

MULTICULTURALISM AND FEMINISM - DISTINGUISHING AMONGST CULTURAL PRACTICES

A REVIEW OF SUSAN MOLLER OKIN'S "IS MULTICULTURALISM BAD FOR WOMEN?"

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Introduction

Susan Moller Okin's paper "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" deals with the tensions of multiculturalism, feminism, and the protection of minority cultures and religions. Okin's argument is surrounded by these themes, arguing that minority cultures and religions that practise gender-oppressive practices must not be protected, as protecting them would create a hostile, oppressive environment for women.

Okin expresses in her writing that the argument for the preservation of minority group cultures affects women more than men because women participate more in the domestic sphere than men, and since cultures mostly govern the domestic spheres of life, women are more affected (Okin, 1998). Additionally, she argues that most cultures preach the control of women by men, especially in the reproductive and sexual spheres (Okin, 1998).

Her views raise multiple questions. Do some deserve protection or more protection than others because of their tolerable practices, and if yes, how do we distinguish amongst these practices and decide which are tolerable? This paper tries to answer these questions by using the works of various scholars, but firstly critically analyses Okins' arguments. The findings are that all cultures must be respected, accepted, and equally deserve cultural protection and general support, and argues that having an objective criterion for distinguishing between oppressive and enabling cultural norms has inherent flaws.

According to Okin, creating a society that is accepting of minority cultures means that women will have to live in oppressive, hostile environments, which affect them adversely because these cultures practise inherently oppressive practices. Okin regards this as too high of a cost for women to bear and, hence, rejects minority groups' rights for multiculturalism (Okin, 1998). A practical application of her argument would be, for instance, the tribes in Nagaland. The Indian constitution provides special protection for minority culture of India in Nagaland, but this culture is known to have patriarchal norms and men controlling the decision-making roles, adversely affecting women (The Constitution of India, 1949). This is the crux of her piece, which adds a lot of weight to the literature on multiculturalism as it brings in the dimension of feminism to it, and highlights the connections

between gender and culture. However, her views have been criticised on multiple accounts by various scholars. Finally, Okin claims that unless women are fully represented in negotiations about group rights, they will be adversely affected rather than being promoted through the endowment of such rights.

Two scholarly articles that are essential for this theme are Saskia Sassen's "Culture Beyond Gender", as it extends Okin's arguments and brings in new dimensions to multiculturalism - intercultural inequalities, and Will Kymlickas's "Liberal Complacencies", as he highlights that both multiculturalism and feminism are based on the same underlying principles, fighting for a more inclusive conception of justice, and there's a common interest in fighting for them.

Criticism of Okin's Views

Okin has been criticised for having a narrow lens towards multiculturalism. Joseph Raz, in his response to Okin, writes that Okin does not consider issues that are equally as serious as gender oppression and restrictions on the individual autonomy of women. I agree with Raz, as cultures can be oppressive towards other groups too, like LGBTQ+ and disabled members, or practice oppressive practices like casteism or racism. This aspect is overlooked by Okin. This is not to say that just because a culture is also oppressive towards other groups, its impact on women specifically should be ignored. Rather, this just emphasises a narrow view of multiculturalism. Saskia Sassen, in her response, also points out that Okin overlooks the dynamics of intercultural relationships and dominant cultures with minority cultures (inequalities among cultures). Overlooking this aspect is expensive because it plays a fundamental role in developing cultures. Joseph Raz, in his response, highlights this, claiming that the interactions among cultures in closed political and social spaces can shape and change the practices of the culture.

Okin is also criticised for using "women" to represent a singular monolithic category by Sander L Gilman in his response to Okin (Gilman, 1999). I agree with his criticism, as Anne Philips (1996), in her piece "Dealing With Difference: A Politics of Ideas or a Politics of Presence", comments that many differences can exist within groups. Many differences exist between women; hence, they cannot be grouped into a singular category. For example, within the category of women, we have lesbian women, black women, single-parent women, Muslim women, poor women, illiterate women, financially dependent women, et cetera, all wanting different things and having different perceptions about themselves, and so cannot be seen as a part of a singular category. Similarly, many differences exist within cultures as well, where some members might have dissenting voices and not accept the oppressive practices of the culture. Okin does not acknowledge such differences and treats women and culture as singular categories. Another way to look at this is that every culture will have inherently negative qualities, so does this mean that no culture deserves to be protected? These aspects remain unanswered by Okin.

Okin (1998), claims that the oppressive practices of minority cultures restrain the personal autonomy of women in these cultures and violate their individual rights. This claim is made on a universal level

and is intended to apply to everyone. This completely disregards women's self-view and assumes that all women exposed to the culture see themselves as oppressed and would not voluntarily accept the practices. Sander L Gilman (1999), in his response to Okin, highlights the notion that Western, upper-class women believe they can speak for or represent all women in the world from different cultures, some of which they probably do not even know or understand. This stems from the assumption that these 'oppressed' women cannot speak for themselves and require a voice. In his response to Okin, Robert Post (1999) highlights that typically, an objective and external criterion of what constitutes 'freedom' and 'dignity' is created, which again disregards the self-view of the so-called 'victims'. To deprive women of the choice to decide what is oppressive for them, what is enabling for them, and to provide an objective criterion to decide if they are oppressed also amounts to restricting their autonomy. Women must, at the very least, be provided with the choice to decide if they are oppressed or treated unjustly and must be able to represent themselves. Not providing that choice results in the same oppression we seek to prevent. Hence, the notion of having objective criteria for unjust or oppressive practices is inherently flawed. To elaborate from an objective standpoint, polygamy is considered oppressive. However the women in these marriages may not always think it is oppressive or accept it because their religion provides for it. So it deserves to be given protection, contrary to what Okin says.

Some defenders of group rights claim that groups that are liberal must be given the right to protect their culture (Okin, 1998). However, an inherent loophole in this is: how can we ever verify if these cultures that claim to be liberal are, in fact, actually liberal? Since many of the oppressive cultural practices that Okin seeks to protect women from being practised in the domestic sphere, they are likely to remain hidden. It can be easily portrayed on the surface level that they are liberal but continue to practise oppressive practices in the domestic, private sphere, hidden from the world. The same has been highlighted by Okin (1998), in her essay. This makes it more challenging to award external protection to minority groups that claim to be liberal. It also makes it valid to question whether the requirement of cultures to be liberal in awarding them external protection is effective.

Further, advocates of group rights defend external protection for minority cultures because they need to protect their culture from extinction under the majority culture (Okin, 1998). However, this claim has an underlying assumption that minority cultures are always bullied by majority cultures and that they cannot coexist. The contemporary example of Belgium will disprove this assumption, as 60% of Belgium is a majority community (Dutch speakers) and 40% French speakers, but both of these communities are accommodated by the government through tools of constitutional recognition, representation in parliament, and community governments (Mnookin and Verbeke, 2009). Hence, majority and minority communities can coexist.

Do some cultures deserve protection, and others do not? Distinguishing between cultural practices.

Does a culture that provides a hostile or discriminatory environment to its members still deserve group rights or cultural preservation? Can we objectively decide which cultures deserve to be protected and which deserve to be extinct?

Joseph Raz (1999), in his response to Okins' paper, claims that we should not assume the right to reject the wholesale cultures of various groups within ours in similar circumstances. He claims that we should not reject other cultures just because of the injustices they endorse or their oppressive practices, just like one does not reject the culture that one belongs to for being oppressive. This claim is helpful because it means that we should preserve cultures despite their oppressive, unjust practices. After all, all cultures inherently suffer from problems that are as serious as they are unjust to women. Raz says that just because a culture practises specific acts that require it to be stopped is not reason compelling enough to not preserve, respect or generally support that culture. The answer to our question, then, is that all cultures deserve protection, respect, and general support despite their unjust or oppressive practices.

Another dimension to look at this question is the outsider-insider aspect of culture. Joseph Raz (1999), argues that only a person who is not a member of a culture can desire its extinction. He claims that the thought of letting our culture go extinct is so bizarre that we cannot even envisage it if we are insiders of our culture. So, he claims that the only reason we can actively threaten the existence of distinct cultural groups is that we do not have a membership, or at least view ourselves as not having a membership of that cultural group. This points toward the subjectivity involved in what we consider cultures deserving of protection. It is interesting to ponder if Okin would have had a different view on the cultural preservation of minority cultures that are unjust or oppressive to women if she herself had membership in that culture. Raz also highlights that we are more sensitive to the background and context of our culture than others, and this again portrays the subjectivity involved in what we see as oppressive or unjust practices. Hence, we cannot escape the subjectivity of distinguishing amongst cultural norms.

Since intercultural dynamics and the role that every culture plays in the development of another is so fundamental, the absence or even reduction of different cultures would have detrimental implications for each other. The simultaneous presence of dominant and minority cultures stems from pain and rage during intercultural engagements, and these sentiments have the potential to change aspects of the gender arrangements of the minority culture, as argued by Saskia Sassen (1999), in her response to Okin. Additionally, a minority is a minority only because of the presence of a majority. In the absence of a majority, the minority would be just any other culture. So the presence of multiple cultures also impacts cultures. As earlier highlighted in this paper, the dynamics of intercultural and dominant cultures with minority cultures play a fundamental role in their development, which may be negative or positive. For example, the ban on cow slaughtering in India had been criticised for adversely affecting some Muslim communities directly, whose livelihoods were based on selling cow meat. When the affected communities took this matter to court, the entire issue was portrayed as a Muslim versus Hindu religious issue, rather than addressing the issues of the affected livelihoods in the first place (De, 2018). This illustrates how the relationship between majority and minority cultures can affect minority cultures.

Conclusion

Okin provides us with a very rich essay on multiculturalism and the gender aspect of culture. The varied responses to her essay extend her arguments and create a fruitful discussion on the topic. However, Okin has a narrow lens towards multiculturalism, ignoring other issues equally serious. She views cultures and women as singular, monolithic, categories, and disregards the self-view of women.

This paper has demonstrated that since we can never objectively determine which cultures are oppressive, all of them deserve protection, respect, and support. An objective criterion for distinguishing amongst cultural practices is flawed, and we cannot escape from the subjectivity involved in the same. To deprive women the agency to decide what is oppressive for them, what is enabling them and to provide an objective criteria to decide if they are being oppressed or not also amounts to restricting their autonomy.

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