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The Subaltern is Fucking Speaking! – Immer Autonom

20–25 minutes

"i will kill, i will kill, the one who killed my sister!"

I'm writing this because I'm frustrated. I'm frustrated with the responses to the uprising in Iran. I'm frustrated about how sadly unsurprising they are given the landscape of the discussions surrounding hijab and feminism have been developing for decades.

The current popular understanding of hijab, especially on the left, is one that insists on it being an inherently neutral piece of clothing, with an unspecified personal and spiritual meaning that everyone is wearing by their free choice, unless we're given overwhelming evidence to the contrary. But as we see from the reactions to the uprising against the mandatory hijab in the Islamic republic, even then, we must find a way to say that the uprising is ultimately "not about hijab". And I just wonder why. Why is it that this uprising cannot possibly be what it appears to be? Why is it so impossible to imagine that people forced to wear hijab their entire lives, from the age of six, regardless of their religious beliefs, or their personal desires, might just hate the damn thing?

Our protests are never engaged with on our own terms. They're always filtered through someone else's lens. Either through the American Right's "damsel in distress" narrative, or the left's narrative of a CIA or NED funded coup, and at best, the most bland and hollow statement of "solidarity", before immediately pivoting to talking about how we're getting disproportionate coverage, or about the European bans of hijab and how they're equally bad. Even many anarchists are hesitant to talk about hijab and Muslim patriarchy as the cause of our problem.<fn>On the one hand, white American reactionaries pretend to care about our oppression so they can

morally license bombing us "to save our women"–the "damsel in distress" narrative. On the other, white American leftists deny our oppression even exists, because they think if they acknowledge we–queer and trans Iranians, Iranian women, Iranian children–are oppressed, then it means they'll be morally obligated to bomb us. Far from combating the Right's narrative, white leftists, entrenched in the "white man's burden" paternalist patriarchal frame, cannot imagine solidarity that doesn't look like "taking control of the situation." That does not look like intervention "for our own good." The fact that white leftists cannot imagine "solidarity" with the oppressed and marginalized of an imperialized region without coming to the apparently inevitable conclusion that the bombing of our homes is completely justified to "save us" does not signal that you can see past "Western Propaganda" so much as it signals that you are incapable of imagining solidarity *at all*.</fn>

For years, what's been called "Muslim Feminism" and a large part of post-colonial feminism has been centered around the perspectives of diaspora Muslims. There's hardly ever a recognition of the fact that diaspora Muslims are in a different social context from Muslims at home. This means that they have different concerns in their daily lives, different priorities, and yes, gaps in their perspectives that are a result of them just not being surrounded by a Muslim patriarchy with political power anymore.

It's very easy to speak of hijab as a choice when clearly, it's a choice for you. It's easy, and oh so costless, for you to imply, for your benefit and your benefit only, that hijab is a choice by default. Even when it's being forced through the word of law and constant state-enforced surveillance. Even if they're sentenced to jail for not wearing it. Even if at every scale, from home, to community, to government, there are mechanisms of control compelling them to wear it, this could all be fine, as long as we imagine that everyone compelled to wear hijab, through a very convenient accident, just happens to just love it! Wow, our communities are so harmonious! Just functioning like a well-oiled machine, and the will of the people happens to fortuitously align with the will of the state. There is no internal struggle.

Of course, it's never stated in that exact, glaringly Orientalist terms.

There's always some bone thrown at the idea of an internal struggle and our autonomy. But this struggle is always portrayed as incomprehensible to onlookers. We're doing our feminism our own way. But rest assured! Our concerns are never what you think they might be. We don't actually care about hijab. It's not high on our list. It's just part of our culture you see. It's just clothes. Look at all these women in Tehran wearing colorful and pretty hijab! Surely, if they didn't like it so much, they wouldn't make it into a fashion statement!

This added "complexity" might guard against accusations of Orientalism, but ultimately functions the same. It tells you that we're all either fine with it, or we're just sorting it out among ourselves. Mind your business, don't look (even when you're asked to), don't help (even if they beg you for solidarity), just zip your mouth. *Kind of racist to intrude you know.*<fn>In an exchange with Iranian feminist Attousa H., Foucault somewhat infamously demonstrates the ways in which white European cis male academics often enact forms of white supremacist patriarchy through epistemic violence. Foucault insinuates that Iranian feminists, in criticizing the Khomeini regime's misogyny and speaking out about the terror of mandatory hijab enforced by violence, are simply Islamophobes (though obviously he does not use that much more recently-popularized word), blinded by an irrational (one might be tempted to say *hysterical*) "hatred." In so doing he frames resistance to mandatory hijab as though it cannot possibly be "authentically Iranian," as described by "Against White Feminism" author Rafia Zakaria in a review of a 2005 book about Foucault's engagement with the Iranian revolution.

In "Oppression," David Graeber describes the subtle bait-and-switch game played by the white anthropologist who, in giving himself the right to decide what is and is not authentically "native culture," is still positioning himself as the epistemic authority with the ability to decide what is "authentic" to an Indigenous culture, and thus to deny the authenticity of dissident Indigenous perspectives, because what is "authentic" is always conveniently also that which conforms to the local "authority." Iranian women are thus twice epistemically overwritten: by their own patriarchy, and by white supremacist patriarchy that comes along to tell them they are not authentically

Iranian if they tell a different story about their lives than the story their patriarchs tell. The usual argument from diaspora Muslim Feminists goes that the white gaze is obsessed with "unveiling" the hijabi woman, in a fetishistic, Orientalist way, emphasizing that women can wear hijab of their own choice, but restricting the critique to that point obfuscates the equally fetishistic and Orientalist, but ostensibly "benevolent" gaze of the white liberal–obsessed with "re-veiling" and "re-silencing" the SWANA woman, putting her back under her patriarch's authority, and re-creating the illusion of consent. If she does not consent, she must not be "authentically" a member of her culture, after all.

With this in mind *the burning of hijab becomes an act of permanent, unambiguous resistance*: Iranian women and trans men are not only removing their enforced hijab, at the risk of their own goddamn lives, but stating that *they cannot and will not ever be "re-veiled,"* even by white liberal and Muslim Diaspora Feminist insistence that actually, veiling is the "feminist" thing to do.</fn>

This is an "in-house" matter.

Nothing to see here, move along!

Ignore the shadow of the patriarch taking his belt off.

They say that our protests are about "the government's control" over women's bodies, as if "the government" is the only entity that can ever have control over the bodies of its subjects. As though transferring the management of patriarchal violence from the state to the family or community is a massive improvement. With this tepid "solidarity" we see with the protests against state-controlled patriarchy, I don't hold much hope that they show any commitment to the end of (or even acknowledgement of) Muslim patriarchy at these levels.

This framing of "government control" also allows for a frankly misleading comparison of the European hijab bans and mandatory hijab. It is also a different form of oppression. It's intracommunity, Muslim patriarchy. It's not the racial patriarchy of white Europeans imposed on racialized women. Muslim women experience both. But it seems that it's never the right time to speak of the former, even

when it's happening. It is bizarre to hear Muslim women express solidarity by talking about European hijab bans, as if that's the only reference of comparison they have for what it's like to experience coercive control. As though there is no patriarchal control in their communities, and all compulsory hijab can remind them of is when white people try to ban hijab. It has the appearance of a statement of solidarity, but coming from people who must have a similar struggle to us, not talking about that struggle feels more like deflection. It's never just a statement about the cruelty of compulsory hijab. It always comes with the addendum of "hijab bans are just as bad!" It's as though it's impossible for diaspora Muslims to show solidarity to us without centering the struggle we're just not talking about. And coming from people who experience both, it doesn't seem like an ignorant sort of self-centering. It feels like a silent redirection of attention away from Muslim patriarchy.

I must emphasize, none of these "feminists" said a word in these last forty years about coerced hijab. They didn't lift a finger for us. The struggles of women, queer and trans people, religious minorities and oppressed ethnicities in Iran are politically "inconvenient" for the left to talk about. We are alone in our struggles. Despite all the outcries on the left about disproportionate media attention to us, that's brought us nothing. Last time there were massive protests, 1,500 people died. Do you even remember? We have more to grieve every day and we're told the world pays too much attention to us, and that this attention must be approached with suspicion.

Compulsory hijab has a history much longer than any hijab bans in Europe. It's existed as a tool of Muslim patriarchy since its inception, on an unbroken line between then and now.<fn>In "Status Distinctions and Sartorial Difference: Slavery, Sexual Ethics, and the Social Logic of Veiling in Islamic Law," Omar Anchassi argues that in early Islamic law, hijab functioned as a means of distinguishing between slave women, who were marked as "free game" for sexual harassment, and "free" women who are protected by the authority of their fathers. Free (non-enslaved) Muslim women were thus marked as legally "free" in somewhat ironic terms precisely by their being coercively constrained by hijab, whereas enslaved women were not

veiled and thus "exposed" to the whims of others.</fn> The more widespread phenomenon of "modesty" imposed on women is even older. It's frankly baffling how pervasive the idea of hijab as a "free choice" is, to the point of denying such a long and painful history of patriarchal oppression. It's at best seen as a pointless theological debate that would alienate Muslims if discussed. But this is a discussion of history, and our present. And it'd be a disservice to all the victims of Muslim patriarchy, present and past, if we ignore and erase their abuse and label its discussion as off-limits, especially in the presence of an active push to reframe and erase it.

I was so confused when I first heard people like Yassmin Abdel-Magied saying "Islam is the most feminist religion"<fn>*'Islam is the most feminist religion': Two Australians have a shouting match on TV over sharia law: The far-reaching consequences of Donald Trump's ban on Muslim immigration.*</fn> as a young queer person in Iran. I was perplexed when people spoke of hijab as empowering. It was like I was being asked to ignore all I'd learned about Islam, feminism, and the histories and present states of both. And I was given nothing except for the most generic Islamic apologia talking points that I'd already been fed by the Islamic Republic's education system in middle school as a kid growing up in Iran.

For a long time, I believed that they simply subscribe to a different version of the faith, a more progressive one. And as someone who had no religion, the question of the validity of their version of Islam was immaterial. As long as they arrive at the conclusion of full liberation from patriarchy, I need not investigate the inner workings of their faith. But when I saw how these "feminist" Muslims treated the women, and queer and trans people who left the faith due to the immense weight of Muslim patriarchal violence, and the way their priority was mostly on defending their faith and there being no contradiction between Islam and feminism or queer liberation, often at the expense of these victims, I realized that these Muslim "feminists" and "queer liberationists" simply didn't see Muslim patriarchy as harmful enough to warrant any focus. They didn't see the depth of its roots and its pervasiveness.

Their focus was on reframing the violence of this patriarchy so as to

make it seem on par in its intensity and its nature to western patriarchy (or less severe!), and to frame responses to this patriarchal violence as motivated by Islamophobia and racism instead of genuine care for these oppressed groups. Even when this response came from these victims, they were branded as traitors who aided imperialist aggression, presumably just by talking about their suffering. In practice, these feminists and queer theorists just happened to do nothing but wash the blood off of the hands of Muslim patriarchy by developing an understanding of feminism that acted as an ideological cover for these harms.

Hijab has been a tool of patriarchy since it was codified as a religious mandate in the beginning of Islam. We must all be free to do with our bodies as we wish, and that includes wearing hijab. But any reclamation of hijab as a form of empowerment should at least start with the understanding of hijab's oppressive current and historical function in a most parts of the Muslim world. But I don't see any recognition of this history or present. All I see is the denial of the idea that hijab is or has ever been, to any extent, patriarchal.

I am tired of people acting shocked that we would be disturbed by seeing others wearing our chains as a source of their pride, while denying that they were ever chains to begin with. I'm tired of your expressions of disdain for those of us who break this chain. I'm tired of people flowing with the current of patriarchal expectations and calling it subversive feminism.

I don't know how hijab fits in a future where the coercive notion of gender will no longer exist, and that's the future I want. I have trouble believing a gendered expectation of clothing will fit when gender isn't what it is now. How far from womanhood must a transmasc person feel to stop wearing hijab? How close to womanhood should a transfem person feel to have to wear it? What will happen to hijab when man and woman are no longer reference points in the landscape of gender?

I ask these not as hypotheticals. I ask this because I remember the doubly painful experience of my transmasc brothers having to fucking wear hijab in Iran. I say this because I knew transfem people who wouldn't wear hijab, and their response to the question of "why

aren't you wearing hijab if you're a woman" was "I'm trans". This might sound nonsensical within patriarchal understanding of gender, but it makes perfect sense to me. Because what the fuck do your rules mean for someone who rejects their basis? How does hijab work for people who don't *WANT* to assimilate into the coercive notions of femininity or masculinity? Will hijab be hijab if it's truly a choice? I know there are answers to this question, but I know who *ISN'T* looking for it: those who pretend hijab is already a "free choice" by default. It's bizarre to me that we feel free to discuss how the superficially "free" choices women make in the west about their clothing, such as wearing or not wearing bras, are influenced by patriarchal coercion through many mechanisms. But we are expected to assume that the choice of a Muslim woman to cover almost her entire body is free of all forms of patriarchal expectations. The range of choices Muslim women are assumed to want to make are always limited to what they're allowed to under Muslim patriarchy, but somehow, that narrow range is also assumed to be an expression of a free choice, unburdened by the weight of patriarchal control.<fn>Patriarchy (rape culture in particular) famously manufactures and enforces a form of apparent "consent" on the part of oppressed and marginalized genders, or the appearance of consent–even the appearance of "enthusiastic consent"–through various forms of physical, social, economic, and epistemic violence. One means of doing this is by constraining the oppressed or subordinated subject's available forms of agency to a restricted set of choices in which the oppressed subject *does* make a choice, and thus it can *appear* they are exercising "free" will. Another means through which "consent" is fabricated on the part of the oppressed is through forms of epistemic injustice–injustice done to a person in their capacity as a *knower*, in their ability to interpret and narrate their experiences of the world–for reference, see Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic injustice. Hermeneutical injustice describes the ways in which patriarchal societies epistemically constrain marginalized genders by taking away the language and terms in which we could describe our oppression, and by trapping us in a system of "knowledge" and belief–or religion, as the case may be–where the only available interpretations of what happens to us all tell us the

same thing: you liked it, you agreed to this, you consented to this. Taking the example of the claim that women would not make a fashion statement out of wearing colorful and pretty headscarves if they did not "consent" to wearing it in the first place, women in Iran are presented with the choice: wear colorful and pretty hijab and have a way to express something of your interiority and individual personhood, or wear plain hijab. The "choice" is theirs, so when they choose one, the patriarchal manufacturing of consent concludes that must be acting freely, it must mean they have "consented" to and enjoyed wearing Hijab, regardless of whether they really do or whether they are making such choices within a situation where the alternative is to get killed by the Morality Police, so they might as well make the best of the situation.

Even religion provides a system of interpretation in which hijab is rendered as the "desirable" choice, at least if women are to view themselves as faithful and respectable. But in a more subtle way, diaspora Muslim Feminists who make themselves unelected "representatives" help to create (and trap Iranian women within) a system of knowledge in which women must affirm that they wear hijab of their own free will or else be construed as "making us/our culture look bad" and betraying their people, who are being slandered as "barbarians" and "brutes" by American conservatives. This isn't to say there are no hijabi women who wear hijab of their own authentically free will, but rather that there is no external position, even that of the diaspora Muslim Feminist, from which it is possible to reliably "interpret" a woman's consent to hijab in a context where she must wear it or die. It is necessary to *both*: 1. understand the structures of power in which she makes her decisions, and 2. actually listen to her speak for herself.

Hence, women and trans men in Iran burning their hijab are in fact speaking very clearly, and the efforts of unelected diaspora feminists to overwrite them and re-impose the manufactured appearance of "consent" are themselves a form of colonial epistemic violence in the classic sense articulated by Gayatri Spivak.</fn>

For me to consider hijab a "neutral choice" in the Muslim world and Muslim communities as they exist today, requires me to not only

abandon all I know about gender, hijab, and its history, but it also requires me to abandon half of my commitments as a brown queer trans nonbinary anarchafeminist.

For once, let go of our chains.

For once, ***listen to us on our terms.***

For once, see our problem as it is: Muslim patriarchy.

For once, show us solidarity without centering yourself.

My people are fighting and getting murdered. ***For once just have our backs unconditionally.***

– merc