

Book Review

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Iranian Feminism and Transnational Ethics in Media Discourse. Sara Shaban. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2021. 280 pp. \$63.35 hbk.

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In 2017, when Iran saw an eruption of protests around rising oil prices, one voice, very different from prevailing campaigns, fought to be heard. Vida Movahed, now known as “the Girl of Enghelab Street,” stood on a box in Tehran to protest the country’s compulsory hijab law. Her brave image gained traction online and soon, she became the unofficial symbol of the #WhiteWednesdays movement, that saw women from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and others post videos and photos of themselves with uncovered heads or wearing white scarfs to show solidarity with activists protesting this arcane law. The reactions of Western feminists on the issue was galling and notably aggravating when Swedish prime minister, Ann Linde, wore a hijab on her visit to Iran, in a move construed as a show of tacit support to antifeminist laws.

Using the White Wednesdays campaign as a case study, Sara Shaban—an assistant professor of communication at Seattle Pacific University—compares the narratives between mainstream U.S. news media and Iranian women on Twitter, through the lens of Femonationalism, to analyze discourses regarding Iran, Islam, and feminism in her intriguing publication *Iranian Feminism and Transnational Ethics*. As she explains, “Femonationalism is a term created by Sara Farris (2017) that describes rhetoric utilizing feminist and gender equality language to promote anti-Islamic and xenophobic campaigns, usually practiced by right-wing, conservative Westerners.” In the process, she sharply brings to the forefront the failure of Western media and feminism to consider the distinct characteristics of feminist ideology and demands of women in non-Western cases.

Considering the implications through the lens of Femonationalism is especially important since the numbers of Muslim women in Western countries continue to rise and thus demands a change in discourse where predominantly the Muslim women is considered a victim of “of Islam and Muslim men” and where there is little consideration of the persecution they face within Western situations. Journalism around such issues is lacking in nuance and perspective. Since they do not employ a transnational feminist framework and use elite sources and debatable structures of objectivity to

guide reporting, such media rhetoric creates an “othering of the Muslim” that hurts Muslim women in all parts of the world and especially women from Iran. This is especially dangerous given the dominance of Western journalism on the profession and scholarship in global contexts.

Shaban tackles certain important contemporary issues in journalism in a specialized circumstance that forcefully brings home the need for multifaceted understanding of Muslim women’s issues. This appreciation cannot be gathered by interviewing select people and employing dominant paradigms to frame a story. It requires a deep dive into the history, culture, and incidents that have shaped the politics and economics of the region. For instance, if foreign reporting bureaus had not been shut down and international media collaborated better with local reporters then perhaps Western feminism would have better understood that the protests against the hijab were not just about controversies surrounding the compulsory covering of heads by women but also about choice; the choice of women to cover their heads or not. As Shaban notes these women are not waiting to make their voices heard. Women have taken to alternative media platforms and social media to express views and opinions.

Shaban’s insightful critique of Western understanding and coverage of issues in non-Western situations is no simple display of the failures of Western media. The arguments, presented engagingly, display a deep understanding of a struggling profession and its strained structures under strained economic circumstances. “Western journalists did not necessarily come to these problematic representations of Muslim women on their own,” she says and explains the role of “native informants” in aiding these constructs. These informants point reporters to sources and help them understand situations but, also can, in certain circumstances, weave in their own biases and misinformed notions. The good news is that these have concrete and actionable solutions.

Shaban’s research emphasizes that reducing the use of elite sources, reaching out to marginalized women and collaborating with grassroots activists on social media and perhaps, most importantly, adapting clear ethical practices regarding journalism from transitional positions will help address crucial gaps. It is this nuanced and adaptable framework that makes this volume a welcome addition to the growing literature on feminism, activism, and media that extend our understanding of how Muslims, different communities, women, and activists can and should be ethically represented. As this monograph clearly emphasizes, if not done right entire communities are at the risk of misrepresentation that can prove extremely detrimental to the health of democracy.

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