

Sara Shaban, **Iranian Feminism and Transnational Ethics in Media Discourse**, Washington, DC: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020, 138 pp., \$90.00 (hardcover).

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The #WhiteWednesdays campaign was launched in May 2017 when Viva Movahed, known as the “Girl of Enghelab Street,” stood on a utility box in Tehran to protest Iran’s mandatory hijab law. Movahed, who later became the unofficial symbol of the #WhiteWednesdays movement, inspired women from Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia to stand in solidarity and disseminate online videos of themselves without the hijab or wearing white headscarves.

In ***Iranian Feminism and Transnational Ethics in Media Discourse***, Sara Shaban, assistant professor of communication at Seattle Pacific University, looks at the scholarship on feminism and resistance that embraces the complexities of the 21st century in light of social activism, postcolonial suspicions, and neo-orientalist narratives. Her research uses a case study of the #WhiteWednesdays campaign to compare the extent to which the U.S. media and Twitter discourse on the campaign reflect transnational feminism, femonationalism, and/or orientalist narratives. Guided by the Femonationalism lens, she captures the embedded structural and power relationships of dominance and discrimination present in the discourse of Twitter and mainstream media. Femonationalism, as introduced by Farris (2017), explains the paradox of far-right actors who claim to advocate for women and minorities to spread an Islamophobic agenda. Consequently, it becomes of particular importance to explore the risks of femonationalist rhetoric in news media coverage of Muslim women, particularly in Iran, and how that coverage harms rather than helps Muslim women.

This book opts for a paradigm shift in the transnational coverage of women’s struggles and protests across borders—a shift that more aptly explores Muslim women, challenging ethnocentric discourses amid a shifting cultural, political, and geographical framework. In the context of globalization and given the growing number of Muslim women living in the West, it is crucial to pay attention to the harmful narratives that journalists perpetuate about Muslim women with the help of native informants and geopolitical agendas. These discourses have fostered ethnonationalism as well as a sense of fear and animosity toward Muslims.

The “global public sphere” that Reese (2010) put forth involves a transnational logic, which should, in theory, create politically significant spaces that engage various publics. In practice, however, the sphere privileges particular forms of power, broadcasting world news as it pertains to the local community instead of the world. About the aforementioned, the media has fallen short of the “global village” ambition and has embodied a more “glocal” approach, which fails to embrace the diversity and



multiplicity of cultural dialogues. To this end, Shaban's central argument is that pursuing transnational journalism can guide news networks to improve "cross-national awareness of events" and appeal to audiences in different cultural, economic, and geographical contexts (p. 348).

Global journalism happens when journalists report news from an international perspective that serves global citizens and promotes discourses that help individuals understand one another. This framework is, however, subject to "postcolonial suspicion," which refers to the concern that any conversation about international media ethics will put Western interests first (Rao & Lee, 2005). Consequently, a more approachable method of reporting on problems at any level (i.e., local, national, international, or global) is provided by transnational journalism; a type of journalism that maintains domestic relevance while crossing borders. Instead of working toward a fictitious "common good" imposed by the state, transnational feminism emphasizes the intersectionality of women's oppression, which differs across multiple contexts as opposed to overemphasizing a common woman's experience. Central to Shaban's argument is the idea that journalists can exercise their agency and expand their antigeopolitical eye by reporting on marginalized voices that are absent from the hegemonic sphere of mainstream media, where neoliberalist ideology thrives.

Middle Eastern and Muslim women are frequently featured in U.S. news outlets as oppressed and repressed by the men in their culture and religion. These orientalist depictions lead to a "confirmation bias," which blames Islam for the violation of Muslim women's rights and therefore emphasizes the need for Western liberation and emancipation from patriarchal societies. Shaban argues that these problematic depictions of Muslim women are not entirely the fault of Western journalists on their own but are the result of the absence of the voices of Iranian women who are active in movements. In addition, Western politicians and news organizations use the rhetoric of individuals who share unpleasant experiences with Islam, especially with the help of "native informants," who widely disseminate Islamophobic narratives in collaboration with Western media. The coverage of Muslim women through a native informant's eye might be problematic, Shaban argues, since they might, consciously or not, include their own biases and interpretations in the narrative.

Native informants are used by right-wing nationalists, feminists, women's equality organizations, and neoliberals in the practice of femonationalism to paint Islam as a misogynistic religion and culture. Consequently, it is essential to understand the historical background of feminism and women in Iran to comprehend how Iranian women were let down by Western mainstream news media. Starting in 1848 and ending in 2020, Shaban traces Iranian women's historical participation and leadership in social movements across the country during nationalist and anti-imperialist campaigns. Similarly, scholars argued that Northern feminists view the various forms of veiling, including the burqa, as a yardstick to women's victimhood and oppression, which signifies that these women need to be rescued, disregarding that they might find the veil a form of dignity, self-worth, and a statement in the face of colonization, Islamophobia, and cultural imperialism.

Muslim women have responded to the inaccurate reporting of the Western mainstream news media by amplifying their voices on alternative media platforms to reach a global audience. Cyberspace challenges conventional media platforms and creates spaces for alternative forms of participation. Reconfiguration and remediation are two ways that activists can use the media in the context of a

transnational/global social movement. The former is the process by which users adapt already-existing technological tools to suit their goals, and the latter is where users change preexisting materials to support novel ideas and social networks. Shaban notes that social media can be a platform for grassroots voices to be heard, but for radical change to happen, those voices must be heard and respected by those in power. In this regard, digital activists can take advantage of their cultural capital to influence those in positions of authority.

In this book, Shaban advances critical arguments about the need for a transnational framework that detests the homogenization of any woman or struggle and acknowledges nuance, context, and debate within different cultures. In her concluding remarks, she skillfully offers bridge-building steps into the inclusion of less-privileged voices to counter the unified definition of feminism portrayed through the hegemonic political eye that the world has known in both theory and practice. Decolonization, in essence, transforms us from a state of knowledge to a state of advocacy and resistance and challenges colonial and ethnocentric worldviews that nurture a Northern feminist attitude, which primarily explains the essence of the conversation between mainstream news media and Arab and Muslim women activists on Twitter.

Shaban believes that crossing borders “both literally and figuratively” (p. 15) is the way forward for both journalists and activists to intermingle rather than collide and to erase the binary narrative on hijab in service of women’s rights. Her writing truly creates a space for challenging patriarchal structures and is dynamic in a way that embraces interdisciplinarity with a vast range of narratives between gender, politics, and ethics. My hope is that feminist scholars will use Shaban’s book as a guide to their future study of feminism, postcolonialism, and other fields of practice.

References

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