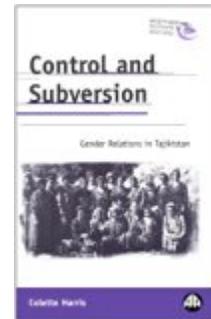


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Colette Harris. *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan*. London: Pluto Press, 2004. xii + 212 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7453-2168-4; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7453-2167-7.

Reviewed by Akim Elnazarov (Central Asian Studies Unit, Institute of Ismaili Studies)
Published on H-Gender-MidEast (June, 2005)



Complexity and Contradictions in Gender Relations

Not often does one come across a book which so meticulously depicts the process of ethnographic research as Colette Harris's *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan*. It is particularly remarkable that this attempt has been made to study such important phenomena in the transitional societies as gender relations in Tajikistan.

Tajikistan is the most impoverished of the former Soviet Republics which inherited poor economic infrastructure and strongly entrenched traditional and cultural values from the Soviet Union. Decades of Soviet rule and attempts to change the social and cultural fabric of the Tajik society did not yield desirable results. Gender relations stood at the heart of the social resistance to the modernization efforts undertaken by Soviets in the country and continue to exert influence on the emerging social, economic, and cultural transformations.

In current studies on Central Asian societies during their transition from socialist to a new form of society (which is yet difficult to define), gender relations in Tajikistan are often overlooked and at best are considered secondary and supplementary to the studies on civil society, security, politics, etc. Colette manages to bring this into the forefront and illustrates the importance of gender relations in the understanding of and the formation of Tajik society.

The author employs life histories to grasp the nature and the subtleties of gender relations in Tajikistan. The narrations and stories of the lives of the research participants are supplemented by theoretical literature that allows her to elaborate and conceptualize her observa-

tions. Narrating the life stories of the research participants, the author manages to demonstrate the complexity and at times contradictions in Tajikistan gender relations. There is a good attempt to explore the historical and cultural foundations of current gender relations that provides profound insights into the social and cultural makeup of the Tajik society. In that sense the book can serve as a fine guidebook for students and researchers interested in getting into the depth and breadth of the phenomena under study.

Colette is an insightful scholar who does not limit herself to the description of the findings of her research alone, but also places herself in that context and tries to relate the stories of the research participants to her own experiences while inviting the readers to do the same. The detailed description of her research methods and analysis of the literature related to gender in Muslim societies as well as Soviet and pre-Soviet periods at the outset of the book provide a conceptual framework that adds to the strength of the research and enhances its validity. This is well reflected in the first chapter of the book on the conceptual background of the research.

In the second chapter, "The Bolsheviks Attack but the Tajiks Resist," the author succinctly illustrates the historical background of the gender issues in Tajikistan starting from the conquering of Central Asia by the Russian Empire to the rise of the Bolsheviks. Colette manages to provide a balanced description of the so called "hujum" (assault against veils) in the 1920s which was characterized by social and political contradictions, psychological dislocation for the women and both positive and negative consequences for the transformation of Tajik society under the new regime and ideology.

In the following two chapters, Colette presents the current post-Soviet affair of gender norms in terms of community and family control. She demonstrates the role of society and community in forging the gender norms and how communal “tools of repression” as the surveillance of members by other family members leads to what she calls “auto-repression.” In this theory individuals do not appear submissive, passive recipients of social norms, but actively engage with the prevailing norms, manipulating them and trying to subjugate the situation for their own benefits. A similar approach is taken in family relations, where members of the family, though undertaking clear roles and positions, find ways of escaping the norms but remain largely dependent on the overall family structure and established norms.

An important theoretical basis for Colette in these chapters is an honor-and-shame system that the author claims to be the base of the moral system in Tajikistan and other Muslim countries in gender relations. In this regard the author delineates Islam as a juridical religion which adjudicates how people should lead their lives. As such, Colette concludes that “it is this that allows female seclusion and veiling to be incorporated into religious practices.” This generalization leaves many significant factors unaddressed and reflects the type of stereotyping which is often observed in the western context. It is not apparent from the study how the tenets and principles of Islam manifest themselves in the actions of the family and community members. How such concepts as “respect for parents and elders,” “brotherhood,” “social responsibility,” etc. define the behavior of the community and family members and whether the social norms are strictly determined by manipulation, power struggle, auto-surveillance, etc. The spiritual and religious dimensions of the human actions would have certainly shed light on the contextual understanding and appreciation of the honor-and-shame system, as well as the formation of gender identity in Tajikistan.

The author tries to develop a relevant theoretical

framework for each phenomenon which she insightfully observes. In the process Colette seems to overemphasize the theoretical underpinnings and at times diminishes the role of research participants to passive objects of study. Their voices and interpretations of their actions and behavior remain largely unheeded. There are rare indications of the reasons and actions of the research participants from their own perspectives. How do they perceive their behavior in terms of gender relations? For example, how would Dila (a research participant) elaborate her relation with her father? How would she explain her attitude and actions in different situations in her relations to her father and mother? The insight of the participants in their own words, though tacitly narrated through the narration of the researcher, would have illuminated many aspects of cultural and traditional values.

The last chapter, addressing couple relations and marriage, is probably the most provocative and stimulating part of the book. The author lucidly describes the most intimate aspects of gender relations including marital relations, love, and sex. Without much theoretical background, she provides insight into the complex marital relations of each case, which leaves very little room for generalization on family life in Tajikistan. This in itself is of profound value and allows looking at the situation and in this case the gender relations with an open perspective and to draw conclusions with full appreciation of the contextual, cultural, social, religious, and political factors which shape and reshape human actions.

Control and Subversion is a significant step towards a better understanding of Tajik society in general and its gender relations in particular. The book is of educational and methodological value to a range of scholars and students studying gender and a wider public interested in understanding gender issues in the post-Soviet context. The book also has valuable implications for development workers in Central Asia and the creation of a civil society in Tajikistan.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-gender-mideast>

Citation: Akim Elnazarov. Review of Harris, Colette, *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10658>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.