights, western women directly pressed the authorities at the beginning of the national democratic movement to obtain political rights such as voting. During the American Revolution, the representatives of the feminist movement, Abigail Adams and Mary Warren, signed a letter demanding women's right to vote. During the French Revolution, the feminists, led by *Olympe de Gouges*, fought back firmly against the sexism of the revolutionaries, and put forward the demand for political rights. The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen was born. Their fighting methods were also extremely aggressive, including “*breaking into the cabinet, encircling ministers, smashing shop Windows, blocking traffic, planting bombs, burning train stations*”. What they wanted was awaking the public's awareness of women's suffrage. However, such bottom-up and radical methods are not suitable for the Middle East.

But it does not mean that women in the Middle East does not have their own means. They take a positive stance on national issues and reach consensus on supporting the revolution to strengthen their forces. Middle-eastern feminists worked with male nationalists to gain political capital, which is a mild and mutually beneficial form of struggle. It is evident that women in the Middle East have gained the right to vote within decades or even years after national independence. This modest approach has also worked.

Although in *Persepolis* this kind of mild struggle is not obvious, but the hope that many people never give up shows the subtle way of feminism in the Middle

East from the beginning to the end. In the school hall, the deal between *Marjane* and the discipline leader also reflects the indirect struggle of feminism in the Middle East. There is no direct violent conflict, nor cold treatment of non-violence and non-cooperation, but the witty and even humorous argument. This moderate and realistic way of fighting leads the authorities to think about the position of equality between men and women, and to fight for liberation and equality in another way, which is undoubtedly the most effective and efficient when it cannot replace the influence of fundamentalism and gain the support of the vast majority of lower class women.

5. Conclusion

With the development of civilization in the split, under the guidance and impact of western feminism, the Middle-eastern feminism, which was born from the unique regional environment, historical background and cultural values, is bound to be inseparable from nationalism. Although its independence may lead to the crisis of sliding to the democratic tool controlled by politics, the Middle-eastern feminists always adhere to the moderate and realistic fighting methods and make unremitting efforts to make it a part of the world feminist movement. They have contributed their own strength to the overall independence and liberation of women in the world.

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