ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND FEMINIST THEORY

By

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Abstract

Western feminist theory has developed significantly from its early roots in the suffrage movement. As it grew to encompass those women who were not white and middle class it was caught in the trap that ensnares most social movements. It fragmented, became exclusive rather than inclusive. The hyphenated feminisms that are now in place struggle to find space where the fragments can meld, even if only for a short time. Islamic feminism is one of the fragments. It is activist and vocal, attempting to find a place where women can interpret for themselves what Islam means in various patriarchal cultures where men have always had the power to define that religion. Whether or not Islamic feminism can be seen as a true aspect of feminist theory is dependent on the ability of the women of those individual cultures to gain for themselves a place in the power structures that interpret rights and behavior for the community as a whole.
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Introduction

Many years ago – while I was pregnant with my third son (who turned thirty this year) – I was at the medical clinic of the of the oil company compound in Saudi Arabia where our family lived. There were three other pregnant women there that morning. All of our children were sorting through the toys set up in the corner, playing together quite happily. The only real difference was that the other three women were fully covered. All I could see were their eyes. What struck me at that moment was not their appearance but mine. How did they see me? Was I like them struggling through pregnancy with other young children? Or was I an interloper, living in my nice house with paved streets and sidewalks, parks and swimming pools and tennis courts, driving wherever I need to go while they lived in the village outside the gates of our walled compound (the only Saudis living in camp were managerial level and above) hauling their drinking water from wells and depending on male relatives for transportation?

That was my “aha” moment as a feminist. Up to that point I believed that feminism was about equal rights in the marketplace and at the ballot box. It was about every woman’s right to make her own choices about how she lived her life. “Woman” was a generic term. I was an essentialist, comfortable in my own world and sure that other women wanted the same things as I. How does one get past the arrogance of the assumption that the only difference in women is how they choose to clothe themselves, that the values of Western, white, middle-class educated women are the values of all women? This paper will attempt to discover if there is a connection between Western feminist theory and Islamic feminism, whether the voice and agency so important to Western feminists can exist in a world that is governed by religion based on a fourteen hundred years old book that has been interpreted through male community standards. How do religious proscriptions on dress and social contact - often, but not always, enforced by the state - affect Muslim (whether that definition be religious, cultural or some combination of the two) women? Do those prescriptions influence the way they interact with each other and with women who are not Muslim?
Feminism and Patriarchy

Any discourse is constrained by theoretical parameters. Patricia Elliot and Nancy Mandell state that feminist theory has moved beyond an exploration of the gendered nature of all social and institutional relations, the inherent inequality of those relations and the fact that those relations are social and historical constructs (qtd. in Crow and Gotell, 2004, p.5) to one that encompasses the “construction, formation and articulation of gender” (6) by diverse women and the societies in which they reside. If that is so Islamic feminism has a definite place within the broader context of feminist theory. Parvin Paider, one of the earliest Iranian secular feminists to attempt to find a way to work with Islamic women in Iran, defined feminism as “aiming to increase women’s rights, opportunities and choices within any ideology or context.” (qtd. in Franks, n.d., p. 3/10 )

It is the ideology and context that cause the most confusion for those attempting to interpret what feminism means. How do women go about better understanding their past, how does that past affect the present, and how does one make that understanding available to society at large? Western feminist scholars have taken on the task, defining themselves as political activists in the struggle to free knowledge from patriarchal ties that restrict what knowledge is allowed and how it is gained. A basic tenet of feminist scholarship is that all knowledge is constructed within a frame of reference. Nothing is ever learned or taught with objectivity. Feminist theory developed out of the need to place women in the world, both as active participants in the events that occur and as students and teachers of those events.

In her book Women, History and Theory, Joan Kelly discusses the idea of two sociosexual spheres that have developed in feminist theory. Marxist-feminist theory takes on the public/private spheres concept to show that the separation of society into work/leisure spheres was true only for men. It ignores the sexual division of labour. Women’s work of biological and social reproduction supports the social, political and economic order dominated by men while denying them full participation in that order. To Kelly this
theory faces difficulties because it is rooted in the property arrangements of class society and is never able to see sex and class as operating at the same level. It does not provide any real explanation of the nature of sex oppression or its causes. Radical feminist theory takes a different approach. It analyzes the psychic, sexual and ideological structures that differentiate the sexes and the antagonistic relationship of dominance and subjugation. Women are seen as subject to the personal “satisfactions” of male privilege. This theory too easily makes women victims, denying their agency in interactions with the world. Both theories have value but both miss elements of value in the other. “We are pulled in one direction by a Marxist-feminist analysis of the socioeconomic bases of women’s oppression and in another direction by a radical feminist focus on women’s bodies as the key to patriarchy” (219).

All feminists resist patriarchy, but patriarchal relations are not the same in all parts of the world, let alone in individual communities. Our frame of reference and the knowledge available within it will define how we accept or reject that community. Identities and outlooks result from the culture in which we are raised. In order to understand where we are, we need to go back and trace the path that got us to this juncture.

Being pulled in different directions by different theories results in tensions between the competing theories (let alone the theories not even mentioned by Kelly), in particular the tension between the need to be separate and the need to create a new social vision that will encompass all of humanity. Patriarchy feeds on that tension. Feminists of all persuasions need to find a way beyond the tensions, to incorporate ideas that will provide the best means to make patriarchy clearly visible and to dismantle it. “It has been the strength of patriarchy in all its historic forms to assimilate itself so perfectly to socioeconomic, political, and cultural structures as to be virtually invisible. It could even couch demands for female subordination in terms of prevailing social and cultural values: Athenian civilization, bourgeois equality (separate but equal), socialist priority of class struggle” (325).
Islam and Feminism

Western feminism, like Western societies bases itself on individual rights and freedoms. The individual makes choices based on his or her own needs and circumstances. The Islamic world is more concerned with group rights and protections. Hijab (veiling) has become the symbol on both sides of this tension, the West seeing it as a sign of lack of power, the Islamic world proclaiming it as a reminder of the true value their culture places on women. Present day leaders in Islamic states, religious and secular, insist that hijab comes from the Qur’an, that veiling and seclusion for women are essential to preserve their modesty and their family’s honour:

“And let [the believing woman] not reveal their beauty, except that which is apparent, and let them clasp their scarves over their bosoms. And let them not reveal their beauty except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands’ fathers, or their sons or their husbands’ sons, or their brothers, or their brothers’ sons, or their sisters’ sons, or their women [i.e. Muslim women] or their slaves, or male servants free of desire, or children who have no sense of the shame of women’s nakedness. [Qur’an, 24:31] (Regulations, n.d.)

Many Muslim women readily accept this precept: “…modest dress is part of a larger system in which everything that does not need to be known in public is kept private and out of sight, and in which private behaviors are reserved for those joined in marriage or family. Men and women are completely equivalent in this regard since the only differences in their dress relate to physical differences between men and women, while the rules of conduct are exactly the same for both of them” (Al-Muhajabah, n.d., p. 2/7). There are also many who do not, who see it as a symbol of oppression and suppression, or what should be a matter of personal choice, both in legal and religious terms. Mehrdad Darvishpour’s article “‘Islamic Feminism’: compromise or challenge to feminism?” quotes Fatima Mernissi, a well-known Algerian feminist scholar, on the subject: “In western culture, sexual inequality is based on the belief in the biological inferiority of women. In Islam, it is the contrary: the whole system is based on the assumption that woman is a powerful and dangerous being. All sexual institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual
segregation, etc.) can be perceived as a strategy for containing her power” (n.d., p. 2/8).

Muslim feminists, on the other hand, see the power of the veil as the power of freedom of choice. “… the ability to choose whether to veil or not, in accordance with the Muslim feminist’s own personal interpretation of Islamic faith and morality, is at the very heart of what Islam represents. to Muslim feminists: the basic Qur’anic ethic of the sovereign right of both women and men as human beings who have the freedom of self-determination.” (Woodcock, n.d., p. 2/6)

Islamic feminists struggle to define their identity within the constraints of present-day Islam by holding to what they accept as the original precepts of the Prophet Mohammed in the Qur’an. Muslim feminists use Islamic sources to show that full equality between men and women, granted by God, has been subverted by history and culture. Secular Muslim feminists see religion as a private matter, not relevant to the public realm. The responses of individual women to the challenges they face must note country of residence – whether the discourse is initiated within countries defined as Islamic or secular. It is much easier to declaim Islam as a source of identity when you do not live in country that demands – with penalties of imprisonment and death - Islam as a source of identity. The difficulty of combining theory and practice is much more apparent in countries that define virtue and vice according to shari’a1 which is Qur’an-based in form and extremely oppressive to women in substance. (Shaheed, 1994, p. 998) Islamic feminism is a response to the patriarchal structure explicitly stated in shari’a and implied in all actions of society and the state that deny women their place in that community. It has both theological and social activist underpinnings. (Cooke, 2000, 151) Islamic feminists state that, by returning to

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1" Sharia is the totality of religious, political, social, domestic and private life. Sharia is primarily meant for all Muslims, but applies to a certain extent also for people living inside a Muslim society. … Sharia is not something the intelligence of man can prove wrong, it is only to be accepted by humans, since it is based on the will of God.” Encyclopedia of the Orient  lexicorient.com/e.o
The roots of Islam, gender equality will be automatic as was intended by Allah, and transmitted through his prophet Mohammed:

The Qur’an provides women with explicit rights to inheritance, independent property, divorce and the right to testify in a court of law. It prohibits wanton violence towards women and girls and is against duress in marriage and community affairs. Women and men equally are required to fulfill all religious duties, and are equally eligible for punishment for misdemeanors. Finally, women are offered the ultimate boon: paradise and proximity to Allah. (Wadud, 2002, p. 1/6)

The difficulty in attempting to deal with Islam and feminism is that this will differ according to which state is being studied and whether that state is predominantly Sunni or Shiite. Cultural practices differ in all the states that proclaim themselves as Islamic and it is culture not religion that defines how women are treated and how they themselves see the world in which they live.

Culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is a clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life, a particular culture.

Raymond Williams, Culture and Society
(Quoted in British Cultural Studies, p. 46)

Cultures Displaced by Imperialism

To study any culture one must develop an understanding of the stressors that delineate the actions of its members and how the individuals and groups within that culture relate to each other and to the structures – particularly ideology - that bind them. In his interview with Lawrence Grossberg Stuart Hall defines articulation as asking “… how an ideology discovers its subject rather than how the subject thinks the necessary and inevitable thoughts which belong to it.” (Morley, 142) Ideology, according to Hall, is the means by which people make sense of their world without having to define that world by one particular means, whether that be gender - economic class -
geographic location - or social position. Religion is one way to do this because it provides
cultural continuity, connection and order in an unconnected, disordered world. It operates within
a particular structure of power, one that has built up over time to develop its own ideology and
cultural strictures. Articulation in this case is the connection between religion and the other
elements that make up that social structure.

In post-colonial societies, such as those in the Middle East and North Africa, articulation
reaffirms the place of the post-colonial subject in a world that no longer is constrained by
colonial rules, but must still find a method of definition that assures the place of the pre-colonial
subject. The culture displaced by imperialism must be returned to centre stage, and religion is an
important element of that return, particularly since religion was the cultural artifact most
denigrated by the imperialist.

Any attempt to discuss the relationship of women to religion and to the nation must firmly place
women within the history of both. Women have been excluded from history, made invisible in a
world of male dominance. Feminist scholarship insists that gender is a social construction, with
societies establishing roles and identities that are gender-specific. Those roles and identities are
then seen to be a natural result of sexual differences. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in her article
*Placing Women’s History in History* insists that gender roles and identities that have been
assigned by societies must be seen as historical facts that require historical analysis. “The
primary theoretical implications of the confrontation between women’s history and official
history are this recognition of gender system as a primary category of historical analysis – as
deeply ingrained in social and economic formations and the political institutions to which they
give rise as class formations” (15). The gender system is endemic to all social relations. Women
are denied access to power and learning, but the men who deny them access don’t see anything
wrong with doing so. They are off building nations and fighting wars, acting for their communities and their class with little thought for anything except what they were trying to accomplish. Genovese-Fox notes the interdependence of members of families, communities and classes and the fact that women, as members of all groups, have accepted the hegemony of the dominant ideology, even accepted its definitions of place for themselves. History stresses the importance of women’s roles in family life, in providing the stability necessary for social relations and the development of cultures. It places little emphasis on the terms of participation, how women formed families, what power they derived from that formation (15-16).

**Islam and Feminism in Context**

To discuss religion, its cultural context, and its effect on women, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the intent of the originator of that religion. Amina Wadud, an Islamic Studies Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, compiled a rereading of the Qur’an from a woman’s perspective. To her the Qur’an accepts sexual difference and functional gender distinctions but it does not either support or propose a single definition of gender roles across every society. Both men and women are individuals and members of society and how they function culturally is not a religious matter. “Such a specification would be an imposition that would reduce the Qur’an from a universal text to a culturally specific text. … What the Qur’an proposes is transcendental in time and place.” (9) The Qur’an was revealed in 7th century Arabia. Perceptions and misconceptions specific to that time resulted in injunctions specific to that culture. The example given is of the need for women from powerful tribes to veil as a protection against unsolicited sexual overtures because, at that time, unveiled women in the city were normally slaves who could be propositioned while the upper classes of women veiled. Tribal women travelling with Mohammed were told to veil to show they were under his protection.
Wadud’s point here is that the Qur’an requires modesty from both men and women but that veiling was necessary for cultural reasons. The two are not synonymous. If the Qur’an is identified as guidance and guidance extends beyond the normal boundaries that identify individuals, then it extends beyond gender.

She goes on to cover many points regarding women’s place within religion but always reaffirms that cultural constraints are not religious dogma. The Arabian peninsula in the 7th century was patriarchal, with women’s roles defined by men’s needs, primarily in reproduction. The Qur’an sets out universal guidelines that would take its followers to move from the old ways to a new and better way to live with each other according to revelation. “To restrict future communities to the social shortcomings of any single community – even the original community of Islam – would be a severe limitation of that guidance” (81).

Interpretation of the Qur’an involves reading – interpretation based on the attitudes, experience and memory of the reader. As what has been written has certain ideas about gender, those ideas can come to be the focus of the reading, because of the attitudes of the reader, attitudes that will be a part of culture and social structure. It also involves exegesis, the attempt to overcome individual perspectives and approach the text objectively. It is impossible to interpret without acknowledging perspective and what has already been written. No interpretation can be accepted as definitive. The goal of the Qur’an is to “… emulate certain key principles of human development: justice, equity, harmony, moral responsibility, spiritual awareness and development. Where these general characteristics exist, whether in the first Muslim community or in present or future communities, the goal of the Qur’an for a society has been reached” (95).
Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot in her essay in *Feminism and Islam* adds to the cultural interpretations of the Qur’an and *shari’a*, the Islamic legal system. Both have been used to prove and disprove the place of women in Muslim society. The Qur’an clearly states that men and women are equal when it comes to religious duty and that they both earn the same rewards and punishments. Interpretations of the Qur’an vary according to how the leaders and the judiciary within a specific society determine rights, duties and obligations. “All interpretations of the Qur’an have been produced by men, who consistently held the politico-judicial positions in their society; the result was that different interpretations were underlined at different periods” (34).

Religion sets out guidelines for society to follow. How they do so is dependent on the economics, politics, social behaviour and demographics of a particular society. What is accepted as normal in Egypt, such as a woman driving a car, is anathema in Saudi Arabia where it is seen as outside a woman’s role as dictated by the Qur’an.

In the countries under discussion women are active participants in economic life, not just as consumers but also as producers. The Qur’an gives women the right to inherit, to be named as heirs. Some Muslim lands find ways to avoid granting women the right to own land but it is done through legal sleight-of-hand rather than through the Qur’an and *shari’a*. Women have the right to dowry from their intended husband on marriage and their fathers were expected to add to it. This was the personal property of the bride, not intended to be used for household maintenance, which was the responsibility of the husband. Within different societies this right has been denied but, again, this is a result of cultural denial of religious injunction rather than a correct interpretation of religious rights and obligations. She also notes that Qur’anic statements on dress refer to the idea that both men and women dress modestly. *Hijab* (covering of hair) and *niqab* (veiling the entire face) are cultural derivations rather than religious requirements.
There can be no doubt that gender and religion are tightly intertwined in Islamic countries. A person can research and study revelation to try and understand what the intent of that revelation was and how it is applied to individual communities. It is difficult not to mix the universal and the particular, to not make what interests or alienates the interpreter a particular rather than a universal. The Qur’an is a very old document and the community of believers lived in societies very different than the ones now in place. It has a legal system attached, a legal system that take little notice of changes in roles, expectations and needs, and that is bound by prior interpretations directly linked to the original text. How the text is studied has little to do with original intent. It has more to do with the cultural expectations of interpreters. It is easier to wear hijab when not doing so leaves a woman open to harassment. It is easier to accept one’s role as wife and mother as primary when you are constantly reminded that your country is on the brink of destruction.

…women’s unfreedom stems not from Islam per se, but from the use and interpretation of Islam to feed into and support overtly political agendas and purposes which are in turn developed by and for men and serve patriarchal interests, just as supposedly gender-neutral value systems, such as liberalism and Christianity have been used by and for Western men.

(Hirschmann, 346)

Feminist theory specifically links itself to pointing out how the particular has become the universal through male domination. In terms of the Qur’an it is easy to see the cultural connotations of interpretation, and how those cultural connotations can be the cause of oppression of half of the members of that religion, even when many of the oppressed accept the interpretations as universal.

**Conclusion**

This paper has focused primarily on Islamic feminism within the Middle East and North Africa because that is the area that seems to be the primary focus of the conflict of feminisms. One
point that must be noted is that most of the women advocating Islamic feminism were born in present day Islamic countries but now live in the West. It is easy to assert the value of something when doing so will not result in official harassment and/or imprisonment. Shirin Ebadi may have won a Nobel Prize for her championing of human rights as a lawyer in Iran but she now lives in England. It is right and good that she and her compatriots focus in print and in person on the lack of rights of women in Islamic countries and for Amina Wadud to explain what the Qur’an actually says but nothing will really be accomplished for women in Islamic countries until they can make the same statements inside those countries.

Malaysia has a large Muslim population and there are the same tensions there over interpretations of the Qur’an. Zainah Anwar, leader of the group Advocacy for Women’s Rights Within The Islamic Framework, can speak from within her country:

We need not look any further to validate our struggle. Women’s rights were rooted in our tradition, in our faith. We were more convinced than ever that it is not Islam that oppresses women, but interpretations of the Qur’an influenced by cultural practices and values of a patriarchal society which regards women as inferior and subordinate to men. (594)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


