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AGOMONI
GANGULI MITRA

Women, Sexuality and Othering: A review of David Jacobson's *Of Virgins and Martyrs*

David Jacobson, *Of Virgins and Martyrs: Women and Sexuality in Global Conflict* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2013).

In this ambitious book, Jacobson explores difficult issues surrounding global conflicts, religion, and women. In a four-part thesis touching upon history, globalization, religious extremism—in the form of Islamism—and multiculturalism, Jacobson strives to unveil the various ways in which ‘women are now at the heart of the world’s most dangerous quarrel’ (2); namely, the one between the West and many in the Islamic world. Sexuality, violence, women’s status, and cultural, religious, and political conflicts are the ideas that lie at the heart of his project. Jacobson weaves together several important projects to present a rich, contextually informed picture of his thesis, which is that the ‘world’s present clash’ is at heart a ‘struggle over the woman’s body represented by two opposing paradigms: *honor* and *interest*’ (4); it is a clash between self-ownership and the demands of a community or culture. Although Jacobson deftly juggles these ideas, drawing from history, linguistic trends, fashion and dress codes, art and symbolism, social studies, political theory, and cultural trends, several parts remain deeply problematic and overly simplistic, making an otherwise interesting and provocative read at times frustrating.

The first part of the book delves into the early history of the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa and into the origins of biblical patriarchy and honor societies in the area as well as the subsequent evolution—beginning with the Reformation—of a culture of self-ownership and self-interest in Western Europe. The second part explores how globalization and global markets—essentially by opening borders and markets to foreign financial flow—have enabled women to break through the barriers of tradition and carve an economic and political space for themselves against all odds. Despite its darker side (e.g., sex trade, trafficking), globalization, according to Jacobson, has provided women with ‘greater sovereignty over their bodies’ (80). As an example, Jacobson cites Indonesia, which has actively encouraged foreign investment since the 80s. This, compounded by weak unions, an authoritarian government suppressing the Islamist movement, and the absence of tribal patriarchy, (91) has allowed for previously unseen growth and a far greater involvement of women in the manufacturing industry, and thus in the formal labor market. In a more

controversial example, Jacobson talks of *jineteras* (85), who are involved in a form of relatively highly paid sex tourism, although the author differentiates this activity from traditional forms of prostitution in other parts of the world. In the third part, through an exploration of the fundamentalist and extremist backlash to globalization, Jacobson unveils a tool, the Tribal Patriarchy Index—a connection between tribal patriarchic characteristics and violence—to explain and measure violent Islamist extremism (which he carefully distinguishes from the larger, global Muslim community). In the final part of the book, Jacobson examines contemporary multicultural Europe, with special attention to Britain and France. He argues that the French model of integration is superior to that of Britain because it allows for a lower incidence of radicalism and better educational and economic integration. Here the Tribal Patriarchy Index is once again put to use to measure religious extremism among second- and third-generation immigrants. Although in both countries there is a significant difference between the first- and second-generation immigrants, where women (and young girls) are outpacing their male counterparts in higher education (171), the trend appears to be greater in France. This, the author believes, lies at least in part in the different models of integration. That, despite the usual academic criticism of the French ban on the hijab, niqab, and burqa (a statement of body politics), for example, France’s national identity is one in which ‘[r]eligion accommodates itself to the state and the secular nation, not vice-versa’ (176), leading to more assimilation, compared to the UK’s traditional emphasis on multiculturalism. Here too Jacobson notes a significant relationship between tribal patriarchy and religiously motivated violence (184), and drawing from this and other forms of data (surveys, crime records, etc.), he argues that the French model of assimilation (to a secular state) offers better prospects than the British multiculturalism, which seems to result in greater ‘disenchantment from the surrounding society’ (187).

There is no doubt that Jacobson’s ability to draw upon facts and numbers with the same ease as historical, political, and legal anecdotes, as well as cultural and linguistic trends, makes for an interesting and thought-provoking read. I have, however, several points of contention with his analyses and interpretations.

The first and perhaps lesser concern is one of building the thesis as a conflict between honor and interest, which is compounded by the fact that culture and tradition are only two of many influences on women’s freedoms. Women’s status around the world is as much an issue of economic freedom as it is of culture. As Amartya Sen and others have extensively shown, women working outside the home, and who have an independent income, tend to have a better social standing in the household and in society.¹ Jacobson does devote many

¹ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), p. 191.

pages to discussing the educational and employment status of immigrant women in Britain and France. He therefore clearly recognizes the importance of the economic, educational, and political aspects of the discussion. However, although Jacobson presents how globalization has helped women, he fails to show the ways in which it has harmed them. Globalization has also increased inequality in many sectors, and women have suffered in great measure as a result. For example, women working in sweatshops or as contract workers for multinational garment companies often work under terrible conditions and are poorly paid, raising issues of gender justice and exploitation.² This in itself could have provided an interesting counterpoint to the initially posited honor–interest paradigm.

My central worry with Jacobson’s book, however, is in his treatment of culture and in a cluster of problems that includes stereotyping, false dichotomies, and a mild form of cultural imperialism. The first of these problems revolves around a lack of serious attention to diversity and complexity. From early on in the book, Jacobson seems to treat societies and cultures as homogenous entities, with a specific, overarching identity. True, ‘honor’ and ‘interest’ are crucial concepts in understanding attitudes toward women and their bodies, but Jacobson, while lightly touching upon various other influences, often fails to portray the complex ways in which cultural, political, and economic trends and institutions interweave to uphold and obstruct women’s interests. To illustrate my points, let me use an example from a different cultural, religious, and political context: sex selection and preference for the male child in some Hindu communities in India, a particularly poignant and worrying example of discrimination and oppression against girls and women. True, preference for the male child has roots in tradition, customs, and rituals; in the tradition of giving and expecting a dowry; and in the concept of honor, closely associated with the sexual purity of young women. However, the prevalence of sex selection in many parts of India has increased with development and modernity, contrary to expectations. This is because rather than arising solely from the confluence of traditional mentality and poverty as is often thought, preference for the male child as we see it today is the result of multiple factors, including a lack of access to formal employment, a decrease in fertility, an increased status aspiration and consumerism in the political economy of marriage, and expensive dowries in urban culture.³ Just as importantly, some the strongest and most critical voices against son preference

2 I. M. Young, ‘Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model,’ *Social Philosophy and Policy* 23/1(2006), pp. 102–130.

3 Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, ‘Children of the State? Unwanted Girls in Rural Tamil Nadu,’ in Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (ed.), *The Scandal of the State: Women Law and Citizenship in Postcolonial India* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 192.

also come from within the cultures in which such attitudes and practices are prevalent. Describing the conflict between so-called traditional, homogenous cultures and supposedly modern, and equally homogenous ones can be deeply misguided. I believe that Jacobson makes a similar mistake in heavily relying on contrasting cultures based on honor and those based on interest. Despite the frequent absence of legal and institutional provisions to empower them, the fact that women continue to negotiate and construct their own space among power hierarchies should have received greater treatment. In a book about women and sexuality in contemporary conflicts, the voices of women remain in the margins, and Jacobson's thesis remains incomplete without seriously addressing the political, cultural, and academic voices of women (scarce as they may be) who live within those contexts.

It is true that contexts that Jacobson labels as 'honor societies' often instrumentalize women and their bodies for the 'great good': that of the family, community, or society. However, women in interest-based contexts, although autonomous to a much greater extent and far better protected by institutions, are also objectified. Nor are the control of sexuality, especially female sexuality, and violence against women absent from high-income, industrialized, and Western countries. Although Jacobson addresses most cultural characteristics relatively subtly, in the early pages of the book, he often presents his concerns as an 'us' versus 'them' conundrum. In his story, Western societies (almost too simplistically) play the role of the evolved and civilized protagonists (e.g., the Netherlands), whereas others are portrayed as essentially backwards. A greater treatment of topics such as date rapes, campus rapes, domestic violence in Europe and North America, and transnational gender movements such as SlutWalk would have enriched the thesis considerably.

A final, related concern is that of cultural imperialism, or echoes of it. Upon closing the book, the reader comes away with an uneasy feeling that although the author addresses carefully, and at length, the patriarchal norms underlying Islamist radicalism, he ignores the political dynamics that sometimes reinforce the plight of oppressed Muslim women. There is little treatment of how Western societies such as the United States have used women's interests and bodies as a battleground, especially in justifying aspects of the War on Terror or the war in Afghanistan. In an essay⁴ that is now a classic in the field of gender and cultural studies, Abu-Lughod has astutely pointed out the ways in which the plight of Afghan women (used as an important justification for military intervention) bore important parallels to the discourse held by imperialists and

4 Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?' *American Anthropologist*, 104/3 (September 2002): 783-790

missionaries (about child marriage, the self-immolation of widows, the veil) to justify colonial rule. Jacobson is clearly not an imperialist. Nor is his treatment of the importance of honor, for example, something that other experts would entirely dismiss. However, the reader will still find underlying symptoms of what Gayatri Spivak, back in 1988, termed ‘white men saving brown women from brown men.’⁵

Not only that, the concepts around women’s bodies, sexuality, tribal patriarchy, immigration, and radicalism are indeed so intertwined that it is sometimes difficult to understand which point the author is talking about. One way out for Jacobson from several of these problems would have been to pay greater attention to other patriarchal societies around the world, those not arising from Abrahamic religious contexts. Although he draws several short examples from countries, including Cuba, Indonesia, and India, a deeper analysis of these contexts and drawing analogies within his argumentation, rather than using these examples as vignettes, would have served him well. In fact, the emphasis on biblical patriarchy and Muslim extremism seems at odds with the apparent theme of the book. As Jacobson correctly points out, global conflicts are reflected within communities and families, but although he refers to similar issues arising within other communities, an extensive look at this phenomenon among non-Muslim communities is sorely lacking. To take one possible example, Indian history and the Indian diaspora’s Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities could have provided interesting analogies and contrasts. There exist several painful accounts from the Indian Partition (1947) of heads of Hindu and Sikh families and villages murdering their own wives and daughters, or forcing them to commit mass suicide, to ‘save’ them from real and perceived violent Muslim backlash, thereby upholding not only their modesty but also, and perhaps as importantly, the honor of the community. Indeed, the stories of India’s partition, rife with examples of conflicts and symbolism over women, their bodies, and sexuality, would have proven an interesting and contrasting example for Jacobson’s theory on tribal patriarchy. For more contemporary examples, Jacobson could have drawn more extensively from child and forced marriages, female genital mutilation as a cultural rather than a religious practice, and surgical reconstruction of the hymen in China as compared to the same practice in the Maghreb region. Without an extensive treatment of women and sexuality in a variety of contexts, the book becomes less about women and sexuality in global conflict and more about oppressed Muslim women and the threat of radical Islam for the West.

5 Lila Abu-Lughod, ‘Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?’ *American Anthropologist*, 104/3 (September 2002):784

This review is not an appeal for cultural or ethical relativism. On the contrary, the injustice and violence perpetrated against women in this age of globalization and conflict is an issue that truly calls for ongoing discussion—academic, political, and societal. Upon finishing the book, however, I was left with the nagging feeling that women’s issues as a recurring theme does not a book about gender make. Although gender concerns are present, they seem to provide a backdrop for a thesis more concerned with Islamist terrorism and its tribal patriarchic roots than one truly centered on women and sexuality.

Agomoni Ganguli Mitra
Emmy Noether Research Group “Political Philosophy and Bioethics”
University of Muenster, Germany
email: agomoni.ganguli@gmail.com

