

Feminine Nationality

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“For most of history, Anonymous was a woman” - Virginia Woolf

“Nationalism is intricately connected to feminism, not only in the sense that nationalist movements often assisted in the birth of feminism, but also in that nationalists and feminists frequently collaborated in their pursuit of a common goal - national independence” (Herr 2003, 137). Feminism and nationalism have similar nuances in their purposes of promotion such as improvement, belief in a better future, and freedom from oppression. Their differences in expectations and their perspectives of how to solve these differences lead to conflicts that may not be able to be resolved. Nationalists use feminism to gain support from women for nationalist goals in defining the state. However, nationalist causes often undercut feminist aspects of equality by exploiting women for boundaries, labor, birth, and legitimacy instead of supporting women and promoting equality. Feminism is sometimes born in nationalist movements as a way for women to speak out for equal rights when they may not have been able to before. Therefore, while the ambitions of feminism and nationalism may be similar, these nationalistic goals may be realized at the cost of women reducing the impact of feminism. In this essay we will discuss the relationship between nationalism and feminism, the promotion of their similar aims, and the differences in their purposes. In addition, we will discuss the view of women as a double-edged sword in nationalist causes – they are necessary for nationalist goals, providing symbols to fight for, giving birth to fighters, and for legitimacy, but they are not necessarily trusted to promote nationalist aims.

Nationalism is defined as devotion to your country, meaning the belief that your country’s interests are of the utmost importance. This includes the idea that people with the same language, history and culture should be independently governed (Merriam-Webster). Feminism is defined as the belief and advocacy that women and men should have equal rights, powers, and

opportunities, and freedom from oppression. In addition, feminism states that women should be treated as intellectual, political, and social equals to men (Merriam-Webster). These two views connect, for example, when there is a revolution to overthrow a government. In this case, both nationalists and feminists work together in the belief that they are fighting for similar causes; desire for a better future and freedom from oppression. However, during a revolution, nationalists often aspire to independence from illegitimate rulers, while feminists desire freedom of oppression from inequality. However, nationalist movements do not typically lift women from oppression for fear that they will weaken the nationalist cause. In fact, a fundamental subtext underlies almost every rebellion in that the reason the regime is wrong is because they have deviated from the natural order (man ruling over women) by supporting equality of women. Rebellion, then, is an uprising to reestablish the correct order of things. The old regime must be removed because it destroyed the natural order of man over women, or what was the norm. “For decades, men and women both didn't see any women in power so automatically they thought this is the role of the man” (McGreal 2012).

While nationalism and feminism are linked in the creation and rule of nations, the relationship is complex. Often nationalism manipulates feminism in order to promote their own agenda. As one example, “Women’s bodies frequently acquire the symbolic significance of the nation and set its boundary: this boundary is vulnerable to foreign incursions, and hence requires not only the protection of but also tight control by men in the same manner that national territory is vigilantly guarded. Women’s sexuality is the possession of the nation rather than the individual” (Herr 2003, 140). Women are used to define the boundaries of a nation, and they are protected only because they give birth to the future children who will defend the nation.

However, female citizens do not have the same rights as the sons, husbands, fathers, or brothers in their lives because the patriarchy of the household is reflected in the rule of the nation.

Women, in many cultures, are viewed as property. Further, “The family is seen as the center and motherhood as the nexus of nationhood” (Afshar 1989, 110). Women are often used as a symbol of a nation, such as Mother Russia or the Statue of Liberty. Women become a symbol of what needs to be protected in a nation because of their role in childbearing. They represent what the men are to fight for: their mothers, their sisters, their wives, and their children. “There is a way in which women, and women’s bodies, become central to the process of nation-making. Normally relegated to the margins, at times of nationalist struggle women come to symbolize the honor and virtue of the nation. They become the icons, the mother-figures for whom men are willing to lay down their lives. It is on this notion of womanhood that the cultural identity of the community and the nation is staked” (Butalia 2001). Women are supported by nationalism as the icon of the nation, the symbol to defend, but women are without legitimacy as a full-fledged citizen of the country they symbolize. In any case, these proprietary outlooks further nationalistic causes since men are more likely to fight for their wives, sisters, daughters, and mothers, especially if they are viewed as property or seen as symbols their nation. Under this guise, many countries advance their nationalistic agendas at the expense of women.

One of the areas feminism and nationalism diverge is in promoting the security of a nation, while ignoring women as full citizens of the country. Historically, men have been the ones to fight, labor, and settle their nations, and are thus able to claim full citizenship. A woman’s role is centered around home and family, subordinate to the protector/defender role of the man. This diminishes their rights to make decisions for the nation. Butalia said, “We’re told

that [men are] the ones who go out and fight to defend the nation, who lay down their lives for it, who carve out nations, who define their boundaries and who create their laws and social mores. Perhaps this is why the 'nation' means little or nothing to women," (Butalia 2001). However, women do sacrifice blood when giving birth to the future defenders of a nation. "Women's role in...the nation is seen primarily in terms of reproduction" (Herr 2003, 142). This nationalistic way of thinking can be seen in Iraq's continued war with Iran and the fact that, "The reproduction of future martyrs has become the patriotic duty as well as the function of womanhood" (Afshar 1989, 110). Not only are women property in the nationalistic view, but they are a means to promote the nationalistic agenda by supplying future generations to the cause.

When women act as martyrs for their country, feminism and nationalism appear to coexist but in reality they do not. Take for example Wafa Idris, a female suicide bomber from Israel. "Ms. Idris, 28, has been hailed in the Arabic-language press as striking a blow not only against Israel but also for women's equality by blowing herself up on Jaffa Road" (Bennet 2002, Feb). Idris has been praised as a feminist because she was a female suicide bomber in a traditionally male role, and Idris performed this act for a nationalist cause (Palestine vs Israel). Even in this role, feminism took the back seat. Idris was compared to the Virgin Mary and other historically strong females, not because she had equal rights to defend her nation, but because she 'gave birth' to destruction and 'hope' in lieu of a child (Bennet 2002, Jan). The way that Idris was described as a suicide bomber was not the same as a male suicide bomber would be described. Instead Bennet said Idris was giving 'birth' to hope and destruction. Even when a female was acting out a traditional male role for her nation, she was described in a way which

was distinctly feminine. Men were given the role to defend and protect the nation in war. Women were assigned the role of giving birth to a nation by actually creating more children.

Nationalism only goes so far to protect the ideal of equality for women, and instead strives to control them. As an example, after the Arab Spring in Egypt, women realized that “We're not a priority even with fellow revolutionaries. They're just thinking of the political change but no one is thinking of setting the rules for basic rights including women's rights” (McGreal 2012). There is a very real sense that feminism is dangerous to nationalism because women with equal rights may act counter to nationalist ambitions. Feminism could very well undermine specific nationalist causes even to the point of removing support for war or defense. Women have the power to change opinions and reach across boundaries, something nationalism is against as such changes could alter the country's boundaries and norms. As an example of women breaking down the boundaries as a threat to nationalism, we can look at a women's march in Korea. Women from 15 different countries took part in a peace walk between North and South Korea demonstrating that women are more likely to cross international borders when men would not be as willing to do so (Falk 2015). Additionally, women are an important influence for socialization as Gaitskell and Unterhalter described events after the Boer wars of Afrikana mothers and their influence on the British. “After the Boer war, a poem by C.L. Leipoldt had a powerful evocation of this maternal loss (the 26,000 women and children who died in British concentration camps) but it also pays tribute to the women as the “strongest of us all” (Gaitskell and Unterhalter 1989, 61). In this case, the image of suffering mothers led to political changes that furthered nationalism. Although socialization can be used to promote nationalism, socialization by women can also undermine nationalistic sentiments.

One of the main conflicts between nationalism and feminism is whether women choose to support a nation whose government ignores atrocities against its female citizens, or if women will stand up for equal rights when those rights are against the nationalistic sentiments of that country. In Iran, many feminists refuse to see certain connections between minorities because the norm is to assimilate and these feminists' voices can only be heard if they go with the mainstream voice. In this case, "In their denial of intersectionality, women activists have turned into agents of patriarchy and reproduce national chauvinism. Since Iranians are under extensive pressure to assimilate, the majority of feminists have tied their cause to their mainstream views" (Homa 2016). There are similar undercurrents in the goals of nationalism and feminism in promoting changes in other governments. As an example, the US has recently been promoting positive images of women in positions of power in their government (Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice, Chief Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, etc.). In this instance, nationalism is promoting feminism by emphasizing the positive effects of working towards equalizing the genders. While it might not always improve the status of women, even in the US, it is a step in the right direction.

However, there can be deeply personal conflicts between nationalism and feminism for women. A woman from India came to America to study at a University. While living in America, the story of a woman in India who was brutally gang-raped made headlines across the world. When asked what she thought of that situation, the Indian student said,

"It should have been easy for me to express the same outrage here in the classroom 7,000 miles away. But I found myself deeply conflicted and uneasy. Being away from home, I was not only homesick, but also felt strangely defensive and patriotic about

India. The Indian in me only grew stronger. Was I going to speak up in my classroom as a woman or as an Indian?...Every time I spoke of my country, I felt my chest swell with pride thinking of the diversity in food, culture, clothing and languages. But now I found myself unable to balance this troubling paradox of being Indian and the ghosts of ceaseless sexual violence against women” (Chawla 2014).

This young woman’s inner conflict between her feminist ideals and her loyalty to her country, even while living thousands of miles away, is a testament for how supporting your nation, or supporting women’s rights, can be at odds with each other for women.

Unfortunately, nations do not always include women in the creation of laws in their government, or even consider women as equals in decision making at the national level. Nationalism contrasts with feminism when traditional patriotic values, religion, history, and laws do not allow for equality in gender. It is true that, “Under the banner of nationalism...women, lower class people, dissidents, and minority groups were consistently exploited and abused” (Herr 2003, 136). In government matters and nationalism, women are left out of political decision-making, leading to a further divide between nationalism (patriotism for your country) and feminism (equality of men and women). “Women are saying: we only want nationalism if it means gender equality and democratic rights. We only want a nation that accepts women and other marginalized people as citizens and full national subjects. If not, this nationalism, and this nation, is not worth having. It’s time to question and reframe the definitions we have been given” (Butalia 2001).

Nationalistic ideals are based on a patriotic duty to one’s nation. Ideally all people in a nation would be nationalists; supporting the nation, government, and elected officials in every

capacity to improve their country's status in the world. However, nationalism often uses women to further their own nationalistic goals, and in doing so, discourages and weakens feminism and women's position in that nation. For example, in 1941, "The Cabinet in Tokyo had approved a proposal to encourage every family to have five children so that Japan's population, then 67 million, would reach 100 million by 1960" (Butow 1991). Japan dismissed feminism and diminished its women to further its nationalistic aim of a powerful military necessary to outrival other nations in order to maintain Japan's status in Asia and in the world. When women are regarded as nothing more than "coin-operated, baby-vending machines" (Butow 1991) then nationalism very obviously clashes with feminism.

In conclusion, while nationalism and feminism are intricately connected, women are still being manipulated by governments to promote their country's national agendas. As seen in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, "there is common agreement that the revolution has changed the game...but when it comes to women, it has failed. The biggest powers in the country...are women-free by default" (McGreal 2012). Fortunately, because women do hold a powerful, (even dangerous to nationalism) position in socialization, in providing legitimacy, and in various other capacities such as birthing, symbols of a nation, etc., feminism is forcing some changes in nationalism. "The [Arab Spring] revolution has also changed the situation. You can see it in the young women...The social change that is taking place – it's gradual but it's still there" (McGreal 2012).

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