



ESSAYS

**Multiple Critique:  
Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies**

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The authors of the 1998 Sisterhood Is Global Institute manual for the elimination of violence against women and girls in Muslim societies declare: “The most important feature of contemporary Muslim women’s struggle for rights is that they reject the proposition that they cannot be both free and equal with men and good Muslims at the same time. This they deny. On the contrary, they insist that a woman becomes an authentic Muslim only when she has achieved freedom and equality as an individual and citizen” (Afkhami, Nemiroff, and Vazir 1998, 7). Some Muslim women today are claiming the right to freedom and equality with men at a time when they seem to the outsider to be so far from both. In this essay, I shall identify who these women are and how they are constructing new identities and negotiating a new presence in places where before they had been invisible.

Social, economic, military, and political failures in postcolonial Arab countries have galvanized reactionary religious responses to Western domination and globalization and the corrupt values they are thought to spread. Islamist groups from Morocco to Bahrain are calling for the establishment of an Islamic state governed by Islamically sanctioned gender norms and values. How and why are women dealing with the growing conservatism in their communities? How do Islamic feminists adapt their convictions that women have certain rights with the perceived need to subsume them to the community interest? How will the ways in which they

position themselves to assert responsibility for the construction of their own new religious identity change the face of Islam?

Why do I use the word *feminism* when many object to its Western, activist, and even separatist associations? I do so because I believe that feminism is much more than an ideology driving organized political movements. It is above all an attitude, a frame of mind that highlights the role of gender in understanding the organization of society. Feminism provides the analytical tools for assessing how expectations for men's and women's behavior have led to unjust situations, particularly but not necessarily only for women. Feminism provides a crosscultural prism through which to identify moments of *awareness* that something is wrong in the expectations for women's treatment or behavior, of *rejection* of such expectations, and of *activism* to effect some kind of change.

None of these three terms is teleological. They are not progressive stages that culminate in their totality. Put otherwise, the activist has not necessarily first understood how the situation she is working to change has been damaging to women. She may never have said no to anyone before she joined a movement. Activism might precede awareness. So might rejection. Awareness might never develop beyond itself; rejection might never be informed by a specific agenda. Activism might never pass through the negativity of rejection and remain positive and focused on constructing new systems.

If feminism can be many changing states of consciousness, each reflecting women's understanding of themselves and their situations as related to their social and biological conditions, then it is not bound to one culture. It is no more Arab than it is American, no more Mediterranean than it is Northern European. Feminism seeks justice wherever it can find it. It is this definition of feminism that I am using.

### Islamic Feminist Rhetoric

Most Muslim women would reject the term *feminist* as Western and neoimperialist. Some Western feminists, on the other hand, will reject outright the possibility of women working subversively within a deeply patriarchal institution. However, the separatist option they advocate would likely change little while they create their alternative, segregated, and probably irrelevant worlds. Separatism is not an option for Islamic feminists who believe in the possibility of creating the conditions in which multiple identities, including the religious, can coexist in safety and with dignity.

Islamic feminists are choosing to work within the systems that are trying to marginalize them. Is it not more significant that some Muslim women are today becoming publicly visible and audible “*in ways that were earlier unobtainable to them and on conditions they define and choose for themselves . . .*” than the specific characteristics of the associations they partake in when it comes to promoting women’s empowerment in a long term perspective” (Ask and Tjomsland 1998, 7; emphasis added)? Yet outsiders continue to see Muslim women and especially those within Islamist movements as victims. Few are exploring what lies behind their apparent capitulations. Dutch anthropologist Wilhelmina Jansen (1998, 86), however, warns against the unthinking dismissal of women as victims when they “take over the idiom of their oppressors and limit their freedom of dress and movement, simplify reality and exalt their domestic activities.” Their behavior tells more than the story of what they are doing, it provides a way to understand “the rise of Islamism and the meaning of Islam for women’s identity.”

During the past decade, some women in Muslim communities have been asserting their identities as feminists concerned with Islamic epistemology. Saying no to those who claim to speak for them, these Islamic feminists are engaging in public debate about the proper roles and duties of Muslim men and women. Who are these Islamic feminists? What do I mean by “Islamic feminists”? Are Islamic feminists creating a space of power as they emerge from the margins into representation?

Many would protest that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron. Is it? Or is it rather emblematic of the ways in which postcolonial women elsewhere also are jockeying for space and power through apparently incompatible, contradictory identities and positions? The term Islamic feminism invites us to consider what it means to have a double commitment: to a faith position on the one hand, and to women’s rights both inside and outside the home on the other. The label *Islamic feminist* brings together two epithets whose juxtaposition describes the emergence of a new, complex self-positioning that celebrates multiple belongings. To call oneself an Islamic feminist is *not to describe a fixed identity but to create a new, contingent subject position*. This location confirms belonging in a religious community while allowing for activism on behalf of and with other women. This linking of apparently mutually exclusive identities can become a radical act of subversion. In the introduction to his study of identity construction in what he calls the Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy ([1993] 1996, 1) writes that people

who occupy the space between identities that “appear to be mutually exclusive trying to demonstrate their continuity” are engaged in “a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination.”

Those who position themselves as Islamic feminists, even when they do not explicitly label themselves thus, may well be political subordinates. They are refusing the boundaries others try to draw around them. They are claiming that Islam is not necessarily more traditional or authentic than any other identification nor is it any more violent or patriarchal than any other religion. They are claiming their right to be strong women within this tradition, to act as feminists without fear, so that they may be labeled Western and imitative. They are highlighting women’s roles and status within their religious communities while at the same time declaring common cause with Muslim women elsewhere who share the same objectives. They are linking their religious, political, and individual gender identities in order to claim simultaneous and sometimes contradictory allegiances even as they resist globalization, local nationalisms, Islamization, and the pervasive patriarchal system.

Islamic feminist performances and practices are situated somewhere on a continuum between the ascribed identity of “Muslim” and the achieved identity of “Islamist.” To be a Muslim is to be born into a particular religious community, to carry an identity card that fills in *Muslim* next to the category “religious identity.” Those to whom a Muslim identity is ascribed participate in a Muslim culture and community without necessarily accepting all of its norms and values. Muslims might be secular, occasionally observing some ritual—for example, fasting for the month of Ramadan while not necessarily praying regularly. Muslims might even be atheists. Islamists, on the other hand, achieve their sometimes militant identity by devoting their lives to the establishment of an Islamic state. The Islamic identification connotes another form of achieved identity, one which is highly volatile and contingent. “Islamic” bridges the two poles of Muslim and Islamist identifications. It describes a particular kind of self-positioning that will then inform the speech, or the action, or the writing, or the way of life adopted by someone who is committed to questioning Islamic epistemology *as an expansion of their faith position and not a rejection of it*. Someone who writes a novel or a memoir as an Islamic feminist may choose another speaking position when she gives a speech or writes an essay. An excellent example is Zaynab al-Ghazali. As leader of the Egyptian Muslim Ladies’ Association, the female counterpart of the Muslim Brothers, she positioned

herself as a gender-neutral Islamist in her Quranic exegesis (1994), but as an Islamic feminist in her prison memoirs ([1977] 1986).

Whenever Muslim women offer a critique of some aspect of Islamic history or hermeneutics, and they do so with and/or on behalf of all Muslim women and their right to enjoy with men full participation in a just community, I call them Islamic feminists. This label is not rigid; rather it describes an attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women.

Islamic feminists are objecting to the fact that the Qur'an has been interpreted and history has been recorded and passed down almost exclusively by men. Egyptian-American historian Leila Ahmed (1999) adds another layer to male domination of the religious sphere: men have excluded women not only from the production of history and hermeneutics, but also from the spaces of religion. Thus emerged two Islams, one for women and another for men. Women worked out their own understandings of Islam "as a broad ethos and ethical code and as a way of understanding and reflecting on the meaning of one's life and of human life more generally"; whereas men's official, arcane, mostly medieval Islam, "in which sheikhs are trained," paid little mind to what is central to women: "Mercy, justice, peace, compassion, humanity, fairness, kindness, truthfulness, charity" (Ahmed 1999, 126).

Women's protest against male hegemony in the production of official Islamic knowledge is not new. In the 1920s, the Lebanese author Nazira Zayn al-Din (1908–1976) noted with dismay in her *Unveiling and Veiling* (1928) and its sequel *The Girl and the Shaykhs* (1929) that Islamic prescriptions for women have been historically framed by men. In 1998, the Syrian critic Bouthaina Shaaban edited and reissued these texts. In her introduction she points out that although these books were very well received at the time of their publication, within less than fifty years this woman's radical interpretations—the first of their kind—had fallen out of circulation. Why? Because they posed harsh questions about social norms and juridical practices that male authorities had both shaped and perpetuated (Zayn al-Din 1998, 15, 32). In the view of feminists concerned with Islamic discourse, women should have equal access to scriptural truth, and their works are showing what difference the gender of the author makes.

Scholars and social commentators agree that if women opt out of these debates, the only texts on the market will be those that insist on the need to hide women's shameful bodies. In order to enter public discourse and to debate effectively without fear of being silenced, women

must position themselves beyond their immediate circumstances. Rooted in their specific places but speaking out transnationally as part of the world Muslim community, they are more likely to have an impact because their interventions cannot be so easily silenced by kin or other authorities opposed to their message. How can they find this speaking position that is both local and global? How does engagement with the norms and values of Islam as a cultural and religious practice and discourse allow for transnational self-positioning? In what follows, I argue that Islam provides the symbolic capital for the construction of such an apparently contradictory rhetorical space.

### The Transnationalism of Islam

Religions theoretically transcend geographical boundaries. This is particularly true for Islam. Its very material connection to Arabia, where it found its beginnings, provides unusual possibilities for constructing a territorialized transcultural identity. Until the emergence of the modern nation-state, religion often assumed primary importance in indigenous self-identification as civic rights came to be associated with religion. For example, in the Maghreb, the colonized Muslim and Jewish communities assumed the characteristics of national cultures; they were *musulmans* or *juifs indigenes* and not Algerians, Tunisians, or Moroccans. To be Jewish meant at a certain stage that one qualified for French citizenship. The Muslims did not. When the French government gave Jews in the Hexagon as well as in the colonies preferential treatment by progressively assigning them French citizenship, they complicated national-political loyalties established over centuries of coexistence. The French racialized and politicized religion, turning what had been transnational into an ethnocultural affiliation that coincided with geography and history. In other words, religion became the key element in indigenous identity. In the postcolonial period, the memory of belonging was that of belonging to a religion. Islam has served as a kind of spiritual, ritual nation, which then provided the site of resistance to the West and above all to Western notions of “progress.” This was the rhetoric then, during the fight for independence; it is the rhetoric today.

Islam provides the symbolic capital otherwise unavailable to many of today’s new nations. In contrast with their claims for pure blood, Muslims can invoke and indeed do have easy access to the pure origins of the Muslim nation. No matter how contaminated by local domination, Muslims seeking an unadulterated past have scripture as a recourse. Islam as a religion may evolve and change as interpretations of its texts proliferate, but the *sources*

of these interpretations remain intact. The Muslim nation is an expedient invention whose obliteration is safe from the anxiety produced by territoriality. When the Muslim nation disintegrates, its citizens may and often do retain the religious tag, but it is demoted into second position, its “essence” sublimated into the spiritual realm. As new borders are drawn, Muslim communities may find themselves politically split while remaining culturally and symbolically connected to coreligionists with whom they continue to live through a transnational imaginary. At home in the border zones that have assured actual and cultural survival, they are like today’s migrants and refugees. Unlike them, however, they have not *become* migrants moving constantly across national borders; rather, this geographically flexible identity, which oscillates between diaspora and origin, characterizes Muslim identity.

Muslims can think transnationally while continuing to live locally, recognizing themselves as citizens of the world while retaining deep connections with a specific place, whether it be of birth, of choice, or of compulsion. Travel and cosmopolitanism are a necessary part of all Muslims’ spiritual and material identities, as Eickelman and Piscatori (1990, 5) explain:

Muslim doctrine explicitly enjoins or encourages certain forms of travel. One is the express obligation to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). Another, *hijra*, is the obligation to migrate from lands where the practice of Islam is constrained to those where in principle no such constraints exist. Visits to local or regional shrines (*ziyaras*) and travel in search of knowledge (*rihla*) provide further examples of religiously inspired travel. Yet other forms of travel unrecognized in doctrine can have equal or even greater significance. For example, Muslims have often mixed travel for trade purposes with religiously motivated travel.

Travel, whether literal or symbolic, always anticipates return to “a mythical realm where home, the ‘fixed point’ of departure and return, is reimaged and further travel inspired” (xiii). Travel, in whatever sense, is therefore a necessary part of every Muslim’s daily reality, and “has contributed significantly to shaping the religious imagination in both the past and the present”

(xvi). Islam's insistence on actual and symbolic travel allows for simultaneous self-positionings in the local and the global and then back to another local, in the present and the past and then back to a transformed present.

Muslims have two apparently contradictory stories with territory. The first is transnational and deterritorialized. Pointing *forward*, it narrates social fragmentation and occasional consociations. Muslims are scattered throughout most countries of the world; they are not members of a single nation. At least once in the lifetime of each Muslim there is awareness of this radical internationalism, when the individual performs the sacred duty of pilgrimage to Mecca. During the month of the *hajj*, Muslim pilgrims from all corners of the world, each national group in its national delegation, converge on two Saudi Arabian cities. Mecca and Medina become microcosms of the multicultural Muslim world.

The second Muslim story is national and, looking *backward*, it roots itself in a specific territory. Despite the fact that they are citizens of most countries of the world, Muslims can invoke the unifying politics of *umma*, known in the modern period as pan-Islamism. In so doing, they link the transnational with the national story by projecting themselves as the "diaspora" of a seventh-century bedouin tribe in the Arabian Peninsula. This diaspora has been held together by its historical links with this simulative origin. These links have been forged through the Arabic language. Although they are overwhelmingly non-Arab, and few Muslims outside the Arab world know Arabic beyond an acquaintance with scripture, Muslims' common identification, their cultural nation, is a text, the Qur'an, God's word revealed in Arabic. For the elite, social hierarchy underscores the Arabia-centeredness of Islamic identity. To be *sharif*, or noble, in Muslim terminology is to be able, wherever one was born and lives, to trace roots back to a single place and a single language, those of the Prophet and his family. Genealogy thus becomes another deterritorialized means of connecting to place. Placed within this context of founding Muslim national, genealogical, and linguistic heritage, the *hajj* may be interpreted as something other than the exceptional gathering of different races, ethnicities, and cultures in two Saudi Arabian cities. It can be seen rather as an occasion when Indonesians, Americans, and Senegalese join their Arab cousins to make the sentimental journey "home" to Mecca, a return they daily anticipate when they orient themselves toward Mecca to perform their five daily prayers.



### Multiple Critique

How can women take advantage of this transnational/national, at once historical and ahistorical Muslim identity without risk of being silenced because they are women? How can they critique the global system, their own political regimes, and religious and family contexts and the patriarchal vein that runs through them all and still remain wary of others' desires to coopt their struggle? Can they do all this and retain historical agency while being considered loyal and effective citizens in each domain? I believe that they can because of the specific strategies some of them are developing, which I call "multiple critique."

I have a double hypothesis underlying the term *multiple critique* that I have coined to describe Islamic feminists' critical rhetorical strategies. First, women who have been consistently marked as victims and who have only recently started to speak for themselves may be able to situate themselves transnationally because of the global nature of the institutions with which they have had to contend. Second, women who have learned as feminists to form principled and strategic alliances which allow them to balance their religious, specifically Islamic loyalties with national, local, class, ethnic, or any other allegiances may be able to invent a contestatory, but also enabling, discourse within the global context that will not be easily coopted. They may thus initiate new forms of conversations across what were previously thought to be unbridgeable chasms.

Since the end of the cold war, Arab intellectuals have been pre-occupied with the problem of how to position themselves in a globalizing universe without submitting to the violent politics of extremist religious movements. The Tunisian philosopher Fathi Triki (1998) points to the dangers that postcolonial Arabs face as they try to find themselves a niche in the global economy. He warns against the uncontextualized invocation of collective identities such as Islamism, Arabism, Nasserism, or Baathism. Without a clear sense of who they are beyond the slogan, these groups may slip into identitarian politics (Triki 1998, 18, 47), thereby running the risk of self-destruction. It is essential for them to learn how to situate themselves in this "new geo-political landscape of a world that remains divided, contested and conflicted." Sloganeering as self-affirmation is "not a way of avoiding transnationalism or of opposing globalization," especially if it happens in what Triki calls "a dangerous void" (14). The challenge, he writes, is to be free and responsible individuals who belong and submit to the values of their various communities.

Islamic feminists may be the ones best equipped to take up Triki's challenge because they are learning how to balance their collective and individual identities while interacting with multiple others. They are beginning to play the pivotal role Homi Bhabha (1994, 163) has claimed for marginalized groups as they emerge from unexpected places, position themselves in the world, affirm their identities and thus disturb "the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification." I am not trying to make an essentialist argument based on gender and race exceptionalism. What I am interested in is how a subalternized group can assume its essentialized representations and use them strategically against those who have ascribed them. I am examining the ways in which Islamic feminists, like black Atlantic activists, are navigating those spaces between what appear to be essential, mutually exclusive identities. Demonstrating their continuity, they are engaging in what Gilroy ([1993] 1996, 1) called "a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination."

I have come to believe that the effectiveness of Islamic feminists' critique is connected with Arab women's multiple representations as "victims" of transnational systems. First, and like women elsewhere, they are victims of gender relations which benefit men. Second, and like their male counterparts, they are struggling with the problems and challenges left behind by colonial rule. The European colonizers may have left Arab soil, but they also left behind a burden of colonial legacies that link different Arab nations vis-à-vis a global system that may or may not include them in its purview. Women are peculiarly vulnerable where their men are most threatened. Finally, the growing prominence of Islam in world politics has drawn attention to the ways in which Islamist groups use women as passive cultural emblems. Women's responsibilities and images in the new Islamic systems are symbolically foregrounded and then pragmatically relegated to the political margins. Rejecting this characterization of their experiences as victimization, even as they benefit from the fact that the victim is innocent of charges of domination and exploitation, a growing number of Islamic feminists are becoming politically active as women on behalf of women. They are developing a *multiple critique*, a multilayered discourse that allows them to engage with and criticize the various individuals, institutions, and systems that limit and oppress them while making sure that they are not caught in their own rhetoric.

The term *multiple critique* derives from two others: the Moroccan cultural critic Abdelkebir Khatibi's concept of *double critique* and the African American sociologist Deborah K. King's "multiple consciousness."

In *Maghreb Pluriel* (1983), Khatibi describes the ways in which postcolonial subjects have evolved an oppositional discourse that simultaneously targets local and global antagonists. In all of his writings, Khatibi focuses on duality and how it can be dialectically mobilized. By injecting gender into his local/global critiques we can imagine a third critique that moves beyond the binary. This third is not numerical but epistemological, because it opens out onto a multiplicity that resolves the problem of mutual exclusivity—one which includes religious zealots and religious others, foreigners, homophobes, and women with different histories. In her essay “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology,” King (1995, 299) describes the “multiple jeopardy” of black women who have become invisible in contemporary American oppositional politics. They are “marginal to both the movements for women’s liberation and black liberation irrespective of our victimization under the dual discrimination of racism and sexism.” She concludes with the assertion that black women who have been characterized as victims are in fact challenging the various systems that oppress and exclude them. She does not, however, describe how such an oppositional praxis might work.

In view of the similarities between black American women’s experience of marginalization, as they fall through the cracks of race and gender, and the condition of postcolonial Arab Muslim women, I use the insights provided by King’s notions of multiple jeopardy and multiple consciousness, itself derived from W. E. B. DuBois’s “double consciousness.” There is, however, a major difference between the historical experiences of black women in the United States and Muslim Arab women under colonial rule. Whereas women of African descent brought into the slavery economy of North America were crucially important to its flourishing and have been remembered as such, Muslim Arab women were separated from the spaces occupied by the European colonizers and then systematically excluded from collective memory, except as outsiders to colonial history.

Angela Davis (1995) describes the pain of African women’s centrality to the entire community, where they were exposed to white men’s desires and black men’s frustrations. At the heart of both white and black households, they became the bridge between the two, a crucial conduit for information and sometimes for resistance. Additionally, they provided “the *only* labor of the slave community that could not be directly and immediately claimed by the oppressor” (Davis 1995, 205). To survive, these women became so strong and intimidating that black men came to refer to them in

derogatory terms as matriarchs. The label has stuck and, according to Davis, many black women today still feel obliged to control their assertiveness.

In 1985, Beth E. Richie (403) declared that the political agenda has to “begin in our homes, our heads, and mostly our hearts to identify the ‘traps’ of loyalty. We must demand equality in our communities and in our relationship with black men.” This is precisely what Arab Muslim feminists are doing, but for them the task is not as charged because of their very different historical experience. Far from being at the epicenter of their own communities, or that of the colonizers, they were always on the margins. That this should be the case is due to the special circumstances surrounding colonialism in Muslim Arab countries. Unlike slave owners in North America, the European colonizers in the Muslim Arab world found themselves obliged to respect the line that separated the private from the public. To be able to rule the men effectively, they had to leave the women in their segregated spaces. The Europeans interacted with or, better, controlled the Muslim men outside their homes. Women’s autobiographies and fiction, as well as court records, describe a place of privacy where the colonizer could not go. There are no stories of European men raping Muslim Arab women. As Lebanese critic Mai Ghossoub (1987, 4) writes, “What better symbol of cultural identity than the privacy of women, refuge *par excellence* of traditional values that the old colonialism could not reach and the new capitalism must not touch? The rigidity of the status of women in the family in the Arab world has been an innermost asylum of Arabo-Muslim identity.” What is germane to my argument in the story about segregated spaces is not their workings as a domain of male domination, but rather their impenetrability to all outsiders, including, especially, European men.

Muslim women, inasmuch as that label implies a colonial identification that is other than that of Muslim men, are not necessarily locked into the postcolonial dynamic of the global system. Because of their marginality under colonialism, their relationship with global capital and culture is attenuated. They are more likely than men to find ways of inventing a humanist nationalism and of holding on to communal, national, and international belonging that do not entail charges of treachery, complicity, or self-sacrifice.

While women’s spaces became the heart of the authentic, ahistorical, uncontaminated Muslim nation, the men were locked into a relationship with the colonizers. This relationship persists and influences men’s choices and behaviors. Because of their disparate histories due to the radically different positioning of women in slave and colonial economies, as well as the

transnationalism of their religious and political affiliations, Arab Islamic feminists have been able to go beyond multiple consciousness to multiple critique. They are inventing new ways of contesting multiple forms of marginalization and silencing.

### **Veiled Strategies**

The veil is playing a role in these contestations. The veil, however, is many things. It may be a traditional, culturally diverse form of body or face covering, or it may be a modern, fashionable form of dress, or it may be a kind of severe political uniform. Despite the wide variety, the veil is often reduced to a simple symbol. For the outsider, it is the emblem of Muslim women's oppression and marginalization. While this may be accurate in the cases where women did not choose to veil, it is not necessarily true for those who have chosen to mark themselves out religiously. For many of these women, the veil can be empowering.

How can this be, when stories of Muslim women's victimization are on the increase? In reactionary Muslim countries like Algeria, Sudan, and Afghanistan, women are told, and, beyond them, the world is told that they must not be seen. An extreme example is the case of women living under the rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan. They are reportedly evicted from the streets, schools, and offices, except in dire necessity, and only then when they wear the *burqa*, an all-encompassing cloth that hides the women's heads and bodies. The sinister consequences of this edict came out in a 20 July 1998 National Public Radio program that reported the death of a girl too poor to afford the veil that would allow her to walk through the streets to her doctor.

The increasing visibility of veiled women in Muslim societies, and indeed elsewhere, is playing an important role in the political sphere. At a symbolic level, women wearing the veil highlight the specific ethos of the community in which they live and function: these are pious people who disapprove of public displays of sexuality, particularly when connected with women. Muslim women's public prominence is not only symbolic, it is actual. The more Muslim women are policed, the more visible they become. It is often the women themselves—some of whom may be feminists—who make the religio-political decision when they adopt the veil. Unlike the traditional covering, the political veil marks a woman as religiously observant.

In her study of the lives of lower-middle-class women in Cairo who have been veiling since the 1970s, Arlene Macleod (1991) opens up

a new way to understand the contradictions involved in the assumption of the veil in a modernizing society. Without in any way minimizing the religious importance of the decision to veil, she points out the socioeconomic constraints that come into play in this decision. She explains that these Cairene women must work if they and their families wish to retain their precarious lower-middle-class status. In the growing conservatism of their environment, working women must beware of the accusation of moral looseness when away from their homes. Wearing the veil assures everyone that these women will not be harassed in the streets and in the workplace, but also that they have become honorable women.

The veil in this late-twentieth-century context is riddled with contradictions. It marks the piety of the individual and of the society by reinforcing women's traditional role as cultural custodians, at the same time that it facilitates educational and professional activities. The veil imprisons and liberates. But—and most importantly for the purposes of my argument—the veil is an item of clothing that each woman chooses daily, or is forced to choose, in awareness of the symbolic baggage it carries. As she looks at herself in the mirror in the morning to hide her hair and adjust the cloth, this Muslim woman daily reaffirms the fact that her body marks her out morally and sexually—in other words, as a religious and as a female person. Daily, this veiled woman has a multiple consciousness of herself, as she sees herself, as her community sees her, and as outsider men and women see her.

### **Critical Networks**

Consciousness, however, does not in itself provide protection against ascription and consequent controls on behavior and movement. Arab Islamic feminists are recognizing how their bodies are being used in this struggle over control of public space. They know that they must assume responsibility for naming themselves and assigning their own meanings to their appearance and actions if they are to participate in the construction of a new society based on justice for all. They know also that to succeed they must join forces with others. Coalition building and networking are vital but risky. There are many with whom they may at some point have to work but whose motives they may have reason to suspect, none more than other women, those of their compatriots who are secular—but above all white Western feminists.

The challenge is how to collaborate on behalf of women “without losing the specificity of the concrete struggles of different women” (Connolly and Patel 1997, 381). Their concern to remain imbedded in their

own cultural, religious, and political realities has made Islamic feminists suspicious of appeals to universal feminist activism, which smack of Western cultural imperialism. Told by generations of men that to fight for women's rights was to line up with Western imperialist women and to betray their culture, they have had to tread very carefully in their relations with women from Europe and the United States. In a context shaped by colonial legacies, women retaining the memory of colonial practices of racialization and subjugation—even if they were not direct targets—may never fully trust the motives of those coming from the erstwhile empire, may doubt the possibilities of finding a common project that will make everyone feel they share a stake in its success. Even if they seem to agree on antipatriarchal goals, how can Algerian and Tunisian women confronting fundamentalism at home trust the French granddaughters of their previous colonizers who insist that they demand their rights and confront their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons? How can Egyptian and Sudanese women struggling with the problem of female genital mutilation trust American women who demand its abolition, even if they be of African heritage?

It is in withstanding the dictates of systems unfriendly to women, but remaining in these same communities, that Islamic feminists demonstrate most vividly how multiple critique works. They have recognized the importance of networking at all levels, but also the risks that such alliances present, because to be with one group may entail apparent and involuntary opposition to another. At one moment the gender identity of the group may be under fire but the religious identity be strong, and then criticism of misogynist behavior may be possible. This would be true, for example, when Islam has become a powerful political protagonist and when resistance to Westernization is strong—this opposition being underwritten by the mobilization of women's bodies to accent the group's rejection of Western values. At another point, the religious identity of the group may be vulnerable but the gender identity strong, and it is then that Islamic feminists will join with their men to assert an oppositional religious-cultural identity.

Islamic feminists' multiple consciousness allows them to consider the possibilities of alliances others might reject. Some scholars argue that religion gives observant women the tools to construct alliances that secular women may not trust. The Iranian critic Afsaneh Najmabadi (1998) suggests that Islamic feminists in Iran are beginning to build bridges of which secular women dare not dream. This is the case because Islam has been

construed by secular women as repressive of women's rights and aspirations. These women reject contemporary Islam as a misogynist, extremist religion. This Islam, retort Islamic feminists, is the religion of a very small, if vocal, minority. It is a politics adopted by individuals who have seen no other way of flourishing in the modern world and of saying no to Western hegemony. Some clearly have used the power they have gained from the success of their anti-West position to harm coreligionists. This is not the Islam to which Islamic feminists pay allegiance. The Islam they invoke is the internationally significant political player, but also the individual faith system that eschews violence as it seeks to manage both internal and external conflict. It is only from within this global, political, and religious system that new visions of Islam can be invented.

In her analysis of the Iranian *Zanan*, an Islamic and explicitly feminist journal founded in 1992, Najmabadi describes the writers who engage in scriptural interpretation as "public intellectuals." Reading the Qur'an as women, they aim not merely to produce new legal interpretations for a small group of religious scholars, but rather to "awaken women so that they will proclaim their rights" and thus transform society (Najmabadi 1998, 72, 66, 71). By juxtaposing religious texts of all sorts with Western feminist writings they are confusing the "comforting categories of Islamic and secular [and are making] West and East speak in a new combined tongue in dialogue with rather than as negating of each other." Their radical interpretations are reconfiguring space in such a way that "women of different outlooks can have a common stake" (77).

From within, Islamic feminists are able to recognize the danger of which the African American feminist Barbara Smith had warned in 1980: political separatism. A single group representing only its own interests will not "topple a system by itself. Forming principled coalitions around specific issues is very important. You don't necessarily have to like or love the people you're in coalition with . . . what *I* feel is radical is trying to make coalitions with people who are different from you" (Smith and Smith 1981, 126). This is what Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF) is doing in Britain today. Mobilized by the 1989 Rushdie affair, which heightened the sense of communalism in Britain, a group of South Asian, Jewish, Irish, and Iranian women came together as WAF. Despite utterly different histories, they share an agenda to resist the dangers posed by politicized religious regimes at the communal level, dangers which were tolerated at the national level where the established church has such a privileged position (Connolly and Patel 1997, 386).



Islamic feminists are not afraid to take on the multiple challenges to their right to seek their own well-being, even when they feel they must criticize their men, and they know that such criticism risks being labeled cultural betrayal. Taking advantage of the cognitive dissonance in the label “Islamic feminist” they can ally themselves with the “good” Islamic community and against patriarchal distortions of the values and norms of the founding Muslim nation. These women are playing back to the men the strategies they themselves have long used in their anticolonial struggles: make the master accountable for the ethical discourse that his actions contradict. To be able to do so, some women are studying the same texts that men used to counter the secular West. When Western governments tout human rights and universal justice, Muslim men may respond by pointing to the 1981 Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, or by showing these Western moral arbiters how they consistently violate their own prescriptions. When Western powers are held at bay, Islamic feminists can demonstrate how these self-righteous authorities have done exactly the same—they have vaunted the social justice inherent in Islam, especially in connection with justice for women, yet they continue to treat women unfairly. Islamic feminists are declaring that yes, Islam is the ideal just society, but that social justice entails equality, dignity, and respect for all, including women.

### Conclusion

In a 1991 essay, the Caribbean-British cultural critic Stuart Hall ([1991] 1997, 183) wrote that the

most profound cultural revolution in this part of the twentieth century has come about as a consequence of the margins coming into representation—in art, in painting, in film, in music, in literature, in the modern arts everywhere, in politics, and in social life generally. . . . Paradoxically, marginality has become a powerful space. . . . New subjects, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, and new communities—all hitherto excluded as decentered or subaltern—have emerged and have acquired through struggle, sometimes in very marginalized ways, the means to speak for themselves for the first time. And the discourses of power in our society, the discourses of the dominant regimes, have been certainly threatened by this decentered cultural empowerment of the marginal and the local.

Surely Hall did not have Islamic feminists in mind when he wrote the above, yet they fit this description of the new subalterns who are finding their voices for the first time. As they come into representation from the margins, they are threatening the discourses of the dominant regimes.

Their history remains—must remain—subaltern, for it is in this subalternity that the ability to act effectively in the global system lies. This history that does not include them as objects of the colonial civilizing mission, that mentions them at most as resisters and survivors, calls into question the global narrative of the totality of European domination and allows these women to construct a pure, empty past they can fill with the kinds of experiences that allow them to be strong, oppositional, and loyal today.

Situating themselves at the nexus of religion, place, transnationality, and feminist practice, some women have collectively placed at the top of their political agenda women's right to examine the gendered formation of religious and local discourses, but always within a global framework. While challenging and deconstructing traditional interpretations of authoritative texts that have served to construct norms that exclude them as women, they continue to defend their transnational, religious, and national communities against detractors. They are asserting and also balancing multiple overlapping and sometimes contradictory allegiances while recognizing that others may ignore these plural identities and ascribe an entirely different communal belonging that would presume another allegiance. Yet they are less susceptible to surprise ascription because of their multiple consciousness of who they are and how others perceive them.

Multiple critique allows those who position themselves as Islamic feminists to speak effectively to, with, and against several audiences. Holding them in tension with each other, Islamic feminists complicate and undermine accusations of cultural betrayal. They reject silence and show it to be a form of acquiescence, capitulation, and abdication of their right to participate in the political process. Having created themselves as subjects of their own histories, they are relocating the knowledges that used to be produced about them. They are pointing to what fills those spaces left empty by official history. Islamic feminist discourse shows that multiple new centers/nodes are networking in those spaces where globalized culture is stopped in its teleological movement because it is forced to take account of local realities. Those moments of rupture and decentering allow for new configurations of Islam and feminism which *disturb the calculations of power and knowledge*.

When women choose to privilege their Muslim identity above others, they are transforming their particular, often marginalized, viewpoint into a universal by *strategically* labeling themselves utterly other while knowing that they are not. They are demonstrating how cosmopolitan individuals can belong to a number of different communities simultaneously while retaining the rights due them in all spheres, including the right to criticize these same communities. They do so as individual members of various groups, as citizens of their nations as well as of the world, and always as women.

In a world divided no longer by ideologies but rather by vague notions of civilizations in collision, conspiracy, and connections, it may be necessary to situate oneself transnationally in order to affirm oneself, to function effectively, and to reach out to others. Islamic identification provides such a transnational sense of belonging. While this identity can become the basis for a global movement of successful, if sometimes violent, contestation against the neoliberal values and aspirations of the United States and its allies, it also allows for the development of an effective strategy of resistance, engagement, and steadfastness that I have called multiple critique.

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