

Hammed Shahidian (1959-2005)

I have lost a beloved friend; my academic confidante. Hammed left us a legacy of a committed scholar, an honest intellectual, and a friend with a gentle soul. This legacy is inscribed in his writings, lectures, and in our personal memories. Hammed was a talented, knowledgeable, and brilliant scholar. He had personal and intellectual commitment to the struggle for gender justice. His scholarship consists of a diverse body of critical literature on social movements, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, exile, immigration and diaspora. He contributed to debates in all these areas in North America, Europe and in the Middle East.

Hammed's books, *Women in Iran: Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic* (Westport, 2002) and *Women in Iran: Emerging Voices in the Women's Movement* (Westport, 2002) are seminal contributions to a crucial debate in international feminist studies, in particular the repression and resistance of women in the Islamic theocracy of Iran and in the Middle East. These books have encouraged a vast range of debate, originated from the theoretical challenges that Hammed put forth. The significance of these debates goes beyond the case of women in Iran, and touch on feminist theory as well as concrete struggle for gender equality in the Middle East and the rest of the world. In the first book, *Gender Politics in the Islamic Republic*, for example he undertook a detailed study of certain institutions such as paid work, domestic labor, law, politics, sexuality, and culture in order to demonstrate the role of state coercion in the construction of gender relations. He argues that despite women's resistance and the reversal of some of the legislation, no crucial change has taken place in gender relations. This study challenges the currently fashionable theoretical claims, which overemphasize the flexibility of the institution of the state in general, and the theocratic state in particular.

In the second book, *Emerging Voices in the Women's Movement*, Hammed embarked upon another significant theoretical challenge; he demonstrated the limits and constraints of political reformism and provided a critique of the cultural relativist approaches to "indigenous" feminisms. This critique is most timely, and is indispensable for both theory and policies rooted in cultural relativism.

Hammed's influence in the sphere of feminist research has shaped the field of women's studies of the Middle East. The vast repertoire of his publications, research, lectures and conference presentations around the world on the topic of social movements, feminism, women and revolution, activism, and women's experience of exile indicate his dedication to enhancing theoretical debates in these areas (check his website at: www.shahidian.com). His scholarly work constitutes important contributions to the emerging field of diaspora studies. Some of his published articles in this area are first-hand and unique contributions to exilic life and political activism in the West.

However, it is important that I assess Hammed's scholarship not only in the context of Iranian women's studies, but also in the international context of the brutal war against women in the Middle East and the rest of the world. We live in a world in which some 2 million girls between the age of 5 and 15 are introduced into the prostitution market of global capitalism. Femicide is the order of the day in south Asia, and Mexico. Women from poverty stricken areas of Russia, East Europe, and Asia are trafficked to the world sex markets, where they are forced into sex slavery. In parts of the world, women are subjected to genital mutilation, honor killing, and stoning to death. It is unfortunate that much of

the scholarship in the last 15 years or so does not seriously challenge these patriarchal atrocities. Post-structuralism, identity politics, postmodernism, and cultural relativism, which dominate the academic world, have in fact been silent on the atrocities committed against “Muslim” women. Hammed resisted this kind of scholarship. His points of reference were not the theoretical illusions of some academic feminists; he was, rather, interested in exposing religion as one of the many strongholds of patriarchy with devastating impact on women’s lives. He was able to show how the Islamic theocracy has turned Iran into a hell for women. And he never did this from an Islamophobic perspective.

Hammed had tireless energy for envisioning new areas of inquiry. He was fed up with repetitious and inconsequential debate on “modernity and Islam.” He encouraged us to collaborate with him on an anthology on the issue of secularism and democracy. This research was an effort to make visible an old, yet overlooked trend in Iranian culture and politics. He wanted to explore areas of political contestation in Iran waged by writers, youth, and human rights activists that have not yet been adequately studied. His proposed book project was the first on this subject and combined both highly theoretical and personal narratives by secular activists in Iran. This approach reflects Hammed’s emphasis on studying social movements from below, an approach he took both in his published works and in developing a manuscript on the underground leftist movement in Iran.

Hammed’s premature departure has left us with a huge void. I mourn more than the loss of a beloved friend. I mourn the loss of an intellect with a profound commitment to social justice. I also celebrate Hammed’s life and legacy by reminding myself and the generation to come of our duty to living a responsible life; a life dedicated to justice.

Shahrzad Mojab
University of Toronto