

# Multiculturalism's Dark Heritage Toward Women

## *A world of cruelty comes to America*

Book Review by Brenda Walker

The author, a Stanford professor of political science, opens this collection of essays with a well-documented article arguing against the curious idea that women have common cause with advocates of multiculturalism. Professor Okin outlines some notable examples of gender-specific oppression along with her mild suggestion that, yes, multiculturalism might be harmful to women. The scholarship of the piece is thorough and includes some eye-opening examples. The lack of passion is disappointing, but not surprising, given that the book is targeted toward an academic audience.

What follows is a series of responses to the general inquiry posed by the title. The selections range from thoughtful engagement to unclear misses to the question presented. A few writers squirm intellectually, apparently unwilling to confront the prickly subject of women's continuing oppression. The immediate lapse into arguments about definition, e.g. "Culturally relevant feminism," is a good clue that the author is going nowhere. Some Islamic writers seem content to dump Muslim misogyny at the feet of "culture," as if that were an acceptable excuse for a religion essentially sanctioning practices like mutilation, slavery and murder. (We recall that there was no Islamic hue and cry against the "Fatwah" murder edict toward novelist Salman Rushdie, just as that community has expressed little disapproval of cruelty toward women within its confines.)

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Feminist columnist Katha Pollitt of *The Nation* remarks in her opening that "coming in late in this debate," she had a "hard time understanding how anyone could find these arguments controversial." She further declares that the very nature of feminism questions the claims of tradition. "You could say that multiculturalism demands respect for all cultural traditions, while feminism interrogates and challenges all cultural traditions ... fundamentally, the ethical claims of feminism run counter to the cultural relativism of group-rights multiculturalism." She is unusual in this regard: her feminist viewpoint is undeniable, particularly in comparison with some of the book's other essayists. She takes women's issues seriously and has a passionate voice. Some of the others seem academics first in their sensibilities and approach women's oppression worldwide as if they were diagramming a sentence.

It might be time to hang some meat on the bones of "women's oppression" — an expression that does not

convey what second-class humanity means in a person's life. These practices include unequal rights to property, child custody, health care, nutrition, political participation, education and treatment in the courts. Violence against women is epidemic in many societies, although in the West the practice is at least illegal and perpetrators are prosecuted. In September 1999, Amnesty

International released a report, "Pakistan: Honor Killings of Girls and Women" which disclosed that hundreds of women are murdered annually for the smallest affronts to rigid social codes of conduct. An unproved charge of sexual infidelity, even a husband's paranoid dream, may result in a woman being burned or hacked to death. Her murderer receives the approval of his family and

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community for his action.

Certain other cultural norms can only be considered torture and child abuse. Female genital mutilation is still practiced extensively in dozens of countries on up to two million girls annually. An estimated 135 million women are subjected to this practice. And abuse of girls is arranged marriage to much older men, which ensures that young wives enter the relationship in a disadvantaged position as regards power, a situation designed to ensure that the men are not challenged. Many polygamous marriages are to minor females, with the aim that male control will prevail. Indeed, in some of these cultures (e.g. in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, etc.) the enforced servility of women is so complete that it is hard to see how "marriage" is anything more than sexual slavery.

A custom which still has widespread currency is the requirement that a rapist marry his victim, a practice which exists in Latin America, southeast Asia and west Africa. It is the law in 14 Latin American countries that a rapist will be exonerated if he marries his victim. Clearly, the feelings of the crime's victim account for zero.

Astoundingly, the federal government believes that the United States would be better off having more residents from cultures such as these. Every year the earnest minds at the State Department determine which countries are not represented adequately in the American mix, presumably on the theory that the new religion of diversity must be fed to survive. Around 50,000 residents of these underrepresented countries are chosen from a lottery (known colloquially as the diversity visa program) to be lucky winners on a fast track to a green card. In this year, 2000, those countries include Sudan, Jordan, Pakistan and others which legally sanction cruelty to women. Importing cultural norms like female genital mutilation and honor killing guarantee that American diversity will absolutely be increased, although certainly at no advantage to Americans.

The essay, "Liberal Complacencies," by Will Kymlicka is mentioned by several other authors as a point of reference. He is the author of the book, *Multicultural Citizenship*, and is a well-known proponent of the notion that cultural groups should have special rights and should be cut extra

slack around having to follow the same laws as the rest of us. He does a cautious tippy-toe around the issue of women's oppression within the same groups which he regards with such admiration. Of course, violence against women is Bad, he says, and he's against it. Yet his main conceptual framework is that cultural communities

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should have "group rights," by definition the opposite of individual rights, a concept that has been rather central to the American political system. And women's rights have been most strongly defended in countries where the legal accent is on individual rights. Mr. Kymlicka ( a professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada) contributes an academic rationale for the excuse, "my culture made me do it." In addition, he throws fuel on the fire of

**The Sierra Club and Immigration**

David Brower, 88, one of America's most prominent environmentalists, resigned from the Sierra Club after an extensive relationship which included membership since 1933 and serving as its first executive director from 1952 to 1969.

"The Sierra Club is very sad that he chose to resign," said Robert Cox, Sierra Club board president. "His history with the Club was one of tremendous accomplishments, from public lands protections to inaugurating Sierra Club publications. We hope he remains very close to the Sierra Club for years to come."

Cox said the biggest conflict Brower had with the Club was on U.S. immigration policy. "He wanted us to take a stronger stand to advocate restriction because of his concern about population pressures in the United States," Cox said.

balkanization at a time when both the United States and Canada have potent forces moving toward separatism.

Of course, no one in this volume questions the underlying concept that “diversity” should be imported en masse through Washington’s absurd preference for cultures vastly different from our own. Would it be shocking to suggest that some cultures are a better fit than others? Where would we live more happily — in London or Riyadh? Most Americans would choose an English-speaking, culturally similar city. Would we feel socially comfortable residing in Algiers, Kabul or Kuala Lumpur? Probably not. But Washington creates a comparable situation through its emphasis on “diversity” in immigration categories. We shouldn’t be surprised when members of disparate cultures have great difficulty with even the most basic aspects of assimilation, given the enormous cultural divide. Consider the Hmong who only recently developed a written language and supported themselves in Laos by means of simple agriculture. The Hmong have not had great success in adapting to the United States, clinging as they do to having large families and showing high levels of gang activity, unemployment and welfare use.

Even the strongest feminists in this book do not seem to grasp that importing millions of misogynist foreigners conflicts with their goal of furthering the rights of women. Or perhaps they are constrained by political correctness to refrain from speaking this obvious truth. The subject of immigration policy is hardly mentioned, despite the fact that it is the main engine bringing diversity of all sorts to America.

Okin’s book is a tiny red flag of warning where a flashing neon sign would be more appropriate. There are gems of information for those of a scholarly bent (as well as some politically correct silliness). However, this is not a book that will waken American women to the threat of multiculturalism to hard-won rights. •