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Dilemmas of Islamic and Secular Feminists and Feminisms¹

By Huma Ahmed-Ghosh²

Abstract

This paper explores ways in which a multifaceted understanding of Islamic feminism can contribute to productive dialogue about the future of Muslim women in both Islamic and secular states. Towards that end I will discuss the numerous interpretations of Islamic, secular, collaborative and hybrid feminisms that have surfaced in Islamic and non-Islamic nations. There is a pragmatic value to developing a standard for Islamic feminism that can be “modern” and held up to more oppressive local conditions/politics and their extremes of patriarchy. To do this, one needs a comprehensive review of what local oppressions exist in specific countries and what feminist angles can be brought together in a hybridized version. One needs to look at what coalitional functions can occur in different communities which can bring together Islamic, secular, and other discourses in a hybridized form that attend better to women’s lived lives and sense of personhood.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, secular feminism, hybrid feminism

Introduction

This paper explores ways in which a multifaceted understanding of Islam can contribute to productive dialogue about the future of Muslim women in both Islamic and secular states. Towards that end I will discuss the numerous interpretations of Islamic, secular, collaborative and hybrid feminisms that have surfaced in Islamic and non-Islamic nations. In this paper, Muslim women’s heterogeneous realities challenge mainstream feminisms, since these women’s lives as products of local cultures and politics, do not fit into typical feminist ideological compartments. Muslim women’s lives also do not conform to the rigid parameters of a secular or Islamic nation but are impacted by women’s class, region, ethnicity and local politics. These variables could potentially give women the option to negotiate their status and rights contrary to the dominant ideology, but since 9/11, the current trend toward Islamization of nation-states tends toward a shrinking of this space.

In this paper I am advocating collaboration among Islamic and secular feminisms as a way of advancing the understanding of lived lives of Muslim women in Islamic states and other Muslim communities. There is a pragmatic value to developing a standard for Islamic feminism that can be “modern” and held up to more oppressive local conditions/politics and their extremes of patriarchy. To do this, one needs a comprehensive review of what local oppressions exist in specific countries and what feminist angles can be brought together in a hybridized version. One needs to look at

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what coalitional functions can occur in different communities which can bring together Islamic, secular, and womanist discourses in a hybridized form that attend better to women's lived lives and sense of personhood.

The reality for all women, religious or non-religious, is that they live in patriarchal cultures. Under patriarchy, there are situations where women willingly conform to Islamic norms (even if these norms are seen as oppressive by others) engaging in what I term "patriarchy trading,"³ which allows them to claim some agency (see Ahmed-Ghosh 2004). It also needs to be recognized that, in the discourse on Muslim women's rights, lives and status there is a contestation of global masculinities, and power games are played out through control over women's bodies. (see Ghosh, 2008) Recently, this contestation has become very obvious but it is not a new phenomena. As Bodman and many historians of Islamic regions have pointed out, "Since the Crusades, Western Europeans have tended to regard the Mediterranean Sea as a frontier to be defended against an alien religion." (1998:1) This, combined with resistance to occupation and colonialism of the Middle East and North African countries has led to historical and political hostilities which continue to be played out today. Thus, one can also historicize the "political use" of women's bodies since the time of colonization. The colonizers' and in more recent western occupiers' fascination with segregation of women from the public has been alternatively romanticized, exoticized, demonized and basically, used to define the region as backward, and led to wars with the rhetoric of "liberating" women.

Islam and feminism have become an even more contentious issue after 9/11.⁴ Most writings on women in the Middle East, North Africa and parts of Asia predate this "global landmark" date and are framed by the debates on tradition versus modernity and/or the post-colonial discourse. Pre 9/11, in academic circles and government policy institutions, the importance of women's lives in states that are Islamic or have a substantial Muslim minority⁵ was not as evident as it is now. If the topic has become visible and of prime concern today, it is not necessarily because of concern over the situation of women in Islamic states and Muslim communities world wide, but more likely because of specific international and local political agendas. The real apprehension in the West relates to preserving political hegemony, waging of wars, asserting economic control over oil supplies and pipelines (eg. Iraq oil, Waziristan in Pakistan and Afghanistan pipelines etc.), and bringing about cultural and political change. Add to this list the demise of the Soviet Union, which no longer warrants the "arms race," but is now justified through conflict with the Middle East.

Thus, the debate about women's rights becomes complex because it is ridden with not just global and local politics, and numerous interpretations of Islam, but also by competing feminisms and masculinities, academic power plays, and colonial and post-

³ Patriarchy trading: Ahmadi women, as mentioned in a previous article, are aware of the patriarchal constraints in their religion but opt for it over what they refer to as western patriarchy which is overlaid with resentment towards Islam and is racist.

⁴ 9/11 refers to the date of September 9, 2001 when the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, and part of the Pentagon building in Washington D.C were destroyed by airplanes flying into them, and a plane crash in Pennsylvania killing a little fewer than 3000 people by terrorists.

⁵ Here I am referring to countries like India, which has the third largest Muslim population in the world and to other countries in the West where the Muslim population is rapidly increasing.

colonial analysis. This debate becomes even more complex given the gap between theorizing Islamic feminism for all Muslim women (assuming they are a homogenous group), and the culture-specific fallouts for Muslim women based on local politics and social norms. In this paper I will discuss some of the prevailing Islamic and non-Islamic feminisms engaged in by Muslim men and women living both in Islamic states and in non-Islamic states, as they attempt to better understand the complexities of women's lives in the Muslim dominated regions of Asia.

Before proceeding, one also has to be cognizant of the kind of Islam that dominates the region. For example is there a difference in the attitudes of Shia⁶ Islam and Sunni⁷ Islam? Are women's lives different under the different subsets of Islam such as Ahmadiyya⁸ Islam or Ismaili⁹ Islam? These are just a few issues that also impact Muslim women's lives but I will not discuss them in this paper, except to claim that these interpretations affect a minority of Muslim women in slight ways. In addition, the level of Islamization is determined as well by the financial and political backing of "outside states" playing crucial roles in impacting not just the socio-cultural situation in the region but also its consequences on women's status. A recent example in Pakistan is the popularity of Farhat Hashmi, founder of Al-Huda, whose mission is spreading Islam by appropriating feminist jargon. According to a report, "Hashmi epitomizes hard-core, doctrinaire orthodoxy - a worldview that appears to be gaining strength as a result of ambitious funding from certain quasi-governmental organizations in Saudi Arabia and Yemen" http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_6-5-2005_pg7_49, accessed 4/4/2007). Another issue I want to point to is the heavy reliance in this paper on writings by Iranian feminists. Iranian feminists have strategized their writings based on their political and religious ideologies and locations due to the dramatic ideological changes their country has undergone in recent decades. Iranians have produced the largest body of Islamic and non-Islamic feminist writing in English in recent years.

Locating Islamic and non-Islamic Feminisms

The important question here is: what are the best discourses to bring about policies of equal rights for women in Islamic states and other Muslim communities. Many shades of western feminisms and Islamic feminisms have evolved over the last three decades to examine the status of women in Muslim societies. The two generalized overarching theories at crossroads in Muslim societies seem to be **Islamic feminism**, and modern, **secular feminism**. Islamic feminism tends to be viewed as a paradox, while

⁶ Shia Islam is a branch of Islam that believes the Caliphate should have descended from Prophet Mohammad's daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali instead of through his Companions.

⁷ Sunni Islam is the branch of Islam with the largest following. Sunnis adhere to Abu Bakr as being the Caliph after Prophet Mohammad's death through his selection by followers and did not believe in succession based on the Prophet's descendents.

⁸ Ahmadiyya Islam was founded in 1889 in Northern India by Mirza Ghulam Ahmed and is referred to by its followers as a renaissance of Islam. This branch of Islam is seen as "blasphemous" by mainstream Muslims, and in Pakistan, Ahmadis is persecuted and have been declared as non-Muslims.

⁹ Ismaili Islam solidified with the twelfth caliph and the followers are also known as Twelvers. They belong to the Shia tradition and broke away from the mainstream in 765 A.D. The largest Ismaili group are followers of Aga Khan.

those who conflate it with western feminism see secular feminism as problematic in Islamic states. Western feminism is viewed as an imposition of western cultural values in contradistinction to Islamic cultural values. A third trend that seems to be emerging is that of collaborators, which I would like to refer to as **hybrid feminism**. Hybrid feminism could be the analytical tool to address women's issues as affecting them regionally and culturally. This flexibility is defined through women's real lives in their communities as dictated by their social norms and local and national politics. Such grounded reality of women's lived experiences varies not just from region to region but also rural through urban, class, tribal and ethnic identities.

While locating Islamic feminisms, it is essential for this debate to elucidate on what is stereotypically perceived as western feminism in non-western nations, and specifically in Islamic states. This is essential for this discussion because: 1) the imposition of Islamic values in society and specifically on women is rooted in an anti-western rhetoric, 2) the crux of Islamic feminism is based on a reaction to western feminism and, 3) liberal feminists in the Muslim and Third world generally identify with some or all of western feminism (especially the debates on human rights), principally when critiquing the oppressive religious social institutions of their own societies.

Risking my own engagement in stereotypes, I find the initial response by Islamicists is that western feminism is an elite, white feminism based on individualism, equal rights and opportunities, etc., and misunderstood as anti-men, anti-family, anti-religion and not necessarily inclusive of family values, gender complementarity, and community needs. Western feminism as a hegemonic model of feminism is itself critiqued in the West. Authors like hooks (1984); Anzaldua (1990, 2002), Wing (2000), and others have presented their versions of feminist theories that are more inclusive of minority agendas as well as explicit about race and class intersections in the West. One has to give due credit to local feminist discourses in the West for deconstructing western feminism and rendering it multifaceted (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). There is an uncritical, ahistorical and stereotyped misrepresentation of western feminism in the non-western world. This kind of thinking by non-westerners creates the same kind of homogenizing as western feminists who claim that the social position of all Muslim women is homogenized through a particular interpretation of the Quran. If western feminists conclude that western feminism is diverse, fluid and constantly evolving, then they should also have the ability to contest the homogenizing of women in Muslim societies through the lens of religious and/or extremist Islam.

To mention just a few forms of feminisms, there are western-educated Muslim feminists living outside their home countries who, immersed in and trained by the feminisms of their adopted country, base their feminism on a human rights discourse and **secularism** (Moghadam 1993, 2002, 2003; Moghissi 1996; Sahidian 1994; Jalal 1991; Jehangir 1990, Said Khan 1994, Jilani 1998). In the same league of foreign educated feminists, especially after 9/11, there is a group of feminists who espouse **Islamic feminism as a "strategy"** with an emphasis on **reinterpretation** of the Quran¹⁰ by

¹⁰ Quran is the divine holy book of the Muslims revealed to the Prophet Mohammad over a period of 23 years starting in 608 A.D.

questioning the Hadith¹¹ and Shariah¹² in Islamic states. Most of these feminists have come from secular-left intellectual backgrounds. (Tohidi 1991, Najmabadi 1993). There is scholarship that propounds an Islamic feminism based on a “proper” interpretation of the Quran where these scholars feel that the Quran does guarantee equal rights to women (Wadud 1999, Webb 2000, Hassan 2004, Engineer 2001, Ali 1996, Mir-Hosseini 1996, Mernissi 1991; Karmi 1996). Other perspectives are also grounded in people’s class backgrounds, the rural-urban divide and ethnicities, etc. by feminists from Turkey, India, and Pakistan, to mention a few countries (Kandiyotti 1991, 1996, Lateef 1990; Hasan and Menon 2004; Khan and Zia 1995; Zafar 1991) who try to bring in issues of local cultures, class and theories of patriarchy to explain women’s low status in society as more important than Islam.

In the following sections I will deconstruct Islamic and secular feminisms, and discuss a hybrid version of feminism in the Muslim world in an attempt to reflect on the viability of these theories on women’s lives in Islamic states and other Muslim communities. My contention is that there is a constant shifting in women’s lives and status due to shifting global and internal politics complicating women’s demands for justice and rights in all societies. Since 9/11, the lives of Muslim women have been pushed to the forefront worldwide to continue the debate on the backwardness of non-western nations, through the projected abusive situation of their women, to further the western agenda of economic and political hegemony.

Islamic Feminisms

Numerous kinds of Islamic feminists can be identified. All these theorists are seeking Muslim women’s emancipation within the rubrics of Islamic patriarchy whether progressive, modernist, traditionalist, pragmatist, neo-Islamist, or fundamentalist. (Badran 2001, Yamani 1996; Najmabadi 1993). Rebecca Foley puts forth a clear distinction in her work on Malaysia (2004), where she discusses the two main streams of Islamic feminisms falling into a discourse on equity and equality. Foley elaborates that equity refers to fairness whereas equality to equal rights with men.

Attempts are made by Islamic and non-Islamic equity feminist scholars to discuss the progressiveness of the Quran, given the social situation in Arabia around the 7th century. They cite this period of “progressiveness” to highlight the issues of gender equity prescribed in the Quran (Farooq 2006, Engineer 2001, Ali 1996). Farooq quotes from the Quran on the issue of gender equality in marriage, “And of His signs is this/that he created mates for you/ from yourselves/ that you might find tranquility in them/ and he put between you love and compassion.” (Dawood 1974, Sura 30, verse 21) According to these scholars, it is the biased interpretations of the Quran and conflation with local cultures that have led to abysmal conditions for women in Muslim states.

Fazlur Rahman is a well-respected Islamic scholar who has written on gender issues in Islam. Rahman, not unlike numerous women theologians and other Muslim

¹¹ Hadith is the compilation of the Prophet Mohammad’s deeds and sayings as recollected by his Companions, wives, and others during the 8th and 9th century A.D. which dictate the way of life for Muslims.

¹² Shariah is the Islamic religious law derived from the Quran and the Hadith during the 7th-9th century A.D.

women scholars, lists instances of liberated women in the text. These include Khadija (the Prophet's first wife) who owned a business, and Aisha (the Prophet's last wife) who led her battalion to war on a camel. There were also instances of women's improved status, such as forbidding female infanticide, endorsements by Islamic scholars that women are protected and "loved," and that the Quran does not advocate veiling or segregation of the sexes (Rahman 1982:290). Rahman blames the Hadith, which according to him contradicts the Quran. Frequently, Prophet Mohammad's wives and daughter are projected as examples of empowered women in Islam. Fazlur Rahman asks, "Will the [Muslim] community be able to rise to the occasion, without undue wastage of human (especially female) resources which might prove overly costly for its future, but also without undue corrosion of the moral fiber which might destroy its very future as the Muslim community?" (1982:309) While acknowledging the economic worth and value of women to society, even a liberal Islamist like Rahman is not able to get away from the rhetoric of celebrating the moral fiber of the Muslim community. This ideology is tricky and, these days seen as ridden with contradictions. Women continue to dominate in the debate on morals, honor, prestige and izzat (respectability)!

Many feminist theologians, too, do not view the Quran as problematic, but feel that interpretations are the issue. Prominent Islamic theologian, Riffat Hassan, is widely quoted for her feminist theological position challenging the claims that human rights can only be discussed in secular terms, and "not within the framework of religion." Hassan (2004) lists the 'general rights' the Quran ascribes to women to underscore the concept of equality and rights in the holy book. She lists these rights as right to life, right to freedom, right to justice, right to respect, etc. What Hassan concludes is that these equal rights are not realized in Muslim societies because of infiltration of local customs, Christianity, Jewish, Hellenistic and Bedouin biases. Hassan recognizes the atrocities perpetuated against Muslim women like honor killings, discrimination against the girl child etc. in Pakistan, but is quick to point out that such institutions are not part of the Quran. Hassan quotes a Quranic verse referring to equality between men and women through equality in marriage to prove her thesis, "They are your garments/And you are their garments" (Dawood 1974, Sura 2, verse 187). Hassan concludes that there may be hope in the future because Islamic states are becoming, "disenchanted with capitalism, communism and western democracy." This should, according to her, lead to a serious understanding of the Quran and ultimately to peace and to a more just society.

Critique of Islamic Feminism

Ironically, this understanding belies the reality of most women's lives as the religious right gains prominence in most Muslim states. What emerges from such discussions of the virtue of the Quran and women's rights is the disconnect in the discourse on women's status in Islam with the reality of Muslim women's lives. Such a discourse, though based on a study of Islamic jurisprudence, does not effectively challenge the patriarchal and masculinist interpretation of Islamic texts, nor accommodate for women's status as it is played out in reality.

First, the Quran while appealing to all Muslims, men and women, to a common faith where they will be treated with love and compassion, also has verses that privilege

men over women as their protectors and providers. What is ignored widely by Islamic jurists who are trying to prove gender equality in the Quran are verses such as, “Men have authority over women because Allah has made them superior to the others, and because they spend of their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them” (Dawood 1974, Sura 4, verse 34)¹³. In this “complementarity” of genders, the dominance of men over women is reflected in verses where men have the right to reprimand their wives, physically too, if she does not comply. In courts, it takes two women’s testimony versus one man’s; divorce is unilateral prohibiting women from appealing for divorce, etc. More important, the need to take recourse to the Quran to establish contemporary social norms of inequality may be an unfair reference to the text itself, which was revealed 14 centuries ago. If, as these authors suggest, the Quran is indeed a progressive text, then the text should be interpreted to keep up with changing times and discourses based on human rights and citizenship. On the issue of Khadija and Ayesha being progressive role models for Muslim women, there is no doubt that having Muslim female role models is better than western female role models for young women in Muslim societies, but if the state does not institute policies and laws to achieve those heights that it claims the Prophet’s wives had achieved, then the rhetoric of role models is irrelevant.

The concept of Islamic patriarchy may appear discordant to some Islamic feminists but as long as the Quran is referred to in order to define sexual inequality, these theorists have to work with a text that does identify specific gender hierarchies. This does not deny the rights the Quran ascribes to women, nor the mention of humanity that refers to both men and women in certain verses, but the underlying message of the Quran is that men are the “protectors and providers” of women and children. Women are seen as “complementary” in their roles to men, subscribing to an “equal but different” philosophy. Such sentiments are reflective of an inherent gender hierarchy in Islam. In Asia too, Islamic feminism is fragmented as mentioned earlier along lines of “equity versus equality,” rhetoric of “separate but equal,” focus on “complementarity” of gender roles, sometimes worded as “supporting” of gender roles.

There is a wide chasm between the rhetoric of what is prescribed in the Quran (through diverse interpretations) and what the reality for men and women is in states that are Islamic and states with a substantial Muslim minority. Academically, debates center on the equality and compassion (or lack of it) that the Quran subscribes to women. Such rhetoric is very problematic because it creates knowledge in denial of people’s reality, of people’s lives, in an apologetic and defensive way to counter attacks on Islam, and also in an attempt to reconcile Islam as a faith with a way of living in recent religious extremist states. There is also an attempt here to diffuse patriarchy (a universal phenomenon) with the word of God, especially by Islamic feminist theologians. As Bassam Tibi (2001)

¹³ Some feminist Islamic scholars contest the interpretation of “then beat them,” claiming that this is a male interpretation. They claim that the original Arabic words have multiple meanings but men have emphasized the negative one. Similar argument has been put forward for the strict dress code prescribed for women by Islamic feminists.

states, "Islam is both a religious faith and a cultural system, but not a political ideology." One can respect the Quran as a religious text, as a source of spiritual empowerment, and a text that opens itself to modernization and applicability to contemporary life. It is a document, that, when looked at historically, was once ahead of its time, but today it should be viewed as a guide to interpretations to keep up with changing times (Tibi 2001:2).

But again it is within the confines of the text that somewhat liberal claims are being made about women's status. Islamic feminists in turn end up being "used" by religious extremist states to show the western world that Islam preaches equality between genders, while for women in these states the reality continues to be one of oppression, ironically in the name of Islam.

Secular Feminism

At its base, Islamic feminists use religion as a framework to define gender roles, structure of the family and community, and ultimately, its inclusion in the formation of the nation state in which the individual is subsumed. Secular feminists, on the other hand, base their rationale for women's rights on a human rights discourse to enable and empower the individual in a secular democracy to create a civil society. As Moghadam puts it, "Although religious reform is salutary and necessary, it is important to recognize its limitations. Women's rights and human rights are best promoted and protected in an environment of secular thought and secular institutions" (2002, 1162). Given its mutability, secular feminists writing in and outside Muslim states are generally rooted in one of three ideologies: western, socialist, and human rights, though there is often an overlap as well. These ideologies and overlaps are reflective of the location of feminists and determine their scholarship. This in turn, gives rise to various responses and critiques thus building the base for feminist theorizing. Secular democracy is seen as the prerequisite for demands of individual rights based on a system of fairness and justice, thus ensuring women a vehicle to claim those rights.

A call for secular democracy in Muslim states as a prerequisite to ensure equal rights for women, or some semblance of human rights for all men and women is based on various reasons, most of them in contestation to an Islamic state. For example, when a state is declared Islamic, which interpretation of Islam would empower the state? The recent situation in Iraq has educated the West about Shias and Sunnis. This divide is only one of the many that contribute to the multi-variant interpretation of the Quran. This could lead to another issue; whose interpretation at what historical political juncture? Another concern is what would the status of non-Muslims and Muslims of different shades be in an Islamic state? Examples of ill-treatment of Sunnis in a Shiite Iraq and vice-versa, Christians in Pakistan, Hindus in Malaysia and Bangladesh, and Sikhs in Afghanistan are a few examples that bring to the forefront the fears of theocratic states.

From a secularist perspective, specifically for women, Islamic states control family laws to perpetuate the perfect family as prescribed by religion along gendered lines. A combination of strict family laws and religiously prescribed "modesty" would inhibit women's mobility, freedom, etc. This could prevent economic development and

modernization by prohibiting half of the population from education¹⁴ and the work force, and would prevent equal political participation in the political arena by limiting women and minorities from running for office. Concurrently, secularism is not about negating religion in lives of people, it is about separating the state and religion. Secularism is also cognizant of constructing a human rights discourse within a culturally and politically appropriate setting, without imposing western ideals and values.

In its various avatars, secularism is seen as a western imposition that belittles and marginalizes not just religions, but local cultural and moral values. Therefore, as long as secularism is defined in terms of westernization and is seen as an imposition on Muslim states by the West, its viability will always be questioned. Besides, women and the majority of the people in Muslim communities may favor “patriarchy trading” by preferring an Islamic state over a state that alienates them from their belief system. Neither has the call for democracy shown us the path to gender equality or any other form of equality for the oppressed (race, class, ethnicity, caste, etc.) In fact, the call for democracy has proven to be highly problematic where it has ushered in radical and fundamentalist regimes, not only in theocratic states, but also in so-called non-theocratic states in the West. This of course does not absolve Islamic states of their role; in fact, they offer a more repressive patriarchy. But for feminists it poses dilemmas.

The struggles of feminist theorists and the grounded reality of women were reflected more recently in Turkey and in France through the wearing of the headscarf, which has become a controversial issue. Unlike Iran, where women are fighting to shed the veil, some Turkish women are contesting the ban on headscarves. This has created a political situation where a conflict between the recently elected Muslim parliament and secular and powerful military has tested the power of a resurgent conservative religious identity in the region. Recently in Turkey, a Bill has successfully passed allowing women to veil in public institutions much to the chagrin of the secularists. Such irony throws the neatly compartmentalized debate of the West vs. Muslim states into a new light and raises the most important question, what is secularism? Given the above example, is secularism about religious tolerance or about negating the public display of religious symbols as identity markers? These conflicting interpretations reflect the fragility of secularism in Muslim states where revivalism of Islamic identity politics is evident. In so-called non-Islamic countries like Turkey, Jordan and Egypt, more and more women are visible in the public with headscarves and head coverings to varying degrees. This was not the norm and in some of these states deliberate attempts were made to remain unveiled.

Hybrid Feminism

For hybrid feminism, while a secular democracy would be the desired state of affairs, concessions are made to fight for women’s rights based on certain issues that do not necessarily challenge the dominant system at that historical moment. Haleh Afshar sums up the situation in Iran, “Islamist women have located their negotiations with the

¹⁴ Examples do exist of higher literacy rates of Muslim girls because of segregated schools and in universities in Pakistan and Iran, but to what extent this education empowers women or enables their decision-making powers is still highly contested.

government within the context of Islam and its reconstructed meanings, whilst secular women have chosen to present their protests in terms of human rights and the international recognition of women and their universal entitlements. What both groups seek is the lifting of constraints placed on women's social and political integration by the post-revolutionary government." (Afshar 1998:36)

Consequently, Islamic feminism and secular feminism have to be understood in their historical context. While some of the Islamic feminists might have differences among themselves, these theoretical constructs are deemed essential to the expansion of Islam. Thus, given the limited options, feminists in fundamentalist states granting women rights through an interpretation of the Quran may be deemed essential. The emergence of Islamic feminisms in the modern world is the product of the Islamization of certain societies, especially since the late 1970s and the 1980s, and post 9/11. The historical precedents are important because women in these societies have had to wrestle with their reality, as limited as it may be, to continue to engage in a process to empower themselves and other women. Islamic feminism, while different in its message from secular feminism, may have been the only situationally appropriate strategy for women to employ under the watchful and critical eyes of Islamic regimes. I do not want to deny that there are pragmatic Islamic feminists, who irrespective of their governments are convinced that Islamic feminism is the best solution, but there are many who are strategizing (simply using Islam as a tool) to empower women "within" the framework. Thus, one has to historicize the process of such feminisms as one historicizes the process of western, secular or left feminism and work towards a hybrid feminism that ensures women their rights.

In secular states with substantial Muslim populations, strategizing for Muslim women's rights has to be done differently. This is primarily because *all* women in such states need to unite to challenge the patriarchy to grant women their rights within the civil society.¹⁵ With the spread of pan-Islamism in the region of south Asia, some Indian Muslim women are wary of the power the clergy is trying to exercise under the rubrics of "protecting" Muslim women from globalization and the Hindu majority.

For Iran, Povey points out, "Many secular feminists see the struggle for more reforms to empower women as very important and in this they welcome their unity with Muslim feminists. But they also question the whole notion of Muslim feminism and are raising very important questions: to what extent can they rely on the support of Muslim feminists?" (2006:66) While this question in itself is problematic, it is posed by Povey in the context of Iran, where there is a "coming together" of "all" feminist forces to bring about changes in family laws to benefit Iranian women. This strategy is a welcome and astute way of claiming at least those rights that are guaranteed in the Quran. The risk though does exist of endorsing masculine institutions to strengthen the pre-existing patriarchal social order. Just focusing on patriarchy though is a losing battle. Even in a

¹⁵ Many who feel that minorities have to subsume their identities and cultures within the majority hegemonic cultures have also criticized this generalized viewpoint. But in this paper I am looking at the situation of India, where the Muslim conservatives and clerics want to stick to the Muslim Personal Law within the secular confines of India to continue to have power in the community and simultaneously oppress Muslim women through the religious family code. (see the case of Shah Bano, Engineer 1987)

secular democracy based on some sort of human rights discourse, patriarchy is not challenged. Mere accommodations are made to ascribe some “rights” to women to maintain a superficial pretence of “equality” otherwise referred to as a false consciousness. But there is no denying, that the demand for secularism ensures a democratic participation of the underprivileged in society to a larger extent than under a political ideological and/or religious dictatorship or socio-political system.

If the discourse on rights for Muslim women is based on varied interpretations of Islam, then the discussion can be engaged in since the challenge to patriarchy is taken for granted. But if Islam is seen as a homogenous faith that binds all Muslims together and dictates the fate of its entire people, then it once again becomes problematic because not only does it privilege the elite interpreter but also devalues local discourses that may provide the space for discussion. Of course, the reverse could also hold, where the local discourses prevent any change that the Quran may inhere.

The above discussion sheds light on the various feminisms that are propagated by a range of Muslim feminists who are trying to establish women’s rights through the Quran, a human rights discourse, through socio-historical –political hierarchies and through a combination of the above. This debate among feminist positions raises the question: How does one interpret freedom and choice under Islam? Such a question raises many dilemmas for feminists. For women, the conflicting interpretations affect daily life. Under these conditions, hybrid feminism may be more accommodative to Muslim women’s demands for more rights.

Examples of Collaborative Islamic Feminism

Iran and Malaysia are a few examples which are grappling with different degrees of hybrid feminisms. I have already mentioned examples of Islamic feminism versus secular feminism in Iran. Since the mid-1980s, to counter the repressive regime of the Islamic fundamentalists, a deep sense of commitment to women’s rights is being expressed by feminists in Iran through founding of feminist journals and magazines (Zanan and Farzaneh) that are openly questioning women’s position in society and demanding the rights owed to them in the Quran. At this writing though, Zanan has been ordered by the current Iranian government to shut down for being too critical of Iranian society. (Casey, February 15, 2008) A vibrant debate on topics pertaining to women’s rights in Iran seemed to have taken root in Iranian society to the extent of forcing the government to guarantee certain rights to women. These recent rights, though small steps, constitute real progress for working-class women since the 1979 declaration of Iran as an Islamic state. An additional factor unique to Iran was also the absence of men during the 10-year war with Iraq. This forced women out of their homes to support the Iranian economy. Many Iranian feminists conclude that this push of Iranian women into the public sphere led to a rise in feminist consciousness.

In Malaysia, one observes an attempt at hybrid feminism being endorsed not by women’s groups alone but also with the complicity of the state in certain situations. Foley (2004) in her work in Malaysia clearly distinguishes the Malay agenda of development as, “The Government sought to promote an interpretation of Islam that included a focus on the worldly as well as the afterlife; and an emphasis on hard work, thrift and loyalty.”

(2004:57) Foley continues that this was done in an effort to economically counter the West and to decenter the perception of Islam “away from dogmatism and conservatism.” In Malaysia, Sisters in Islam, an organization founded in 1988 has been instrumental in engaging the state with issues of Islam and gender. Sisters in Islam believe in equality of sexes versus equity and are convinced that the Quran guarantees that. While this philosophy is closely tied in with versions of Islamic feminism, one difference lies in their total abrogation of the Shariah on the basis that it was created by man and not divine in its origin. With this caveat, Sisters in Islam are pressuring the state to change family laws and elevate women’s status within the state. This demand combined with Malaysia’s need to keep their women employed in the economy and to hold political office could be viewed as an example of hybrid feminism. I do want to clarify here though that my version of hybrid feminism would ultimately push for a secular democratic state apparatus within which the gender hierarchy is negotiated independent of religion while allowing individuals access to their religious beliefs.

Alternative Strategies: Mere Suggestions

There is no denying that men and women, especially in contemporary times, are located globally and are mere actors at the local level. A negotiation to empower at the local level within one’s own cultural and historical framework is essential to retrieve one’s agency to disempower global hierarchies of dominance. In that attempt, such local feminisms as Islamic feminism have a stake but should not be seen as an end in themselves. Where proponents of Islamic feminism fall short of conviction is when they do not spell out “proper” interpretation, “true” interpretation, “authentic” interpretation, and “valid” interpretation of the Quran. Much has been written on the critique of past and current interpretations of the Quran by male clerics faulting their interpretation of women’s place in the text, but an alternative interpretation has yet to be presented, especially within the realm of women’s rights. On the other hand, as Khattak questions, should there be a “true” or just one interpretation of the Quran? It is in the varied interpretations and their flexibilities that the Quran can be projected as a text for all times, which can be adapted to changing needs and demands (Khattak 2007). As Tohidi succinctly states, “One overall conclusion is that, no matter how described, Islamic gender activism,” “Islamic gender reformism,” or Islamic feminism,” is a growing and potent force that should be taken seriously.” (Tohidi 1998:287)

One also has to be aware of academic rhetoric on “equality” or at least women’s rights in Islam and in the Quran and the reality on ground. Much has been written and debated about women’s rights in Muslim countries where women themselves are divided on the “best practices” approach. This debate, however, has been confined to academia. Bridge building has to occur to relate these debates with women’s realities and vice-versa. In this attempt, one might be able to diffuse tensions amongst various thinkers, theologians and feminists to influence policy makers more effectively. While there is, rightfully, a revival of the debate on women in Islam, especially their representation in the Quran, it is done more in a context of addressing the West’s perception of Muslim women. This response to the West has to be decentered and any analysis of women’s

status in Muslim society has to be looked at within its own social, economic and historical context.

Maybe one way of looking at Islamic feminism is not use the term feminism. For Islamic feminists who claim that a rereading of the Quran by women is essential to the reinterpreting of women's status in Islam, a different term needs to be used. Neither Islamic feminisms nor secular feminism is an end in itself; they are processes that are constantly shifting. Both have to coexist until women are empowered enough to make their own decisions, and men sensitized and educated enough to not feel challenged by their own women. A suggestion could be womanist theologians. The term is borrowed from African-American women theologians who have appropriated the term womanist from Alice Walker. Some of the womanist theologians' goals spelt out by Linda Thomas (1998) are, "to introduce the social construction of Black womanhood in relation to the African-American community." Areas of overlap of womanist theology with Islamic feminism can lead to a recreation of the term feminism for Islamists. Womanism for Black women creates the space for them to engage in life histories for their cultural preservation, enables them in a "critical conversation with male theologians," focuses on the importance of family as a unit to protect and cherish, "decolonizes the African mind and affirms their heritage," and prioritizes "women's relationship with god and creation and survival in the world." For womanist theologians, this is a liberatory exercise. According to its proponents, 'womanism completes and intensifies feminism. Womanism turns against every form of oppression' (Thomas 1998). This call for new terminology could also sidestep the frequent reference to feminism being a "western" term that then carries with it a sense of feminism that is derived from a western hegemonic tradition and politics. Another advantage would be to draw on the similarities of the conditions of women among the minorities in the West and women in non-western traditions where the status of women (or lack of) is based in their class, race, ethnicity and social structures. Thirdly, it would decenter the issues of Muslim women's status being rooted in traditional Islam only.

This third point is important because it is reflected in western perceptions of Muslim women, where their status is located, centered and interpreted solely through religion. Such a limited interpretation of Muslim women's lives prevents a thorough understanding of the realities shaped by class, ethnicity, kinship and regional culture. According to Kandiyotti, "current feminist literature goes as far as claiming that if secularization of the political sphere and extensive democratization of society does not occur in the Middle-East, women's status will not change. On the other hand, some feminist theologians attempt to establish Islam's compatibility with the emancipation of women."(1989:5). It is somewhere between these two polarized views that the reality of a Muslim woman's life plays itself out. Through conforming to an Islamic lifestyle, the Muslim woman is simultaneously seen by Westerners as a symbol of her regressive Islamic regime with no rights, and by Islamists, as a symbol of their strict interpretations of the Quran and politics to the outside world. If she does not conform, she is seen as betraying the Islamic cause by her "brothers" and by Westerners as reaffirming their belief in the "oppressive" institutions of Islam. Such external construction and expectations of her behavior thus render her own decisions, choices, and life

circumstances invisible and her reality is reduced to a simplistic and judgmental interpretation. (Ahmed-Ghosh 2004)

Change, however, is a process not a solution. For feminists, there is always a dilemma working within or from outside the system. Similarly, for women in Islamic states and in Muslim communities, dilemmas exist as to should they contest internal oppressive religious norms or “support” their communities in their resistance to westernization. As spelt out in this paper, these dilemmas mainly exist because of the politicization of not just Islam but also secularism. There needs to be a multi-pronged approach to understanding feminism in Islamic countries and Muslim communities giving prime importance to the multi-causal ground reality of women’s lives. For example, while a policy oriented effort has to be made to challenge the existing patriarchal order, the complexity of such patriarchy rooted in class, tradition, religion etc. has to be broken down. A rights discourse has to be introduced into social systems that empower women to decide their own lives within a framework amenable to them.

On the one hand, the contemporary politicization of Islam is a response to the ongoing crisis of the modern, so-called ‘secular’ nation state in the world, and on the other, it is an expression of a defensive culture. The frame of reference therefore has to do with acceptance of the reality of change. It has to do with the fact that there no longer exists a monolithic Islam, if there ever was one. Ideology has to be grounded in some sort of reality, especially these days when talking about Islam and gender. Also, much of the discussion post-9/11 around women’s issues in Islamic and substantial Muslim minority societies is based on the urgency to defend Islam. For Muslim women this becomes problematic: should they defend Islam as a monolithic faith, which provides no space for a critique or should they judge their lives through their multi-layered identities?

Conclusion

While political dominance of Islamic states by the West is based in their need for economic resources like oil, the debate is often played out in terms of “clash of civilizations.” Such projections then involve a condemnation and denigration of Muslim societies, which in turn leads further to the need of the elite in Muslim states to engage in a more rigid political process, resulting in the drawing of cultural battle lines. The contemporary conflict defines and redefines modernization in terms of women’s rights in the West and in the Islamic East. Anti-West for these analysts means anti-modern, and anti-modern status is expressed through women’s oppression in non-Western states. An essential question is, can one in fact conflate anti-West with anti-modern? Perhaps it is a myth (especially in the eyes of many Westerners) that modern can only mean Western. Islamic and non-western history is rife with examples of modernity occurring or modernists existing in those nations. Therefore, the question that follows is, can there be a Muslim modernity similar to Christian modernity in the U.S. and Europe and socialist modernity in Russia and China? The myth of modernity as the brainchild of the West, based only on western social and political principles has been further perpetuated by the constant presentation of non-western states as the “other.” This legitimizes the West as modern and Muslim states as anti-modern. It is in this definition that political battle lines are drawn, and women’s lives and bodies are “used” by both patriarchies to claim their

superiority and political dominance on the global scene. A change in language may diffuse these political tensions. By disassociating the concept modern from western one can redefine modernity through a local cultural lens.

Women (feminists and non-feminists) are looking at feminist issues through a myriad of strategies and ideologies. Recognition of diversity among women in feminist discourse could then lead to non-stereotyping by western and non-western feminists alike. Coalitions across borders based on common issues, for example minority feminism in the West and Third World feminism could be formed. Also a distancing of feminist agendas from hegemonic national policies needs to be embraced. For example western feminists need to challenge their governments' policies and Islamic women need to challenge the religious extremism of their own governments' policies. The call once again is to break down or disrupt simplistic binary categories of West versus East, Islam versus Christianity, and Us versus Them. In the Third World, most secular and left feminists are aware of these differences and claim women's rights through a human rights discourse, but a class and intellectual disengagement is still apparent where feminist ideology is seen as the purview of elite women.

Feminists should contest the politics of the region. If the current appropriate framework of social empowerment is Islam, feminists have to work with it to empower women. It is then for women in these situations to exercise their agency to bring the changes to their lives that matches their aspirations. For secular minded feminists, religion was and is still seen as an oppressive state institution. Given the pan-conservative Islam in the region (Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan and further into India and the east of Asia), a partnering of "moderate" Islamic feminists with secular feminists might avoid the schism and stalemate that may exist in the discourse on women's rights in this region and help bring about at least some changes in women's rights as has been observed in Iran and Malaysia.

Religious extremism has empowered the family, the tribe, and the community (many times in opposition to the state) to dictate Islamic norms, and has led to private becoming the public domain in respect to women's lives. Control of women through their sexuality is evidenced Afghanistan and Pakistan through the increase in honor killings,¹⁶ blood money, forced wearing of the burqa, increase in domestic violence, reduction in the age of marriage for girls, and an increase in polygamy. Various practices like bride price and swara (giving away of daughter to settle enmity) are banned. But these practices not only persist but also have seen a rise (perhaps due to higher reporting) in recent years. This, combined with the strengthening of a kin-based family system, further alienates women from their rights and/or an understanding of rights not just within a secular human rights framework but also those rights that are granted to her through the Quran. Dilemmas run rampant, not just amongst feminists but also policy makers and agents of social change who, while trying to theorize for a just society, find themselves swimming upstream.

Hybrid feminists need to look at the reality in society and women's lived experiences to grasp an understanding of women's lives, and impact implementable

¹⁶ According to the Annual Report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2006, the numbers of women killed in 2006 due to issues of honor have doubled since 2005.

policies and build meaningful praxis. The gap between theory and practice is glaring in all Muslim countries. What is apparent from feminist theory so far is that it is rooted in national ideologies, cultural hegemonies, international politics, and global dependencies. Hybrid feminist understanding and solidarity is crucial for creating an environment for learning and exchange of ideas. This theorizing would then lead to examining certain critical issues pertaining to a better understanding of feminism, Islam, and the complexities of women's lives. It is within this discourse that Muslim women's lives can be negotiated given the struggles of the politics of identity formation by the Islamic and Muslim community and nation post 9/11. I would like to add that 9/11 has been, on another level, an equalizing force for Muslim men and women's identity politics. 9/11 has created a divisive world of the West versus Islamic states and other Muslim communities. Thus, one cannot ignore the sense of an Islamic identity that is more commonly shared among Muslims today than in any other historical period. 9/11 has succeeded in unifying diversity among Muslims through the creation of an identity politics that is now being exploited by local, national and international governments. This is reflected through Islam increasingly becoming the dominant discourse globally for political and cultural impositions to attain economic ends by focusing on women through strictures on their lives and status.

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