

A Book Review: Marxism and Feminism

Edited by Shahrzad Mojab, PhD. London: Zed Books, 2015.

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While in today's academia, all we hear is apolitical and ahistorical feminist lens/ identity from a 'local' and 'specific' cultural point of view; and material modes of production and consumption are discussed assuming that the women's emancipation will presumably occur when class hierarchy is abolished, this book—*Marxism and Feminism* becomes conspicuous. *Marxism and Feminism* rejuvenates the Marxist reader while breathing new life into the dusty lungs of feminism. Shahrzad Mojab, in her new book *Marxism and Feminism*, once again emerges with a new revolutionary collection of thoughts, ideas, experiences that are the pure meaning of resistance against capitalism and patriarchy by Marxist and feminist struggles in theory and praxis.

Shahrzad Mojab offers solutions by raising new questions/ problems to tickle the belly of the beast in which capitalism and patriarchy are so internalized that we often forget how delicately we are preoccupied with (re)producing them (i.e., living patriarchal and capitalist social relations). Shahrzad Mojab, this time, brings to the table a strong collection of weeks, months, years perhaps decades of groundbreaking discussions between her and her prominent colleagues; and by doing so, she provides a universal access to these thoughts by presenting them to the ordinary reader who might not have access to the higher levels of academia due to poverty, precarious status, gender inequality and so on that are embedded in capitalist and patriarchal society. This book is a blatant declaration of combat against capitalist and patriarchal organization of human thinking and acting.

Reading this book, I was gripped by a feeling that it will mark a politically-necessary moment in the history of Women's and Gender Studies as well as educational theories encompassing class, race, disability, sexuality and all axes of identity formation/ imposition in the late capitalism, but not through cultural inquisitions or identity politics subverted in post-structuralist or post-modern approaches. Further reading convinced me that this book is certainly a challenge for ahistorical and apolitical reading of radical thinking in Humanities and Social Sciences in general, and educational theories concerning women's liberation and class-abolishment in particular. Having been at the forefront of Marxist criticism for decades, Shahrzad Mojab rudely undresses patriarchal and capitalist social relations by invoking cutting-edge dialectic-materialist epistemologies and ontologies from her comrades: Cynthia Cuckburn, Himani Banerji, Michelle

Murphy, Helen Colley, Judith Whitehead, and so on goes the most glowing list of critical and revolutionary educators in the table of contents of this book. She does not stop here; rather, she includes non-Western Marxist analysis, which is an act of resistance against often racist/ White and bourgeois academia.

Marxism and Feminism lives and breathes historical-materialism along with mapping out the movements against capitalist social relations that are often problematically racist, sexist and ableist. Shahrazad Mojab offers the extract of her life-long combat against capitalism, imperialism, sexism and anti-materialism that is organized around Marxist theory reading groups and discussions in her teaching (given her coherent knowledge of theory and praxis). Shahrazad Mojab's sophisticated approach to pedagogy is drawn upon the works of Marx, Paula Allman, and many others who have contributed to the revolutionary struggle for workers' and women's liberation. Mojab unveils appropriation of exploitation based on unethical/ irresponsible/ unaccountable surplus labour, women's death and disablement in this battle, and ignoring the world system of male dominance, which will generate discomfort in certain readers and relief in others. This book is the ramification of decades of praxis in which collective thinking and practicing is implicated.

In *Marxism and Feminism*, Shahrazad Mojab unravels the inner dynamics of late capitalism and class and gender-based dominance by illuminating the relation of feminism to socialism as a matter of profound importance to revolutionary women. The editor does not intend, in this book, to delineate the relationship between feminism and Marxism. Neither is she interested in writing the history of this relationship. She, instead, by relentlessly focusing on Marxist and feminist theories, criticizes movements that have reduced gender relations to class relations and calls it an anti-dialectic reading of Marx that has reduced the political to economic determinism. Mojab being one of the seminal revolutionary education scholars on the planet, dismantles theories and approaches that see Marx as hopelessly irrelevant to the "new times" and fail to see patriarchy as a political struggle amongst and within classes. This book demolishes the post-structuralist and post-modernist approaches that promote the 'relativity of truth' by fighting approaches that legitimize dominant discourses in propagating the capitalist contradictions that constantly relocate themselves from East to West while thirsty for living labor and profit.

Shahrazad Mojab insightfully observes that feminism has been an accelerating force to achieve socialism (or even bourgeois democracy, in which formal equality is combined with social inequality), while socialism has sought emancipation through negations of bourgeois relation. *Marxism and Feminism* enlightens the reader about the inseparable link between Marxism and feminism, and critiques Women's and Gender Studies programmes in academia for failing to see the patriarchy as a political system that is firmly connected to capitalist social relations by seeing gender-inequality as only a 'cultural' issue. Mojab is not afraid to put forth that today's feminism is inadequate because it ignores the theory/ politics and praxis (not just hypothetically but also in material sense) behind women's movements, such as exploitation, subjugation, internationalism,

and so on. In other words, Mojab warns the reader that seeing feminism as only a class relation, and not seeing the political nature of patriarchy both are committed to drown centuries of women's struggle in liberalism (even if that is called democracy surrounded/ constituted by free-market). *Marxism and Feminism* sheds light on/ stems from Shahrzad Mojab's personal involvement in the revolution of 1979 in Iran while being enormously impacted by CIA's 1953 coup in Iran, living through imperialism and fundamentalism, state-led westernization before the revolution, and religious state-led Islamization after the revolution is where this book find its dialectic-materialist nature—a real life story of a revolutionary Middle Eastern woman.

Committed to historicization and politicization of notions whether metaphoric or concrete material, Shahrzad Mojab, this time unveils her very own narrative. Her very own story hand in hand with her comprehensive analysis of events, delineates her life as a teenager during the monarchy to her youth and activism, under a theocratic oppressive state, which robbed the Iranian nation from their revolution. Mojab, tells her story in a first-hand account by depicting herself as a young woman involved in the revolution and subsequently being forced to live in exile as a doctoral student with the sorrow stemming from defeat of the revolution that she had very much hoped/ fought for. However, in her introduction of *Marxism and Feminism*, Shahrzad Mojab does not romanticize her story as a young Middle Eastern woman forced to be perceived as a Muslim woman in the United States where she lived and studied; instead, she uncovers the antagonistic terrain of capital while persuading her reader to think dialectically about women's role in revolutions. Shahrzad Mojab defines her own narrative as (Mojab, 2015, p. 16):

“[T]he life story [...] implies that a century of struggle to link the two major emancipatory projects, Marxism and feminism, involved more than a preoccupation with theoretical interests. It provides evidence about the ways in which resistance against patriarchy in a country like Iran is inseparable from the rest of the world. This struggle is rooted in the material and intellectual conditions that have emerged since the nineteenth century as well as worldwide resistance to class and gender rule. This story reveals both the universality and the particularity of oppression (gender, race, ethnicity, etc.), its political and ideological character, as well as the internationalization of feminist knowledge and women's struggle for emancipation.”

Mojab's contribution to both fields of Marxist theory and feminist research is sharing her awareness that what can plague both fields is the assumption that they are separate. Mojab redefines feminism by identifying several fundamental misconceptions that have plagued the socialist critique of patriarchy and gender-inequality (in more liberal terms). Mojab's feminist revolutionary vision in *Marxism and Feminism* will not let the reader rest easy after reading this book. Because away from politics of hope, she envisions a society that does not only preclude abolition of the capitalist forms of production processes and the value form of wealth, but also a society with newly defined/ transformed social relations that are based on collaboration/ collection that address 'the political nature of patriarchy'. By writing the introduction for this book, narrating her own account as a revolutionary Middle Eastern woman scholar/ educator (involved in a real revolution, perhaps the most significant one in the past hundred years),

gathering Marxist and feminist scholars for decades, organizing reading groups, developing communities and collectives, and editing over 16 chapters in *Marxism and Feminism*, she has contributed enormously to both realms of Marxism and feminism.

As it is completely lacking in subtlety, Shahrzad Mojab is committed to her meticulously mapped out praxis as much as to theory. She walks her talk by placing considerable importance on collective thinking and acting; and this book is an evidence for my substantiated claim. Shahrzad calls for a radical (re)envisioning of feminism. She urges the reader to (re)learn and (un)learn what she already knows about Marxism and feminism and push the boundaries of dialectic-materialist epistemologies by building upon the already interwoven efforts in theory and practice to simultaneously abolish class, critique political economy and emancipate women. Shahrzad Mojab and her colleagues, who have contributed to *Marxism and Feminism*, refuse to be intimidated by sophisticated identity-and-state-based post-modern and/ or post-structuralist feminism. They, instead, argue that their work is the point of departure for the ongoing conversation on the possible (or even essential) synthesis/ synergy between/ within Marxism-feminism by pointing out that *Marxism and Feminism* is where the plane of revolution takes off. In summary, Shahrzad Mojab along with the contributors of *Marxism and Feminism* see the internationalized women's movement as a breeding ground for the socialist, and eventually communist, society in which patriarchal racist capitalism/ imperialism is the "Achilles' heel", and therefore questionable and annihilable.

Going into the details of chapters one by one, I was gripped by a theme—a very salient theme. Each chapter discusses one problem that is gender-ed and class-ed, such as financialization (Financialization Chapter by Jamie Magnusson), which is one of the ways in which capitalism survives—given its enormous dialectic capacity/ flexibility to make profit out of interest on people's debts; the other one is nation-building/ nationalization (Nation and Nationalism Chapter by Amir Hassanpour)—which is founded on the pillars of gender-ed ideologies of building a nation/ territory and then defending/ expanding it, which will require war (a very masculine notion). In fact, each chapter dismantles a problem that is embedded in the internal contradiction of capitalism as well as the political nature of patriarchy, in addition to class. Marxist theories (readings of Marx), as each chapter somewhat explains, emphasize the class nature of social inequalities that give birth to the bourgeoisie class while gender is missing from this theorization. On the other hand, they argue, by presenting an example, that Women's Studies and feminist research have problematized the patriarchal nature of capitalism while ignoring the issue of class, labour and historical exploitation of proletariat women.

Marxism and Feminism does not stop in inheriting from Marx and mutually informing Women's Studies and feminist research; in fact, it inherits from Marx and critically goes beyond him, by making the Marxist readings fruitful for feminist projects. For instance, in a chapter by Frigga Haug, 'The Marx Within Feminism' which is based on a detailed reading of the Feuerbach theses, the author sees lessons from Marx as indispensable lessons for contemporary practical

feminism. The issues that she depicts are commonplace but often overlooked in ‘politics of care’, a care that is usually expected from women. Frigga Haug’s reading of Marx in *Marxism and Feminism* introduces the reader to a new reading of Marxian thoughts on labor, useful for feminism that avoids falling into the trap of subjection of all work for wage, which has been demanded by feminists. Instead this new reading of Marx, useful for feminism, goes beyond ‘wage for house labor or as Lenin puts—slavery’, because a comprehensive critique of a class-ed society certainly questions the modes/ means of production including ‘wage’ in the first place. Women’s Studies and feminist research is in debt to Materialism for its dedication to physical world (reality) as opposed to metaphysics. Borrowing its methodological and epistemological tools from materialism, Women’s Studies has been able to critique the family form, the gendered division of labor, alienated form of waged labor, capitalism itself, and combat the notion that ‘domestic labor is productive’ (which has had terrible political implications for women).

Marxism and Feminism has aimed to awaken today’s feminism by reminding Women’s Studies and feminist research that “[they] should not remain indifferent to material practices under capitalism which precludes, labour (reality-shaper of everyday life)”, states Teresa L. Ebert eloquently in the epilogue of *Marxism and Feminism* (Mojab, 2015, p. 141).

The book calls for an urgency to welcome ‘Red’ feminism, which not only, can answer the woman question but other questions, that are the building-blocks of the woman question, such as class and labor. Third World women’s exploitation, disablement, injury and death are not just a linguistic metaphoric game as Cultural Studies signifies in theory and practice; instead, it is a material reality, particularities of oppression (not fetishized) that function in a painful and concrete zone of truth. Contemporary social theories are designed to treat ‘human difference’ as a cultural difference by bypassing the questions of exploitation, labor, history and class.

Marxism and Feminism warns us that reducing history to events is reducing material modes of production to ‘supposedly’ an autonomous culture that cannot explain material exploitation, which is the root-cause of globalization. *Marxism and Feminism* warns the reader that feminism, without understanding the material exploitation, class, labour and history, can become a dangerous discourse or language that can be easily forged/ replaced/ changed. This could get really messy when, for instance as Teresa L. Ebert writes, “rape is not seen as a domination, but a narrative—(mis)representation of victimization and sexualization that can be resisted through signification” (Mojab, 2015, p. 145).

Marxism and Feminism fulfills the promise that Shahrzad Mojab makes in her introduction: explaining how and why Marxism and feminism as two emancipatory projects and two political affinities should be converged despite all political/ ideological projects that are committed to diverge them. The content ages gracefully, from an introduction to ‘Marxism and feminism’ through a first-hand revolutionary account. And then it moves to ‘class and race in Marxism and feminism’, ‘Gender relations’, ‘revolution, ‘reproduction’, ‘race’, ‘intersectionality?’ and so on.

Marxism and Feminism is not only readable as well as technically accurate, but its language natural not stilted. The examples, whether biographical or autobiographical, are easy and simple to follow but not simplistic.

Shahrazad Mojab and her ally authors, throughout the book, clarify for the reader why critics of capitalism who do not dismantle gender relations, fall abysmally short of a proper scrutinization of the capitalist social relations including gender and class (not just class). Mojab and her contributors call for an urgent de-hierarchizing of the existing power relations accompanied with challenging the ways in which that power is constituted through gender division of labor as well as material modes of production. *Marxism and Feminism* is a movement—a step towards a revolution or perhaps a new step towards an already-embarked transformation in women's movement as well as the proletariat/ working-class movement, both embedded in a Marxist feminism and a feminist Marxism. This book is a pedagogy—a form of resistance written and practiced by Shahrazad Mojab and her allies who, by jotting down this piece, have overcome the fetters that have obstructed our voices to protest exploitation of women by capitalism and patriarchy.

Reference

Mojab, S. (2015). *Marxism and Feminism*. London: Zed Books.