Empty Hands: Iranian Feminists Reach Out (and it’s our turn to listen)

By Alisa Eisen

There is an unsettling assumption that seems to have taken root in the imaginations of many of us living in predominantly Euro-American societies. That is that women are subjugated in the Islamic world. Fueled by media representations and misinformation, many believe that women are subjugated in the Islamic world. This singular focus on the veil, however, limits our vision, and thus hampers cross-cultural dialogue. “Islamic” feminists are forced to choose between engaging in a dialogue with “Western” feminists – which means a great deal of educating about Islam, its history, and practice, before getting to the issue at hand – or pursuing their own goals outside of the larger discourse. Because neither choice is optimal, feminist activists, scholars, and artists in the Islamic Republic of Iran have been exploring the spaces in-between these choices during recent years.

By Kristy Phillips

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The particular success is Empty Hands, a short eight-act play performed by amateur actors and karate students this past December 2001 in the small Moulavi Theater near the campus of Tehran University. This undistinguished circumstance, however, belies the play’s gravity. Written one year earlier by Fatemeh Arabalshahi, with the assistance of Nasrin Pakhlo, this play’s message is one that transcends cultural distinctions. Not only does it challenge all of us to see beyond our differences; it also raises some noteworthy challenges to social and cultural norms.

The story follows a young girl who sells newspapers in order to augment her mother’s sewing income. One day, somberly, in the paper catches the girl’s eye, sending her on a quest to understand the significance of the phrase “empty hands.” She first goes to her mother with questions, but meets resistance. The portentous lesson her mother wishes to impart seems to be that curiously leads only to frustration, or worse, and should thus be avoided. But the phrase continues to preoccupy the girl until she walks past a sign bearing the puzzling words. The sign is for a women’s karate center named Empty Hands, where renewed curiosity drives her to spend countless hours hovering just outside the door.

Peeking in through the doorway, the newspaper girl observes a range of women, including an older, beginning karate student, an advanced student with a Western father, a strong-willed, but somewhat shortsighted teacher, and a female janitor mourning the death of her only son. As the play unfolds, each person’s inner struggle comes increasingly to the fore, until all simultaneously witness an anonymous woman’s public execution for speaking out about the women’s rights. All look on and listen. For a few seconds following her stabbing by the guards, the audience shares in the disbelieving – and then the complicity in her murder. No one utters a word. Finally, the women on stage begin to grieve, especially the young news- paper girl, as the space in-between these choices during recent years.

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