

**Twilight: It's Always Darkest Before the Dawn**  
**Discourse on Feminism and Multiculturalism**

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**Introduction**

Susan Okin's text entitled, *Is Multiculturalism Bad For Women?*<sup>1</sup> explores the many issues to such a pressing question. Okin asserts that minorities were previously expected to assimilate and modernly this assimilation is considered to be a form of oppression.

The author concludes that, "female members of a more patriarchal minority culture may be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct (so that its members would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture), or if the culture were encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women."<sup>2</sup>

I argue that Okin places multiculturalism and feminism against each other privileging the American system. Ideally, a more egalitarian approach would be to consider the problem from the perspective of how Americans make choices based on cultural values.

**a. Culture in the Third World**

Third World cultures are often depicted as significantly more male dominated than the American culture is. Media commentators make these assumptions about so-called minority cultures. This is one way that feminism and multiculturalism are depicted as being at odds with one another, and American traditions are construed as 'privileged'. The discourse embodies the suffering female immigrant against the framework of the so-called liberated female American.

I think this is problematic within Okin's work, which incorporates some misunderstandings about Third World culture. There are clashes of cultures that Okin discusses such as the Muslim school children wearing head scarves, polygamous marriage among African immigrants, clitoridectomy in African immigrant communities in France and the United States.<sup>3</sup> To some extent, it furthers the notion that America is the best place in the world for women because the Third World promulgates violence against women.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Joshua Cohen et.al. eds., Princeton Press, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>3</sup> Okin, supra note 1 at 9-10, 18.

## **b. Culture in America**

Okin furthers this distinctively American belief that culture is to blame and Third World culture is more violent than our own. The problem is that culture is always used to explain the violence in the Third World and among American immigrant populations. Culture is used to explain violent crimes and it may even justify why such things occur. An interesting point to note is that there are aspects of minority immigrant cultures that the American culture favors, while other facets our society disapproves of. For example, we desire the 'exotic' features of these societies such as fashion styles, trends and accessories that we replicate and market as the latest 'in' item. Indeed, it has been said that imitation is the highest form of flattery. Americans are not, however, interested in any negatively viewed aspects of those cultures. An example of this includes the treatment of women in non-American cultures.

## **c. Culture and Violence in America**

Interestingly, culture is not used to explain why there is so much violence against American women who are often not directly part of an immigrant culture. Okin states that although women are subject to greater incidences of sexual violence in Western societies like America, they are afforded more opportunities and freedoms.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Okin's major premise is that Western liberal societies are less gender-subordinating than many minority immigrant communities.<sup>5</sup> Okin muses:

*While virtually all of the world's cultures have distinctly patriarchal pasts, some-mostly, though by no means exclusively, Western liberal cultures-have departed far further from them than others.*<sup>6</sup>

Okin makes the argument that female members of a patriarchal minority culture would be better off if that culture was disseminated.<sup>7</sup> This is problematic since it can be viewed and dismissed as an imperialist claim. Also, it also not be true at all. Okin's argument does not account for the fact that Western women are also victims of death by culture. If we look at the domestic violence statistics in America then we can see that women are dying in large numbers. This is a form of death by culture because accepted sexism has made it more socially acceptable for a man to beat his wife.

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<sup>4</sup> Okin, supra note 1 at 16.

<sup>5</sup> See, Homi Bhabha, *Liberalism's Sacred Cow*, in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* 79-80; Sander L. Gilman, "Barbaric" Rituals?, in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women*, 57-58; Bonnie Honig, *My Culture Made Me Do It*, in *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* 36-37.

<sup>6</sup> Okin, supra note 1 at 16.

<sup>7</sup> Okin, supra note 1 at 22-23.

#### **d. Sexism and Western Females**

The sexism that Western women experience is subtle when contrast to dowries and bride burning. In fact, some commentators urge that dowry murders should be treated as akin to domestic violence murders here in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Narayan, for example, argues that domestic violence in the United States is just as much of a social problem as dowry murders in India when we consider the respective populations and the number of cases in each category.<sup>9</sup> So, how can it be said that Western culture is more progressive towards women? Why is that these dowry murders are focused on by the media? These commentators use it as a symbol and marker for some sort of primitive culture that needs to be reformed. No one really points to the social problem of domestic violence against women in the United States. The fact that it is an ongoing issue highlights that point that society needs to be re-educated about tolerance, diversity and respect. Commentators only focus on the Third World and they are quick to point out that these fatal forms of cultural violence occur in the Third World. Okin notes:

*Western majority cultures, largely at the urging of feminists, have recently made substantial efforts to preclude or limit excuses for brutalizing women.<sup>10</sup>*

#### **e. Fatal Forms of Cultural Violence**

Contrary to Okin's propositions, fatal forms of violence indeed occur in the 'enlightened' Western world. The sad truth is that Anglo-Saxon people do not view their own behavior as cultural. The violence here in the United States against the average white female has its own cultural underpinnings. It took many years of women suffering before they secured the right to vote. Women still do not have significant representation in Congress and the United States has still never had a female President. We tend to think of the Third World as exotic and perceive much of what they do as a result of their culture, which is also exotic. We ascribe culture to them, as an unfair mark that does have some negative connotations. We often view something negatively because we do not understand it. Perhaps the Third World views the Western world as exotic. It is hard for us to place our own versions of morality on Third World cultures and the immigrant cultures here. The fact remains that we practice some of the same things that the media labels as primitive cultural practices in the Third World.

#### **f. Western Patriarchal Society**

There is a widespread belief in America that violence against women, including domestic violence and rape occur less frequently. I argue that many Americans naively believe that this violence is committed by a minority of society when really, this violence is imbedded in our culture. For

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<sup>8</sup> Narayan, *Dislocating Culture: Identity, Tradition and the Third-World* (1977).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 99.

<sup>10</sup> Okin, *supra* note 1 at 19.

example, young American boys are exposed to video games that sanction violence against women. This is one example of how American culture condones violence against women and promotes patriarchy in boys from a young age. It is the reason why Okin is incorrect – Western culture has really not departed at all from its patriarchal past. Western culture, especially in the United States, continues to be sexist. Okin is helping to direct attention away from this issue by calling attention to Third World and immigrant minority cultural practices that subjugate women.

Western women appear to have more rights and opportunities when compared to women who reside in the Third World. This gives us an artificial sense that we are doing something right here in terms of how we treat women. Feminism should be judged independently and not in relation to how well or poor women are doing in other parts of the world.

Okin argues that feminism and the values of minority cultures are incongruent.<sup>11</sup> For example, Okin asserts:

*Again, the idea that girls and women are first and foremost servants of men—that their virginity before marriage and fidelity within it are their preeminent virtues—emerges in many of the statements made in defense of cultural practices.<sup>12</sup>*

She uses the case of an Iraqi immigrant father who forced his young daughters aged thirteen and fourteen to marry his friends aged twenty-eight and thirty-four to further illustrate these conflicts.<sup>13</sup> The father was charged by police with abuse and the men who married them were charged with statutory rape.<sup>14</sup> The men asserted culture as justification for their acts which are unlawful in America.<sup>15</sup> Okin uses many extreme cases referencing immigrant populations as key examples to illustrate the problem.

Okin chooses to ignore the controversy and practice among white Christian groups who do the same thing. It cannot be that only immigrant marriages of children who are not Anglo-Saxon serve to threaten feminism. We know that this is a problem within certain Anglo-Saxon religious sects in the United States. There is a tendency to see the immigrant behavior as motivated by culture while the non-immigrant doing the same thing to be motivated by something else. Okin does not mention that there are Anglo-Saxon religious groups that practice child marriage in parts of our own country. She does not see that the Anglo-Saxon behavior is also motivated by their culture. The power of Christian fundamentalism in the United States and its impact on women's rights and freedoms cannot be ignored. Yet, she chooses to ignore it and to focus on immigrant minority cultural practices here in the United States.

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<sup>11</sup> Okin, supra note 1 at 10.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

The Anglo-Saxon population and its activities are fertile ground for a feminist who is writing about this discourse between feminism and multiculturalism. We do not approach this problem with clean hands or as angels ready to stand in judgment over others. The United States has some real problems in this area and officials are doing a good job of diverting feminists' attention from these problems.

## **Conclusion**

It is not entirely clear that minority cultures are any more sexist than Western cultures. America struggles with its share of violence against women too. We have social problems with child marriage and other practices that are attributed to minority immigrant culture and the culture of the Third World. Okin tends to present an unrealistic view about minority culture by writing about the progress Western cultures are making towards women's rights.

Okin pegs minority cultures as steadfast to their own traditions and with a marked refusal to change. There are some communities within those cultures that are calling for meaningful reforms that they think are necessary. Okin presents western culture as dynamic and more open to positive change when it really is static.

Western culture is not any more enabled to deal with womens' issues and rights than any other culture. Why is it that we attribute the power of choice to those in the West and turn a blind submission to culture to all others? Okin paints a picture that Western females are stronger with little or no cultural restraints when this is not the reality for many who still struggle for equality and do have cultural mandates. We also assert culture as an excuse and defense in the judicial system. For example, western women are expected to be thin, shave their legs and armpits, and to endure a multitude of pains just to look good. Our culture has just as many dangerous characteristics to it, as any other. Why do commentators choose to overlook these facts? There seems to be an unfair emphasis placed on Western culture's ability to reason and to change.

Minority cultures can and do change within the world. The Western world often believes that these cultures remain unchanged forever. Further, they think that these culture rely on some religious readings that will not change or be subject to a new interpretation. Okin's presentation and ideas do not consider that those cultures will change.

Okin maintains the following:

*Establishing group rights to enable some minority group rights to enable some minority cultures to preserve themselves may not be in the best interests of the girls and women of those cultures, even if it benefits the men.<sup>16</sup>*

Each person experiences culture within a community in his or her own unique way. There are certain factors that are to be taken into such as age, gender, and sexual orientation. Okin is

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<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 23.

exploiting and describing cultures that are focused on male dominant interpretations. She unfairly ignores the feminist ideas that exist within the minority and Third World cultures that she references. Her decision not to discuss the feminist aspects of minority cultures further enhances her claim that there is a rift between feminism and multiculturalism. Her position is that the two can never be compatible. Western feminists need to be skeptical about granting minority group special rights, according to Okin.<sup>17</sup>

Even more distressing is the notion that women in minority cultures need to become Westernized since this culture is supposed to be more liberating for them. Western women are depicted as strong and independent. In no way are they victims of a patriarchal society. The problem is that Western women are only viewed as independent in relation to the plight of those suffering in the Third World. There are other forms of oppression that women experience, such as racism and economic disadvantages. It is not entirely clear that women are much better off in the Western world. Is it proper to focus only on the most atrocious cultural practices, such as genital mutilation? What about pressing economic and political problems that these women face in these places? When we concentrate on cultural violence it is hard to recognise the other problems. Women face ongoing issues with economic and social disparity. The world is too caught up in dealing with cultural practices that are tied to sexual violence. The danger here is that we ignore other problems like economic inequality, racism, and environmental and reproductive exploitation.

These are the concerns that Western women have about women from these cultures. Western women fear sexual violence and so this becomes a main concern. Economic issues become less important and we can see what issues are important to Okin. Given her background and upper middle class status, she is writing about this problem in the context of what she personally fears. It is not about economics but it should be. We need to be concerned about violence against all women and about economic disparity and social inequalities too. There is no dialogue about economic issues. The sensationalized violence takes center stage in the media and by commentators like Okin. This is all for the purpose of making Western females think that they are more equal and privileged. Western women are just like the females from the Third World and from the minority immigrant populations here in the United States, though. It is in this manner that Western women are fooled into thinking that they are no longer subordinate to men.

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<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 11.

