

Leading Ladies

By Nancy Honey

Interviews by Hattie Garlick

Baroness Afshar: *Professor, life peer and prominent Muslim feminist*

1944: Born in Iran

1994: Published *Islam and the Post Revolutionary State in Iran*

1998: Published *Islam and Feminisms: An Iranian Case Study*

2005: Awarded the OBE for services to equal opportunities

1999: Appointed to the board of the Women's National Commission

2007: Formally introduced into the House of Lords

2009: Named as one of the twenty most successful Muslim women in the UK and was appointed an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences

2011: Received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Essex

Today: Visiting Professor of Islamic Law at the Faculté Internationale de Droit Comparée at Strasbourg

I'm a Muslim feminist. Islam gave rights and entitlements to women fourteen centuries ago that I'm still fighting for in Britain today. So I'm a serious Muslim feminist.

I've been teaching Islamic law for years and the problem is not Islam, it's the men who bar the way for women to understand and access their rights, which is a fairly universal experience!

Muslim women have always been economically independent. When I married my husband he had to convert. I explained to him that the reason was that according to Islam, 'what's mine is mine and what's yours is mine too.' Motherhood and domesticity are paid – if you suckle your baby you can charge for it; housework is paid, wages for housework are recognised; and marriage is a binding contract between two consenting partners. Women are actually entitled to payment for agreeing to sign the contract.

The whole business of the invisibility of women's work was dealt with fourteen centuries ago. I would like the West to do the same!

One of the cornerstones of feminism was that women should have control over their bodies. Unfortunately, this has come to be misunderstood. Women now mistake flaunting their bodies for having control over them. Whereas our argument was the opposite: what matters is the person, it's irrelevant what you look like.

Sometimes, in desperation, I think: women who cover, who wear the hijab, have the right approach. At least they are no longer the object of the gaze. They might be stared at because they look weird, but no one's saying, "Her nose is too big," or, "Her eyelashes aren't long enough," or, "She's too fat." The objectification of women has become much more intense than it was when we were young. And heaven knows it was bad enough then.

Still, I think standing outside, on the ringside and telling people to fight harder is wrong. I'm a fighter, I like to be part of the movement and to talk to women as a feminist, as someone who's committed to the cause, so I have the right to say, "Okay, in this respect, I think we can do it differently."

I'm afraid feminism has often been largely a middle class cause since working class women have always had to be in the labour market and dress appropriately. In Iran, where the staple food is rice, this is grown by women, working knee deep in water, transplanting the seedlings.

I'm a third generation campaigner for women's rights. My grandmother, in Iran, rejected the veil.

My grandmother was part of a generation of women who were solidly supported by their men. They were not doing it on their own but they were very strong, too, themselves. My grandfather was a real feminist. My great aunt was a formidable lady, really pretty scary. She was very tall and imposing and assertive – I remember her as an absolutely magnificent lady and I only met her when she was in her seventies! These strong women just could not tolerate the veil; they couldn't see the point of it.

But it was a risk, because in the 1920s, when my great aunt and grandmother were active, there was also a large group of conservative bazaar merchant families, and many of them had a very conservative interpretation of the Koran. There was a real division between the technocrats, many of them had been educated in Western-influenced schools and looked West, and the traditionalists who felt threatened. That reflected a real division in society.

I myself had a very privileged life; at the age of fourteen I had never brushed my own hair. My mother brushed it and plaited it. I had never given myself a bath, I had never dressed myself. Then I read *Jane Eyre* and I thought, *Well if you left me on the side of a road I wouldn't know which way to turn. I'd better go to this England where they make these tough women.* So I convinced my parents to send me to England.

I didn't speak a word of English when I arrived for school here. But I soon learned the language. I think I inherited that determination from my great aunt downwards!

That independence of mind has stayed with me but it's not a driving force, it's just a part of my nature. I never question it, I just think, *well of course.* It's always been thus, for me, for my mother, for my grandmother, for my great aunt... For the women in my family, it's just normal!

I am driven, though, to defy stereotypes. In the sense that when I came to this country, the idea that people had of a Muslim woman was so abominably wrong that I really was driven to challenge it. It was a wrong that needed to be dealt with. And in many ways it still goes on. Even now, when I tell people I'm a Muslim they say, "No you're not." I mean, come on!

I've never lost my country. I returned home to Iran for the holidays while at school and university in England, so I kept in touch with all my friends from school. Even today, though I haven't been back since the revolution, I've always kept in touch. I work with women inside the country.

By the time I went back in my twenties, to work, Iran had changed. It was taken for granted that women could do the same jobs as men and that they were entitled to ask for the same wage, not that it always worked out that way.

In many ways, women were doing male jobs more commonly than they were in England, in terms of being engineers and architects. The feminisation of the labour market, which was very sudden and marked in the West, was less obvious, more gradual, in Iran.

I worked for the Ministry of Agriculture, which was run and directed by men to deal with a sector that had a large proportion of women workers. They didn't have many women on staff to talk to the women who are actually in agriculture, doing the work, so they needed me!

Back in the UK, I found the notion of sexual liberation difficult, in terms of my interpretation compared to the Western interpretation. For me, the important thing about feminism was that it emphasised the idea of choice, which was an Islamic idea anyway. But I did find the obsession with sexuality, and the idea that you proved your womanhood by finding diverse partners, not particularly liberating. For me, relationships were between individuals and were much more meaningful than chance encounters in the night.

Essentially, I think I've stayed very Iranian and I couldn't see any reason for changing. I don't think I have cherry picked from British and Iranian attitudes towards women. I've been very much who I am. But I'm very lucky that, gradually, other feminists like myself have begun to encourage feminism and feminists the world over to learn to celebrate differences.

We don't have one measure of sexual liberation any more, we don't have one measure of what feminism is. There has been fantastic progress in my lifetime, we've learnt to recognise and value differences, rather than adopting the notion of 'one size fits all.' We accept that women may well choose to cover in order not to be objects of the male gaze.

The important thing is to support voices that come from different cultures, rather than looking at them from afar and saying things like "Wearing the hijab is a terrible thing and anti-feminist, it is abhorrent that a woman covers herself." On issues that women within communities identify as being oppressive and unacceptable, we must support them in their campaigns, rather than dictating the terms, sitting in the West and saying, "This is what you should do." It's handing over the initiative and being sisterly and supportive.

Actually, feminism is much more vibrant in the rest of the world than it is in the West. Because people in the Western world seem to feel that they've done it all, won all the battles, whereas actually there is a great deal to do yet.

What worries me slightly is the complacency of some women, the idea that we've made it. I just think, *look around!*

As a young married woman, I didn't think motherhood would be for me. I still think, in the West, motherhood is the most deskilling thing that can happen to you. The moment you become a mother you have an unpaid, full-time job. It's seen as a duty that is exclusive to women. And it's very, very difficult to do two full-time jobs.

Because I'd never changed my name and I'm not the right colour and right religion, the whole process of finding my first job was quite complicated. This was many years ago before there were equality and discrimination bills and all the rest.

My view on motherhood, particularly for minority woman in the seventies, was that having a child would mean pulling out of the labour market. And pulling out of the labour market for a number of years in which science and technology progress and you do not.

I was not supposed to be able to have children, which I thought was fantastic, so I had no idea that I was expecting my first 'til I was seven months pregnant. I had checked with a specialist in Harley Street and he told me to have a child I would have to have a little operation. Both Maurice and I felt that there were enough children in the world, we had nieces and nephews and we really didn't need another kid.

Even at seven months, you really couldn't tell. She was so tiny when I went to see my father to tell him about it, he thought I was having a phantom pregnancy.

When Molly was born, we decided to have a nanny and employ her properly with social insurance and all that. As a result, once I'd paid for my commute and the childcare, I had five pounds a week. But I had to carry on working otherwise I'd be left behind in the job market. So of course it's insane to have children!

We then decided that, with two working parents, this child needed an ally. So we planned the second child.

Of course, today, the choice that I made back then just doesn't exist. You don't choose whether or not to go back to work because most families need two earners. It's not even feasible to think of buying a house unless you have two incomes. So all working-aged people have to work, particularly if they want to buy a house and have a family. They need two incomes.

Today, I can't go back to Iran. I have always been a dissident. I've written extensively on the Iranian government not delivering on its Islamic duty to women. I think that's what they find difficult.

My argument is that the Iranian government is barring the way to education for women because they're scared of educated women.

Because educated women can actually read classical Arabic, access the Koranic teachings, and demand their rights, contextualised in the Koranic teachings. They would then be taking on the Iranian government in its own terms.

I think that argument is something that they find far more unacceptable than if they could put a label on me; 'communist,' for example, and deal with me in that way.

The reality is that if you claim to have an Islamic republic, you have to deliver Islamic rights, and they don't. But having said that publically, it wouldn't be safe, now, for me to go back. I wouldn't like to put it to the test.

The women's movements in Iran think I'm much more useful on the outside, saying what's going on and fighting for their rights, at least in terms of international human rights.

I feel that I have to do my best for them, but then I've always felt that about everything I've done. There's no point being a doer if you don't do. It's what I do and who I am. Just as in this country I feel I have to echo the demands of Muslim women from the British government, I also feel I have to echo the demands of Iranian women internationally.

I'm absolutely over the moon at the moment because in the International Women's Day debate, I asked the Minister Baroness Northover to consider more leniently applications by Iranian women who wanted to study in British universities because of the difficulties. I feel that they treat applicants from Iran as potential freedom fighters rather than terrorists. In her answer, she very graciously agreed, I just sent her a text saying how wonderful it was, but I'm going to keep that sentence, reading, "The Minister says, 'Yes.'"
