

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

April 6, 2017

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*, University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 272 pp., \$27.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780816699490.

*A Letter to Foucault:
Selectively Narrating the Stories of Secular Iranian Feminists*

Kristin Soraya Batmanghelichi

Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's *Foucault in Iran* builds a chapter-by-chapter defense against critics skeptical of Foucault's engagement with the Iranian Revolution of 1979. But the pit stop the author takes in the fourth chapter linking Iran's women's movement to Foucault's writings is both daring and peculiar. At the start of the book, he rejects criticism that Foucault demonstrated a "gendered ambivalence towards the question of rights and civil liberties" in relation to his writings on revolutionary Iran. "The Reign of Terror, Women's Issues, and Feminists Politics," as the fourth chapter is titled, opens with a provocative letter ("An Iranian Woman Writes") penned by one Mme. Atoussa H. Published in a November 1978 issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Atoussa chastises leftists of the "Western liberal Left" for their sympathetic advances towards the Islamic revolution, singling out Foucault by denouncing his ideas on "Muslim spirituality" and the potential calamities she predicts will befall Iran should Khomeini remain in control. Suggesting he look to passages in the Qur'an for reference, she points to *surahs* whose alleged misogynistic undertones are incompatible with gender equality and minority rights. Clearly fearful of an impending "Islamic" government, she adds the example of Saudi Arabia among a litany of nations where a Muslim majority is more engaged in brute force and limiting freedoms than in pursuing a heightened spirituality (114).

A few sentences into this missive, Ghamari-Tabrizi's takedown of her appears imminent. The author has positioned this letter writer as an out-of-touch, diaspora Iranian feminist residing in Paris who not only failed to grasp the forces behind the popular mobilization to remove the Shah from power,

but also had little understanding of basic facts about Islam, Iranian politics, Foucault, and even women's equality. In many respects, in exposing the fallacies and weaknesses of her argumentation, Ghamari-Tabrizi swiftly condemns all of the sentiments expressed in her letter, pointing out its "Orientalist prejudice" and calling out its trivial textual essentialism—or, as he surmises, "a familiar trope in twenty-first-century political debates over headscarves and the vulnerabilities of Muslim women" (114). Given such marketing, it seems that Atoussa's letter has no redeeming qualities. Ghamari-Tabrizi is obviously so unimpressed by her fears of diminished women's rights at the hands of an "Islamic" government that he cannot seriously consider them; rather, he is occupied with highlighting her ignorance of the diversity of Islamic practices around the globe. Hence her statements are rendered illegitimate, hyper-reactive, and emotional; she has exposed her failure to understand the many nuances and legitimate grievances of her own people. Moreover, her letter is an insensitive and historically inaccurate articulation of Iranian women's true grievances, of which any keen and informed observer of the "situation of women in Iran" should be more vigilant (115).

Yet, in what ways does Ghamari-Tabrizi's interpretation of Atoussa's letter forestall any other possibilities of feminist agency and consciousness that were developing during this revolutionary moment? Should Atoussa be ridiculed for not accessing the language of post-colonial, Third World feminist discourse? In what follows, we will examine how such a move to reduce Iranian women, such as Atoussa, to a "bourgeois creature alien to her [own] culture"¹ does not aid in furthering any understanding of the historical and political contexts within which everyday Iranians were not only attempting to make sense of the new political ideology taking shape under Khomeini, but also to predict its potentially wide-ranging consequences for Iranian women at home and abroad.

Responding to a Woman's Voice: Foucault Writes Back

In the October 1978 piece entitled, "What are the Iranians dreaming about?"² Foucault's radar was attuned to a political spirituality³ developing in those revolutionary days. Capturing statements made by ayatollahs and their supporters, he observed this theory crystallize in the streets while interviewing religious leaders, students, intellectuals, and ex-guerilla fighters who allegedly worked inside "the traditional society" and praised only "Islamic government" during their lengthy conversations.⁴ Foucault saw their aspirations for Iran's future as transparent and unified: the Iranian people did not chant "*engbelab*" (revolution); they knew whom they wanted to lead them and under which value system to construct this new post-Pahlavi Iran. Foucault surmised that what would happen next would likely be the result of a

¹ See Reza Afshari, "Egalitarian Islam and Misogynist Islamic Tradition?: A Critique of Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic History and Heritage," *Critique: Journal of Critical Studies of Iran and the Middle East* 4 (1994): 13-33.

² See Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 203-9.

³ Ghamari-Tabrizi interprets Foucault's "political spirituality" as being "romanticized [by Foucault] as a new mode of revolutionary expression (nothing more than an ideological foundation for a religious tyranny)." See Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 117.

⁴ Michel Foucault, "What Are the Iranians Dreaming about?," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, October 16-22, 1978, in Afary and Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution*. Available online at: <<http://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/007863.html>>, (accessed January 30, 2017).

revolutionary process to which the Iranian people would submit themselves. Notably absent among these interviews and soundbites were comments from Iranian women. And if he had any in-depth conversations with them, specifically about how this change in government and process would impact them, he does not say.

But in Paris, Atoussa H. was taking note. As described above, and narrated by Ghamari-Tabrizi, soon after her letter hit the *Le Nouvel Observateur* stands, it *did* prompt a response from the French philosopher himself though for reasons not divulged by him. His remarks were brief and didactic in nature. Foucault wrote of his travels to Iran, where he witnessed millions of Iranians shouting “Islamic government” in the streets, apparently ready to die for this new cause and the Ayatollah Khomeini. Following his retelling of these events, he rather unsubtly encouraged her to seek further self-reflection on the revolution’s genealogical origins and thus recognize the dynamic forces that gave fruit to the resounding cries for regime change. Critics were likely seeking to use Atoussa’s letter as evidence of his naïveté or as a word of caution, imploring him to “reconsider his position and acknowledge the pitfalls of defending the Islamic Revolution” (115). But his retort blunted their moves, and as is made clear in Ghamari-Tabrizi’s contextualization of the exchange, he found Foucault more adept at understanding Iranian politics than Atoussa. “Foucault showed more sensitivity towards the Orientalist proclivities that informed Atoussa H.’s comments” (115), he observes, explaining:

Foucault was more concerned with the revolutionary movement and the realities that it was generating in its wake. He insisted that one should not draw an unmediated connection between the Islamic dogma and a literal reading of the Qur’an with real-life and revolutionary experiences of the ordinary masses. (116)

It is extraordinary then that Ghamari-Tabrizi turns skeptical of Foucault’s lack of foresight and obtuseness in the question of women’s status. He expresses incredulity over Foucault’s apparent silence on a number of issues, chiefly “on the ‘imposition of the *chador*’ and Ayatollah’s [sic] Khomeini’s order to abolish family protection law further confirm feminist skepticism of his theory of power.” He is simply puzzled by the fact that the renowned “philosopher of gender and sexuality saw no spirituality in women’s protests against mandatory *hejab* during the first post-revolutionary celebration of the International Women’s Day on March 9, 1979” (121). He asks, “How could he dismiss a global feminist movement that supported them, both by taking part in rallies in Tehran and mobilizing women in Paris, New York, Milan, and London” (121)?

Given Foucault’s monumental corpus, this kind of question seems hyperbolic and like rhetorical posturing at best. Why would there be any presumption that Foucault would be knowledgeable, investigative, and/or deeply engaged in issues of gender equality relative to Iranian women when there has already been a vibrant debate among feminists who point to the absence of “woman” throughout his work?⁵ This particular question naturally ignites a domino effect of similar inquiries: Who is qualified to speak on behalf of Iranian women’s “situation”? Who is afforded the right to assess the revolutionary fervor taking place on the ground? And for added context and frame of reference: How many letters were similarly

⁵ See Terry Aladjem, “The Philosopher’s Prism: Foucault, Feminism and Critique,” *Political Theory* 19, no. 2 (May 1991), 277-291. See also Christine Di Stefano, “Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodern-ism,” *Women & Politics* 8, nos. 3/4 (1988), 20.

written by Iranian women living abroad who feared compulsory *hejab* and asked themselves how it might directly and possibly detrimentally impact their families, mobility, education, employment, and relationships? Surely even an “out-of-touch” Parisian-Iranian could add her voice to the cacophonous pile of feminist dissent, even despite the fact that hers was particularly filled with Islamophobic rhetoric and historical and geographic inaccuracies? Should her larger fears about the erosion of women’s rights be automatically invalidated? For the moment, let us address the first question posed above.

It has been well established in the fields of women’s and gender studies that Foucault offered very little commentary on subjects of feminism and/or gender. Much of his writing pertains to power exercised through disciplinary technologies and social control, whereby the body is the principal target of power and populations are regulated and rendered docile through the disciplinary regimes of biopower and biopolitics. Lois McNay and Rosi Braidotti are critical of Foucault’s failure to examine “the gendered character of many disciplinary critiques.” McNay faults his treatment of the body as a passive entity, “upon which power stamps its own images.”⁶ Referring to his assessment as one-dimensional, she argues, “the reduction of individuals to passive bodies permits no explanation of how individuals may act in an autonomous and creative fashion despite overarching social constraints.”⁷ Braidotti furthermore observes that sexual difference has no role in the Foucauldian universe, “where the technology of subjectivity refers to a desexualized and general ‘human’ subject.”⁸ He is also criticized for his apparent indifference to sexual indifference, which, according to many feminists, “reproduces a sexism endemic in supposedly gender-neutral social theory.”⁹ Similarly, Monique Deveaux described two major pitfalls in his work: one, that he erases “women’s specific experiences with power,” and two, that he does not offer any model of power to “articulate processes of empowerment.”¹⁰ Nancy Fraser contends that no room is left for resistance to power. “In Fraser’s view, Foucault’s normatively neutral stance on power limits the value of his work for feminism because it fails to provide the normative resources required to criticize structures of domination and to guide programs for social change.”¹¹

Undoubtedly, Foucault’s previous work on disciplinary technologies has provided ample material for feminist scholars, whose interest in the poststructuralist philosopher soared during the 1990s and according to one account, was comparable to “feminist interest in Marx in the 1970s.”¹² From Judith Butler to Jana Sawicki, feminist scholars sought to lay out “the basic features of a politics of difference” in Foucault’s work and method and show their application in feminist debates concerning sexuality, as was the latter’s case.¹³ “Foucault’s

⁶ Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1992), 12.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 11.

⁹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰ Monique Deveaux, “Feminism and Empowerment: A Critical Reading of Foucault,” *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 2, *Women’s Agency: Empowerment and the Limits of Resistance* (Summer 1994), 224.

¹¹ Aurelia Armstrong, “Michel Foucault: Feminism,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/foucfer/>>, (accessed 3 January 2017). See also Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

¹² Cited in Note 11 to Chapter One. Margaret McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 177.

¹³ See Jana Sawicki, “Foucault and Feminism: Toward a Politics of Difference,” *Hypatia* 1, no. 2, *Motherhood and Sexuality* (Autumn 1986), 23-36. See also Judith Butler, “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault,” in *Feminism as Critique*, eds. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 136-140.

work on power has been used by some feminists to develop a more complex analysis of the relations between gender and power which avoids the assumption that the oppression of women is caused in any simple way by men's possession of power."¹⁴ Nevertheless, in *Foucault in Iran*, the attempts at linking Foucault's *Le Nouvel Observateur* writings to the revolutionary mobilization of Iranian women in the face of the Khomeini's repression of their rights is neither clearly established nor argued. In fact, when Foucault's engagement with Iranian politics is juxtaposed in this very chapter to the dubious experiences and firsthand observations of another white, Western observer, the longtime feminist and American Kate Millett, this stark contrast in presentation has the effect of creating a gendered, intellectual battle—of a “he said *and* understood it better than she did” scenario. In brief, the philosopher Foucault knows “Islamic-Shi'i” Iran better than an uninformed, American secular feminist.

This particular reading gains further ground when we recall how Chapter 4 is bookended—by the stories of two seemingly out-of-touch women who dared to advance a secular feminist politics in Iran—much to Ghamari-Tabrizi's disapproval of their logic and methods! The first bookend is the letter of the “westoxified” Parisian-Iranian Atoussa whose bigotry against Islam is extensively taken to task. The second bookend is the work of Millett, whose work is analyzed under the rather cynical title, “White Women's Burden: Kate Millett Goes to Iran!” And neatly sandwiched in between these two are the informed, measured, and exceptional (7) writings of Foucault.

Millett's entrance into Iran's post-revolutionary fray began after receiving encouragement from a few Iranian members of the Committee for Artistic and Intellectual Freedom in Iran (CAIFI) to participate in an International Women's Day demonstration in Tehran, which was meant to take place within a few weeks after the Pahlavi dynasty had fallen. Millett was accompanied by her female partner, Canadian photojournalist Sophie Keir, and together they sought to document their feminist activism in Iran via essay and photograph. As detailed in over 300 pages of *Going to Iran*, Millett narrates her quest to establish a viable network of international sisterhood with her Iranian feminist counterparts, who at the time were beginning to see troublesome signs that their lives would be drastically different with Ayatollah Khomeini in power.

Ghamari-Tabrizi mercilessly attacks her “civilizing mission project,” so to speak, believing she failed miserably in her futile quest to secure Iranian women's liberation. Though her writing down these memories took place almost forty years ago, Ghamari-Tabrizi holds her as equally and as passionately accountable—at one point highlighting her “reductionist sense of womanhood without regard to the contingencies of post-revolutionary power struggles” (8). He also accuses her of blatant Orientalism, having “colonial roots,” and claims that she was hell-bent on a mission to save her Iranian sisters from “*hejab* oppression” (136-137). In one fell swoop, he even sends her into the feminist hall of shame, referring to her as a “white, Western woman” who has committed *the* crime of other second wave, liberal feminists: “Millett's account typifies the kind of dated feminism whose emission was to save ‘brown women...from brown men.’” This interjection of Spivak's highly cited deconstructive battle cry from “Can the Subaltern Speak?” effectively paints Millett as a brazen, clueless “interventionist feminist” ideologue. She is an imposter entering a women's struggle she understands very little, and her purported mission in Iran to safeguard a women's solidarity movement against universal patriarchy (143) was in actuality, by her journey's end, when she and Keir were sent by Iranian authorities on a one-way plane

¹⁴ Armstrong, “Michel Foucault: Feminism.”

ride out of Iran and bound for Paris, just a gruesome display of American opportunism and selfishness.

In many respects, this demonization of Millett's Iranian "adventure"—which, in fact, is the term she chose to describe her anticipation and the overall resonance of her trip¹⁵—is warranted. There are many moments throughout *Going to Iran* whereby the author is clearly feeling overwhelmed, presumptuous about the people she meets, and childish and careless about her conclusions—her taunting of hotel waiters to provide her with alcoholic drinks in a now teetotal, Khomeini-run Iran is case-in-point. Still, there is something redemptive about the feminist politics Millett engages which Ghamari-Tabrizi too easily dismisses or glosses over. According to Millett, her main purpose in Iran is to “keep the record, attend to the archives”¹⁶ as a “large and powerful independent feminist movement” takes shape.¹⁷ Albeit an “observer,” she does not censor her reactions or her emotions. Instead, she lays bare her ambivalent feelings about her role in Iran's women's movement, and expresses her frustrations that she is not taken seriously and/or viewed skeptically by other activists, reporters, and Iranian officials she encounters. And thus, her stream of conscious writing over the course of her travels makes it an uncomfortable and necessary journey for the reader. The prevalent moments of self-doubt and self-criticism about her activism, whereby her contradictions, lack of experience, and fluctuating emotions and opinions are made plain make it highly undesirable to wear (and rationalize) her particular hat of feminism. When Millett arrives in Tehran, for instance, she is disappointed that she had not yet met with her Iranian contact Kateh, a skillful women's rights organizer responsible for getting the rallies to honor International Women's Day off the ground. Kateh is apparently one of the CAIFI members who had encouraged “foreign” feminists to attend rallies and meetings in Tehran as part of a global feminist solidarity movement. After she fails to show up at the airport, Millett is then chaperoned to random locations around the city by male acquaintances. These feelings of instability and being out-of-place lead to her blurting out, “...I feel I am running after feminism in Iran; despite their invitation, I have yet to meet even one sister.”¹⁸ Here she is being both judgmental and presumptuous, in the least. Yet halfway through *Going to Iran*, as Millett comes into contact with diverse Iranian women activists and does not interfere in their mobilization, her reflections about the different modalities of feminism in the Iranian context are exploded, expanded, and scrutinized by her. Recall her earliest reactions in her travels: Millett is shocked and frightened by the sight of “a sea of chadori women” at the airport, “like black birds, like death, like fate,”¹⁹ supposedly hushed into silence by their domineering husbands. By the time of the march, she digests a slightly different scene: Feeling the rapture of Tehran university alive with protest, she writes,

“*Engelab*” the chant goes on—“Revolution.” [...] The women's movement has just passed its very first test. The march goes on and on, past our vision in every direction, twenty thousand people now. Women in chador, women in headscarves, children, men. Many men...encircling us with their arms, a great chain of them along the march. Past the iron fences of the university,

¹⁵ Millett wrote, “Iran is an adventure, it isn't a book. I don't want to go there as a journalist.” See Kate Millett, *Going to Iran* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1982), 31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 99

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

like the iron fences of Columbia—it has been years since I have seen a university alive like this... And the men around us, the other men, our comrades and protectors, how new to feel this great affection for men. Men as strangers yet friends. No man in America has ever risked life or limb to affirm his belief in women's freedom, no man in the West, no man in my world before. And seeing them, one has to love them.²⁰

A 1983 review of *Going to Iran* perfectly describes this eyewitness account, its narrator's vacillating interpretations, and the very constraints under which they are formed and held: "Her book is best read not as history, but as a historical document itself—a rare and therefore valuable eyewitness account of a series of important developments in the history of Iranian women. As with any document, it is most useful when we recognize the assumptions the observer/writer brings to the account, together with the limits and constraints of her experiences."²¹ Thus it would be helpful to screen *Going to Iran* as a confessional diary of a feminist activist's trials and tribulations, one who deeply and *openly* struggled to promote international feminism—with all its unsightly blemishes—and from whom we can glean invaluable and cautionary lessons about the pitfalls of "Saving Muslim Women."

Can the Secular Iranian (Diaspora) Feminist Speak?

Millett is not the only feminist under scrutiny in *Foucault in Iran*. The opening salvo to the section on Kate Millett is initially directed towards those Iranian women's organizations that emerged outside the country in the late winter months of 1979 and began promoting their individual causes upon their return to Iran—Ghamari-Tabrizi points out that none of which emerged during the revolutionary struggle (135). Moments later he chastises these very organizations for "[failing] to articulate a feminist politics outside the binaries of objectified versus militant women, Western blasé dolls versus modest committed revolutionaries, the champions of embourgeoisement versus the defenders of toiling women" (135). At no point does he differentiate between these organizations or their leaders; instead he lassoes them into a culpable mass of activists who apparently were not nuanced enough in their politics despite having returned from the "United States or Western Europe." There are also obvious omissions of citations: we are to take Ghamari-Tabrizi at his claim that those who "wished to advance a feminist politics" in Iran "hoped to turn the celebration into a day of solidarity between European and American activists and their Iranian 'sisters'" (135). Oral history and ethnographic accounts would surely differentiate his unmediated subject of the diaspora, secular Iranian feminist whose designs for her country came in direct opposition to Khomeini's and his supporters.

This last point invokes an earlier comment on the right of representation, in particular who has the authority to speak on behalf of Iranian women: Are Ghamari-Tabrizi's scathing assessments of Atoussa's letter and his rejection of Millett's activism reflective of a pattern of collective silencing of secular women's activists since the Revolution? Have we arrived at a point where women living outside Iran, who may have multiple concerns about compulsory veiling, patriarchy, and freedom of expression, must not even utter such fears if not expressed eloquently and/or with nuance? Moreover, is Atoussa's letter even representative of the many letters and phone calls made by the constellation of Iranian women from

²⁰ Ibid., 196-197.

²¹ Patricia Higgins, "Going to Iran by Millett," *Signs* 9, no. 1, *Women and Religion* (Autumn 1983), 154-156.

diverse educational, ideological, and cultural backgrounds who, during the Revolution, were already skeptical and growing increasingly worried about the many pronouncements of Ayatollah Khomeini? Were their anxieties and concerns about gender apartheid and patriarchy too easily being cast aside?

The true archive of Iranian women's activism during this critical development in Iran's modern history is a noisy, colorful, contradictory, and expansive one. To be highly selective about its revolutionary voices, isolating just one poor example from the cross spectrum of Iranian women's activists and the obscure zones of resistance, means that one is purposefully not attending to the multiple opposing realities generating during the revolutionary movement and their diverse implications for men and women. Hence the highly complex "reign of terror, women's Issues, and feminist politics" gets thrown into an "Iranian-Islamic-Shi'i" echo chamber consisting of what only certain Iranians are "dreaming about"—the result of which only a handful are allowed to speak *and* be heard.

Kristin Soraya Batmanghelichi, PhD
 Postdoctoral Research Scholar
 Institute for Religion, Culture, and Public Life
 Columbia University

© 2017: Kristin Soraya Batmanghelichi

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by *SCTIW Review* with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and *SCTIW Review*.

Citation Information

Batmanghelichi, Kristin Soraya, *A Letter to Foucault: Selectively Narrating the Stories of Secular Iranian Feminists*, *SCTIW Review Book Symposium on Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi's Foucault in Iran*, *SCTIW Review*, April 6, 2017. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1414>.

ISSN: 2374-9288