



SERENDIPITY YEAR AT WIKO
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Born in Iran in 1952, I obtained my B.A. in Sociology from Tehran University in 1974 and my Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the University of Cambridge in 1980, where I have been a Research Associate at the Department of Anthropology since 1984, and a Fellow of Girton College (1990–93). Since 1993, I have worked as an independent researcher, consultant and writer on Middle Eastern issues, specializing in gender, family relations, Islam, law and development. In autumn 1998 I was Visiting Professor in Århus University, Denmark; in 2002 and 2004 I was Hauser Global Law Visiting Professor at the School of Law, New York University, and I will be again in 2006. My publications include three books: *Marriage on Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law in Iran and Morocco* (1993, 2000); *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran* (1999, 2000); and *Islam and Democracy in Iran: Eshkevari and the Quest for Reform* (with Richard Tapper, 2006). I have also directed (with Kim Longinotto) two award-winning feature-length documentary films on contemporary issues in Iran: *Divorce Iranian Style* (1998) and *Runaway* (2001). Since 1998 I have been Senior Research Associate at the London Middle Eastern Institute and the Centre for Islamic and Middle Eastern Law, both at SOAS, University of London. – Address: 6 Chivelston, 78 Wimbledon Parkside, London, SW19 5LH, Great Britain.

We (my husband Richard Tapper and I) arrived in Berlin at the end of September. We had spent most of the summer working on a joint book, and decided reluctantly to miss the intensive German courses offered by Wiko in order to submit the first draft before leaving London. I was determined to spend my fellowship year writing a new book on the changing relationship between Islamic law and feminism, a project I had been working on

for some time. Richard, just retired from SOAS, was full of plans to complete much-postponed old projects and embark on new ones.

Of course, things did not turn out the way we planned. In November, we received the readers' reports on our manuscript, and spent much of the next two months on revisions. The book, *Islam and Democracy in Iran*, has a strong Berlin connection. It tells the story of the struggle for democracy in the Islamic Republic of Iran through the writings and experiences of one of its clerical advocates, Hassan Yousefi Eshkevari. In the 1970s, as a young revolutionary and a follower of Ayatollah Khomeini, he sought the creation of an "Islamic utopia", but two decades later, feeling disillusioned and betrayed, he tried to lay the theoretical foundations – in Islamic terms – for a separation of religion from the state and for the secularization of Islamic discourses. In December 2000, he was condemned to death for "apostasy" and "war against Islam", charges that arose from his speeches in April that year at the Berlin conference on "Iran after the [parliamentary] elections", following the reformists' victory in February. His sentence was later commuted to 7 years in prison. Our book attempts a kind of textual ethnography, in the sense that we put a selection of Eshkevari's writings, up to and including his Berlin speeches, into their personal, social, cultural and political contexts, with relevant background information, showing how they reveal his intellectual and political trajectory during the years when the reform movement in Iran was still both unformed and full of hope.

In February we resubmitted our manuscript, having rewritten much of it. It was a real bonus for us and the book that we did our revisions at Wiko in a year when the Fellowship included Abdolkarim Soroush, the foremost religious philosopher in Iran, and in many ways the theoretical architect of the reform movement. I had known him for a decade (and indeed had devoted a chapter of a previous book to a discussion with him about gender issues), but it was a real privilege to be able to engage him in almost daily discussions at Wiko lunches. He generously shared with us his immense knowledge of Islamic sources and his reformist vision of Islam. Being in Berlin also meant that we could visit the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the site of the 2000 conference. A final bonus for us and our book was that, just at the time when we submitted the revised manuscript, Eshkevari was released from prison.

As for my project on the changing relationship between Islamic law and feminism, during my stay at Wiko I did not even begin to write the book I had hoped to complete. But I took full advantage of the superb library facilities to read far more widely around the topic, and I did write and deliver two papers containing elements of the argument that I

want to develop. In this project I explore the ways Muslim women can achieve equality within an Islamic framework rather than by the import or imposition of Western/global institutions and values. I ask two questions: If justice and equality are values intrinsic to Islam, as Muslim jurists claim and all Muslims believe, should they not be reflected in the laws that define the rights of men and women and regulate relations between them? Why are women treated as second-class citizens in standard jurisprudential texts that define the terms of the shari'a? I ask these questions not only as a trained social anthropologist, but also as a believing Muslim woman who needs to make sense of her faith and religious tradition.

This project is in many ways the culmination of work I have been doing since the early 1980s. I began with fieldwork conducted in family courts in Iran and Morocco (1984–89), focusing on marital disputes and litigants' strategies and examining the gap between theory and practice in Islamic family law (*Marriage on Trial*. 1993). Then I became interested in exploring the changing notions of gender that lie at the root of this law, and the ways gender models manifested in Islamic law are perpetuated, modified, deconstructed and reconstructed by its custodians in Iran, the clerics; for this, I did field research in Qom and Tehran (1995–96), entering debates with a number of clerics and their texts (*Islam and Gender*. 1999). Now in this project I am engaging with Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), to show that its rulings on gender are not only untenable in modern times, but also go against the egalitarian spirit of Islam. I seek to contextualize these gender rulings by examining their authors' underlying cultural and metaphysical assumptions as well as the social conditions of their times. I focus on two key areas of current law: rulings that define marriage and divorce, on the one hand, and *hejab* on the other. In my view, these areas are very much connected, two sides of the same patriarchal coin: both deny Muslim women the right to make dignified choices. It is also through them that patriarchal Muslim states justify and maintain their control over women in contemporary times. In short, their function is to make women insecure: the first in the family domain, and the second in public space.

My year in Wiko was important for me in other ways. I met wonderful people, some of whom became friends. Five of us – Nancy Fraser, Maria Todorova, Lydia Liu, Jamie Monson and myself – formed a reading and discussion group and (to counterbalance the pre-formed Picture Boys) naming ourselves the Globalization Girls. We usually met in our Villa Walther apartments for dinner, and sometimes at Sachs, Maria's favorite Berlin eating-house. We all learned much from each other and had lots of fun and gossip, both being essential constituents for academic and psychological well-being. I also participated

as often as I could in the “Islamic and Jewish Hermeneutics” seminars and others held in the Villa Jaffé, and developed academically stimulating and rewarding relationships with several of the “Islam and Modernity” Fellows.

I must admit that I came to Wiko with a certain apprehension about returning to collegiate life, probably tainted by my previous experience in Cambridge. Apart from occasional meetings to determine college business (governing body), most Girton College Fellows kept themselves to themselves and interacted mainly with their faculty associates from other colleges. College meals were voluntary and often low-key affairs, and the few compulsory college occasions were very formal and conversations rather stilted. Perhaps this was because most Oxbridge College Fellows are also faculty teachers, with long-term appointments, while research fellows are almost all appointed for longer than a year. There was none of the urgency and intensity that Wiko Fellows – only too conscious of their limited time together – put into their intellectual, social and cultural interaction and activity. Wiko was indeed very different, and though it was at first difficult to accept the “compulsory” lunches, which many Fellows complained broke up the day, the Kolleg was right to insist on them, and their regular replacement by the more formal Thursday dinners structured the weeks in a way that worked very well for me. Above all, I welcomed the obligation, which I came to see as a privilege, to participate in the Tuesday colloquia, as a result of which, over the course of the year, I felt I had my academic and personal horizons immeasurably expanded. They were, too, the focal point of regular, ethnographically fascinating confrontations, expressions of the different underlying cleavages that both divided and united the academic community that was slowly but surely forged during the year: between “hard” (rigid?) science and “soft” (flexible?) humanities, between English speakers and the rest (or was it between German speakers and the rest?), between visual and verbal modes of representation, between men and women, old and young. Into the colloquium discussions, too (as well as in specific meetings that were held on other occasions), there inevitably leaked some of the other tensions deriving from the world outside: not least, the US presidential elections in November and events in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East throughout the year.

We came back to London full of admiration for Wiko and its vision, enormously grateful for the generosity and good humor of the staff who made our year in Berlin so special. Yet, as we wrote in our farewell message to our fellow-Fellows and partners of 04/05: “Berlin was beautiful, Wiko was wonderful, but our fantastic ten months would have been nothing without YOU!” My only regret is that I did not learn nearly as much German as

I had planned, and consequently experienced much less than I would have wished of a people and culture that I came to respect deeply. And of course, the book that I was so determined to spend the year on was never written. But no doubt when it does get written it will owe much to my serendipity year at Wiko.