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**FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF MULTICULTURALISM.
PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS OF DEBATES ON S. OKIN
PAPER *IS MULTICULTURALISM BAD FOR WOMEN?***

INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism – as a political platform and a conflict resolution program in a multicultural society – has been shaped from the outset by criticism from the entire political spectrum. But in the group of critics, however, the feminist thing has been missing. Okin's article *Is Multiculturalism Harmful to Women* appeared almost 10 years later, suddenly and loudly, like a pistol shot. It is like someone shouted at last: Sisters, this king is naked! There is no beating around the bush. The truth cannot be hidden! He is a man, defender of patriarchy! A sharp and lively discussion immediately broke out, in which some, especially younger feminists, took the side of Okin, but some of the feminists stood – indirectly – on the side of multiculturalists, defending simply the minority cultures protected under the umbrella of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism defended the right of cultural minorities to stay with their right ways of life, even when it violated the current social order in the host society. It was widely expected that if there were any consents for guests coming to the country to

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stay permanently and settle among existing residents, it is obviously associated with the adaptation – called *assimilation* – of immigrants to the prevailing law in this country and to respect widespread moral beliefs and universally respected rules and customs. This expectation was met in the past. Immigrants as well as indigenous cultural communities were left only to the extent that their different behaviors were out of the way for existing hosts, and did not offend their moral convictions in a blatant manner. However, at the end of the last century, the resistance of new arrivals (especially their second generation) against the expected assimilation was intensifying. Taken over by surprise, countries used different tactics, from turning a blind eye to law violations and even explicit concessions sanctioned by law (the British model), to attempts to severely punish and enforce assimilation (the French model). Both solutions encountered criticism.

A significant group of academic scholars, who were called *multiculturalists* since then, appeared at the turn of the 80s and 90s with a strong incentive to pursue far-reaching concessions to the demands of cultural minorities. Almost immediately, the anti-multiculturalism front was formed. Feminism generally stayed away from this dispute, clearly as if embarrassed. And since the beginning of its rebirth in the 1960s (as the second wave of feminism), it strongly criticized patriarchy and sexism, also present in Western liberal democracies. Meanwhile, the newcomers' cultures were usually much more patriarchal than Western societies. Multiculturalism as a program to leave immigrants the freedom to practice their patterns and cultural norms seemed to be much worse for women than possible forcing newcomers to assimilate. However, feminism usually remained silent, and if anyone from that camp spoke, it was on the contrary on the side of multiculturalism.

The group of founders of the new platform of multiculturalism was joined by one of the leading figures of the academic and ideological front of feminism, Iris M. Young, apparently convinced of the deep affinity of both these platforms. As a supporter of a communitarian political project, she saw the basic opponent in the individualist liberalism of the West, as well as the typical for it cultural assimilation, which allowed her to treat multiculturalism not only as an ally, but also feminism itself to smoothly unite under one roof the project of a society of pluralist-group democracy (Young, 1990; see also Ślęczka, 2018). Her stance might have seemed rather extravagant, it was more logical for feminism to be critical about minority cultures and those who wanted to give them cultural autonomy. Feminism remained silent. A really puzzling situation. For let's look at the standard list of atrocities and various forms of violence against women in non-Western cultures, which was usually invoked to indicate the centuries-old and global backing of the native Western patriarchy.

Here are the typical items on the list: female circumcision (female genital mutilation – FGM), practiced especially in the African Sahel zone, but also in many other Islamic societies, burning widows along with corpses of dead husbands (*sati*) in India, restraining (bandaging) feet, horrifically deforming Chinese women's feet, honor

killings (e.g. daughters or sisters for associating with non-Muslims), forced marriage of even little girls, polygamy, covering the face (niqab), and sometimes compulsion covering the whole body from head to toe (burka), etc. The whole list has appeared from the beginning in the publications of the second wave feminism, showing how women – as women – are badly treated all over the world, much worse than in Western societies. Where there is so much to do about it as well!

Thus, when after the Second World War, and especially in the last quarter of the twentieth century, many immigrants from other cultures poured into the Western societies and when in their communities they tried to practice and actually practiced some of the above-mentioned customs, it seemed obvious that feminism would be in the first series of critics of multiculturalism, which de facto protected these practices. However, it did not happen!

It was not until 1997 that Suzan Muller Okin, a New Zealand and later American political science professor and feminist, published a short article discussed here having it previously judged by outstanding multiculturalists and feminists, resulted in the fact that in the same issue of the Boston Review appeared more important commentaries and her answers to them (Okin, 1997). That magazine's issue became a bestseller, so two years later it was published in a book form (Cohen, Howard, 1999). Until her untimely death in 2004, the author repeatedly took the floor again in the same matter, speaking in perhaps a more conciliatory tone, but without changing her position. Her speech has become a canonical text in the feminist movement and is repeatedly quoted and extends into further layers of literature. Since the source phenomenon, the collision of the patriarchal culture of immigrants with the human rights regime in force in the West, continues invariably and is far from being resolved. They connect, somewhat bypassed in the text but very important, topics from the point of view of pedagogy.

THE RELATION OF MULTICULTURALISM AND FEMINISM ACCORDING TO S.M. OKIN

The author's speech had thoroughly practical intentions. At the very beginning there is a question: What to do? "What should be done when the claims of minority cultures or religions clash with the norm of gender equality that is at least formally endorsed by liberal states (however much they continue to violate it in their practice)?" (Cohen, Howard, 1999, p. 9).

And who is the addressee of her suggestions?

It is not the self-appointed elders representing a minority, because there is no reason they can be convinced; the times of voluntary assimilation have come to an end. Nor is it – at least directly – a state that should punish members of a minority for violating applicable law, also, mainly in the areas of women's and children's rights, and family law. The addressee, not so much accused by the author as rather referred

to correct a political project, are multiculturalists who call on the state (and they are already making the first successes) to soften the position on minority demands and to exclude the applicability of the law at least in matters most relevant to their members (men would benefit mainly, often at the expense of women). And some multiculturalists, including the feminist Young, demand the “recognition” of their cultures as equal to the culture prevailing so far, which would lead to negotiating on the path of deliberative mutual concessions and consent to the parallel applicability of different norms, and perhaps legal systems. In other words, individual minorities would obtain some “group rights” in relation to the prevailing law (including also special support from the state budget, which they usually care about). In the succumbing of the Western state to such persuasions, the author sees – as a feminist she draws attention – a great threat to women, because it would mean the authorities’ consent to further dictates, women’s oppression, exploitation and gender discrimination, much worse than those that women still meet in Western societies.

“Most cultures are suffused with practices and ideologies concerning gender.” “Under such conditions, *group rights* are potentially, and in many cases actually, anti-feminist. They substantially limit the capacities of women and girls of that culture to live with human dignity equal to that of men and boys, and to live as freely chosen lives as they can” (Cohen, Howard, 1999, p. 12).

Some multiculturalists, especially Kymlicka, whose political influence is the most significant, really want a state’s recognizing the “group rights” of minorities and providing the necessary cultural support for their life being dependent on respecting liberal human rights. And with this postulate, the author agrees as much as possible. But that is not enough. Multiculturalists disregard the deeper, more hidden or masked forms of subordination of women. It is not enough to formally equalize the rights of both genders in the public sphere. Minority cultures are focused primarily on regulating the sphere of private life, in which the patriarchal status of women and girls is deeply fixed.

“Those who practice some of the most controversial such customs – female genital mutilation, the marriage of children or marriages that are otherwise coerced, or polygamy – sometimes explicitly defend them as necessary for controlling women, and openly acknowledge that the customs persist at men’s insistence” (Cohen, Howard, 1999, p. 15). Just “controlling women” is evident in these cultures an obvious value per se. The desire to control especially reproductive function of women plays a big role here. The prelude to the later submissive status of women is already the control of children during education, where parents are entitled to a decisive final say. And it is known that they generally require isolation of children from contacts with other cultures, because they are themselves deeply indoctrinated and convinced of the exclusive value of their own culture. And it is precisely in the background of girls’ education that there are particularly violent conflicts in multicultural Western countries (insistence of parents on separateness of their children’s education from the mainstream educational system, when approved, would result in lack of coherence of social life in multicultural society, see Czarnecki, 2007).

Thus, the limitation proposed by Kymlicka, although going in the right direction, is insufficient. Virtually all cultures are still patriarchal, to a lesser or greater degree, though Western least of all. Spreading a protective umbrella over minority cultures, often combined with the conviction of some autonomous value of maintaining the greatest diversity of cultures in the world, may not be convincing, especially for young women in minorities who want the same freedom to shape their own life as men have. From their point of view “Establishing group rights to enable some minority cultures to preserve themselves may not be in the best interests of the girls and women of the culture, even if it benefits the men.” Even more – says the author, and this part of her speech became a stumbling block for her critics – women of minority groups “indeed, they might be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct (so that its members would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture) or... preferably, to be encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women – at least to the degree to which this is upheld in the majority culture” (Cohen, Howard, 1999, p. 22-23).

For, of course, the internal, autonomous evolution of minority cultures is better than their destruction. One can only force the group elders to open a basic mechanism enabling such an evolution. They must give voice to the younger members of the communities, especially to young women who have traditionally not been listened to before. At the very end of her speech, the author puts it this way: “Moreover, policies aiming to respond to the needs and claims of cultural minority groups must take seriously the need for adequate representation of less powerful members of such groups. [...] Unless women – and, more specifically, young women, since older women often become co-opted into reinforcing gender inequality – are fully represented in negotiations about group rights, their interests may be harmed rather than promoted by the granting of such rights” (Cohen, Howard, 1999, p. 23-24).

The discussion went a bit alongside the main issues and due to the lack of space we can omit its reporting here. It did not significantly affect the position of the author. Her views and critical restrictions of possible cooperation between feminism and multiculturalism still have many supporters and followers. There is an excellent contemporary British scholar, Anne Philips (2007), who has developed and deepened this line in feminism in a significant book *Multiculturalism without Culture*.

EDUCATIONAL ISSUES IN THE DEBATE

In Okin’s criticism of multiculturalism, incidentally interesting aspects from the area of education appear. Among the conditions on which a state should grant some “group rights” to these communities, it is obviously their consent to equal educational opportunities for boys and girls. In many minority cultures, girls’ education is limited and so profiled as to indoctrinate them into patriarchal norms and patterns of their cultures. No wonder then that grown-up women bear patiently the cul-

turally conditioned oppressive limitations of freedoms as well as forcing them into a model of human beings subordinate to men, latched in the private and home sphere, whose developmental potential is suppressed already in their childhood. Meanwhile, against this background, in the multicultural liberal societies of the West there are very frequent conflicts between educational authorities and parents who, contrary to the applicable law, despite school curriculum, demand that their daughters be excluded from certain activities and often end their education as soon as possible, which is linked sometimes with their very early, also unlawful, forced marriage. Therefore, even more so – and this is the key issue of the author – in negotiating the group rights with the authorities young and very young women who have not yet completed the patriarchal indoctrination should also be allowed to speak.

And multiculturalists seem not to notice such a need. Feminists closely associated with multiculturalism, as well as multiculturalists themselves, think that the author unjustly refuses the right to think independently to older women, more willingly admitted to negotiate by group elders at their side. In their opinion, the voice of these women, generally in harmony with the views of minority leaders, certifies the lack of need for changes in the educational standards of these communities. According to them, the author wrongly ascribes to them the so-called “false consciousness,” the state after “brainwashing” (Parekh, in Cohen, Howard, 1997, p. 73). However, in the summary of discussions Okin remained unyielding, girls are to have the right to equal education with boys, to equal opportunities for personality development, and young women must be admitted directly to negotiating tables, if the state is to make concessions on some other matters of significant importance for the cultural identity of minorities.

Multiculturalism itself entangles in its program in some contradictions and in this field. Originally, even the term “multiculturalism” appeared precisely in this narrow, “educational” reference (more widely on this subject in another text: Okin, 1998). It proclaimed, quite correctly, the need for such a modification of the school curricula that the cultural achievements of all mankind were taken into account, and not only Western white authors, as it is actually the case.

Such a change should take place regardless of the appearance of pupils and students from non-European cultures in schools, but even more so (the new kind of multiculturalism results from today’s globalization, Parzęcki, 2018). Cultural minorities should be guaranteed that their children will learn about the achievements of their own cultures during school education, not just Western cultures, often former colonizers. And to this point one can agree with multiculturalism.

But in this case, the antinomy present in multiculturalism comes to the fore. Respect for all other cultures and the unquestioned recognition of their equal rights leads, in consequence, to the need – conditioned by their culture – to remove from their children’s curricula any other cultures than their own.

Dominating education by one culture, which multiculturalists want to move away from in the education of Western countries, paradoxically returns as a consequence

of their success. Here are some minority cultures now demanding the right to unilaterally dominate the content and forms of education through one – this time their own – culture, because it is in line with their cultural beliefs. And if the children of different cultures study together, then parents are to have the right to exclude their children from certain activities. It is most preferable when their children can study in a separate, their own school system.

As I mentioned above, this topic remains in the author's speech somewhat off the beaten path. It is known, however, that to this day it has not lost its relevance and has grown into rich literature. In practice, in the Western countries the topic of multicultural education is sometimes solved very differently, even in opposite directions, where two poles, as is commonly assumed, are determined by the British and French model. In Polish conditions, contrary to popular belief that our society is monocultural, tensions and conflicts arise on issues such as teaching religion in school, required school readings, how to shape the history curriculum, the parents' rights to decide about the presence of certain activities at school, etc. There are clearly two cultures existing in the Polish cultural mainstream, although it may be better to say two poles of the cultural spectrum which however, recently polarizes even more strongly.

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FEMINIST CRITICS OF MULTICULTURALISM: PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS OF DEBATES ON S. OKIN'S PAPER *IS MULTICULTURALISM BAD FOR WOMEN?*

Keywords: multiculturalism, feminism, cultural minorities, group rights, oppression of women, education of girls

Abstract: Okin's paper started a long and heated discussion on various aspects of the relation between feminism and multiculturalism. Both concepts were on a collision course since the beginning. But at first, feminists tried to keep aside those discrepancies. Okin tries to formulate conditions of possible co-operation. The very difficult questions to be solved are conflicts in the field of educational practices acknowledged by cultural minorities as culturally substantial.

FEMINISTYCZNA KRYTYKA MULTIKULTURALIZMU. O PEDAGOGICZNYCH ASPEKTACH SPORÓW WOKÓŁ ARTYKUŁU S. OKIN *IS MULTICULTURALISM BAD FOR WOMEN?*

Słowa kluczowe: multikulturalizm, feminizm, mniejszości kulturowe, prawa grupowe, ucisk kobiet, edukacja dziewcząt

Streszczenie: Artykuł Suzan Moller Okin (1997) wprowadził nagle w środowisko akademickie Zachodu problem napięć i sprzeczności między feminizmem i multikulturalizmem. Wbrew stanowisku I.M. Young (1990) okazuje się nader wyraziście, iż oba programy polityczne, choć zwrócone przeciw temu samemu przeciwnikowi, asymilacjonizmowi, przy próbie realizowania swych celów w pewnych kwestiach okazują się przeciwstawne. Multikulturalizm nakazuje bowiem chronić przed asymilacją kultury mniejszości, które jednak pozostają na ogół znacznie głębiej patriarchalne i bardziej szkodliwe dla kobiet niż, też nie wolna od seksizmu, liberalna kultura Zachodu. Autorka proponuje warunki, od spełnienia których uzależnia możliwość współpracy obu orientacji.