

ENGAGING ISLAMIC FEMINISM: PROVINCIALIZING FEMINISM AS A MASTER NARRATIVE¹

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As you know, both Margot Badran and I chose to offer our keynotes under the same title, “Engaging Islamic Feminism,” even though we approach the subject rather differently. As a feminist historian, she theorizes, analyzes, and documents Muslim women’s struggles for equality, and in particular, the advent of Islamic feminism. I, on the other hand, have been doing the kind of work she defines *as* Islamic feminism; i.e., trying to open up the Qur’an to anti-patriarchal readings. However, as a result of dialogues with her, some public and others not, I have become increasingly interested in trying to clarify why I resist being called a feminist.

This is always an awkward place to start at a conference on feminism since, to most people, my resistance seems inexplicable and even pointless given how useful some feminist theories are for engaging Islam in liberatory modes. Besides, the phenomenon Badran calls Islamic feminism seems to be an actually existing reality, so why obdurately refuse to accept it? This is the question I’m going to engage and, to give you a sense of the direction of my talk, I want to share its subtitle with you: “Provincializing feminism as a master narrative.” (This is, of course, an homage to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* from which I have borrowed some of my arguments.)

¹ Borrows from Chakrabarty 2000.

² I want to thank Anitta Kynsilehto and Renata Pepicelli for inviting me to this workshop and for putting the hard work and energy required to organize it.

I should also clarify that most of this talk is based on an earlier response to Badran (in October 2006) which I had called, quite self-indulgently, “Four Stages of Denial or my On-again, Off-again, Affair with Feminism.” Even though we’ve both moved on in our thinking since then (and I have revised my comments to reflect the changes in mine), I still thought it worthwhile to share that essay for two reasons. First, some of the issues I’ve been struggling with remain the same and, second, that talk gives a chronological account of the different stages in my approach to feminism and therefore provides a context for explaining my latest stance on it.

FIRST STAGE:

The first stage was soon after my book was called feminist by some people, in both the positive and negative sense of the word. I was upset. This is because I thought I had acknowledged my debts to certain feminisms in the book but I had also tried to differentiate myself from feminists by calling myself a believing woman. So my reaction to being called a feminist was both visceral and mono-logic and it essentially boiled down to asking a whole series of “what” questions though mostly rhetorically, as in:

“*What?* How can people call me a feminist when I’m calling myself a believing woman?” “How can other people tell me *what* I am and *what* I’m doing?” “So *what* if I use some of the same language as feminists? Can’t one do that without buying into an entire ontology or epistemology!” “*What?!* Do feminists think that they discovered equality and patriarchy?!” And, eventually, “so *what* if they did? I derive *my* understanding of equality and of patriarchy from the Qur’an, not from any feminist text!”

So, there was much indignation and not much analysis during this first stage.

SECOND STAGE:

But, of course, once labels get stuck, it’s hard to shake them off and, over time, more and more people began to call me a feminist. Eventually, I had to abandon outrage as a permanent political strategy

and start explaining more carefully than I had in the book why I resisted being called a feminist.

In part, my resistance was a displacement of frustration with real, live, feminists, all of them white. Although I'm sure they were and remain well-meaning, many of them seemed utterly blind to the racial politics of speaking for women of color like myself and that too in our presence, as if we didn't exist.

Anyone who has been silenced in the name of sisterhood can understand how strange and difficult that is and it wasn't until I read black feminists like bell hooks that I could give voice to my discomfort at being seen as the Sister Other.

So, it was hard for me to celebrate feminisms' liberatory stance when liberation entailed a loss of voice and sense of self for women like me and it has taken some practice to look beyond actual feminists to appreciate certain feminist principles. (I guess many of you must feel the same way when you hear me speak about the Qur'an's liberatory stance in the face of Muslim misogyny. It must be equally hard for you to look beyond the reality of Muslims to the theory and potential of Islam.) But, of course, there are *always* slippages between theory and practice and, in theory, I have always been committed to the concept of sexual equality, which is at the core of feminist theory.

Even so, I felt that the insistence on calling my work feminist denied something very real and specific about my encounter with the Qur'an and I tried to express this by comparing myself to Muslim feminists who believe that Islam is a sexist and patriarchal religion that puts a "sacred stamp onto female subservience," in the words of Fatima Mernissi.

In contrast to such feminists, my own stance is that Muslims read Islam as a patriarchy partly because of how they read the Qur'an, who reads it, and the contexts in which they read it. In other words, I believe that texts are always read from and within specific material and ideological sites and that we need to be aware of these sites when attempting to understand readings of scripture.

In passing, I should note that in the years since I wrote my book I have come to appreciate its limitations in exonerating the Qur'anic text itself from charges of being anti-women. Still, I think that it is

wrong and misleading to speak about texts without also considering issues of context and inter- and intratextuality. Especially where the Qur'an is concerned, a whole host of scholars has shown that it has been continually de-contextualized and re-contextualized in light of Muslim sexual politics. And this politics is overwhelmingly male-centric.

In any event, during this second stage of my response to feminism, I began to clarify the differences between myself and feminists like Mernissi and to point out that it was possible to speak the same feminist language, of patriarchy and sexual equality, and yet have completely different readings of Islam.

THIRD STAGE (TORONTO):

It was at this point that Badran and I began a dialogue via email while she was in Egypt. I specially recall an email in which she wrote that she was listening to the muezzin's call to prayer as she was reading my book. And the part she was reading was my interpretation of Abraham's story which tries to show that, far from being the archetypal patriarch, Abraham was not a traditional father, or a father in the traditional sense. This is because his rights as father, as indeed the rights of *all* fathers, were and are, circumscribed by the rule of God and a God who is neither father nor son nor man nor male nor human and nor even created.

That I didn't see the Qur'an as privileging fathers or fatherhood and, indeed, read it as subverting the concept of father-right and father-rule which is at the heart of traditional patriarchies was a building block in my claim that the Qur'an is anti-patriarchal.

It is precisely such arguments that Badran eventually came to view as evidence and incidences of Islamic feminism which she defines as a "discourse of gender equality that derives its mandate from the Qur'an and seeks rights and justice for all human beings across the totality of the public-private continuum."

In effect, rather than locate the Qur'an within feminist discourses, this definition re-locates feminism in the Qur'an though Badran is careful to point out that many Muslim women have been engaged in recuperating this sort of Qur'anic discourse much before the advent of feminism proper.

I was utterly captivated by her definition both in the sense of being fascinated by it and in the sense of being made captive by it. I was fascinated because it was the first time that anyone had offered such a concise and yet comprehensive definition of Islamic feminism. And I was made captive by it because, if my reading of the Qur'an is feminist simply by virtue of being based in and on the Qur'an, then, clearly I am an Islamic feminist and there's no escaping that fact!

So I stood alongside Badran in Toronto some years ago and said as much publicly. I guess our dialogue could have ended at this point but then she and I decided to make a joint presentation in Ithaca, my home institution, in 2006 and both of us brought some new thinking about feminism to that encounter.

FOURTH STAGE (ITHACA):

I describe this as the fourth stage of my affair with feminism and the point of departure for my response to Badran was her conclusion that "Because feminism provides a common language, and for analytical reasons, the term Islamic *feminism* should be retained, firmly claimed and repeatedly explained."

Although I agree with her that Islamic feminism needs to be repeatedly explained I also argued that the language of feminism does not *always* allow us to explore commonalities and, more to the point, that shared languages also create analytical and political problems. Therefore, if we want to build solidarity with Muslim women, we need more than the shared discourse of feminism. We need to be able to understand the specificity of their movements and while I did not give a name to this specificity, I asked some new what and how and why questions in making my argument.

For instance, even if historians must name patterns in order to see them, doesn't the naming also run the risk of flattening out important differences? As I've said, one can use feminist analysis to recuperate the Qur'an's egalitarianism and also to re-present Islam as patriarchal. While the plurality of feminism is said to be its strength, how useful is a big-tent pluralism that erases such fundamental epistemic differences between feminists?

Of course, Badran's definition of Islamic feminism gives one a way out of this conundrum by distinguishing between Muslim and

Islamic feminists. Yet, given that most people don't know what this distinction even means, how does calling oneself an Islamic feminist render one's work any more transparent or legitimate to Muslims? To me this isn't just an existential anxiety but also a practical issue in that I think many of us who are working on the Qur'an are trying to speak mainly, though of course not exclusively, to our own Muslim communities. And the fact is that most Muslims do not make such fine distinctions between feminisms.

Just as importantly, if we change the world by naming it—as Paulo Freire says—then how do we change something by calling it Islamic, or Qur'anic, or feminist? That is to say, do we redeem the Qur'an by mapping feminism onto it? If so, how? As Badran's own work shows some Muslim women were reading liberation into and out of it much before feminism. Why not just call their stance Qur'anic or Islamic since, after all, it is both? Or, do we redeem feminism when we locate it in the Qur'an? If so, what are the implications of this redemption for feminist theorizing?

Here again, Badran offers something tempting by de-secularizing the project of women's liberation. As she makes clear, it is not only Westernized secular humanism but, also a specific mode of God-consciousness that can lead us to emphasize justice and rights for all human beings by affirming the unity and equality of human life. So, why then do I continue to dither in my embrace of feminism?

In Ithaca, I gave two reasons: first, calling myself a feminist was never a choice I was given. And, as I said, perhaps it was the combination of a perverse post-colonial sensibility and personal stubbornness that kept me from giving away my right to even name myself. Particularly at a time when a self-defined West has unleashed such bloodshed against Muslims everywhere there is some comfort in such seemingly small acts of individual resistance. Of course, as Ashis Nandy says, the West is now “everywhere, in structures and in minds,” and there is simply no escaping it, but I still seek to protect my sense of self from parts of the West by refusing to speak some common languages.

Secondly, I said that to the extent that feminism in *any* form is complicit with this violence—which I believe it is when it reads oppression into Islam and reads liberation out of the West's imperialist depredations—I feel the need to resist it in *all* its forms. And, if in the

end, this is a self-defeating strategy, it shows just how narrow the world has grown for many of us, especially those who call ourselves Muslim.

CURRENT STAGE: (TAMPERE)

This is how I ended my response to Badran in 2006 and here we are again, this time in Finland and, once again, I've had to stretch myself to engage feminism since I did not want to end on the same note as I did in the U.S.

In some ways, I'm clearer about why I resist the feminist label even though I don't pretend that the answers I have come up with are in any way definitive.

For one thing, I am clear that the focal point of my resistance has never been the idea that women and men share in an indivisible and equal humanity; rather, the focal points of my resistance have had to do with some of the accoutrements of feminism. Then, too, I understand that Islamic feminism as Badran defines it is liberatory in the sense both of being inclusive and being based in notions of justice that cut across spurious and unproductive binaries and divisions. And, I expect and hope that many Muslim women will continue to extend and refine this project of Islamic feminism in meaningful ways.

However, even though I believe deeply in Islamic feminism's advocacy of sexual equality and I recognize the very real political necessity of certain feminisms, I am troubled by the extent to which feminism as a discourse has foreclosed the possibility of theorizing sexual equality from within alternative paradigms. An obvious sign of this is the fact that one can't avoid being called a feminist any time one speaks about women's liberation or equality, no matter what sort of language one speaks in. In fact, feminism simultaneously usurps and silences critiques that fall outside its own discursive framework.

Even if we believe that reality exists independently of how we choose to define it, as we know, the very process of defining it also gives it a particular shape. So, when we call something Islamic feminism we close off the possibility of seeing it as anything else and it is this closure that I find problematic.

When we ignore how people choose to name themselves, their work, and their struggles, we necessarily do some epistemic violence to them. Besides, the autonomy to define oneself seems to be an important principle to defend irrespective of how honest self-definitions actually are. After all, naming other people, or the world on behalf of other people, isn't any more honest.

In a sense, then, it is the very inclusivity of feminism—its attempt, as a meta and master narrative, to subsume and assimilate all conversations about equality—that I find both imperializing and reductive.

Here, I'm reminded of Chakrabarty's argument that the Western "investment in a certain kind of rationality and in particular understanding of the 'real' means that history's—the discipline's—exclusions are ultimately epistemological."³ It seems to me that we can make exactly the same argument about history's inclusions. That is to say, feminist history can only regard Muslim women's encounter with their religion and sacred text as being real in an ontological and epistemological sense if it can name that encounter feminism.

I realize that Badran is too careful a historian to be comfortable with how she names the world and too critical not to question her own naming. But, speaking more generally, one could argue that history's—the discipline's—inclusions as well as exclusions have become the ultimate marker of all our realities. To Chakrabarty it is clear that we cannot respect the "diversity of life practices or life-worlds" so long as we embrace the "universalizing political philosophies, which remain the global heritage of the Enlightenment."⁴

Granted feminism isn't a direct heritage of the Enlightenment, but, as long as it functions as a universalizing political theory, I don't think it can accommodate the "diverse ways of being human, the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle—perennially, precariously, but unavoidably—to 'world the earth' in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging."⁵

³ Ibid., 98.

⁴ Ibid., 148.

⁵ Ibid., 254.

I guess where Chakrabarty and I differ is that, for him, provincializing Europe, and hence its universalizing narratives, is a project born out of gratitude and love.⁶ I am less politically charitable than he is. While I have always acknowledged my intellectual debts to feminism, and to individual feminists, my critique isn't based so much in love as it is based in a sense of being wronged, and hence in some notion of justice. To me, justice in this instance means being able to give voice to my own loving engagement with my scripture in whatever language I find meaningful. So far, I have called myself simply a "believer." But this doesn't mean that I'm always comfortable with the epistemological closure that this term implies either. But then belief isn't so much about certainty as it is about an open-ended willingness to go on searching after what one considers the truth. Perhaps a more appropriate way to define myself therefore would be as a seeker of God's grace, a supplicant for it.

REFERENCE

Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2000) *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁶ Ibid., 255

ENGAGING ISLAMIC FEMINISM¹

Margot Badran

Feminism as a phenomenon engaging with issues of women's rights, women's liberation, and gender equality as part and parcel of the rights, liberation, and equality of all was constructed and shaped *concurrently* by Muslims and others in the East (I use this term in contradistinction to the West, referring to countries of Africa and Asia) and by westerners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. History attests that feminism is the creation of both easterners and westerners, of Muslims and those of other religions, of the colonized and colonizers, and of women of different races and ethnicities. Those who claim that feminism is 'western' and 'white' do not know their history and perpetuate the circulation of myths.

Until today feminism remains in many ways a prisoner of colonialism. Feminism first appeared during the heyday of colonialism and its moment of birth has left long shadows. Early in the 20th century feminists from different parts of the world made efforts to join hands in international meetings and conferences to strengthen the cause of women at home and abroad even as they were positioned on either side of the colonizers/colonized divide. Emergent feminisms in Africa and Asia were nationalist feminisms while emergent feminisms in the colonizing western countries were variously implicated in colonialism and were later referred to as imperial feminisms. The

¹ This paper is a combination of my presentation at the seminar on *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives* organized by the Tampere Peace Research Institute and of my reflections and thoughts triggered during and after the event by other presentations and by the debates and exchange. My paper is thus an engagement with Islamic feminism in part produced by and reflecting the dynamism of the event. I would like to thank Anitta Kynsilehto and Renata Pepicelli for organizing this seminar and the Tampere Peace Research Institute for hosting it and for their warm welcome.

very coming together of eastern and western feminists in international forums throughout the 20th century testified to each other's existence.² Yet, a brew of arrogance and ignorance led westerners at large to assert that feminism was western, insisting that it was beyond the imagination and will of non-westerners. Meanwhile, in the West and East alike, feminists were up against home-grown patriarchalist opponents who used sundry means to denigrate feminism and its supporters. In the West, detractors portrayed feminists as man-haters. In the East, enemies branded feminists as perpetrators of cultural treason and, ironically in so doing 'colluded' with westerners in declaring feminism western.

In 1990 when religious identity politics in general, including political Islam or Islamism, was rampant a group of international scholars, mainly women, gathered in Helsinki for a Roundtable on Identity Politics and Women organized by sociologist Val Moghadam at the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics (WIDER).³ We came together to examine women and identity politics. We wanted to compare ways identity politics shaped and controlled women and were concerned how women themselves were often complicit in supporting identity politics and its patriarchal agenda. It was in this context that some of us reported that Muslim women were subverting the patriarchal Islamist project through what appeared to be a new form of feminism-in-the-making which Muslim women in different parts of the world would soon call Islamic feminism. Iranian sociologist Nayereh Tohidi told us how some women in the Islamic Republic of Iran growing increasingly restive under gender restrictions were beginning to re-read the Qur'an in order to claim rights accorded to them by Islam.⁴ I shared

² See Rupp 1998.

³ Valentine Moghadam edited two book containing papers presented at the WIDER conference: *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies* (Moghadam 1994a) and *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Moghadam 1994b). For Muslim women's transnational networking, see Moghadam 2005.

⁴ See Tohidi 1994. She talks of a reformist approach to Islam among women of the elite in the Islamic Republic saying "I tentatively call 'Islamist feminism.'" (p. 139). Later she would use the term Islamic feminism. Islamist feminist refers to as a femi-

my discovery how some new ‘religious women’ (*al-mutadayyinat*, then a neologism) in Egypt, close to or affiliated with the Muslim Brothers, were embarking upon a re-examination of the Qur’an to work out a new “feminist” paradigm grounded in scripture. They abhorred the term “feminism,” while acknowledging that some of the work of feminists at home and abroad had done had been useful, but were hard-pressed to come up with a satisfactory alternative. I had unexpectedly stumbled upon this effort in the late 1980s while investigating contemporary feminism in Egypt.⁵ It is perhaps hard to imagine so many years later the excitement produced by this new turn.

Now seventeen years later, in 2007, at a moment when Islamic feminism had become widespread and at the forefront of attention, women gathered once again in Finland. This time we convened take part in a seminar hosted by the Tampere Peace Research Institute (TAPRI) in order to discuss current perspectives on Islamic feminism, now nearly two decades old. By now there are two generations who are engaging in a variety of ways with Islamic feminism. Eager for a cross-generational dialogue, Souad Eddouada, Anitta Kynsilehto and Renata Pepicelli, scholars of the new generation, spearheaded our event. Together our two generations bracketed the life-span of Islamic feminism. As participants in the seminar we included Muslims and non-Muslims, women born in Muslim majority countries and those born in the West, and women, who change locations within and beyond East and West with frequency and apparent ease. We juggle multiple identities shaped by location, time, circumstances, and by our own proclivities. We include those who use the term Islamic feminism and those who do not, and those who identify as Islamic feminist and those who do not. We came as scholars who

nist operating within the context of Islamism or political Islam, in the Iranian case in control of the state, and in most other instances as movements of political Islam. Many see the term “Islamist feminism” as an oxymoron. However, women from Islamist movements may leave them and become ‘Islamic feminists,’ something Nilufer Göle alerted us to in *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling* (Göle 1996).

⁵ See Badran 1994. I devised the term “gender activists” as a blanket term to include women across the political spectrum who acted or thought as feminists.

operate in and out of our ivory towers because we feel we have a stake in Islamic feminism, indeed, multiple stakes.

As a member of the older generation it is instructive to learn how younger scholars come to Islamic feminism: what their issues are, how they produce their own discourse, ways they enter and shape the debates, and what the stakes are for them. The first generation of women engaging with Islamic feminism includes those who created seminal texts of Islamic feminism now regarded as classics, and those who chart and theorize Islamic feminism. The new generation builds upon earlier work and carries it in their own directions. We of the two generations who are in dialogue are mutually enriched and become part of the dynamic of re/defining and enacting Islamic feminism. Those of both generations and of many backgrounds who engage with Islamic feminism may be seen as forming a kind of community.

Engaging with Islamic feminism as a historian I would like to do what historians do: look at what has come before and at how, in complicated ways, past and present intersect. In the early 1990s when Muslim *secular feminists*—scholars, journalists, and writers—from various countries in Africa and Asia observed the process begun by some Muslim women to explicate gender equality and social justice grounded in re-readings of the Qur’an and other religious texts, they immediately recognized this as a new form of feminism and called it “Islamic feminism.”⁶

Secular feminists in Muslim societies were heirs to feminism/s first articulated earlier in the 20th century made up of a composite of Islamic modernist, secular nationalist, and humanist discourses. It was a feminism that emerged in territorial nation-states whose citizens were bounded by a secular covenant guaranteeing the *equality of all citizens* irrespective of religion and at the same time was *equally protective of all religions* within the polity. Muslims’ feminisms were secular, like the *secular* nation-states in which they were located, that is, they included space and respect for religion in a

⁶ I pointed to early examples of the use of the term Islamic feminism in Badran 1999, 166–67. During a trip to South Africa in 1999 I found the term Islamic feminism current among progressive Muslims.

religiously pluralistic entity. Secular feminism/s, however, re-thought religion while the secular state regulates religion and determined the limits of religious freedom. Muslims shaped their secular feminism/s together with compatriots of other religions.⁷

The Islamic modernist strand of foundational secular feminism aimed at activating rights accorded to women in the Qur'an, in so doing, freeing women and society at large patriarchal practices masking as Islamic which sustained constraints on women and burdens on men. Central to the project of Islamic modernism, articulated by Shaikh Muhammad 'Abduh of Egypt, widely influential in the Muslim world in his day—the late 19th and early 20th centuries and after, was the recuperation by Muslims of the practice of *ijtihad* or independent critical examination of religious texts. *Ijtihad* would assist individuals and society to be both modern and Muslim; it would help Muslims shape the dynamics of change within a renewed understanding of Islam. For Muslim women under the dominion of patriarchal restrictions imposed in the name of religious prescription, the insights of Islamic modernism helped them to expose the patriarchal intrusions into Islam and their own lives. The early feminists were not equipped by education and training to engage in direct examination of religious sources, themselves. This would fall to women at the other end of the 20th century—the Islamic feminists of the future—who would be so equipped and would feel the urgency in the context of the resurgence of patriarchal political Islam their own personal motivations to engage in *ijtihad* and to conduct their own *tafsir* (Qur'anic interpretation).

Secular feminists used Islamic modernist arguments in tandem with secular nationalist and humanist arguments during the 20th century to successfully promote rights to education and work and a variety of other women's rights. In the process Islamic modernist thinking on women and gender became internalized or 'naturalized' among certain classes and segments of the population. In the domain of the family, however, patriarchal beliefs and practices were highly resistant to Islamic modernist thinking. Thus, feminists

⁷ On the historical trajectory of Muslims' secular and Islamic feminisms, see Badran 2008.

were unsuccessful in effecting the reform of Muslim personal status laws in those Muslim majority countries where they existed. It was harder for feminists to dismantle patriarchy in the family or private sphere than in the public sphere, that is, the secular but not religious parts of the public sphere.

Along with growing increasingly impatient over the decades for an amelioration of Muslim personal status codes, women accumulated further demands, such as gaining admittance to the positions of judge (who adjudicated in both secular and religious courts) and *mufti* (the official who issues religious opinions called *fatwas*), which, as they could see, was possible in some Muslim countries and not in others. To argue their cases more persuasively women needed to draw upon deeper knowledge of the Islamic sciences. With the onslaught against women and their already won rights mounted by Islamists from the latter decades of the 20th century, advocates of women's rights felt the urgent need for a powerful gender-sensitive Islamic discourse to counteract the patriarchal resurgence imposed in the name of religion.

It was at this moment that a plethora of Muslim women's writings discussing issues of women and gender within an Islamic discourse began to appear. Writers in *Zanan* (est. 1992) in Iran offered Islamic readings of gender equality and justice.⁸ Sisters in Islam, founded in Malaysia in the mid-1980s, issued pamphlets discrediting wife-beating condoned in the name of Islam. Fatima Mernissi published *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry* (1991) exposing the fraudulence of misogynist *hadiths* (sayings and deeds attributed to the Prophet Muhammad). Amina Wadud published *Qur'an and Woman: Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1992, 1999) elucidating the message of gender equality and social justice found in the scripture. It was the discourse on women and gender located within an egalitarian reading of Islam expressed in such works that Muslim secular feminists identified as Islamic feminism.

⁸ See Eftekhari 2003. *Zanan* was closed down by the state in January 2008. See Esfandiari 2008.

The term Islamic feminism was well-established by the turn of the 21st century when in 2002 Asma Barlas published *'Believing Women' in Islam: Un-reading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, disentangling patriarchal meanings projected onto the Qur'an, which was immediately heralded as another work of Islamic feminism. In 2006 Wadud published *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* further elaborating her hermeneutic work on women and gender and bringing to wide attention the meaning of gender jihad which some might think better captures the project of 'Islamic feminism.'

Word of the new Islamic feminism and its compelling texts spread rapidly through cyberspace where it appeared on Muslims' e-journals, listservs, and websites of Muslim women's organizations. The circulation and enthusiastic reception of these new works on women and gender under the banner of Islamic feminism was testimony to their relevance to Muslim women, and many men, and indeed, to an urgent need. A spontaneous 'Islamic feminist' community appeared to be in formation.

Although writers in *Zanan* publically identified with feminism, along with some others, those revered as creators of seminal texts of Islamic feminism firmly rejected the term. Amina Wadud placed her work in the context of *tafsir* (exegesis) carefully noting, however, its departure from classical Muslim scholarship. Although she does not choose to use the term Islamic feminism in relation to her work, in the 1992 preface to *Qur'an and Woman* she declared that her hermeneutics "...can be viewed as *part of a larger area of discourse by feminists* [emphasis added] who have constructed a valuable critique of the tendency in many disciplines to build the notion of the normative human from the experiences and perspectives of the male person."⁹ As we learn from Gisela Webb's *Windows of Faith* a number of North American Muslim women engaged in new gender-sensitive *ijtihad* in the mid-90s (Wadud among them) referred to their work simply as scholarship-activism.¹⁰ The generic term,

⁹ Wadud 1999, ix.

¹⁰ Webb 2000; Wadud was among the contributors.

‘scholarship-activism,’ it will be remembered has been a hallmark of feminist studies which has always connected theory and praxis.¹¹

The question of “Islamic feminist” as an identity label has been more contentious than the term Islamic feminism. Most authors of texts of ‘Islamic feminism’ adamantly objected to being labeled Islamic feminists. Over time, however, some like Wadud have become more accepting even though they do not elect to call themselves Islamic feminists. Wadud writes in the 1999 preface of *Qur’an and Woman*: “The two names most consistently hurled at me are “Western” and “feminist.” “Western” could mean that I can only be who I am: a daughter of the West, born and raised American of African descent. It is reduced however to mean anti-Islam. “Feminist” is used in a similar reductionist manner. No reference is ever made to the definition of feminism as the radical notion that women are human beings.”¹² However, Barlas remains perturbed at being referred to as an Islamic feminist, even when the term is used purely analytically. There are different reasons people object to being seen an Islamic feminist, or a feminist for that matter. Some feel that they are being reduced to a single identity. Many strategically object to any kind of feminist label for political or professional reasons. However, people also realize that there is urgent work to be done and many have moved on.

The past twenty years—the life-span of Islamic feminism—has seen a significant dent in the patriarchal narrative of ‘Islam’ as the egalitarian version of Islam steadily takes wider hold. At the core of Islamic feminism, and its major breakthrough, is a stringent Qur’an-backed doctrine of gender equality enunciating the full equality of women and men across the public-private spectrum that includes gender equality in the religious part of the public sphere (in the religious professions and in public religious ritual). The Islamic feminist formulation of gender equality is more radical than that of Muslims’ foundational secular feminism which argued for full gender equal-

¹¹ It is interesting to note that feminist studies came out of the movement of second-wave feminism (first in the United States) while Islamic feminism as a theory and discourse preceded Islamic feminist activism—although the activist application was very soon part and parcel of Islamic feminism.

¹² Wadud 1999, xviii.

ity in the public sphere, excepting the religious part of the public sphere, while acquiescing in the notion of gender complementarity or gender equity in the private sphere and in so doing accepted a patriarchal model of the family. Using the tools of Islamic religious sciences together with those of modern social sciences, Barlas was able to forcefully demonstrate that patriarchy in family, as well as in society was un-Islamic. Early secular feminists, like Muslims in general, had been led to believe that the patriarchal family was Islamic and strove to make the regime of complimentary gender roles function optimally. However, second-wave Muslim secular feminists later questioned the notion of the patriarchal family, attempting, like their predecessor to reform it piecemeal through legal reform of Muslim personal status laws until later secular and Islamic feminists joined forces in some places. Islamic feminists not only connected the public and private as the indivisible terrain of gender equality but also elucidated the necessary linkage of gender equality and social justice. Gender equality is integral to the Islamic feminist notion of equality of all *insan* or humankind transcending tribe, class, ethnicity, and race.

Islamic feminism has seen successful applications of gender equality in the 2004 revision of the Moroccan family law called *al-Mudawwana* whereby the two spouses become co-heads of the family, polygamy is made virtually impossible, and women are able to initiate divorce. While the moment must be politically ripe for such a change to occur, the ideological framework must also be in place. The revised Moroccan family law is presently the most advanced *shar'iah* backed family law in existence and is the culmination of a long feminist struggle by secular feminists and Islamic feminists.¹³ In Egypt a similar combination of secular feminist and Islamic feminist forces and argumentation resulted in the successful outcome of the long struggle for women to be eligible to be judges and for *khul'a*, a mechanism by which women can initiate the dissolution of a marriage, became part of the Muslim Personal Status Code.

Islamic feminism continues to gain an ever higher profile and with this increased public space for extending debate among schol-

¹³ See Sadiqi 2006; Sadiqi and Ennaji 2006.

ars and activists. The past two or three years has witnessed a proliferation of transnational conferences, workshops, and seminars. I observe two recent trends.

One is a tendency by Islamist women, instead of absenting themselves from Islamic feminist events as they did previously, are now attending open forums taking advantage of an opportunity to make their views known and to challenge Islamic feminist thinking. These forums provide an opportunity for Islamist women to put forth another definition of Islamic feminism that dilutes its core tenet of full gender equality. It is interesting to note that Islamist women who enter the arena of gender debates typically call for gender equality in the secular part public sphere—they do not seek equality in the religious domain, and uphold the notion of the patriarchal family promoting an optimal performance of differential gender roles, replicate the foundational secular feminist approach first articulated a century ago, which by now most secular feminists have moved beyond.

Secondly I observe a tendency by some analysts of Islamic feminism to broaden the arc of what they regard as Islamic feminism and Islamic feminists. Thus, women who join Islamist movements and in so doing move beyond the confines of the family to assume new functions in the domain of public activism in the process gain more control over their lives are sometimes seen as *de facto* 'Islamic feminists.' Such women, however, do not challenge the idea of a patriarchal family as religiously ordained. Thus to place them within the circumference of Islamic feminism would be in the eyes of many Islamic feminists to call into question Islamic feminism's core notion of full gender equality. Such women might be more appropriately seen as incipient Islamic feminists, especially if they become disaffected by male Islamists' treatment. Arat and Göle pondered this earlier in the case of Islamist women Turkey in the early 1990s as Islamic feminism was emergent.¹⁴

Islamic feminism is very much a work in progress. To engage Islamic feminism is to stretch our minds and to expand the parameters of knowledge, and to develop and refine new analytical and con-

¹⁴ See Arat 2005; Göle 1996.

ceptual vocabulary. It is to forge new bonds and extend the scope and forms of our collective and everyday activism. It is also to enter an embattled arena and perhaps this is a sign of Islamic feminism's urgency and relevance.

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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. It is important to distinguish between Islamic feminism as an explicitly declared project, as an analytical term -- and Islamic feminist as a term of identity. Some Muslim women, as seen from the foregoing remarks, describe their project of articulating and advocating the practice of Qur'anically-mandated gender equality and social justice as Islamic feminism. Some who engage in the articulation and practice of Islamic feminism assert an Islamic feminist identity from the start. Islamic feminism, along with secular feminism, is engaging in a determined and necessary act of re-politicizing as it insists upon erasing the travesty of national constitutions guaranteeing the equality of all citizens and clearly this is part of the overall democratic struggle. Q: For Islamic feminism to become "mainstream", or, at least, to gain credence among the ulema or the male religious establishment, do you feel it is important that Islamic feminists seek to dialogue with them as well? Islamic feminism started out as an open discursive space which anyone could and did enter, whether to create, elaborate, debate or to disseminate its discourse. It had the hallmark of the inclusive. Islamic feminism was not tied to Muslim identity or a faith affiliation. Islamic feminism is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam. It aims for the full equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender, in public and private life. Islamic feminists advocate women's rights, gender equality, and social justice grounded in an Islamic framework. Although rooted in Islam, the movement's pioneers have also utilised secular and European or non-Muslim feminist discourses and recognize the role of Islamic feminism as part of an integrated global feminist Islamic feminism may appear to be the inevitable result of this convergence. However, Islamic feminism as an analytic construct is also inadequate to concerns for sex equality in Islam. In the 1990s, scholars such as Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, and Amina Wadud instigated a new trajectory of thought that implicated early Muslim societies and contemporary Muslim practice in the decline of Muslim women's status. Furthermore, the naming of the convergence Islamic feminism has not gone unchallenged, with the most revealing contestation being an exchange between Margot Badran and Asma Barlas. Badran promotes Islamic feminism as an analytic construct, while Barlas resists Badran's characterization of her work thus. Reading works by feminist Muslim scholars has been a source of comfort and hope that certain community practices of Islam can be improved. As a practicing Muslim who is uncomfortable with many practices within the Muslim community and the religious justifications backed up with Quran and Hadith used for those practices, reading works by feminist Muslim scholars, activists and artists has been a source of comfort and hope that certain community practices can be challenged and improved through faith-rooted efforts. As I've explored the space of progressive Muslim writings in general and feminist ones in particular, I've come to like a few in particular that I'd like to share with you. 1. Sexual Ethics and Islam by Dr. Kecia Ali.