Feminism in Islam

Secular and Religious Convergences

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ISLAMIC FEMINISM: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

What's in a name? What's behind a name? What is Islamic feminism? Let me offer a concise definition: it is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism is both highly contested and firmly embraced. There has been much misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and mischief concerning Islamic feminism. This new feminism has given rise simultaneously to hopes and to fears. We shall look at who is producing it, where, why, and to what end.

FEMINISM

As has been rightly noted, concepts and terms have a history – and practices around concepts and terms have a history. The term "feminism" was coined in France in the late 1880s by Hubertine Auclert, who introduced it in her journal, *La Citoyenne*, to criticize male predominance (and domination), and to make claims for women's rights and emancipation promised by the French Revolution. Historian of feminisms Karen Offen has demonstrated that since its initial appearance the term has been given many meanings and definitions; it has been put to diverse uses and inspired many movements.[1]

By the first decade of the twentieth century the term had made its appearance in English – first in Britain, and then, by the 1910s, in the United States.[2] By the early 1920s it was in use in Egypt, where it circulated both in French, and in Arabic as *nisa'iyya*.[3] Yes, the term

originated in the West, specifically France. No, feminism is not Western. American feminism is not French, as Americans and French alike would loudly proclaim. Egyptian feminism is not French and it is not Western. It is Egyptian, as its founders have attested and history makes clear.

Feminisms are produced in particular places and are articulated in local terms. Creators and practitioners of women's history, taking shape as a new field in the 1960s, and expanding in 1970s and 1980s, have analyzed the plethora of feminisms that have appeared in different global locations. Sri Lankan scholar Kumari Jayawardena's 1986 path-breaking book *Feminisms and Nationalism in the Third World* documented feminist movements that had emerged in diverse Asian and Middle Eastern countries, showing how they were located within the contexts of local national liberation and religious reform movements, including movements of Islamic reform.[4] Egypt, as we know, was a pioneer in articulating feminist thinking and organizing collective feminist activist campaigns. Yet despite a large literature in many languages recording and critiquing these globally scattered feminisms, the notion that feminism is Western is still bandied about by those ignorant of history – or who perhaps willfully employ it as a delegitimizing tactic. Some still speak of a "Western feminism" in essentialist, monolithic, and static terms, belying a certain Occidentalist turn of mind or, perhaps, a political project aimed at adversely "framing" feminism (pun intended). Feminism, however, is a plant that only grows in its own soil. This is not to suggest that ideas or movements anywhere are hermetically sealed.

ISLAMIC FEMINISM

The term "Islamic feminism" began to be visible in the 1990s in various global locations. It was from the writings of Muslims that I discovered the term. Iranian scholars Afsaneh Najmabadi and Ziba Mir-Hosseini explained the rise and use of the term Islamic feminism in Iran by some women, as well as men, writing in the Teheran women's journal *Zanan*, which Shahla Sherkat founded in 1992.[5] Saudi Arabian scholar Mai Yamani used the term in her 1996 book *Feminism and Islam*.[6] Turkish scholars Yeşim Arat and Feride Acar in their articles,[7] and Nilüfer Göle in her book *The Forbidden Modern* (published in Turkish in 1991 and in English in 1996) used the term

Islamic feminism in the 1990s to describe a new feminist paradigm they detected emerging in Turkey.[8] South African activist Shamima Shaikh used the term Islamic feminism in the 1990s, as did her co-activists, both male and female. By the mid-1990s, there was growing evidence of Islamic feminism as a term created and circulated by Muslims in far-flung corners of the global *umma*.

Some Muslim women, as seen from the foregoing remarks, describe the articulation and advocacy of a Qur'an-mandated gender equality and social justice as Islamic feminism. Others, however, do not call this Islamic feminism, but describe it as a woman-centered rereading of the Qur'an and other religious texts by scholar-activists (a term found in the 2001 book *Windows of Faith*, edited by Gisela Webb).[9]

The producers and users of Islamic feminist discourse include those who may or may not accept the Islamic feminist label or identity. They also include religious Muslims (by which is typically meant the religiously observant), secular Muslims (whose ways of being Muslim may be less publicly evident), and non-Muslims. I would like to add that while many Muslims use the adjectives religious and secular to label themselves or others, there are other Muslims who feel uneasy about these terms. It is important to historicize or contextualize the use of the terms secular and religious, as they mean different things in different times and places. Finally, it is helpful to remember that the terms religious and secular are porous rather than rigid categories.

Some who engage in the articulation and practice of Islamic feminism asserted an Islamic feminist identity from the start. These include contributors to the Iranian journal *Zanan*, South African exegetes and activists, and women belonging to the group Sisters in Islam in Malaysia. Others, and these include many of the key producers of Islamic feminist discourse or new gender-sensitive Qur'anic interpretation, have been reluctant to identify themselves as Islamic feminists or simply feminists. Fatima Mernissi, author of *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*[10] (published originally as *Le harem politique* in 1978 and first in English in 1991), who produced what was to become one of the core texts of Islamic feminism, is a secular feminist; she would not call herself an Islamic feminist.

Some of the religiously-identified women producers of Islamic feminist texts have changed their positions in more recent years. In the past, Amina Wadud, the African-American Muslim theologian

and author of the landmark 1991 book *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, adamantly objected to being labeled an Islamic feminist.[11] She now shows less concern if others identify her as such. What is important to her is that people understand her work. However, Wadud does bristle when she is slammed as a "Western feminist," decrying the pejorative use of both "Western" and "feminist" in the preface to the 1999 Oxford University Press edition of *Qur'an and Woman*.[12] This devout Muslim woman asks "what's wrong with being Western?" (Let us not forget that there are large and growing numbers of Western Muslims, or Muslims in the West, of whom Wadud is one.) As for discrediting feminism, she snaps back: "No reference is ever made to the definition of feminism as the radical notion that women are human beings." Riffat Hassan, an American-based theologian of Pakistani origin, has also come to accept the Islamic feminist designation – concerned most, like Wadud, that her work be understood.

GLOBAL PHENOMENON

Islamic feminism is a global phenomenon. It is not a product of East or West. As already noted, Islamic feminism is being produced by Muslim women from both majority and minority communities in Africa or Asia as well as from immigrant and convert communities in the West. Islamic feminism is circulating with increasing frequency in cyberspace.

Globally, English is the major language in which Islamic feminist discourse is articulated and circulated. At the same time, it is expressed in a large number of languages locally. In order to do Qur'anic interpretation and closely read other Islamic religious texts, mastery of Arabic is essential. With the spread of Islamic feminist interpretation Arabic loan words, such as *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources), are entering English. Since English is the common language of Islamic feminism, the feminist terminology available in that language is also being accessed.

Islamic feminism transcends and eradicates old binaries. These include polarities between "religious" and "secular" and between "East" and "West." I stress this because not infrequently there are those who see Islamic feminism as setting up or reconfirming dichotomies. In my own public lectures and writings I have argued

that Islamic feminist discourse does precisely the opposite: that it closes gaps and reveals common concerns and goals, starting with the basic affirmation of gender equality and social justice. Suggestions or allegations of a supposed "clash" between "secular feminism" and "religious feminism" may result from ignorance – or, more likely, from a politically motivated attempt to impede solidarities among women.

The pioneering secular feminisms in Egypt and other Arab countries have always had space for religion. The founding Egyptian feminist discourse was anchored simultaneously in the discourse of Islamic reform and of secular nationalism. Secular feminism (often called simply feminism) offered Islamic arguments in demanding women's rights to education, work, political rights – along with secular nationalist, humanitarian (later human) rights, and democratic arguments. When feminists pleaded for changes to the Muslim personal status code they advanced Islamic arguments.[13]

Islamic feminism uses Islamic discourse as its paramount – although not necessarily its only – discourse, in arguing for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice. Islamic feminist discourse in Iran draws upon secular discourses and methodologies to strengthen and extend its claims. Wadud, in her women-sensitive interpretation of the Qur'an, combines classical Islamic methodologies with new social science tools and secular discourses of rights and justice while retaining a firm and central grounding in Islamic thought.

For many years in my talks and writings, I have discussed how Muslims' secular feminists' discourses typically included religious discourse. In more recent years, as I discovered a new Islamic feminism in the making, I observed intersections of religious and secular feminisms. I talk about this in two recent articles, "Feminisms: Secular and Religious Paradigms: A Selective Look at the Middle East in Feminist Movements: Origins and Orientations," published in Fes in 2000,[14] and "Locating Feminisms: The Collapse of Secular and Religious Discourses in the Mashriq," published in a special fiftieth issue of the African Gender Institute's journal *Agenda*.[15]

Some of the specific activist goals of Islamic feminists are the same as those articulated earlier by secular feminists, such as changes in various national Muslim personal status codes. Often, when secular and Islamic feminists try to work together for common goals, they

are inhibited or pulled asunder by competing political forces. This happened in Yemen following the successful drive by a coalition of a wide spectrum of women to prevent a regressive personal status law from being enacted in 1997.[16]

CONSTITUTING A DISCOURSE

How is Islamic feminist discourse (or Islamic feminist theology, as the Lebanese researcher Hosni Abboud, examining the depiction of Mary in the Qur'an, puts it) being constituted? Islamic feminism argues that the Qur'an affirms the principle of equality of all human beings, and that the practice of equality between women and men (and other categories of people) has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas (ideology) and practices. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), consolidated in its classical form in the ninth century, was itself heavily saturated with the patriarchal thinking and behaviors of the day. It is this patriarchally-inflected jurisprudence that has informed the various contemporary formulations of the *shari'a*. The Hadith – the reported, but not always authentic, sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad – have also been often used to shore up patriarchal ideas and practices. Sometimes *hadith*s are of questionable provenance or reliability, and sometimes they are used out of context, with negative consequence for women. Thus a priority of Islamic feminism is to go straight to Islam's fundamental text, the Qur'an. However, while some women center their attention on interpretation of the Qur'an (Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan, and Saudi Arabian Fatima Naseef),[17] others scutinize formulations of *shari'a*-backed laws (Lebanese Aziza al-Hibri, Pakistani Shaheen Sardar Ali),[18] while yet others reexamine the Hadith (Moroccan Fatima Mernissi, Turkish Hidayet Tuksal).[19]

The basic methodologies of Islamic feminism are the classic Islamic methodologies of *ijtihad* and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an). Used along with these methodologies are the tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, etc. In approaching the Qur'an, women bring to their readings their own experience and questions as women. They point out that classical, and also much post-classical, interpretation was based on men's experiences, male-centered questions, and the overall influence of the patriarchal societies in which they lived.

FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS

The new gender-sensitive or feminist hermeneutics renders compelling confirmation of the principle of gender equality in the Qur'an that was lost sight of as male interpreters constructed a corpus of *tafsir* promoting a doctrine of male superiority reflecting the mindset of the prevailing patriarchal cultures. There are many verses (*ayat*) of the Qur'an that declare male–female equality. *Aya* 13 in *sura* 49 (al-Hujurat): "Oh humankind. We have created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other [not that you may despise one another]. The most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you [the one practicing the most *taqwa*]." Ontologically, all human beings are equal. They are differentiated by the practice of *taqwa* or God-consciousness (sometimes translated as piety).

Feminist hermeneutics distinguishes between the universal and timeless, and the particular and contingent. Certain practices are controlled and condoned as a way to encourage people on the path to behaving with fuller justice and equality in their human interactions. Feminist hermeneutics has taken three approaches:

1. revisiting verses of the Qur'an to correct false stories in common circulation, such as the accounts of creation and of events in the Garden of Eden that have shored up claims of male superiority;
2. citing verses that unequivocally enunciate the equality of women and men;
3. deconstructing verses attentive to male and female difference that have been commonly interpreted in ways that justify male domination.

As an example of new Qur'anic interpretation, we can look at *sura* 4 (al-Nisa'i), *aya* 34. While fundamentally equal, humans have been created biologically different in order to perpetuate the species. Only in particular contexts and circumstances will males and females assume particular roles and functions. Woman alone can give birth and nurse, and thus, in this particular circumstance, a husband is enjoined by the Qur'an to provide material support, as indicated in 4:34: "Men are responsible for (*qawwamuna 'ala*) women because God has given the one more than the other (*bima faddala*), and because they support them from their means." Wadud, Hassan, al-Hibri, Naseef, and others demonstrate that *qawwamuna 'ala* conveys the notion of providing for, and that the term is used prescriptively to indicate that men ought to provide for women in the context of child- bearing and rearing. It does not necessarily mean that women cannot provide for themselves in that circumstance. The term *qawwamuna 'ala* is not an unconditional statement of male authority and superiority over all women for all time, as traditional male interpreters have claimed. The women exegetes thus show how classical male interpretations have turned the specific and contingent into universals. While deconstructing particular verses such as the above to dismantle the patriarchal notion of male authority over women, the exegetes also draw attention to verses that clearly affirm the mutuality of responsibilities of men and women, as in *sura* 9, *aya* 71 (al-Tawbah) of the Qur'an: "The believers, male and female, are protectors (*'awliyya*) of one another."

TO WHAT END?

Islamic feminism serves people in their individual lives, and can be a potent force in improving state and society. Second-generation Muslim women in diaspora communities in the West are often caught between the practices and norms imported from the original home cultures of parents who migrated from Middle Eastern or South Asian countries and imposed in the name of Islam, and the ways of life in their new countries. Islamic feminism helps such women untangle patriarchal customs and religion. It gives them Islamic ways of understanding gender equality, societal opportunity, and their own potential. Meanwhile, Islamic feminist discourse is also relevant in predominantly Muslim countries in parts of Africa and Asia as people try to construct a new and more egalitarian understanding of their religion in order to change old mind-sets and cultural practices that purport to be Islamic.

In reexamining the Qur'an along with Hadith, Islamic feminists, answering back to those who allege otherwise, are making cogent arguments that Islam does not condone wanton violence against women; they underscore that violence against women is indeed anti-Islamic. This alone will not put an end to violence, but it is one of several weapons against it. The Malaysian group Sisters in Islam is one among many (and one of the earliest to be outspoken in print) that

have decried violence against women perpetrated in the name of Islam in a pamphlet called "Is Wife Beating Permissible in Islam?" which they widely distributed. South African Sa'diya Shaikh has also completed a study on this subject in the form of an M.A. thesis for the University of Cape Town (1996) entitled "Battered Wives in Muslim Society in the Western Cape: Religious Constructions of Gender, Marriage, Sexuality and Violence." In her Ph.D. dissertation, she looks at notions of sexuality in Islamic religious texts.[20]

Islamic feminism is more radical than Muslims' secular feminisms. Islamic feminism insists on full equality of women and men across the public–private spectrum. Secular feminists historically accepted the idea of equality in the public sphere and the notion of complementarianism in the private sphere. Islamic feminism argues that women may be heads of state, leaders of congregational prayer, judges, and muftis. In some Muslim-majority countries, Muslim women function as judges, some as prime ministers and heads of state. Islamic feminism stands to benefit us all, Muslims of both sexes, as well as non-Muslims living side by side with Muslims everywhere.

It is important to focus on the content of Islamic feminism, on its goals, and not to get bogged down with distracting issues about who has the right to think/analyse and to speak. It is important not to be too defensive or proprietary about Islamic feminism. The way I see it, Islamic feminism is for all.

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This originated as a talk at the American Research Center in Egypt, and was subsequently published in *al-Ahram Weekly*, 17–23 January 2002. It has been translated into Bosnian, Dutch, Flemish, French, and Italian.

NOTES

1. See Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs*, 14, 1 (1988), pp. 119–157; and Karen Offen, "On the French Origin of the Words Feminism and Feminist," *Feminist Issues*, 8, 2 (1988), pp. 45–51.
2. See Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1987), pp. 15–17.
3. Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 19–21. On the politics of feminism and language from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century in Egypt see Irene Fenoglio-Abd El Aal, *Defense et illustration de l'Egyptienne: aux débuts d'une expression feminine*, dossier 2 (Cairo: Centre d'Etudes et de Documentation Economique, Juridique et Sociale, 1988), and also Margot Badran, "Preface," pp. 6–12.
4. Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminisms and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Press, 1986).
5. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Feminism in an Islamic Republic: 'Years of Hardship, Years of Growth," in Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito (eds.), *Islam, Gender, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 59–84; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari'a in Post-Khomeini Iran," in Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (London: Ithaca Press, 1996), pp. 285–320.
6. Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam.*
7. Yeşim Arat, " Feminism and Islam: Thoughts on the Journal *Kadīn ve Aile*," in Şirin Tekeli (ed.), *Women in 1980's Turkey from a Woman's Perspective* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayīnlarī, 1990); Feride Acar, "Women in the Ideology of Islamic Revivalism in Turkey: Three Islamic Women's Journals," *Islamic Literature in Contemporary Turkey* (1991), pp. 280–303; Feride Acar, "Women in the Ideology of Islamic Revivalism in Turkey: Three Islamic Women's Journals," *Islamic Literature in Contemporary Turkey* (1991), pp. 280–303.
8. Nilüfer Göle, *Mödern mahrem: medeniyet ve örtüme* (Istanbul: Metis Yayīnlarī, 1991), trans. as *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).
9. Gisela Webb (ed.), *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).
10. Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
11. Amina Wadud-Muhsin, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakati, 1992; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
12. P. xviii.
13. See Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, esp. pp. 124–135.
14. "Feminisms: Secular and Religious Paradigms: A Selective Look at the Middle East in Feminist Movements: Origins and Orientations," in Fatima Sadiqi et al. (eds.), *al-Harakat al-nisa'iyyat: al-'asl wa al-tawjihat/Mouvements feministes: origines et orientations Feminist Movements/Origins and Orientations* (Fes: Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur la Femme, Université Sidi Mohamed ben Abdallah, 2000), pp. 73–88.
15. "Locating Feminisms: The Collapse of Secular and Religious Discourses in the Muslim Mashriq," *Agenda* (South African feminist journal), special 50th issue on African Feminisms, 59 (2001), pp. 41–57.
16. See Margot Badran, "Unifying Women: Feminist Pasts and Presents in Yemen," *Gender and History*, special issue on Feminisms and Internationalism, 10, 3 (November 1998), and chapter 11 in this volume.
17. Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*; Riffat Hassan, for example, "Equal before Allah? Woman–Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (January–May 1987), pp. 2–4; Fatima Umar Naseef, *Women in Islam: A Discourse in Rights and Obligations* (Cairo: International Islamic Committee for the Woman and Child, 1999).

18. See, for example, Aziza al-Hibri, "Islamic Law and Muslim Women in America," in Marjorie Garber and Rebecca Walkowitz (eds.), *One Nation under God? Religion and American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 128–44; and Shaheen Sardar Ali, *Gender and Human Rights in Islam and International Law: Equal before Allah, Unequal before Man?* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2000).
19. Mernissi, *Women and Islam*; Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal, *Kadin karşiti söylemin İslam geleneğindeki izdüşmleri* (Traces of misogynist discourse in the Islamic tradition, Ankara: Kitâbiyât, 2000).
20. Her Ph.D. dissertation is entitled "Spiritual Cartographies of Gender: Ibn 'Arabi and Sufi Discourses of Gender, Sexuality and Marriage," Temple University, 2004.

11

UNIFYING WOMEN: FEMINIST PASTS AND PRESENTS IN YEMEN

In campaigns to achieve national sovereignty and to establish new state systems women have participated as active agents, promoting gender-egalitarian notions of citizenship.[1] States themselves have both mobilized women to serve their own internal political agendas and used women to signal to the outside world an egalitarian and democratic construction of citizenship they do not necessarily deliver.[2] There is a distinct tension between states' needs to articulate the equality that is fundamental to democracy and (patriarchal) states' intentions to reproduce gender inequalities. This tension constitutes a potent site for feminist exploitation.

The literature on women's activisms and on gender and the state in Middle Eastern Muslim societies produced in the 1980s and 1990s has brought into view complicated politics and projects. In her introduction to *Women, Islam, and the State* (1991), Deniz Kandiyoti writes: "The ways women are represented in political discourse ... and the social movements through which they are able to articulate their gender interests are intimately linked to state-building processes and are responsive to their transformations."[3] Marnia Lazreg, Sondra Hale, Parvin Paidar, and I show ways women both came forth as active participants in national liberation and revolutionary movements and were used by states for their own purposes in analyses of gender politics in Algeria, Sudan, Iran, and Egypt.[4] The equality of citizens was promoted when women's active support was needed, such as in campaigns for national independence, or in oppositional movements aimed at radical state transformation. When new state power was sufficiently secured the avowed equality of citizens was replaced