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The Dissimilitude Paradox in Literary Studies: Islamophobia in Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Heterogeneity in Neshat's *Women Without Men*, and Finding a Way Forward in the New White Supremacist Era in the US

Abstract

This essay uses Shirin Neshat's film, Women Without Men [originally entitled Zanan-e bedun-e mardan], which is based on Shahrnush Parsipur's novel and Marjane Satrapi's adaptation of her Persepolis books to film, as case studies to explain why feminist and multicultural curricular reforms in US universities during the 1990s, which emphasize valuing diversity for its own sake, failed to prevent the rise of Islamophobia, sexism, racism, and other forms of hatred in the post 911 era. As a result of this failure, activists and scholars need to reconsider how to foster civil/human rights as well as basic respect for diverse beliefs and peoples. Socio-cultural psychology offers two alternatives to "diversity multiculturalism," which are the arguments of similitude and self-interest. While neither are perfect or even perhaps palatable solutions to conspicuous white supremacy in US government offices and policies since the presidential election of 2016, they should be included in discussions about remedies that can reverse trending bigotry.

Key Words: *Diversity, Multiculturalism, human rights, social cultural psychology* representations of Islam, Iranians, and contemporary Iranian constructs of gender.

INTRODUCTION

Women Without Men [originally entitled *Zanan-e bedun-e mardan*], Shirin Neshat's filmic version of Shahrnush Parsipur's novel by the same name, and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* franchise, which includes a two-volume graphic novel series and an animated film,[1] both treat watershed moments in the history of twentieth-century Iran. Nevertheless, these literary and filmic artefacts differ significantly in their

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[1] *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* and *Persepolis: The Story of a Return* were published in four volumes in France before being translated and sold in the US as two.

representations of Islam, Iranians, and contemporary Iranian constructs of gender. Comparing them demonstrates that local conditions shape feminist movements around the world and, as a result, women's concepts of rights and equality are diverse. It also shows that the local is heterogeneous and that there is no single "truth" about women's oppression locally or globally. More to the point of this essay, contrasting these depictions of women, gender, and Islam reveals that conventional liberal-progressive approaches to fostering appreciation for diversity—celebrating and otherwise emphasizing the Other's difference as a rich contribution to US society and culture—are less effective than two alternatives, which are the arguments of similitude and self-interest.

Thus, regardless of how repugnant these arguments are to most who identify as liberal or progressive, it is important to give serious consideration to these admittedly cynical methods of achieving just social change. The surge in Islamophobia and anti-immigrant bigotry or at least greater public expression thereof, intensified during the 2016 US presidential campaign and the subsequent election of Donald Trump.[2] As president, Trump has instituted policies that deliberately dismantle civil and human rights in the US.[3] One example is the shocking US Supreme Court decision, handed down during final edits to this essay, to uphold the Trump travel ban on several Muslim-majority countries simply because the executive branch invoked a hazy, ill-defined threat to homeland security. Another is Trump's policy of deliberately separating children from adult family members who have entered the US without visas and indefinitely detaining these minors while their families apply for legal entry and residency status (usually political asylum). These injustices and attacks on democracy underscore the need to revamp how activists and scholars make the case for civil/human rights and basic respect for diverse beliefs and peoples.[4]

Twentieth-Century Curricular Reform

[2] One response to the "new" white supremacy, as this essay names it, has been that "we [Americans] are better than this," which implies that white supremacy is antithetical to US cultures. While Islamophobia is a relatively recent form of bigotry in the US, anti-immigrant hatred and racism have a long history in the country, as evidenced by hundreds of years of legal enslavement of Africans and African-Americans.

[3] For an excellent overview of Donald Trump's attacks on civil rights, see the Southern Poverty Law Center's "America the Trumped: 10 Ways the Administration Attacked Civil Rights in One Year," at https://www.splcenter.org/20180119/america-trumped-10-ways-administration-attacked-civil-rights-year-one (2018).

[4] Clearly, the Trump era is not the first time in which US policy has been shaped by hatred; however, the ferocious, methodical of nature of his regime's assaults on civil and human rights—the conspicuous determination to reverse progress made in these areas since the mid-twentieth century—is not typical.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the English literature curriculum in the US, from pre-school through graduate and post-graduate, expanded the general definition of literature to include the idea that it is a useful tool for promoting social justice. One of the basic assumptions of this approach to literary studies is that expanding the canon and adopting the feminist practice of "reading against the grain" (from the perspective of the Other), can disrupt humanism's traditional dominance of theory and pedagogy which, rooted in Christian, Western European cultures, has strongly influenced if not wholly determined mainstream political and aesthetic ideologies in the US despite the country's broadly diverse population. The new, liberatory canon thus challenges the humanistic concept of subjectivity—our consciousness of our personhood—as unitary, constant, and "unconstrained by socio-historic forces" (Strickland, 1990). The goal of this liberatory theory and pedagogy is to socialize students not into patriarchies and racialized, classed hierarchal categorizations of texts as "great" or inferior but into a stance of opposition against unjust structures and a desire to remedy them.

Theoretically, this socialization is supposed to happen through reading the "history of a people by the internal logic of their own culture" and accessing the Other's cultural logic. Such reading enables those who do not share a common social location (individuals' and groups' social status as determined by the dominant population's definitions of alterity or difference, especially race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and religious affiliation) to recognize and value the achievements and beliefs of the Other (Gates, 1989). But there's a hitch. The US university, despite offering greater access to higher education to veterans of WWII and, later, women and people of color due to the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s, is not the great social equalizer it is portrayed to be in the "American Dream," which itself is a myth that is rarely realized by historically oppressed groups. Instead, education institutions, coopting late twentieth-century multiculturalist reforms, appropriate the Other politically and pedagogically, in order to subvert them and maintain the dominancy of white, middle-class cultural values, including, of course, the racism which this population maintains in its institutions and social structures.

Simply put, the university is an elite institution with a gate-keeping function that keeps more people out than it inducts into leadership, influence, and wealth. For example, in 2015 46.9% of white non-Hispanics aged 25 and over held a four-year university degree, but only 22.5% of Blacks and 15.5% of Hispanics (regardless of race) the same age had earned a bachelor's degree (Ryan & Bauman, 2016). Furthermore, just one-third of the population are university graduates. These data clearly show racial and ethnic disparity and a pattern of white privilege. But the full story may be worse than the data suggest. As Moser argues, data on diversity in education cover up a grim picture of inequity (2015). For instance, the culture of

higher education, which trickles down to elementary and secondary classrooms through teacher training programs, is normed around white, middle-class; patriarchal values regardless of the number of university graduates of color or their density in tertiary education institutions. One example is the impetus to erase linguistic difference by penalizing students who employ dialect or who overtly integrate experiential knowledge into their research. This same push toward universalization informs bilingual education in elementary and secondary schools, which is designed to eradicate the home language in order to produce a nation of English-only rather than truly bilingual speakers.

Another simple illustration of the university's perpetuation of the dominant society's practices and values is found in how the topic of civil rights is frequently approached in traditional disciplines, which do not include content and methods associated with Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies or Critical Race Studies unless individual instructors employ them in the classroom. Whether structural inequities exist depends on the academic field and, for the most part, the message to disenfranchised, oppressed populations is that great progress has been made and they should wait patiently while residual bigotry gradually declines. For instance, discussions of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Malala Yousafzai suppress these figures' radical messages about the impossibilities of economic justice under capitalism. Rather, the focus is on maintaining social order and the importance of girls' and women's education, which, until the 2016 presidential campaign, were cultural clichés given at least lip service in US public discourse.

In fact, a favorite lesson that secondary education majors develop on civil rights features Senator Robert Kennedy informing African-Americans in Indianapolis, Indiana, at a pre-scheduled campaign speech, that King had been assassinated. Kennedy's message is inspiring, but it is dominated by placating language and the main appeal is that the audience needs to leave the venue calmly. The lesson triumphantly concludes that Indianapolis was the only major city where riots did not occur that night. The explicit message is that justice cannot be achieved by violence; however, in the socio-political context of Trump-era US, the obvious subtext is that racism should be met with passivity and stoicism rather than active resistance (Note that this analysis of Kennedy's speech is in no way an endorsement of or advocacy for violence). In other words, this commonplace lesson inculcates students of color into an ethic of compliance with the hegemony—the cultural "middle" ground—and, rather than igniting a passion for social justice, it socializes white students into the white savior complex (the imperialistic dynamic that occurs when a self-serving, "heroic" white person rescues people of color, denying them agency and thus reifying their oppression). It demonstrates as Christina Gramatikov contends, "Without a basis in the histories and lived experiences of students of color, the present system

reproduces itself and remains a perpetual simulation of equality" rather than serving as a catalyst for change, bringing about actual equality (2017). This is to say that educational institutions continue to promote intellectual and cultural homogeneity in order to maintain the hegemony, despite well intentioned curricular reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (Atkinson, 2008).

Can Socio-Cultural Psychology Provide Solutions?

Socio-cultural psychology, also referred to as social psychology, may provide some practical, effective solutions to the cooptation of multiculturalism. This field asserts that psychological processes are primarily social in order to consider how liberatory theories and pedagogies inadvertently reinforce the very phenomena that they wish to undo. One proposal is that emphasizing similitude works better than focusing on diversity. The second is to employ the norm of self-interest to decrease Islamophobia, anti-immigrant bias, and other forms of hatred. Notably, the target population for these modes of persuasion does not compromise of extremists. Rather, the aim is to move a mass of average whites to become more progressive and to catalyze anti-racist, anti-oppression activism among moderate whites who agree that hatred is, simply put, wrong, but who have not been motivated to take action against structural or institutionalized action in the past—or, for that matter, to actively resist today's "new" white supremacy. In these ways, educational institutions continue to promote intellectual and cultural homogeneity in order to maintain the hegemony despite well intentioned curricular reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (Atkinson, 2008).

Irini Kadianaki and Alex Gillespie observe in "Alterity and the Transformation of Social Representations: A Sociocultural Account," that it is "unclear exactly how encountering alterity—difference—can be transformative, leading to changing social representations" and that contact with alterity does not necessarily lead to social transformation despite the claims and desires of liberatory scholar-teachers and activists outside the academy. To clarify, social psychology asserts that social representations are "collective representations" or sets of beliefs and ideas - religion, in fact - that communities generate for multiple purposes, such as governing behavior, explaining relationships between people and their world, and providing a means of communicating about the world (Moscovici, 2008). Moscovici explains social representation as a "system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history" (1973). According to this definition, religion is an example of a social representation. Social

representations are also "part of individual psychological functioning," writes Gillespie in "Social Representations, Alternative Representations and Semantic Barriers" (2008). In this article, he refers to religion to explain the relationship that social representation implies between collective beliefs and the individual. According to this view, throughout life a person, strongly socialized into a religion, is likely to interpret and explain the world in terms of that religion. The exception, of course, occurs when learners encounter alterity and question the veracity of the religion because "knowledge is not uniform and consensual but formed in varying degrees of dialogue with alternatives" (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015). Social psychology further asserts that not all experiences of alterity catalyze learning and lead to change. Kadianaki and Gillespie observe, "While there is increasing heterogeneity, diversity and contact with alterity in modern societies," social transformation does not necessarily flow from these interactions (2015). The authors go on to propose that social transformation hinges on self-reflection on the part of individuals who encounter or experience alterity. Self-reflection in this sense is a dialogical process "through which individuals turn upon their own representations by distancing themselves from them and making them objects of their thought and talk" (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015).

In other words, self-reflection occurs when learners interrogate and analyze their beliefs from the perspective that these principles are ideas rather than truths and, as such, co-exist with many other possible explanations of events and experiences. But self-reflection can be blocked under certain conditions. If, for instance, an encounter with the Other provokes fear, learners may not be able to distance or disassociate themselves sufficiently from pre-existing social representations that dominate their community, which prevents them from engaging in self-reflection. Or, learners may be immersed in "polemical representations" that militate against engaging in the dialogic necessity for expanding their knowledge (Kadianaki & Gillespie, 2015). Fear, in this case, is a semantic barrier. In contrast, the experience of pleasure is a semantic facilitator that fosters self-reflection and, as such, fosters change. Research shows that identifying similitude between the Self and Other is a powerful semantic facilitator. It establishes connections among concepts that otherwise appear to be different or contradictory. Logically, then, emphasizing difference—dissimilitude—may be a semantic barrier despite education reformers' strong allegiance to the principle that knowledge of diversity ultimately promotes social justice.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an interdisciplinary, intersectional approach to examine multicultural education reform in the 1990s. Specifically, it is informed by critical race theory, feminism, and socio-cultural psychology. The interrogation of *Women*

Without Men and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* to develop case studies on the effectiveness of these reforms rely on New Critical close reading, feminist, New Historicist, and post-colonial practices of "text" analysis.

Case Study: Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*

Satrapi's *Persepolis* narratives are an interesting case study in considering the argument of similitude's potential for promoting self-reflective dialogic and expanded knowledge, that ameliorate hatred. Conversely, they also demonstrate that identifying resemblances among different groups and their organizing social representations may involve constructing a dissimilitude that makes resemblances recognizable and knowable, often by means of a false binary. For example, recent white immigrants to the US who are non-native English speakers sometimes engage in highly racist discourse about people of color in order to establish their "Americanness," i.e. similitude with the dominant population. In this case, the

Argument from Similitude

- If S resembles P in X particulars, it is probable that S resembles P in one or more further particulars.
- S does resemble P in X particulars.
- Therefore it is probable that S resembles P in one or more further particulars.

resemblance between white Americans born in the US and a specific type of American immigrant hinges on both groups' difference from Americans of color, which, in the end, is a false binary. Significantly, *Persepolis* employs this type of dissimilitude to foreground an argument of similitude between Iranians and Westerners and counter anti-Iranian bias in the early post-911 era. The premise is that the protagonist, Marji Satrapi, a charismatic, precocious adolescent narrator who comes of age in Tehran during the Khomeini revolution in 1979, is so much like her peers in the West that audiences will learn that they share the quality of humanness with Iranians and that Iranians are not really the maniacal evil doers that George W. Bush claimed when he put Iran on his infamous "Axis of Evil." Thus, using the argument of similitude, Marji's story answers the deluge of anti-Iranian propaganda—some of it, like Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, produced by Iranian-Americans who fled Iran in the 1970s and 1980s (or their children)—that circulated at the height of Bush's so-called War on Terror when his administration twice considered taking military action against Iran (soon after 9/11 and again from 2005 through 2007). Educators and activists who were working to foster respect for populations were perceived as "suspect" in the post-911 hate-fest—especially Muslims, Arabs, Middle Easterners, Sikhs, and immigrants (and people

who "looked like" these populations)—quickly introduced the graphic novel to secondary schools and universities while other enthusiastic fans flocked to Satrapi's book signings, lectures, and the film. Scholarly essays lauded the *Persepolis* story's ability to "provide a productive avenue for beginning the process of critical thinking necessary for Western students to reconsider their [false, negative] beliefs about Iran, gender, and war" (Botshon & Plastas, 2009). It is still considered a narrative that counters Islamophobia and anti-Iranian sentiment.

However, the similitude between Westerners and Iranians proposed in *Persepolis* rests on its argument of dissimilitude between Iranians and Muslims. On one hand, Marji's character effectively counters depictions of Iranians and Iran as "evil" through her performance of antics that evoke empathy among audiences who see themselves in the jeans-wearing, heavy metal-loving, back-talking youngster with spunk. Marji is like them, an ordinary girl who just happens to be "different" as a result of the extraordinary circumstances wholly beyond her control. Additionally, the black and white graphics in the books and film render Marji white rather than a person of color or a figure who "looks like" an Iranian or brown-skinned immigrant.

In addition to calling attention to commonalities between U.S audiences and Marji, the story vociferously blames Islam for Iran's misdeeds at home and abroad. Throughout, *Persepolis* portrays Islam as homogeneous while suggesting that the theocracy that Ayatollah Ruhallah Khomeini imposed on Iran is representative of all Islam. In reality, Khomeini and Khomeinism were political and theological outliers even among conservative Shi'a scholars and clergy in the 1970s. Thus, just as negative stereotypes of Islam in the US depict Islam as a uniquely oppressive form of patriarchalism, *Persepolis* 1) essentializes the nature of Islam and Muslims, 2) focuses excessively on veiling, 3) depicts Islam as a monolithic belief system mired in religiosity, 4) characterizes Muslim men as misogynistic bullies and terrorists, 5) represents individual experiences as totalizing explanations of Muslim culture, and 6) portrays middle-class status as universal while erasing experiences of the working-classes and the poor (Keshavarz, 2007; Morrow, 2018). In effect, *Persepolis* improves Iran's image by blaming Islam for the country's suspected support of terrorism, human rights violation, oppression of women, and totalitarianism. Thus, it prompts U.S. audiences to reconsider stereotypes about Iran and Iranians, but at the expense of fostering Islamophobia by using an exaggerated argument of dissimilitude that is factually incorrect, inflected by hostility, and bigoted. Of course, dissimilitude operates far differently in *Persepolis* than US multiculturalists' conventional argument that diversity is good in and of itself and that simply knowing the Other will naturally erode fear and hatred of difference while leading to greater social justice. Regardless of this the *Persepolis* franchise demonstrates how hatred can be

reinforced—inadvertently or deliberately—once the argument of dissimilitude is activated.

Case Study: Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men*

Neshat's film, *Women without Men*, provides a clearer picture of the risks inherent in teaching about difference in order to combat hatred. While *Persepolis* is set at the beginning of the Khomeini era and the end of the US presence in Iran, *Women Without Men* explores women's lives during the beginning of the US franchise in 1953 when the CIA and British intelligence orchestrated the coup that ousted the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh after he nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (now British Petroleum or BP). Mosaddegh took this step in order to end approximately 50 years of petroleum "giveaways" to BP in which Iran received less than 20% of the profits while England earned about 100 million dollars annually. Although Mossadegh was committed to maintaining a democratic, secular parliamentary monarchy, the US and Britain installed Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a totalitarian dictator who went on to accrue a great deal of blood on his hands, but obeyed orders from the US and UK. Of course, the 28 *Mordad Coup D'état*, otherwise referred to as Operation Ajax by the US and Operation Boot by the British, is one of many events that set the stage for the Khomeinist revolution more than twenty years later.

Based on Parsipur's classic but banned novel—Parsipur has been imprisoned by both the Pahlavi and Khomeini regimes and she and Neshat are banned from Iran—*Women Without Men*, unlike *Persepolis*, offers viewers a cross-section of Iranian society in the 1950s by featuring the stories of four women whose personal crises intersect with the national emergency. Zarin (Orsi Tóth) is an emaciated young sex worker who is so traumatized by her exploitation by male clients and a female brothel manager that early in the film she is haunted by images of faceless men. Munis (Shabnam Tolouei) is a young woman from a lower middle-class family who becomes politically active in response to the coup but is strictly governed by her apolitical brother, Amir Khan (Essa Zahir), a religiose, who restricts her movements and is bent on marrying her off to almost any man so that he, too, can marry. Faezeh (Pegah Ferydoni) who is Munis' closest friend is infatuated with Amir Khan and dreams of marrying him, but he is oblivious to her. Fakhri (Arita Shahrzad) is secular, wealthy, middle aged and unhappy in her marriage to a prominent general loyal to Pahlavi, and her dissatisfaction peaks when a suitor from her young adulthood, Abbas (Bijan Deneshman) who has just returned to Iran from the US, appears and wants to renew their relationship.

Each woman reaches her breaking point and travels to a paradisiacal orchard in the desert outside of Tehran. Zarin is the first to leave the city on foot when her hallucinations start. For Fakhri, it is her husband's idle threat to marry a second time (strongly frowned upon by Pahlavi's government due to his "modernization" campaign) that prompts her to purchase the garden and house. Munis kills herself rather than be forced to marry and, in a feat of the magical realism that threads through the film, miraculously rises from the dead. Faezeh is first crushed by Amir Khan's marriage to another woman. Later she is gang raped after Munis joins nationalist protests that break out during the coup's early days and abandons her in a "tea bar," normally a sexually segregated space that in the film is patronized primarily by predatory men. Of the four, only Munis does not remain in the orchard but after an initial visit, she returns to Tehran, joins the male-dominated socialist party, falls in love with one of its youthful leaders, Ali (Navíd Akhavan), and plays a prominent role in carrying out the party's anti-imperialist actions during the coup. Significantly, the garden in *Women Without Men* is not actually without men—the groundskeeper-gardener (Ahmad Hamed) is a kind man who nurtures the critically ill Zarin. Nor does the refuge offer perpetual sanctuary. It is definitely not a feminist utopia, which is a departure from the *topos* of the garden in feminist European and South Asian literature.

As Zarin seems to be healing and Faezeh and Fakhri begin to feel safe, Fakhri becomes bored and decides to host a party for friends who are among Tehran's intelligentsia and *literati*. This triggers an influx of outsiders to the garden. In a shocking surprise to Fakhri, Abbas arrives with an American wife, revealing himself as superficial and unctuous. The other guests' exchanges, which had sounded profound and weighty in Tehran, are trivial and irrelevant if not ridiculous when uttered in the garden house, more so after the arrival of a contingent of Pahlavi's troops; boorish, ill-mannered bullies who are all too conscious that they have the power of life and death over the *literati*. Zarin, who relapsed just as guests arrived, dies during the party and Amir Khan shows up and proposes that Faezeh become his second wife, an offer that she vociferously rejects, realizing, for the first time, the extent of his patriarchalism. Meanwhile, in Tehran, Ali inadvertently kills a young soldier at the height of the coup's confusion. The symbolism is clear. Iran, like the garden, has been invaded and exploited by outsiders. Just as the four women's pursuit of agency—their capacity to act independently of patriarchal imperialism—ends in disaster; the movement to restore Iranian self-determination and the country's sovereignty quickly collapses. Moreover, both failures are abetted from within. Fakhri opens the garden to disruptive outsiders. Likewise, the Pahlavi government enables the US and Britain to control and exploit Iran.

This overview of the plot underscores the profound complexity of *Women without Men*. Not only does the film employ elements of magical realism to examine the four women's lives and psychology but its scope and depth are rarely captured in film media. The exquisite visuals heighten the film's intensity, as do Munis' and Zarin's embodiment of the film's theme. From the first scene, which shows Munis plummeting from the roof of her house in slow motion, the filmography confounds and seduces and when Zarin scrubs her skeletal body raw in a women's bath, viewers cannot resist watching despite the horrific nature of the scenes. The same is true of Faezeh's rape. *Women without Men,* thus, offers a multiplexed, heterogeneous representation of Iran and Iranians, intersecting the personal and political without heroizing characters or groups, or, alternately, offering an overly simplistic representation of the story's villains. For instance, major characters such as Ali, Munis, and Fakhri are multi-dimensional—alternately flawed, victimized, generous, idealistic, petty, negligent, fearful, and courageous. Even Amir Khan earns some sympathy when he proposes to Faezeh due to his despair about his deeply unhappy marriage.

The portrayed figures are abundantly human just as the film's treatment of gender and politics is nuanced. It proffers not one but a panoply of analyses of how both operated in Iran in the 1950s. For example, blame for Mossadegh's overthrow is placed on various agents, most obviously the US, Britain, and Pahlavi, but also Iranians who were paid to demonstrate against Mossadegh. Additionally, the film subtly faults idealistic nationalists and socialists—it's most heroic figures—for failing to anticipate that their resistance to imperialism might lead them to employ colonizing tactics, particularly violence, as shown when Ali, fearful and desperate to escape, kills a common soldier. The film deploys an equally sensitive, complex depiction of gender. First, it argues that imperialism is a macro-level manifestation of patriarchalism, most obviously by establishing the parallel between men's abuse of women and Iran's exploitation by the US, Britain, and its own government. Thus, Faezeh's rape, Zarin's abuse at the hands of clients, and Munis and Fakhri's regulation by male relatives mirror Iran's position in contemporary global politics and *vice versa*. But *Women without Men* avoids negatively stereotyping men by refusing to absolve women of their complicity in the prevalent patriachalism. A woman operates the brothel where Zarin works; Munis puts Faezeh at risk for rape by delivering her into the hands of sexual predators and the generous but fatally self-interested Fakhri invites troublesome interlopers to the garden refuge simply because she is bored and wishes to pursue a romantic liaison with Abbas.

Consequently, the audience realizes that women perpetuate patriarchalism and that even the patriarchy's female victims can and do contribute to women's oppression. Notably, too, the film avoids *Persepolis'* facile explanation of a pre-existing cultural

schema that Muslims are the villains and Islam is the root of all evil. In fact, in *Women without Men* Islam is represented as being as diverse as the film's characters, which include secularists, revolutionaries, agnostics, sinners, and the confused religiose. By this means and through its multi-valanced representations of Iranians, *Women without Men* is a magnificent depiction of the heterogeneity of Iranianess [*Irāniyat*]. Furthermore, *Women without Men*'s narrative and aesthetic are self-consciously rooted in Iranian traditions, for Neshat "was trying, with her husband and collaborator, Shoja Azari, to 'pioneer our own way of storytelling. It was about not following patterns or models within cinema, but following the conceptual art and poetic traditions of Iran" (Khaleeli, 2010). As a result, *Women without Men* is difficult and unfamiliar for Western viewers, less accessible and harder to understand than the flatter, simpler *Persepolis* that, like its black and white graphics, creates a false binary between Islam and Iranianess based on glaring misrepresentations of Islam.

The examples quoted are sufficient evidence that *Women Without Men* is a brilliantly executed study in dissimilitude of the sort that multiculturalism privileges due to the conviction that teaching about diversity will ameliorate bigotry. As such, the film also exposes the problematics of the multiculturalist position, for it garnered only small audiences, limited circulation, and more than the usual number of negative reviews from film critics given that it is an independent rather than a commercial film. *The Washington Post* dismissed it as "relentlessly dark" (Saslow, 2010). *The Financial Times* "complained that the film is a series of tableaux to which no one brought the *vivants*" (Andrews, 2010). Viewers lacking knowledge of Iranian aesthetics, narrative conventions, and literary elements registered similar reactions in informal commentaries:

> What I didn't like about this movie is that it always stays on the political surface. We notice that there is a revolution going on, but we don't get to see any historic context -- by way of saying "sit up and listen, USA, this is how you fecked [*sic*] up Iran in a big way". Communists as well as loyal supporters of the [Pahlavi] Shah somehow seem to be equally opposing "the system". I also didn't like how women are portrayed as helpless victims of one-dimensionally evil men. (oOgiandujaOo_and_Eddy_Merckx, 2009).

Clearly, this viewer misses the mark completely, wrongly (and arrogantly) mistaking her/his lack of knowledge as poor filmmaking. Another writer actually considers the film's complexity a flaw:

> It's not particularly successful, I don't like saying that, but I think . . . Shirin Neshat . . . has simply tried to weave too many strands . . . . The stories of the different women became a bit cacophonic, there was no unison message. (Self, 2010)

The complaint illogically alleges that the lack of a "uniform message" in *Women Without Men* renders the male characters "uniformly comedy sketch buffoons, the women martyrs" and that its rootedness in Iranian aesthetic traditions makes it "soporific" (Self, 2010). Again, the film's unfamiliarity—its dissimilarity—alienates the uninformed viewer, who, paradoxically, faults its lack of a single "message" or meaning for what he/she deems stereotyped representations of masculinity and femininity although it's unclear whether this analysis refers to Iranians or women and men generally. This reception strongly suggests that the argument of dissimilitude easily miscarries and has the potential for undermining the social justice project by giving learners opportunities to blame the Other for their own lack of knowledge and understanding, which, ironically, is a significant dynamic of bigotry in the first place. Thus, dissimilitude may be less effective than a discourse of similitude and even risks reinforcing fear and hatred. But similitude also has unintended consequences. For example, critical race theories warn that the "we are all human" approach (the principle that people are not really different because they share the common quality of being human) to fostering social justice obscures the need to undo structural and institutional barriers to equality because it universalizes and essentializes human experience.

Though well intentioned, it also strengthens the centrality of the dominant culture because the notion of "human" is almost inevitably defined in hegemonic terms. In other words, a universalized notion of humanness promotes the illusion that existing social structures can accommodate everyone's needs equally regardless of vastly diverse lived experiences and histories. This leads right back to Gramatikova's critique that institutions that erase their constituencies' differences reproduce the status quo while merely simulating equality (2017). It also presents social justice activists a conundrum that urgently needs solving given the ferocity of current attacks on the Other in the US and their negative implications for foreign policy, which affect global communities as well as civil and human rights standards locally.

The Self-Interest Norm

An alternative to the arguments of similitude and dissimilitude is built on the norm of self-interest. According to social psychologists, self-interest is a more effective motivator of political activism than ideology alone (Ratner & Miller, 2001). Studies show, for example, that people who do not think that public involvement directly

benefits them tend to eschew political activities because without self-interest, they 1) do not feel entitled to take action; 2) worry that they will be seen as illegitimate, and 3) do not think that others will value actions that are not motivated by self-interest (Ratner & Miller, 2001). As Ratner and Miller report, "Lacking a self-interested account, people may feel they lack both the moral authorization and the psychological cover [justification] to act" (2001). Another issue is that potential actors measure the effectiveness of their public involvement in terms of the advantages it accrues them. When they are not able to realize tangible, self-beneficial results in the short-term, they lose confidence that taking action will be efficacious.

This, unsurprisingly, fosters passivity if not apathy. In contrast, potential actors who believe that they will profit from public involvement are more likely to become publicly involved. One reason is the perception that they will be rewarded actors' fears of attracting negative attention, particularly anger (Ratner & Miller, 2001). In addition, data suggest that potential actors believe that self-interest signifies authenticity, honesty, and trustworthiness to the public. Actors think that if they are perceived as self-interested, they and their public involvement will be valued and, in turn, successful: "Once self-benefit is seen as an outcome of social action, potential participants are far more willing to undertake it" (Ratner & Miller, 2001). These findings may disconcert social justice advocates, but they are sufficiently convincing to be part of discussions about how best—meaning effectively—to stem the rising influence of white supremacy in US governance and stimulate hitherto unengaged actors to take a stand against individual and structural bigotry.

To achieve this goal of expanding social justice by means of the self-interest norm would entail persuading moderate whites (Attiah, 2018) that they will quickly accrue direct benefits by actively contributing to social justice initiatives, i.e. if they become public activists and advocates for this cause. What would that take? Clearly, the promise of moral and ethical edification (the notion that those who do not hate and who take action against systemic manifestations of hatred in social institutions gain virtue) which long has been a staple in discussions about the advantages of ending bigotry, has not been sufficiently inspiring. In fact, as of this writing, the progress of two major social movements that employed this appeal extensively, the civil and gender rights initiatives, have stalled, as evidenced by the impending end of Affirmative Action in college admissions, the likely reversal of the US Supreme Court's ruling that so-called gay marriage is constitutional, the same court's sanction of the Muslim travel ban, and loss of economic ground among people of color. That the prospect of ethical reward is insufficiently persuasive lends support to the idea that direct, reasonably rapid material gain would be a better stimulus than the arguments of similarity and dissimilarity.

In other words, an argument that the majority of whites will be economically better off in the foreseeable future—within their life span—might be efficacious. Of course, the claim that a just society benefits everyone has circulated for years, and there is extensive economic data to support it. Bigotry is expensive because it diverts funding from education, science, community development and a plethora of other social enhancement schemes and funnels it into costly punitive institutions, such as prisons, law enforcement, the immigrant detention industry (private, for-profit prisons housing immigrants prior to their asylum hearings), the military, and the ever burgeoning bureaucracies that maintain them. However, even this logic falls short because the benefits that it describes—superior health and education, transportation systems, a stable economy, low levels of violence, thriving arts—are felt only indirectly and in a generalized manner in the long term. Hence, this appeal is often met with skepticism, which leads to the conclusion that the payback for whites' mass public involvement in social justice activism must be direct and immediate. Frankly, this option is cynical and ethically repugnant. It smacks of bribery and capitalizes civil and human rights, which is a terrifying prospect—it's not difficult to imagine a dystopia in which corporations would profit from privatizing social justice, for instance. It also would be likely to coopt the progressive movement, for neither institutions nor individuals can retain their morality while embracing the immoral. But it may be effective. At the very least, the possibilities of the self-interest norm should be included in liberal and progressive discussions about how to diminish—ideally to eradicate—hatred from the most powerful, influential spaces in the US. Hopefully, this less than half-hearted proposal to employ this norm in social justice work will catalyze creative thinking leading to solutions.

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