

# Against Faux-Feminists Who Deny the Rights of Muslim Women and Jews

Why today's postmodern postcolonial feminism avoids the true front lines of the battle for women's rights

*Adapted for Tablet.com from a speech, "The New Feminism and Anti-Semitism," delivered at the United Jewish Appeal Federation in Manhattan on Sept. 12, 2017, in acceptance of the "Defender of Women's Rights Award."*

## Phyllis Chesler

I came into my feminist destiny in 1967, both as an academic and as an activist. Our original feminist vision was radical and transformative. We believed in universal human rights. We envisioned multicultural diversity but we were not multicultural relativists. We called out misogyny when we saw it and did not exempt a rapist, a wife-beater, or a pedophile because he was poor (his victims were also usually poor); or a man of color (his victims were often people of color); or because he had an abused childhood (so had his victims).

Like other American radical feminists, I was active in the civil-rights and anti-war movements. Unlike other feminists, I had "once lived in a harem in Afghanistan." This is the opening line of my book, *An American Bride in Kabul*. Quite unexpectedly, I lived in a polygamous household in very posh purdah – which meant I was not allowed out without a male escort. Quite surprisingly, my father-in-law had three wives and 21 children – facts my Westernized husband failed to mention during our long American college courtship.

When I was 20, I saw Afghan women stumbling around in burqas – sensory-deprivation isolation chambers, ambulatory body bags. These ghosts were forced to sit at the back of

the bus. This was long before the Taliban arose. I remembered that sight even when I critiqued American sexism, racism, homophobia – and imperial overreach.

Between 1967 and 1975, I joined NOW [National Organization for Women], went to meetings, joined a consciousness raising group and a class-action lawsuit, founded women's studies at CUNY, co-founded the Association for Women in Psychology – and the National Women's Health Network. In 1970, I delivered a fiery speech at the annual American Psychological Association meeting in Florida. I demanded reparations for the women who had been misdiagnosed, pathologized, drugged, and institutionalized by the psychological and psychiatric professions. Two-thousand people laughed at me – but nervously. Some accused me of "penis envy."

I began writing what would become *Women and Madness* on the plane back to New York. My speech made world headlines. I was deluged by publishing offers. At the end of 1972, Adrienne Rich reviewed the book on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*. My book became a bestseller, a "landmark," a classic.

In the early to late 1970s, I delivered feminist speeches in Israel, began working with Israeli



*Phyllis Chesler in Israel, 1972.*  
(Photo courtesy of author)

feminists; led a delegation of left-wing and feminist journalists to Israel; obtained signatures opposing the UN's "Zionism = racism" resolution; co-organized a press conference and then a legendary conference about feminism and anti-Semitism and about women and Judaism; co-founded the first feminist Passover Seder which we held in my Manhattan apartment – and created Jewish-feminist life-cycle events. I also worked with Muslim dissidents and artists from Israel, Egypt, Kuwait, Iran, Lebanon, etc. During this time, I published three more feminist books.

In 1981, I convened a panel at the annual meeting of the National Women's Studies Association in Storrs, Connecticut, about anti-Semitism and Feminism. For the second time, Aviva Cantor interviewed me for *Lilith* on this very subject. However, I did not become a professional Jew. I did not turn

my Jewish identity or my concern about our survival, into a career or a calling.

Between 1981 and 2002, I researched and

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published six feminist books. I conducted campaigns on behalf of mothers losing custody, birthmothers being forced to surrender their genetic children against their will (aka surrogacy); a woman's right to self-defense; and Jewish women's religious rights in Jerusalem at the Kotel. (Yes, I prayed in the *ezrat Nashim* that first time in 1988, co-founded the International Committee for Women of the Wall, was a name plaintiff in our original lawsuit, and, after a quarter-century of grassroots and legal struggle,

joined the Original Women of the Wall "*Tfilat Nashim Bakotel*.")

I can tell you that anti-Semitism – Jew-hatred – is not new among feminists. I first encountered it in the early 1970s among radical

feminists and lesbians and, together with Aviva Cantor and Cheryl Moch, immediately began exposing it.

However, a new and what I describe as a “faux feminism” has arisen in the last 30 years, a postmodern and postcolonial feminism that passionately condemns Christianity and Judaism as the greatest danger to women’s rights but dares not critique religiously supremacist Islam for this same reason; an intersectional “faux feminism” that condemns only Western imperialism and refuses to acknowledge the long history of Islamic imperialism, colonialism, slavery, anti-black racism, and religious and gender apartheid; a “faux feminism” that is far more concerned with the alleged occupation of Palestine than it is with the occupation of women’s bodies, faces, minds, and genitalia world-wide – including those women who are being forcibly face-veiled, death-threatened, and honor killed in the disputed territories.

Women’s studies associations, national feminist organizations – many feminist Jews – are not merely “politically correct”; they have become “Islamically correct.” They are currently more concerned with the religious sanctity of head and face veiling than they are with FGM, forced face-veiling, honor-based violence, polygamy, child marriage, and honor killing in the West. Not only have faux feminists betrayed the Jews – in the name of anti-racism, they have also abandoned tribal and immigrant women of color – Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus – to barbaric misogyny. Above all, they have abandoned the most heroic ex-Muslim, Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu feminist dissidents, both in the developing world and in the West.

And that’s the tragedy – that so many Western feminists have become such conformists. They are no longer independent thinkers. Faux feminists have also been persuaded that Islam is a “race,” not an ideology or a religion; that America’s historic enslavement of black Africans and South Africa’s apartheid regime are exactly the same as alleged Israeli discrimination against Arab Palestinians, including Jew-

hating bomb makers and terrorists with blood on their hands.

Fundamentalists are trying to destroy what feminists have accomplished.

Feminists in America exposed, condemned, and analyzed rape. We began rape-crisis counseling and changed the laws about rape. Today, Western professional feminists – our women’s studies professors, politicians, journalists, human-rights activists – are not rescuing rape victims in Islamic communities, either in the Middle East or in the West. Feminists are too nervous about being called “Islamophobes,” “racists,” or “colonialists.”

We may not be able to personally, physically, rescue the raped girls of ISIS or Boko Haram or those in refugee camps across Europe. But American feminists can fund those who do; we can also call barbarism (beheading, stoning, crucifixion, public gang-raping, the destruction of our human cultural heritage) by its rightful name. We can finally understand that the leaders – not the people – of Iran and all the Caliphates in formation are dangerous to America and to a Western way of life. American-style feminism is also on the line.

We can help girls and women who live here and who are being beaten, stalked, and death-threatened by their own families because they refuse to veil or to marry their first cousin. Their blood should not be on our hands. We must create shelters or extended families that understand what honor-based violence is about. We must prosecute honor killers and their accomplices.

The battle for women’s rights is central to the battle for Western values. It is a necessary part of true democracy. Here, then, is exactly where the greatest battle of the 21st century is joined.

\* \* \*

We live in dark times. We can feel it in our bones and see it written on the sky. Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Jews were blown up, stoned, stabbed, and car-rammed to death in the Jewish state. The West refused to take note – and has now inherited the whirlwind. Think London,

Madrid, Nice, London again, Barcelona; think Sept. 11, Fort Hood, San Bernardino, Orlando.

Like many people, I had assumed that the world's hatred of Jews had ended, that Jewish history would never again repeat itself. I was wrong. Those who still believe that Jewish history can never again repeat itself must dispense with that illusion. Jewish history has always repeated itself and may continue to do so until the coming of the Messiah.

One of the things that's new about the "new" anti-Semitism is that it is coming to us both from the Islamic world and from the Western intelligentsia – and this time it's global, and 24/7, via videos, the internet, cable vision, doctored footage, etc..

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Anti-Semitism has, incorrectly, been viewed as solely a right-wing phenomenon. It is not. In fact, genocidal anti-Semitism has been perpetrated against Jews by ancient pagans, by Christians – both Catholic and Protestant, by Muslims – both Sunni and Shia, by Nazi-pagans, and by criminal psychopaths. We have recently been horrified by genuine, bona fide, American Nazi freaks in Charlottesville, chanting "Blood and Soil," "Jews will not replace us," and holding aloft flaming torches. This evokes terrible collective memories. Yet these hundreds of white Nazis on American soil are not nearly as numerous as Muslims who have been religiously, politically, and socially indoctrinated to hate and kill Jews and other infidels.

In 2003, I published the first edition of *The New Anti-Semitism*. I wrote that anti-Zionism is the new-Anti-Semitism – and I held the Western intelligentsia responsible for their alliance with

Islamic-style Jew-hatred. My Berkeley-based editor fought with me about this. Back in 2003, what I was saying was considered heresy. It still is.

For the first time in my career, the increas-

ingly left- (and no longer) liberal media was not interested in reviewing my work or publishing what I had to say. I was shunned by many of my feminist friends on the left but welcomed by conservatives, libertarians, and Zionists who had long viewed me and my cohorts as dangerous to Judaism and to Zionism. I sometimes needed police protection when I spoke on American campuses. But it was also as if I had not spoken. I was "disappeared."

After publishing *The New Anti-Semitism*, I went on to write six more books, two not yet published, and nearly a thousand articles. I also con-

ducted and published four studies about honor killing. This pioneering feminist research about femicide enabled me to submit affidavits on behalf of Muslim and ex-Muslim girls and women in flight from being honor killed in immigrant communities in Europe, North America, the Middle East, Asia, India, and Africa. This research has also been used in honor killing prosecutions in the United States and Canada.

The fact that I am also a passionate Zionist has been used to marginalize my feminist work. Like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, I have been disinvited as a keynote speaker at conferences. I have "made" some death lists. I have seen American classrooms being invaded by American totalitarians, fascists who, in the name of "free speech" and "academic freedom," are verbally and physically violent. They mean to censor all objective truth, but especially the truth about Israel and Islam, and to redact history.

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Today, my closest allies are not faux-feminists for Palestine. I work with genuine dissidents. Therefore, none of us are politically correct. We are anti-Islamists or anti-Sharia-ists: As the feminists of yore, we share one universal standard of human rights.

in the name of cultural relativism, tolerance, anti-racism, diversity, or political correctness. Why are so many good feminist Jews confused about any of this?

Our tribes are, as ever, at war with each other. How may we best understand this? Rabbi Hillel is known for his three questions: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?

Jewish conservatives, Zionists, and many Orthodox Jews are trying to answer his first question: "If I am not for myself..." Jewish liberals and leftists are trying to answer only his second question, "If I am only for myself..." As a people, we need to answer both questions, and as the rabbi asked: "If not now, when?"•

We support post-Enlightenment Western values such as individual, human, and women's rights, free speech, the right to dissent, freedom from and freedom of religion, the separation of religion and state. These dissidents comprise the major resistance movement of our time. Many write under pseudonyms and live with 24/7 police protection.

I can no longer work with Jew-haters. It is too painful. Therefore, my allies and I all support Israel's right to exist and flourish.

Gender apartheid and honor-based violence are human-rights violations and cannot be justified

*Phyllis Chesler is the author of 17 books including the landmark feminist classics Women and Madness (1972), Woman's Inhumanity to Woman (2002), and An American Bride in Kabul (2013), which won a National Jewish Book Award, and Islamic Gender Apartheid: Exposing a Veiled War Against Women (2017). Her forthcoming work is titled A Politically Incorrect Feminist. She is a Fellow at The Middle East Forum and is one of the Original Women of the Wall.*

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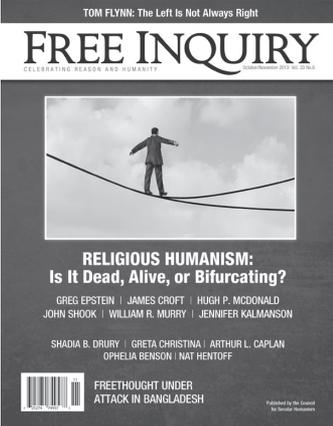
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