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# IS FEMINISM BAD FOR MULTICULTURALISM?

Chandran Kukathas

**ABSTRACT:** Multiculturalism and feminism are in tension to the extent that multiculturalism is a doctrine that condones the toleration of cultural communities which might not respect or value women's concerns or interests. This has led some feminist thinkers, notably Susan Okin, to ask whether multiculturalism is bad for women. This paper agrees with Okin that there is a tension between feminism and multiculturalism—some of her critics to the contrary notwithstanding—but argues that multiculturalism should take precedence.

But stories were already gaining ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgement at Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion. It was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary

—Chinua Achebe<sup>1</sup>

**T**he most important social movement of the twentieth century is arguably the movement for the liberation of women. Without doubt there have been other political movements of great significance, including those to build, and then to destroy communism; and others to liberate societies from colonial rule or to create new national states. But as social movements go, the women's movement is hard to match, not only

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for the transformation of society it has effected and continues to foment, but also for the challenge it has presented to the most fundamental social and political institutions—from the family to the state. And while the most profound changes have been pursued, and to some extent gained, in the societies of the developed West, the women's movement is not unknown in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Feminism is the body of thought that gives theoretical expression to this movement. Though it must be said at once of this set of ideas, first, that it has a history which predates the women's movement of the twentieth century, and second, that it is not a single doctrine or ideology but a body of ideas which embraces a wide range of doctrines or theories, some of them greatly at variance with, and indeed highly critical of, others. Nonetheless, while there are many feminisms, it is possible to speak of feminism. Following Susan Okin, I take it to mean "the belief that women should not be disadvantaged by their sex, that they should be recognized as having human dignity equal to that of men, and that they should have the opportunity to live as fulfilling and as freely chosen lives as men can."<sup>2</sup> Because it addresses the condition of women in general, feminism is a universal doctrine. Indeed, it is one which poses a profound challenge to other ethical and political theories which, it claims, have universalist pretensions that are implausible because they fail to include one half of humanity.

There is, however, another political development of the late twentieth century which has come to dominate political theory as well as political practice and political action: the demand for cultural recognition. In Western societies such as the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia, France, and Germany, either or both of two particular developments have brought this about. First, the culmination of decades of immigration of peoples from a diversity of cultural backgrounds has changed the ethnic and cultural composition of the society sufficiently that the status of migrant communities and their traditions has become a political issue. Second, the emergence of indigenous peoples who found the resources and will to question their own social conditions and political status within their societies gave concerns about cultural protection a prominence they had hitherto lacked. In Canada and the United States, moreover, the rise of Québec nationalism and of the civil rights movement lent further impetus to the development of a politics in which cultural diversity and its implications became a major political issue—at many levels of debate and action.

Arguments about what kinds of political institutions and social policies are needed to deal with diversity have become arguments about the virtues, and shortcomings, of 'multiculturalism'—a term which has its origins in Canadian public policy, but which now has a place in philosophical

debate as well as public policy all over the world. What exactly multiculturalism amounts to, however, is not so clear, since policies bearing that name vary, and principled defenses of multiculturalism do not always defend the same thing. But in broad terms, multiculturalism advocates dealing with diversity not by assimilating, or expelling, cultural minorities but by accommodating them. The significance of this development is considerable. Among Western nations such as Australia, Canada, and the United States, the dominant view of political elites as well as of the general public was that most minorities should be assimilated. In Australia it was once thought that indigenous peoples should be allowed to die out (or be bred out), and migrants assimilated (or, in the case of nonwhites, excluded). Now, however, public policy recognizes that people do not always desire assimilation (even if they do not wish to be excluded from membership of political society) and tries to find ways of accommodating diverse cultural traditions without requiring those who live by them to abandon their particular ways. As Nathan Glazer put it, "we are all multiculturalists now."<sup>3</sup> The political theory of multiculturalism tries to explain why—and addresses the problem of how—diverse cultural traditions should be accommodated.

These two social movements which have produced feminism and multiculturalism are in important ways the manifestation of a more general development of ideas over the past three centuries. Of central importance here is the idea of freedom. Feminist thinkers, from Mary Wollstonecraft and Harriet Taylor onwards, have been preoccupied with the *emancipation* of women. And in the history of debate about the resolution of cultural differences, those who have defended the idea of accommodating dissent have also been advocates of freedom—and in particular of religious freedom. Feminism and multiculturalism stem from common concerns about human freedom. To the extent that they are also concerned about the *equal* freedom of men and women, and of people of different cultures or religious traditions, feminism and multiculturalism are also theories of equality.

If these two sets of ideas reflect some common concerns it is because they share a common theoretical inheritance. Both have their roots in certain Enlightenment ideas about the value of individual freedom, the importance of human dignity, and the need for toleration rather than the suppression of difference or disagreement. They have their roots in ideas that might broadly be described as liberal. This is not to suggest that all feminists or multiculturalists are liberals. That would be far from the truth, since many explicitly reject liberalism as incapable of doing justice to their moral concerns. Nonetheless, if there are many who try to advance the cause of feminism or of multiculturalism by criticizing

liberal ideas, this is as much as anything a reflection of the dominant place liberal ideas have in these two traditions of thought.

But while these two traditions of thought share a common inheritance, they are also in serious conflict. While they may both agree about the importance of freedom and equality—of human emancipation—their different particular concerns put them at odds. Their political aims are in tension. This has been argued most vigorously by Susan Moller Okin, who poses the question: “Is multiculturalism bad for women?” and answers “yes.” But the question could as easily be turned around if one asks: “Is feminism bad for multiculturalism?”—which could readily produce an answer which is much the same. That would bring us to a larger question: if feminism and multiculturalism are in tension, what is to be done? Which way should we go if we have to choose between them? Susan Okin’s suggestion is that, to the extent that the two are incompatible, so much the worse for multiculturalism. Feminist concerns should take priority. Some of her critics have tried to suggest that the tension is not as deep as she suggests, and that some resolution of this difference is possible. My contention, however, is that Okin’s analysis of the tension is fundamentally right; but the question should be resolved in favor of multiculturalism. Of course, the issue is complicated, and qualifications may have to be made, and a more nuanced understanding of both these ideas may give us a more subtle and less unambiguous conclusion. But while all that is true, it is important to state clearly what is the bottom line.

Yet before the bottom line can be defended, more needs to be said about the nature of the tension between feminism and multiculturalism, and also about the reasons for resolving the difference in favor of feminism. Only then can we turn to the defense of multiculturalism. But it ought also to be made clear now that such a defense will involve an argument for a particular understanding of multiculturalism—one which rejects the idea of group rights, and of many of the protections (or privileges) multiculturalists often claim for cultural minorities. If this argument runs the risk of giving offense, it is a risk of offending doubly.

## I. THE TENSION BETWEEN FEMINISM AND MULTICULTURALISM

Katha Pollitt puts the matter very clearly when she says that, while feminism and multiculturalism may find themselves allied in academic politics, as political visions they are very far apart. “In its demand for equality for women, feminism sets itself in opposition to virtually every culture on earth. . . . Multiculturalism demands respect for all cultural traditions, while feminism interrogates and challenges all cultural traditions.”<sup>4</sup> In this she is agreeing with Susan Okin, who points out that

“most cultures are patriarchal . . . and many (though not all) of the cultural minorities that claim group rights are more patriarchal than the surrounding cultures.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, some cultures not only have customs that aim to control women and render them servile to men’s desires and interests, but have traditions that are so much concerned with the control of women that they virtually define the culture in question.

Feminism and multiculturalism are in tension because feminism’s overriding concern is the emancipation of women from such circumstances, while the advocates of multiculturalism are concerned about how cultural minorities can retain their customs or their cultural heritage in societies which do not share their values. This means that, for feminism, cultures that do not accord women equal dignity, and do not consider that women should have the opportunity to live fulfilling and as freely chosen lives as men, should not be given succor. Equally, for the defenders of multiculturalism, minority cultures should be able to resist the encroachment upon their traditions, including those that confine women, by the dominant culture seeking to impose its allegedly universal values upon all groups.

The extent of this conflict between two different worldviews is evident not only in the philosophical literature on multiculturalism, which addresses practical issues dealing disproportionately with cultural differences over claims involving gender, but also in the cultural cases that come before the courts. When the cultural defense is invoked by those facing criminal prosecution, it is often to try to justify the maltreatment of women. In many cultural communities women are denied the same access to education as men, are subject to forcible genital mutilation in girlhood, or are given no say in the choice of marriage partner or in the question of whether to marry at all. Moreover, in many traditions, the recognized power of husband over wife leaves married women without relief from abuse within the home.

Feminism is in tension with multiculturalism insofar as it asserts that cultures such as these should not be condoned. Indeed, thinkers like Okin ask why a cultural group should be entitled to try to live by its ways if these ways violate the individual rights of their members. “Why shouldn’t the liberal state, instead, make it clear to members of such groups, preferably by education but where necessary by punishment, that such practices are not to be tolerated?”<sup>6</sup> In the end, Okin suggests that it is a serious mistake to think that, from a feminist point of view, minority group rights are a part of the solution to the problem of human development. On the contrary, they merely exacerbate the problem.

In the case of a more patriarchal minority culture in the context of a less patriarchal majority culture, no argument can be made on the basis of self-respect or freedom that the female members of the culture have a

clear interest in its preservation. Indeed, they *might* be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct (so that its members would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture) or, preferably, to be encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women—at least to the degree to which this value is upheld in the majority culture.<sup>7</sup>

Okin is quite right to identify this tension or conflict between feminism and multiculturalism. Some of her critics have tried to suggest that her view is not sensitive enough to the subtleties of the various cultural and religious traditions she criticizes, since some of them (like Islam) have historically been concerned about ameliorating the condition of women. And others have painted her as blind to the weaknesses—as well as to the imperial pretensions—of the liberal feminist ideology from which her arguments spring.<sup>8</sup> But these criticisms do not damage her contention that there is a conflict. Even if many of the religions and cultures Okin criticizes are in fact less harmful to women than she thinks, or indeed even if some of them are entirely benign, feminism and multiculturalism remain in tension to the extent that there are *any* groups which neglect the interests of women, and which seek accommodation within the polity. Their claims cannot be defended from a feminist point of view, for these groups, *ex hypothesi*, reject or fail to honor the values feminism upholds.

There is no question that there is a conflict between feminism and multiculturalism. The issue is, which should prevail when this conflict arises; which should govern, or inform the character of a society's fundamental political institutions?

## II. THE CASE FOR FEMINISM

To the extent that feminism and multiculturalism are inconsistent, why should feminism prevail? Okin's arguments on this score are wanting inasmuch as she devotes little space to explaining why feminism's claims should trump those of multiculturalism. It is one thing to show that multiculturalism is bad for women but another to show that this is sufficient reason to reject—or even weaken—multiculturalism. Nonetheless, this does not mean that Okin has no case, only that more needs to be said to draw it out so that it might be better appreciated.

Before doing this, one point that needs to be disposed of is the charge that, in putting her arguments, Okin is guilty of cultural imperialism. This kind of charge is not uncommonly made against those who criticize cultures or traditions other than their own—particularly if they criticize the customs or practices of colonial peoples, or of cultural minorities. This is a common fate met by outsiders who dare to criticize.



Yet the fact is that many of the claims made by feminists like Okin are also made by non-Western feminists (or women generally) who do find their own cultural traditions oppressive and offensive, or by women living in particular religious communities who are advocates or agitators for reform. Moreover, it is the explicit concern of Okin to address the question of whether culture can provide a compelling defense for what might otherwise be regarded as morally questionable conduct. She has examined the evidence and tried to argue that it cannot. Unless it can be shown that the very undertaking of such an exercise is wrong, it is hard to see how cultural imperialism can be at work here. If it is, many non-Western women are cultural irredentists; and there is no *prima facie* reason for Western feminists not to take their side.

The more serious problem, however, is that Okin does not fully explain why feminism's values should triumph in the contest with multiculturalism. Feminist values are taken as self-evidently true. According to Bhikhu Parekh, Okin simply takes certain liberal ideas to be self-evidently true, without appreciating that they have only a limited place in a morally diverse world.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, some of Okin's arguments allow us to draw out her reasons for thinking feminist values should prevail. (These reasons are also quite consistent with arguments she has advanced elsewhere in her writings, notably in her book *Justice, Gender and the Family*.<sup>10</sup>) First and foremost, to the extent that patriarchal values prevail over feminist ones, women's interests are seriously harmed, and if the harm is to be tolerated, some justification has to be forthcoming. But not any justification is going to be acceptable. Certainly no justification which leaves the interests of women out of consideration altogether is going to be acceptable; the equal consideration of the interests of men and women is fundamental. But more than this, it is not going to be acceptable to consider the interests of women as so fundamentally different from those of men that they do not desire liberty, or require self-respect. Societies or communities or traditions that inculcate or force women into particular social roles may not only stifle women's capacity to make choices about how to live their lives but also hamper the development of self-respect and self-esteem. In a patriarchal society "the healthy development of girls is endangered."<sup>11</sup>

The feminist objection to many cultures is that they perpetuate patterns of unequal treatment and control of women. Such women, even if they are not the victims of violence or cruelty, are left with little freedom to make choices, or to freely pursue life as they see fit. They lack personal freedom in the present, and have no power to make choices for their lives in the future.

What is implicit in these arguments is that freedom and the capacity to make choices are of fundamental value, and that multiculturalism does

not honor or recognize them. Feminism should be preferred because it does. In this regard, Okin takes issue with Will Kymlicka for this theory of *Multicultural Citizenship*, which grants group-differentiated rights to minority cultures, including those that practice overt sex discrimination. Although Kymlicka is sympathetic to feminist concerns, and says he would only grant group-differentiated rights to those communities which are internally liberal to some degree, Okin argues that there are far fewer groups that would meet this test than Kymlicka thinks. "There are many cultures that, though they may not impose their beliefs and practices on others, and though they may appear to respect the basic civil and political liberties of women and girls, do not in practice, especially in the private sphere, treat them with anything like the same concern and respect as men and boys, or allow them to enjoy the same freedoms."<sup>12</sup> Indeed for Okin, as for feminism more generally, "the subordination of women is often far less formal and public than it is informal and private"—so much so that virtually no culture in the world could pass any 'no sex discrimination' test.

Okin's argument is that there cannot be a case for public support in a liberal state for practices which are illiberal. This means that public funding of religious education for ultra-Orthodox Jews, for example, is indefensible to the extent that young boys are given an education which prepares them no other life than one of religious study. This form of education is defended by Margalit and Halbertal,<sup>13</sup> but for Okin there is no grounds for this at all, since it is not an education which is concerned with the well-being of the individual within a culture—which must, she insists, include the right to exit from the group. In the ultra-Orthodox society that Margalit and Halbertal are defending, however, she argues, the problem is even greater for girls, since their education is oriented towards facilitating the religious life of boys. If this is so, she asks, what kind of personal identity can the girls develop, destined to adjunct female status within the culture that controls their future? If this is to be justified, it cannot be on liberal grounds.

Okin's argument in the end suggests that the reason feminism should take priority over multiculturalism is that feminism is truer to liberal values. Liberalism's most important moral commitments, for her, are to liberty or autonomy, and equality. Thus, while she would welcome "a multiculturalism that effectively treats all persons as each other's moral equals,"<sup>14</sup> what that would require is a multicultural society in which all cultures met more exacting (liberal feminist) standards of female autonomy and gender equality.

The implications of this view should be emphasized, for they are important. Cultural communities or traditions which are inconsistent with the standards of liberal feminism should not be encouraged, or subsidized

with public funds. The liberal state ought, in fact, to take active steps to educate such groups so that the scope for coercion of women and girls within the family is reduced. Furthermore, where necessary, the state should punish those whose practices harm women, to make clear that such things will not be tolerated.

### III. THE CASE FOR MULTICULTURALISM

While the feminist case, particularly as presented by Okin, is a powerful one, I think it should be resisted. But before going on to argue why, something needs to be made clear. Many of Okin's critics have tried to argue against her case by suggesting that multiculturalism and feminism need not be in conflict, and that a slightly different (or more subtle or sophisticated) theory would allow space for both political stances. Such writers as Kymlicka, Nussbaum, and Parekh accept the importance of Okin's concerns, but think that some resolution of the conflict she identifies is possible. Kymlicka wants to see feminism and multiculturalism as allies working to revise earlier, "complacent" versions of liberalism; Nussbaum thinks that a Rawlsian "political liberalism" offers a suitable compromise which is sensitive to feminist concerns as well as to cultural sensibilities; and Parekh thinks that a theory which requires liberalism to engage in open discourse with other cultural traditions will allow us to select appropriately which liberal values to uphold along with those cherished by other cultures. Yet none of these writers, to my mind, has recognized Okin's fundamental point: when the interests of women (as feminists construe them) come into conflict with the claims of culture, only one can prevail. According to the theories of multiculturalism she criticizes, the claims of culture should prevail—with the active support of the state. She thinks that feminism—and liberalism—require that the interests of women trump the claims of culture. There is no theoretical halfway house. In the realm of practice we have to recognize that there are halfway houses, since practice is always a compromise (and one in the process of evolution) rather than an exemplification of some pure, static, theory. But theory has to bite bullets. Okin's theory does this by suggesting that, when multiculturalism and feminism come into conflict, feminism should always prevail. Most of her critics have not been so clear.

I would like to argue that when feminism and multiculturalism come into conflict it is the latter that should take precedence. Before the argument is presented, it will be important to say something about the theory of multiculturalism I want to defend, for it is very different from the view advanced by writers like Kymlicka, or Margalit and Halbertal—though it is also a theory Okin criticizes and rejects.

The conception of multiculturalism I wish to put forward has its basis in certain liberal ideas, most important among them the idea of toleration. In a world of cultural diversity and, hence, fundamental ethical disagreement, a good society is one in which differences are accommodated and tolerated rather than resolved by force in favor of the powerful. In such a society the state would not exercise power to assimilate dissenting views to majority belief, or to expel dissenting people within or beyond its borders. Indeed, it would not have the power to do so. At the same time, however, it is also true to say that society is not made up of fixed or unchanging, neatly defined and divided groups. On the contrary, it is composed of numerous overlapping communities and organizations, and religious, linguistic, and cultural traditions which are not all entirely stable. And these groups wax and wane in accordance with social and political circumstances, and also in accordance with the loyalty of their members. In a world of such diversity and instability, the accommodation of difference requires not only a toleration of disagreement but also a structure which does not privilege particular groups or traditions. A multicultural society, in short, is one that accommodates a diversity of groups but does not accord any group a right to cultural sustenance or preservation.

To put it slightly differently, in this view of multiculturalism there are no cultural rights. Groups, or religious or cultural traditions, in the end, have to survive by their own resources. They may survive because individuals, who are free to associate, accept the authority of the group or tradition, and sustain it by remaining members and devoting their energy and resources to keep it going. But if these communities cannot retain this loyalty they will wither. In the end, groups do not matter in themselves. They only matter because they are important for the well-being of individuals.

On this view, groups which act illiberally are not entitled to any special protections so that they might continue to live by illiberal values. But neither is the wider society or the state entitled to intervene in such societies to ensure that they become more liberal or more like the majority of people in society in their practices and beliefs. Groups are not to be entrenched, any more than they are to be eliminated. Indeed, the authorities in such groups are given no explicit recognition, and what power they might exert over their members depends for its legitimacy on the acquiescence of those members, who have always the right to exit from the community of their fellows.<sup>15</sup>

For many multiculturalists, this view is unacceptable because it does not give cultural groups much recognition, and certainly gives it little *external* protection.<sup>16</sup> It does not grant groups subsidies to allow them to preserve their languages if they are dying out, or fund them to enable

them to support their arts or other cultural practices. So smaller or poorer groups are less likely to survive as their members assimilate into the wider community. Indeed, on this view culture does not count as a justification for anything. One cannot claim exemptions from the law on cultural grounds; culture does not provide a justification for actions which are regarded as criminal or breach a contract or are tortious. (Equally, one cannot borrow from Shylock and then claim that Christian prohibitions against usury entitle one to repudiate the debt.)

For many liberals, and liberal feminists in particular, however, what is disconcerting about this view is that it leaves illiberal groups free to deal with their own members, tolerating their practices even when the wider society finds them abhorrent. For as long as members acquiesce in the ways of their communities or traditions, the view of multiculturalism I advance suggests that they be tolerated.

Before attempting to explain how such a stance can be justified, however, I would like to expound the most serious feminist objections to such a view. Once again, the most powerful arguments come from Susan Okin. First, if cultural groups are not homogeneous but are made up of elites and masses, and if it is important not to entrench the power of elites by privileging them with special support or recognition, does this not mean that we should be wary of just leaving groups alone, since that simply allows elites to remain in power. In this context, the elites might be men, and the powerless masses, women.<sup>17</sup>

Second, acquiescence may not be much of a foundation for the legitimacy of cultural practices “if the ‘acquiescence’ by some in cultural practices stems from lack of power, or socialization into inferior roles, resulting in lack of self-esteem or a sense of entitlement.”<sup>18</sup> If female members of some cultures imbibe their sense of inferiority from birth, their acquiescence says little about the legitimacy of the group, but a great deal about its power over its weaker subjects. The theory of multiculturalism being defended here simply looks insensitive to differentials of power.

Third, the theory pays far too little attention “to the enormous scope for coercion that exists within the private sphere of family life.”<sup>19</sup> Here Okin refers to a particular example I offered to account for the limits of tolerance of illiberal practices. In the case of forced marriages within immigrant cultures, I argued that such marriages could be, and in places like Britain were, rightly annulled on appeal because they were entered into under duress. The immigrant community, though entitled to try to live by its ways, has no right to expect the wider society to enforce those norms against the individual. But for Okin this sends a message that parents may coerce their daughters into marriage if they can get away with it. In fact, families can make it extremely difficult for a daughter

to invoke her individual rights against the family's insistence on abiding by their own customs. It is in this context that Okin wonders why the liberal state should not make it clear to members of such groups, by education or punishment, that such practices will not be tolerated.

These three objections are important because they go to the heart of the matter: the problem of social power. Feminists have long argued that women were subordinated not only by being deprived of legal rights but by the structure of fundamental social institutions, such as marriage and the family, which socialized them into beings who were incapable of freedom, and incapable of exercising power. And such power as some exercise is of questionable value if it is bought by the further dereliction of character.<sup>20</sup> The question now, however, is: does the kind of multiculturalism advanced here tolerate the differentials of power to which Okin refers?

The answer is, I think, inescapably yes. Elites in groups will usually dominate the masses. Many who acquiesce will do so because they have been socialized or manipulated into compliance, and many families will all too frequently bully their daughters into marrying unsuitable boys. (For every Elizabeth Bennett who chooses a Mr. Darcy, there is a Lata who forsakes a Khabir.) I do not think the reality of such power, or its destructive capacity, can rightly be denied.

The problem, however, is what is to be done about it. This is where I part company with Okin, and where I think this version of multiculturalism as toleration puts itself at odds with feminism. The view advanced here suggests that the problem of differential social power should be addressed by denying any greater authority, such as the state, the power to support or entrench existing power. Feminists such as Okin, on the other hand, believe that a greater authority, such as the state, should have the power to redress, if not overturn altogether, the existing balance of social power. But in my view this is not a good way to deal with the problem of social power.

The problem with addressing the imbalance of social power by creating or authorizing a greater power to correct it is that there is little reason to believe that the greater power will redress rather than exacerbate the imbalance. If elites can capture power in their own groups and communities, they are also better placed than the weaker group members to capture power at higher institutional levels. Even if the wielders of power at the center are members of different elites, however, it is all too often the case that elites have more in common with each other than with the masses, and will pursue their own interests first. Simply to assume that central power will be benign seems unduly optimistic, if not naïve; on the other hand, to assert that it must be so would be pointless, since one might then do as well to assert that groups must be benign.

As to the problem of determining the meaning of acquiescence, it is quite true that acquiescing may be the product of socialization rather than a reflection of any sort of independence. But the difficulty is that to ignore the preferences of individuals by imputing to them insufficient autonomy is also to deny them autonomy, or any sort of voice. If women are disempowered by the fact that their acquiescence in the social institutions which govern them is conditioned, they cannot be empowered by treating their preferences as inauthentic. There is a genuine dilemma here. The suggestion being made, however, is not that acquiescence be taken to mean full voluntary consent or enthusiasm for anything. It is only enough to suggest that a practice or tradition may have a certain minimal legitimacy because it is not rejected by its members. It means that one should be wary of threatening it, since to do so would be to threaten something which is valued by or has meaning for its members. But it does not mean that the practice or tradition is beyond serious criticism or undeserving of reform. The fact that people acquiesce in a practice or tradition simply means that one should be particularly cautious about the exercise of power to override or overturn them.

This goes in particular for institutions like the family. Feminists are quite right to emphasize how greatly human beings, and women in particular, are shaped and controlled by the exercise of informal power. But it is precisely because it is so subtle that it is difficult to deal with and still avoid doing great violence to people's lives. It is easy enough to annul a marriage in which young brides are coerced into taking husbands before they are ready to make any choice. But it becomes more difficult when the bride complies with her parents wishes out of respect and a deep conviction that this is her duty to marry, even though she has no desire to do so. Such a woman is in an even more invidious position than the coerced bride who can run away, for it looks as if she has made a genuine choice. It is hard to see what the state can do to prevent such things from happening, or what punishments it can mete out to alter people's thinking.

One general reason for arguing that the claims of feminism should not override those of multiculturalism, then, is not that the freedom of women is less important, or that feminism is wrong to think that women's lives in many cultures and traditions are highly constrained and unfree. It is rather that the solution to the problem does not lie in strengthening the power of the state to effect reform.

Nor may it be a very promising idea to have the state try to regulate cultural communities or traditions in the interest of women. For one thing, there is always the problem that the state will regulate in its own interests rather than in the interest of those it purports to serve. And its primary interest is in preserving its legitimacy and perpetuating its rule.

But even if we leave this aside, regulation is dangerous because it tends to reproduce the subjects whose behavior it seeks to shape or control. One thing Michel Foucault has shown convincingly is that “the legal and medical regulation of human behaviour tends to produce subjects who ‘recognize’ themselves in these regulative discourses.”<sup>21</sup> Once political institutions like the state are given the power to regulate for the definition of women and their interests it is likely to produce subjects who will conform to its constructions. But there is no reason to think that these will necessarily bear any relation to the interests of women.

Yet none of this is to deny that multiculturalism may not also be to the disadvantage of women, for reasons already canvassed in this paper. So something also needs to be said about why multiculturalism, at least in the version advanced here, should be upheld. One important reason is that, for all its failings, it is a form of decentralizing political and social power. To consider what this might mean, imagine what monoculturalism might mean. In a society characterized by cultural diversity, and marked by religious, linguistic, and ethical differences, the idea of allowing one particular cultural tradition to dominate should be troubling. Multiculturalism is a theory which suggests that no tradition be allowed to rule unchecked, for society sustains a variety of cultural traditions, each of which has its place. The trouble with this is that some lamentable traditions will also be capable of flourishing under such a regime. The trouble with the alternative is that there is a risk of one of those traditions acquiring hegemony.

The danger here may be no less serious under a liberal regime than under any other, if this is a liberalism which thinks it a part of its task to engage in the cultural reconstruction of society. This became evident in the Australian Aboriginal experience over the past half century. During this time, a series of mostly well-intentioned governments and their administrators thought that it would best serve the interests of Australian Aboriginals if children of mixed descent were taken from their families and raised in white foster homes. This, it was thought, would at once remove them from communities where mixed descent might be stigmatized, and at the same time give these children the benefit of an education they might not otherwise receive. After all, it was argued, the race was dying out, and perhaps, it was also implied, its extinction would not be a bad thing. What the policy failed to anticipate, and which the report on the *Stolen Generations* that appeared in 1999 made abundantly clear, was the trauma visited not only upon Aboriginal children but on Aboriginal parents whose offspring were forcibly taken. These efforts at cultural reconstruction began to cease only in the 1970s.

In the end, the case for multiculturalism is a mixed one. It is filled with dangers and difficulties, many of which cannot readily be overcome.



There is a down side to multiculturalism, as feminists have made very clear. But at the same time, in societies which are in fact culturally diverse, it does provide an important check on other dangerous tendencies—most significantly the tendency for power to concentrate and grow.

In the modern world more generally, however, it may also be necessary because it performs another important function: to apply a brake on the process of social transformation, thereby allowing people some space, and time, to adjust. From the perspective of Western liberalism, it appears that cultural diversity is a Johnny-come-lately, which is bringing about an unexpected reshaping of modern Western society. Yet from the perspective of those whose traditions lie outside the West, and particularly for those in former colonial societies, the changes that have taken place in the twentieth century are dramatic and unsettling. A new religion settled upon the world, and with it came governments to build places of judgment. Even if this will prove in the end to be a good thing, the traumatic nature of this development—for those who have emigrated from their homelands, as well as for those whose homes have acquired new rulers—should not be underestimated.

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned

Feminism, like liberalism, is a reforming tendency. And in the end, the changes it seeks may be necessary and important. Multiculturalism, at least as it is described here, on the other hand, has a conservative aspect to it. But the case for multiculturalism is a qualified one. It is not an argument for upholding traditions and cultures which must be kept immune from criticism and resistant to change. It is only an argument for resisting the tendency of dominant ideas and political powers to acquire greater control than is desirable. Feminism may be bad for multiculturalism, but it is not bad in itself. And multiculturalism is not an unqualified good.

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## NOTES

1. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), p. 155.
2. Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 9–24, at p. 10. The same definition is offered by Okin in her essay "Feminism and Multiculturalism: Some Tensions," *Ethics* 108 (July 1998), pp. 661–84, at p. 661.

3. Glazer, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

4. Pollitt, 'Whose Culture?' in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum, pp. 27–30, at p. 27.

5. Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" p. 17.

6. Okin, "Feminism and Multiculturalism," p. 676.

7. Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" pp. 22–3.

8. See, for example, the essays by Bonnie Honig, Azizah Y. al-Hibri, Sander L. Gilman, Bhikhu Parekh, and Homi Babha, in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum.

9. Parekh, "A Varied Moral World," in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum, pp. 69–75, at p. 73.

10. Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

11. Okin, "Feminism and Multiculturalism," p. 680.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 678.

13. Avishai Margalit and Moshe Halbertal, "Liberalism and the Right to Culture," *Social Research* 61 (1994), pp. 491–510.

14. Okin, "Reply," in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* ed. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum, pp. 117–31, at p. 131.

15. I have tried to defend this theory elsewhere. See in particular the following papers: "Are There Any Cultural Rights?" *Political Theory* 20, 2 (1992): 105–39; "Cultural Toleration" in *Ethnicity and Group Rights*, ed. W. Kymlicka and I. Shapiro, *Nomos* 39 (New York: NYU Press, 1997), pp. 69–104.

16. The term is from Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 35 ff.

17. "Feminism and Multiculturalism," p. 675.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 676.

20. This is what Mary Wollestonecraft had in mind when she wrote: "Women, deluded by these sentiments, sometimes boast of their weakness, cunningly obtaining power by playing on the *weakness* of men; and they may well glory in their illicit sway, for, like Turkish bashaws, they have more real power than their masters; but virtue is sacrificed to temporary gratifications, and the respectability of life to the triumph of an hour." See *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, edited with an introduction by Miriam Brody (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 126.

21. This point is made by Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 78.