

Islamic Feminism

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In some ways the feminist challenge to patriarchy has been a defining feature of the recent past, exploding in almost every region of the world and producing massive change that had once seemed inconceivable. But it is a project that remains incomplete and whose progress has been uneven, with some regions lagging far behind others; one of those regions that has evoked particular concern in the past few years is one typically called the “Muslim world”. Typical views of “Muslim” women are surprisingly monolithic and persistent, seeing them as veiled and “victims” of “oppression” that is either caused by Islam or justified by it¹. For many people, including “Western” feminists both in the West and in the Muslim world, the only path of “liberation” for Muslim women is the transformation of their countries into secular, “Westernized” states and to encourage an indigenous feminist movement that mimics their Western counterparts. Hence they see only the secular women’s organizations operating in these countries as the only true feminist actors in the “Muslim world”².

In recent decades, this project of secular feminism has faced an increasingly challenging landscape in the Muslim world. Propelled by a failure of secular and modernist ideologies to solve its problems and a complex web of social, political and economic factors, the “Muslim world” has been in the throes of an “Islamic resurgence” since the seventies, becoming increasingly hostile towards secular feminism as an alien, imperialist force that violates the Islamic faith that has been growing in importance³. There has also been a realization that, despite making meaningful and significant gains for women in their respective countries, most secular feminist groups remained restricted to a small, elite class and failed to meaningfully help women in the lower classes and more traditional segments of society⁴.

There have also been increasing intellectual attacks on the foundations of “Western” feminism. Post-colonial feminism, a relatively new perspective, criticizes the typical depiction of women in the Third World, including in the Muslim world, as a “homogenous category of powerless victims” who need to be rescued by their

¹ Milton-Edwards, 2004. Pg. 20.

² Abdellatif and Marina, 2007. Pg 1.

³ Abdellatif and Marina, 2007. Pg.3; Milton-Edwards, 2004. Pg.20

⁴ Abdellatif and Marina, 2007. Pg. 2.

liberated “sisters” in the West. Such a perspective, it is argued, both ignores the agency and efforts of these women as they struggle to alter their own realities and falsely depicts Islam as an undifferentiated monolith that is a constant source of oppression for all Muslim women across time and space⁵. “Western feminists” are attacked for assuming that the path they took in their struggles ought to be replicated by other women across the world⁶ and for neglecting the fact that these women, who have different histories, different circumstances, and differently structured desires may choose to define their future in different ways and through different frameworks⁷.

Within the context of this debate, the increasing presence and participation of women in Islamist organizations and the emerging phenomenon of “Islamic feminism” is seen as an encouraging sign by post-colonial feminists but is seen with suspicion and sometimes outright horror by secular feminists who often try to explain away the phenomena by using concepts such as “false consciousness”⁸. There is considerable resistance against accepting them as partners in the debate and struggles to determine women’s rights and their future⁹. This paper, through a rather brief and unavoidably selective overview of “Islamic feminism”, will argue that these movements should be seen as actors who are struggling against a status quo seen as unjust with the aim of changing it through a framework and language that, while it may seem alien and odd to traditional feminist ears, feels legitimate and familiar to those who use it. From this claim it would follow that perhaps an “Islamic feminist” movement may offer a more successful avenue for changing the status of women in the Muslim world, especially of those who were left uninspired by secular feminism. It would also follow that, rather than opposing and demeaning such movements, “Western” feminists ought to accept them as partners in their debates, discourses, and efforts for shaping a better future for women in the Muslim world.

Primarily this essay will focus on the intellectual elements of the movement which could have incredible political consequences as it challenges traditional notions of religious leadership and understanding as well as understandings of “right and wrong” that influence and determine actions taken by individuals on a daily basis in the “Muslim world”. The next section will look at the context in which this movement has originated and the claims shared by most, if not all, Islamic feminists. The following two sections will examine two major projects carried out by the intellectual strand of “Islamic feminism”, specifically a reinterpretation of Islamic history and of Islamic law and theology respectively. That will be preceded by a brief examination of the more overtly political and activist manifestations of the phenomenon before presenting some concluding remarks to close the paper.

⁵ Bahramitash, 2007. Pg. 87

⁶ Bahramitash, 2007. Pg 87

⁷ Sheikh, 2009.

⁸ Abdellatif and Marina, 2007. Pg. 2; Ask and Tjomslan, 1998. Pg. 3

⁹ Sheilah, 2007. Pg. 243

Islam should have been otherwise

As a faith system sincerely prescribed to by millions of people across the world, Islam plays a powerful role in determining both the actions and preferences of individuals as well as structures and patterns of communities. In fact, according to some, Islam is a “complete system of thought” that speaks on every question that one can face in the world, whether political, social, economic, familial, religious or personal.¹⁰ To be able to speak for Islam is to wield massive, if rather ethereal power, a power whose possession was determined in the aftermath of the death of the Prophet Muhammad. In the centuries immediately after the founding of Islam the Muslim community was transformed from a small, rather odd tribal collective in the deserts of Hejaz into a massive, complex and diverse empire. This metamorphosis presented the community of believers, the *ummah*, with challenges and questions they had not faced or expected during the life of Muhammad but whose answers they sought from their religion. That in turn led to many debates and disagreements over the content and meaning of the Quran, the holy text of Islam, and the example and sayings of the Prophet, debates that were complicated by the volatile and contentious atmosphere in which they were taking place. There were conflicts between different classes and groups for control of the faith and the resources of the empire. Massive disagreements over a number of important questions (including the status of women, as will be shown later on) intersected with ideological and material interests lay behind certain answers to the question: What does Islam say?¹¹

Over time there developed a scholarly/clerical class in Islam, called *ulema* by Sunnis and *ayatollahs* in the Shiite tradition, which appropriated for itself the right to answer that question. They were able to do so by maintaining a monopoly over education (especially religious education) and by limiting access to the Quran and other sources of Islamic instruction. These small, almost exclusively male elite were able to maintain a self-proclaimed status as the leaders of the Muslim community. Only they were able to produce the “legitimate” interpretation of the Quran and “true” studies of Islamic histories and the life and sayings of Muhammad, which they then used to produce a complex and detailed corpus of Islamic laws and injunctions, the *shariah*.¹² With the passage of time and as the interpretations made by a generation of scholars began to solidify, the distinction between the faith and its interpretations was lost and the two were increasingly seen as one and the same, greatly reducing the early flexibility and accommodation of the religion.¹³ Simply put, for most of Islamic history it has been this small group of men who have been able to say what Islam is and is not. Arguably what is often seen as being Islamic orthodoxy is merely the opinion of a small, mostly Arab,

¹⁰ Milton-Edwards, 2004. Pg. 20

¹¹ Aslan, 2005. Pg.68

¹² Aslan, 2005. Pg. 144

¹³ Haddad and Eposito, 2001. Pg. 2

group of men from the eighth and ninth centuries who were the first to pen their understanding of Islam, effectively preventing or rooting out alternatives.¹⁴

That changed dramatically in the twentieth century. A massive explosion in literacy in the Muslim world meant that, for the first time, a large number of people were no longer reliant on the traditional clerical class in order to access the intellectual foundations of their faith. Authority in Islam “fractured”, a process that continues to take place today as more and more people turn to the sources of their religion themselves and formulate their own understandings of their religion rather than simply accepting what is handed down from the clerics.¹⁵ It has also meant that for the first time in Islamic history women are able to access the sources of Islam on their own in large numbers, and in doing so they are constructing a new understanding of the religion that is dramatically different from that produced in ninth century Arabia.¹⁶

Though a varied and extremely dissimilar group, almost all of the women who have turned to their faith in this manner (whether scholars or Islamist activists) argue that it is not Islam but rather an interpretation of it that is to blame for the oppression suffered by Muslim women. They argue that the Shariah was created by a group of men without any meaningful participation by women, who were in fact actively marginalized from the process of defining the faith,¹⁷ and that these men, from times and societies that were unabashedly misogynistic, read their patriarchal prejudices into a faith that had actually been progressive and empowering for women.¹⁸ Groups such as the Taliban, who justified their oppressive policies in the name of Islam, are condemned as actually perverting the religion in order to justify their patriarchal beliefs and the unequal power structure between the sexes that exists in traditional Afghan society.¹⁹ Some have gone so far as to argue that the real reason why the traditional understanding of Islam is so pernicious for women is because it is pervaded by values and attitudes of the *jahiliyya*, the pre-Islamic era of Arabia which is generally considered as the height of moral and social depravity in Islam, which the Prophet Muhammad tried but failed to eradicate and which reasserted themselves after his death through the “Islam” fashioned by the ulema and the ayatollahs.²⁰ One scholar has, probably metaphorically, claimed that it was a “Satanic logic” that led jurists to insert their patriarchal assumptions when considering the rights of women in Islam, which have (with the passage of time and encouraged by prejudices of societies around them) acquired the status of a “neutral” and correct reading of the religion.²¹ All of these are very powerful condemnations and reveals the strength of these women’s

¹⁴ Aslan, 2005. Pg. 158

¹⁵ Eickelman and Piscatori, 2004. Pg. 7

¹⁶ Aslan, 2005. Pg. 71

¹⁷ Haddad and Eposito, 2001. Pg. 2; Webb, 2000. Pg. 7; Ashfar, 1998. Pg. 4

¹⁸ Ask and Tjomslan, 1998. Pg. 18; Mernissi, 1991. Pg. viii; Milton-Edwards, 2004. Pg. 120; Sheliah, 2007. Pg. 241

¹⁹ Milton-Edwards, 2004. Pg. 120

²⁰ Aslan, 2005. Pg. 5

²¹ Webb, 2000. Pg. 12

conviction that it is not Islam, but rather a perversion of it, that would deny rights due to them.

And there seem to be a number of examples, some of them remarkably blatant, that “Islamic feminists” could utilize to substantiate their claim that it is a perverted version of Islam that legitimizes the subjugation of women and that the religion should have and, but for a series of patriarchal interpreters would have, been very different. For instance, a Quranic verse instructing Muslims not to “pass on your wealth and property to the feeble-minded,” was interpreted by nearly all of the early commentators as referring to women and children, who were to be deprived of all inheritance, *despite specific Quranic injunctions against such an interpretation and in direct contradiction to specific rights of inheritance laid out in Islam for women and children*. Or when a person called Abu Said al-Khurdi swore he had heard the Prophet tell a group of women, “I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you,” not only was his claim interpreted as *describing the nature of all women across all times despite the lack of any indication of this sort in the saying*, his claims and its interpretations were left unchallenged despite the fact that there is *ample evidence that the Prophet Muhammad repeatedly sought the advice of his wives and other women, even in military matters*.²² Or consider the treatment of Aisha, one of the Prophet’s wives and a prominent personality within early Islamic history, who is treated as an aberration for playing a public role (which is not true as shall be shown later) and who is condemned as being responsible for derailing the unity of the Muslim world and for single-handedly setting off all the conflict that has been experienced in the Muslim world by leading a rebellion against the fourth caliph, which is a ridiculous claim to make, and which is then interpreted as *legitimizing the exclusion of all Muslim women from the public realm*, which does would not logically follow even if the first ridiculous claim was true.²³

The *hadith*, or sayings of the Prophet which are considered important sources of law and instruction in Islam, are especially problematic. There are literally hundreds of thousands of them circulating in the Muslim world, a source of instruction and legitimate authority deferred to in daily life as much as in scholarly discussions. But their reliability is a huge problem and has been since the earliest days of Islam. Consider, for instance, the work of al-Bukhari, widely considered the pre-eminent collector of hadith. He devoted most of his life to travelling across the Muslim world, gathering various sayings attributed to Muhammad and sifting through them to create an authoritative collection. Out of nearly 600,000 sayings that he collected he accepted only 7,257 as reliable enough to put into his work. There were, and are, hundreds of thousands of false hadith floating around, some of them created for purely selfish purposes. Somewhat whimsically, Muslim scholars since early on have divided false hadith into two categories: those fabricated for material advantage and those for ideological ones. This reflects a realization on their part that one had to be extremely sceptical when using and deferring to a hadith and the fact that, given the legitimacy one could attach to any argument by linking it with the Prophet, there would always be temptation to

²² Aslan, 2005. Pg. 68

²³ Memissi, 1991. Pg. 7.

fabricate false sayings and to accept weak ones if they were in line with one's beliefs and prejudices²⁴. But not only is this scepticism largely absent amongst the general public today, it does not seem to have been exercised by someone as esteemed as al-Bukhari when he considered potential hadith that were clearly misogynistic. For instance, he accepted as correct an alleged hadith which stated that "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity," a saying that has been widely employed to prevent women from playing a prominent public role based on the legitimacy al-Bukhari's acceptance granted it, despite the fact that its *isnad* (chain of transmission) led back only to one companion of the Prophet (making it weak according to al-Bukhari's own standards), without recording the fact that it is alleged to have been uttered in reference to a battle for the throne for the Persian empire (without any indication that it ought to be considered in general terms), without considering that this saying was narrated by Abu Bakra twenty-five years after the death of the Prophet during a civil war where he was refusing to side with Aisha (one of the Prophet's widows) despite public pressure (due to which being able to remember this hadith proved very beneficial for him) and by ignoring the fact that Abu Bakra had been punished for falsifying evidence according to biographical accounts compiled about him (which ought to have disqualified him as a source of reliable hadith according to al-Bukhari's own standards).²⁵ Published in the same collection as this hadith are also a whole set of sayings attributed to another companion, Abu Hurayra, which are clearly insulting and denigrating towards women and which seem to set up an image of femaleness as something almost vile and shameful in direct opposition to the divine. Amongst these are sayings that compare women to dogs (which are considered extremely impure in Muslim cultures) and an ass, that equate women to property and animals, one that claimed women was a source of bad luck and others that imply that the presence of women was a barrier to accessing the divine, for instance by making proper prayer impossible. These sayings were included, however, in spite of the fact that many were corrected and refuted by Aisha (the Prophet's widow who was considered a far more authoritative scholar on religion and his sayings than Abu Hurayra) whose corrections were recorded by other scholars but went largely ignored in the work of al-Bukhari and his colleagues, despite the fact that many of these sayings contradicted the Quran and other sayings of the Prophet (who clearly and specifically condemned viewing women as property, impure or less than human in any way), despite the fact that the memory and reliability of this companion was widely questioned and without considering or recording the fact that biographies of Abu Hurayra have depicted him as a very misogynistic character who, due to being sensitive about his own lack of status or social attributes of masculinity (such as work that would be considered proper), had a problematic relationship both with women and the feminine.²⁶

These are only some of the most blatant examples that "Islamic feminists" have referred to while striving to separate oppressive and patriarchal interpretations of Islam from the Islamic faith, arguing that not only is the former

²⁴ Memissi, 1991. Pg.44.

²⁵ Memissi, 1991. Pg.49

²⁶ Memissi, 1991. Pg.64

different from, but also a horrid perversion, of the latter that was able to come into being only because the original interpreters and scholars of Islam failed to adhere to both the actual content of Islam and their *own* standards of interpretation. A true Islam, they insist, would have been otherwise, or rather it *is* otherwise. And it is with that belief in opposition to an alleged but entrenched misinterpretation, that the project of “Islamic feminism” is taking place as an attempt to both imagine and realize the “true” Islam. It is a project that becomes extremely contentious and political for it becomes a battle between two sides determined to appropriate the powerful legitimacy of Islam for their side. The next two sections will consider two extremely significant elements of this project, one that seeks to recast the traditional understanding of Islamic history and another that seeks to recast Islam itself.

Recasting History

Condemning the use of the past as a sacred standard employed in order to justify oppression and exclusion in the present Fatima Mernissi, whose work will provide the major focus of this section, argues that what we generally perceive as being Islamic history is a construction of elites and prejudices of the present that seek, amongst other things, to keep women isolated and limited, and whose project succeeds in an environment that is ignorant of the truth.²⁷ For instance, in her book, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* she challenges the widely held perception that Muslim women were always kept out of the public realm and kept away from positions of influence and power. This assumption was employed as an attack by those who lost to Benazir Bhutto in the Pakistani elections in 1988 as a desperate attempt to keep her from becoming Prime Minister. Mernissi is able to identify (from sources easily available but mostly ignored) not just Muslim women who wielded power and influence, but also at least sixteen women who were able to fulfil the two requirements of sovereignty employed in Islamic history, which is to say that they had coins minted in their image and the Friday sermons delivered in their name. These sixteen women who wielded sovereignty in Islam well before Benazir Bhutto became the first in modern times, Mernissi argues, were wiped from our collective memory by those who abhorred the idea and who would, as men, want to keep power and influence limited to themselves.²⁸

Much more dramatic and powerful is her attempt to completely reconfigure our understanding and memory of the Muslim community under the Prophet Muhammad, pushing back against an image of Islamic history which claims that the community he constructed while having access to the divine was one in which women were isolated in their homes and docile, granted and contented with a status inferior to those of men.²⁹ This project is extremely important for the ideal of “Muhammad in Medina” which is perhaps the most important symbol in Islamic mythology, referred to by militants and pacifists, men

²⁷ Mernissi, 1991. Pg.16

²⁸ Mernissi, 1993. Pg.86.

²⁹ Mernissi, 1991. Pg. 4

and women, democrats and theocrats, homosexuals and homophobes when considering anything from an Islamic perspective, with the assumption that the Islamic present should reflect this element of the Islamic past.³⁰ Hence, if it was the case that women in Medina were docile and inferior and happy to be so, it seems hard to argue that Islam allows women to be anything else.

But Mernissi shows us that the story of Medina is anything but. Working with elements of the Quran, hadith and historical sources that are often ignored when this patriarchal history is being continuously reproduced and validated, she argues that far from being weak, isolated and marginal, women were active in and central to the experience of Medina and were at the heart of the construction of this new faith and polity. A symbolic story she begins with to emphasize her claim is a story of Umm Salma, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad, who once questioned him why the Quran referred to men only and not to women, or rather whether that was the case. And she received a reply in the form of a revelation that emphasized that Islam and the Quran referred to all believers, men and women, with the assumption of a “total equality as believers.” The central instruction one could gain from this story is the fact that in the lifetime of the Prophet, a woman concerned with the status of women in religion was perfectly free to take her concerns to him and then expect to receive a reply from the heavens.³¹

Furthermore, Mernissi argues that this concern with their status was not peculiar to women like Umm Salma, a privileged person within the community as the wife of the Prophet and with unparalleled access to him, but was rather shared by a great many Muslim women. According to historical sources, they would come to Muhammad and his wives, many of them prominent figures in their own rights, with their concerns and tales of their suffering, expecting justice and reform to be forthcoming. And it seems that their hopes were answered to some extent, for there came through a number of revelations that emphasized the status of women as independent and fully human beings with a full network of rights specified, such as rights to property and inheritance rather than being viewed as *things that could be inherited*. There was a promise it seems, of a dramatic fundamental break with a social order that had been extremely oppressive and pernicious for women.³²

But that promise was not fulfilled. It seems that these measures set off a firestorm within the Muslim community, threatening the unity and cohesion of Islam. Interference in what they considered their private realm and their natural right to dominate the women in their lives outraged a great many men, some of whom demanded of the Prophet that he reverse these reforms and rescind the rights granted to women. Though the Prophet refused and warned dissenters of the terrible consequences of refusing these “commands of God,”³³ the resistance and backlash would not die down. These men were outraged not just because their patriarchal upbringing convinced them that they *deserved* to dominate and *own*

³⁰ Aslan, 2005. Pg. 52

³¹ Mernissi, 1991. Pg. 118

³² Mernissi, 1991. Pg. 119.

³³ Aslan, 2005. Pg. 62

women but also because they were going to lose property that would now go to women in their families rather than to themselves, a convergence of their patriarchal convictions and material interests which propelled them to fight these till after Muhammad's death. Led by Umar, an esteemed companion of the Prophet whose misogynistic tendencies are well known (and were considered worrying even during his lifetime) and whose reign as the second caliph was to prove a defining point for women's position in Islam as he sought to limit them to the home, many men in the community sought to shape the definition of these revelations and commandments in a way that would limit, if not eliminate, the rights being granted to women.³⁴ But the women, including one of Umar's wives according to some traditions, resisted and refused to accept these limitations without a fight. In fact they struggled to extend their rights and status as much as they could,³⁵ setting off debates and arguments that consumed the community. They fought over the rights of property and inheritance granted to women,³⁶ over whether women could go to war (which was an important source of money and status within Arab society and which, if allowed, could have challenged the foundations of patriarchy in that society)³⁷ and over whether husbands had a right to choose any sexual position they wanted during intercourse with their wives against their choice,³⁸ to mention a few examples. And, in most of these cases, Mernissi argues that the Prophet was openly sympathetic to the cause of women, though he was not always in a position of implementing his wishes, as he was in a mortal struggle with enemies within and outside of Medina.³⁹ Both sides in this conflict lobbied the Prophet for their case heavily, to the extent that often he felt harassed. There was a constant stream of women coming to see him asking that as the judge of his community he implement the laws that existed to protect their rights. And so there was a golden moment of hope and opportunity at this time, but it was soon lost as these new norms were not internalized within the community, especially by its men, who used their powers after the death of the Prophet to dramatically scale back the rights granted to women and to wipe out from collective Muslim memory this opportunity for emancipation. And they were so successful that today the notion of women seeking emancipation, let alone having it, seem alien to Islam while in truth, Mernissi argues, it ought to be anything but.⁴⁰

Mernissi is not the only one engaged in this project of searching for this alternative lost history that can be re-appropriated for the project of "Islamic feminism." There are others attempting, as in other religions, to rediscover the "lost voices" of the feminine that were silenced by domination of patriarchy in official religious structures, to recreate their religion in a more gender neutral

³⁴ Mernissi, 1991. Pg.141.

³⁵ Mernissi, 1991. Pg.143.

³⁶ Mernissi, 1991. Pg.120

³⁷ Mernissi, 1991. Pg.121

³⁸ Mernissi, 1991. Pg.146

³⁹ Mernissi, 1991. Pg.162

⁴⁰ Mernissi, 1991. Pg.134

manner, and to find inspiring feminine figures along with the many male ones.⁴¹ In Islam they have turned to a number of prominent women from Muslim history, such as the Prophet's wives Khadijah and Aisha, his daughter Fatima and his granddaughter Zaynab who are amongst those referred to most commonly for the respect they obtain from even the most conservative and patriarchal Muslims.⁴² One could understand the spirit of this movement by considering Abugideiri's reading of the story of Hagar as a model for "gender-jihad." She argues that the story of Hagar represents an example of a woman who had suffered because of the patriarchal nature of her world and who was abandoned in the Arabian desert by her husband. But she maintained her faith which propelled her to struggle against her environment, exemplified by the story of her running from one peak to another to find water for her son, which meant that she and her son were able to live, which made it possible for the Arab nation to be born and, ultimately, for Islam to come into being. But, Abugideiri argues the most important message of this story is that God rewarded a woman's struggle and provided her with salvation and grace which many in her patriarchal world would deny her, for she was seen as an inferior wife and therefore, unworthy.⁴³ Though they adopt extremely different strategies and choose varied subjects, both Abugideiri and Mernissi, and those who share their project, share a simple but powerful aim to show that, contrary to popular perceptions shared by both fundamentalists and secularists, the notion of women's emancipation and the idea of women playing a public role and struggling for their rights is not just acceptable in Islam, but is in some ways at the heart of it from its inception. And, in doing so, they make it possible to appropriate the legitimacy of Islam for the purposes of a movement that could seek female emancipation, especially if it seeks that in the language and framework of the religion.

Reinterpreting the faith

Another element of this larger effort, and a supremely important one, is the effort of Muslim women and feminists to engage with the sources of Islamic law, especially the Quran, using the opportunity to access their faith in a way that had been denied to them for centuries. Part of this effort has been to expose the patriarchal biases that had contaminated the work of the classical interpreters, which produced the examples that were presented earlier. However, unlike many secular feminists, they do not use this as a basis for condemning their faith as a tool of oppression, but rather seek to find a framework for emancipation built upon it.

The work of Amina Wadud, a remarkable pioneer in this effort, exemplifies the spirit of this movement. She argues that all the current mainstream approaches to the rights and status of women fails the needs of Muslim women in some way. She rejects both the traditional perspectives, arguing that under the guise of defending the "pristine honour" of women it would restrict and suppress them and simply ignore the many real difficulties and challenges they must face every

⁴¹ Haddad and Eposito, 2001. Pg.4.

⁴² Milton-Edwards, 2004. Pg. 124

⁴³ Haddad and Eposito, 2001. Pg. 84

day. However, she also rejects the “modern”, secular approach, arguing that it is wrong to see Islam as the cause of women’s suffering and that the approach gives no attention to Muslim women’s spirituality and the importance of their religious identity. Furthermore, she argues that both these approaches set up an artificial distinction between what is modern and what is Islamic, creating a conflict in which there can be only one, even though many may want and deserve both.⁴⁴

Instead of choosing between either the traditional or modern paradigms, Wadud instead turns to a third alternative she sees as developing within Islam, claiming that it is a dynamic religion that is capable of changing to produce answers to challenges being faced in individual lives. And though she accepts that Islam, as it is currently understood and practiced, has been used to limit women, she insists that while the Quran is divine revelations whatever proceeds from it, in the form of interpretation, is manmade and so is subject to the faults and prejudices of mankind. In this case she argues that it is the dominance of a male clergy who silenced the voices of women in the process of interpretation that has led to the faulty and problematic interpretation that exists today. And, unsurprisingly, her solution is to argue that women (and men) must reengage with their faith to end the practice of men telling women how they should be and act, and instead develop an authentic and gender-neutral Muslim identity through alternative Quranic *ijtihad* (i.e. exegesis).

Though some have perceived her work as an attack upon Islam, Wadud insists that she is operating from within the heart of the Islamic faith and tradition, using the techniques of interpretation developed by the ulema over the centuries to show how they fell short of their own standards because of their prejudices.⁴⁵ She argues that we must take away from the Quran the influence of the misogynistic context that has grown around it, for instance by recognizing the absolute absurdity of an interpretation that ignores the specific injunctions within the Quran that outline how much daughters should be able to inherit from their parent’s property, to argue that women must be denied all inheritance. And, by separating this context, she argues we will find a truer understanding of the faith which will realize that the trend in Islam was to break with what had been in the past to emancipate women and cut away at the bounds of misogyny that had existed before; as such, she argues that by engaging in this process of interpretation we can find an agenda for women’s rights and the tools for legitimating them.⁴⁶ For instance, she argues with the age old question of the differences between men and women and whether that determines their status in any way from an explicitly Islamic perspective. Wadud argues that while there may be some differences between men and women, to the extent that only the latter can give birth, and roles they play in society, she rejects any notion of hierarchy between the two by referring to the many verses of the Quran which declares men and women as equal. Working from the Quranic story of the creation, in which the first man and woman are created from a single soul, she argues that men and women are just sexually different versions of the

⁴⁴ Webb, 2000. Pg. 5

⁴⁵ Ask and Tjomslan, 1998. Pg.29

⁴⁶ Ask and Tjomslan, 1998. Pg. 31

same creation who are guaranteed equal rights and status in Islam. And based on this she declares her mission, one which she argues as being mandatory for all believers of Islam, to be one of engaging with her faith to separate it from the misogynistic context in which it developed in order to regain for women their “full humanity and moral agency as God-appointed vicegerent (khalifah).”⁴⁷

The vast majority of “Islamic feminists,” whether they are aware of the work of Amina Wadud or not, are engaged in this very project, though some may choose different subjects or strategies for doing so. For instance Riffat Hussein, another scholar of Islam, chooses to focus on the sayings of the Prophet, exposing those that have been falsified as a means of legitimating the oppression of women. But all of them are engaged in a similar project, one that is challenging traditional notions of who is able to interpret the Islamic faith and develop its laws and injunctions, attempting to take away the authority of Islam from those who would legitimate a patriarchal society and world and instead turn it against that kind of a world, using spaces created for women within the field of religious interpretation to examine questions of importance to women from a more gender-neutral or aware perspective.⁴⁸ There are many, many instances of this project of many kinds, all contributing towards this larger project. Some decide to focus on specific laws and actions justified in the name of Islam. For instance Asifa Quraishi in one essay focuses on rape laws enacted in Pakistan during a period of “Islamization” in the eighties and which were justified in the name of religion even though they are known to be extremely harmful for women and victims of rape, allowing many rapists to get away while imprisoning a number of victims under the charge of adultery. She shows that not only are these laws not at all based on Islam, being almost identical to rape laws that had been enacted by the British during their colonial government, and that both the laws as well as the behaviour of the criminal justice system is the product of a patriarchal society that does not show much sympathy for women and their suffering. Furthermore, by a close examination of both the Quran and hadith, she shows that the justification offered for these laws and their content clearly contradicts Islamic injunctions with regard to both rape and adultery, an argument employed by many women’s rights activists within Pakistan.⁴⁹

But some, such as Wadud, engage in a much more grand and wide-ranging project in terms of examining the question of what status Islam accords women in a more comprehensive sense, which gives us an idea of the larger aims of the “Islamic feminist” movements. For instance, one could consider the work of Haifa Jawad as an example of this. Through a analysis of the Quran and sayings of the Prophet, she lays out a list of the basic rights which a woman is specifically meant to have according to Islam as a means of ending their subjugation in eight century Arabia (which include the right to independent ownership and economic activity, the right to choose whom to marry and the right to end an unsuccessful marriage, the right to education, the right to her identity, the right to sexual

⁴⁷ Ask and Tjomsland, 1998. Pg. 30; Haddad and Eposito, 2001. Pg. 92

⁴⁸ Ask and Tjomsland, 1998. Pg. 22

⁴⁹ Webb, 2000. Pg. 102

pleasure within the boundaries of lawful marriage, the right to inheritance, the right to participate in public affairs and the right to be respected) and which, properly understood, insists for every woman the option of living a life she would choose, with freedom and the opportunity to develop her potential and live a life she finds meaningful and fulfilling.⁵⁰ One can see in the work of women (and men) like Jawad and Wadud the outlines of an agenda for women's rights that should probably be seen as similar to many feminist activists in the West and "Western" feminists should find similar to their own, though justified in a very different framework, and which is probably not been achieved even in a number of Western societies, let alone those in the "Muslim" world.

Realizing the agenda

As has repeatedly been emphasized, the work carried out by "Islamic feminists" described in the previous sections has enormous potential for politics, in terms of altering notions of legitimate and illegitimate, not just in the lives of millions of individuals across the world but at the levels of institutions, states, and societies as well; but in a sense, the work can also be very limited if carried out just in the ivory towers of the academia. But there are a number of social changes happening within the Muslim world and a number of actors that promise to translate these ideas and the products of these intellectual exercises into some real social change.

This change, however, will probably not be coming from within the official institutions of Islam, though it would be wrong to consider them as completely unchanging. Religious establishments have, for instance, moved beyond killing any woman who attempts to become a preacher. There are debates occurring within Shi'ite establishments over whether or not women should be allowed to reach the highest level of the clergy⁵¹ and recently, within the world of Sunni Islam, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced that it will soon appoint a female *mufiti*, which is the highest category in the Sunni clergy, which is an extremely contentious first.⁵² Furthermore, women have been able to access institutions of religious education, allowing them a greater voice in religious debates,⁵³ and are also a growing presence in lower levels of religious organizations, such as lower level preachers, ceremonies held in people's homes, which allow them to play a greater, often crucial, role in the daily experience of religion for many people, including women.⁵⁴ But, by and large, these institutions are still almost entirely run by men, and remain some of the most traditional and conservative elements within their societies, so it is probably naive to think that any great societal change will flow from their direction.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Jawad, 1998. Pg.7

⁵¹ Afshar, 1998. Pg. 7

⁵² Siast, 2009.

⁵³ Afshar, 1998. Pg. 29; Otterman, 2009.

⁵⁴ Ask and Tjomslan, 1998. Pg. 177

⁵⁵ Afshar, 1998. Pg. 7

However, as previously mentioned, there has simultaneously been a “resurgence” of Islam and a “fracturing” of religious authority, which has meant that there has been a growth of organizations that in some way claim an Islamic identity and a growth in their ability to speak about religion in a way and with an authority that had once been the exclusive tool of the clergy.⁵⁶ For instance, after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, there was an obvious increase in the role of the clergy and of religion, but simultaneously there was an increase in welfare organizations, advocacy organizations, and magazines that allowed women a chance to further their voices and their interests on these matters. The fight for women’s rights in Iran has been waged both by secular organizations but also by Islamic ones, to the extent that during the Bonn Conference held in 2001 to determine the future of Afghanistan, a number of feminists there held up Iran as an example of a country where women’s rights, though still not adequately accepted or protected, had been greatly enhanced though an Islamic framework.⁵⁷

In fact, modern day Iran presents a number of examples that shed light on both the effectiveness of “Islamic feminism” as well as the difficulties and limitations it encounters as an environment where Islam has been used both by those who would seek to limit and reduce women’s rights and public role and those who are determined to expand it. In the aftermath of the revolution, the theocratic government that was formed held a neo-traditionalist perspective about Islam and its edicts on women, which assumed that there were some natural differences between the sexes due to which women were appropriate for certain roles (as wives and mothers) and men for others, and it was this perspective that led the government to try to force women out of the judiciary and out of regular employment, preventing them from receiving higher education in many fields and instituting many changes that dramatically scaled back advances women had made in previous decades.⁵⁸

However, the women of Iran, including Islamist ones, refused to accept such measures without a fight. Women, many of them from traditional backgrounds, had played an unprecedented role in the revolution and refused to be marginalized by the regime. When the government tried to force them out of the workforce they formed volunteer organizations (some of them for the war effort against Iraq and many of them with an obvious Islamic motivation) and engaged in activism to remain visible, and when the regime used their discourse of difference to exclude women, the few female members of parliament at the time used that as an argument for why women had to be *included*, to have different points of view. This fight was largely carried out by four women who were the members of parliament, the *majlis*, in the eighties and who had been deeply involved in the Islamic revolution. It was clear to them that the Islamic state that was emerging was radically different from what they had expected, and they were determined to have their voice heard in shaping it in a more just manner. And though they did not succeed in halting the conservative tide, they managed to win certain concessions

⁵⁶ Eickelman and Piscatoir, 2004. Pg.7; Milton-Edwards, 2004. Pg. 20

⁵⁷ Sheikh, 2009.

⁵⁸ Beck and Nashat, 2004. Pg.208; Afshar, 1998. Pg.16

such as having women play an advisory role in the judiciary and, slowly, they were able to remove some restrictions on women being able to work and gain a higher education.⁵⁹

However, greater change began to emerge in the late eighties and early nineties. The change was originally discernible in a number of magazines that had been set up by women to discuss women's issues, and which often had clerics write for them. At this time there emerged a trend known as "new religious thinking" which argued the inequality that was associated with Islam was the result of a certain historical context in which those interpretations occurred, and that in truth there was no conflict (or rather an affinity) between gender equality and Islam.⁶⁰ Ultimately the ideas of these magazines spread into society, into more mainstream newspapers, and eventually epitomized the reform movement. This was a movement that was based around the notion of "dynamic jurisprudence" and was exemplified by Mohammad Khatami's overwhelming victory in the Presidential election of 1997. This was also an important moment for the women's movement in Iran because Khatami, himself a cleric, had promised many reforms to encourage gender equality in order to gain the support of women, both Islamist and secular, which proved essential to his victory. And though his government saw both symbolic gains, such as by appointing the first female Vice-President in the history of the Islamic Republic, and meaningful improvements, in terms of providing greater education and employment opportunities for women and creating a less repressive environment, he was unable to push most of his reforms through against the wishes of the conservative clerics who held the power to veto all legislation; and ultimately, after the end of Khatami's two terms, the movement fizzled out due to a combination of repression by the state, economic difficulties and an inability to deliver on many promises. Despite that, and though there was much it failed to tackle, the movement provided a hopeful glimpse of what could be achieved from an Islamic framework and it did make some meaningful improvements for the rights and status of Iranian women.⁶¹

Outside Iran this phenomenon manifests itself most clearly in the form of a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A prominent example would be the group Sisters in Islam (SIS), an organization operating in Malaysia which has operated since 1988 and which argues for equality between men and women from within an Islamic framework and by calling for a reading of the Quran and the hadith in their proper context. The organization engages in activities that are fairly typical of most women's rights organizations, advocating for changes in laws that are seen as being sexist such as the family law, running a legal clinic to help women who cannot access the legal system themselves and advocating for a change of attitudes and social norms.⁶² But some of their activities go beyond that directly as a result of them being an "Islamic feminist" organization. They challenge the exclusive rights of the clergy to read and interpret the Quran and hadith,

⁵⁹ Afshar, 1998. Pg. 16

⁶⁰ Beck and Nashat, 2004. Pg.212

⁶¹ Bahramitash,2007. Pg.91; Afshar, 1998. Pg. 30

⁶² Sheilah,2007. Pg.240.

insisting that they have the right to do so, a move that has earned them considerable criticism (with some Islamic organizations calling for legal action against them).⁶³ Furthermore, they also have a public education campaign in which they try to alter popular perceptions about Islam; for instance, they produce booklets on topics such as whether Islam allows women to beat their wives (no), whether Islam allows for birth control (yes in certain circumstances) and whether men and women are equal (yes).⁶⁴ They run public education campaigns and seminars with the aim of both informing women that it is not right if their rights are denied to them and that there is no conflict between their religions and their rights and also to build greater public support for a progressive vision of Islam.⁶⁵ Through these and other activities, Sisters in Islam pushes for change on many levels, namely at the individual, doctrinal, legal and societal level, through its brand of “Islamic feminist” activism.

There are also other organizations in other parts of the Muslim world. For instance, in India there are organizations such as *Aawaz-e-Nisvaan* and the Muslim Women’s Rights Network who provide services such as legal clinics and battered women’s shelters and who campaign for changes to law as it applies to Muslim women in India, especially family law. While simultaneously demanding the right to read and interpret the Quran and asking for greater representation of women in institutions for interpreting the *shariat*, especially as it applies to women. They carry out all these activities with reference to Islam rather than universal standards of feminism or clauses of the Indian constitution, seeking to change the status of Muslim women in India with reference to the Islamic tradition.⁶⁶ Another example is the North American Council for Muslim Women (NACMW), established in 1983, which encourages women to gain knowledge about Islam and to play a more prominent and active role in defining what Islam is. It also engages in efforts to educate Muslim women, many of them immigrants, in the United States about Islam from original sources to convince them that there is no conflict between them demanding their rights and their religion; for instance, many women who entered the organization were unaware that under Islamic law they were entitled to any money they earned. As such, the organization teaches women that they can have their rights without rebelling against God.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Though extremely exciting and full of potential, it has to be admitted that “Islamic feminism” is only one amongst the many visions and interpretations of Islam and, as has been indicated many times in this paper, one struggling against a much more entrenched interpretation that both reflects and supports the unequal distribution of power between the sexes in the Muslim world. But, that being said, it is a vision of Islam that is growing and that is often lost amongst the more

⁶³ Muslimah Media Watch, 2009.

⁶⁴ Sisters in Islam, 2009.

⁶⁵ Sheilah, 2007. Pg. 245

⁶⁶ Vatuk, 2008. Pg. 289

⁶⁷ Haddad and Eposito, 2001. Pg. 98

reactionary, shocking, and violent forms that often grabs the attention of the world and imposes itself as the default image of the Muslim world.⁶⁸

But to ignore this progressive face of Islam, and to subsume it into a larger, monolithic and dark image that “Western” and secular feminists often have of Islam is, while probably a strategic mistake, is a great disservice to the work of those struggling against the same oppressive reality as those who would discount them. Though “Islamic feminists” resist validating themselves by comparing their efforts and aims to those of a universal (or “Western”) standard, it is difficult not to notice that, in many ways both kinds of feminism share a great deal in terms of wanting to free women from limits and cruelties of patriarchal power structures and allow them opportunities equal to those of the men around them. And the fact that both use different frameworks and languages to express desires, a product of different historical and cultural environment and personal developments, should not become an insurmountable barrier to any cooperation and understanding with one another. This paper does not at any point argue that “Islamic feminism” is the only legitimate vehicle through which women in the Muslim world express their desires and legitimate their struggles, for there has always been a significant secular feminist movement that has made meaningful advancement for women in that part of the world and which continues to command the loyalty of many women.⁶⁹ Rather “Islamic feminism” is *a* vehicle of liberation for many women just as secular feminism can be *a* vehicle for many others and it is equally unjust when any one of them is suppressed or ignored, as either or both often are. Returning back to the central premise of post-colonial feminism for a moment, it is argued that there is diversity within efforts to seek emancipation and equality for women that ought to be recognized and valued. A part that has to be recognized is “Islamic feminism” as the vehicle employed by many women engaged in that larger and multi-faceted struggle.

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⁶⁸ Milton-Edwards, 2004. Pg. 4

⁶⁹ Kandiyoti, 1991. Pg. 3

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