

## Islamic Feminism(s): A Very Short Introduction

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**Abstract:** *Contemporary Islamic feminisms, already quite diverse, deconstruct preceding Islamic interpretations, proposing more egalitarian re-readings and reconceptualizations of Islamic tradition while preserving the centrality of classical textual sources (Qur'an and Sunnah) as fundamental references, the valoric hierarchies being reorganized according to the principles of Islamic ethics. The integration of social, economic, and political analysis that explain power dynamics, alienation, marginalization, and the liberation of women is another defining dimension of Islamic feminisms. Some Muslim feminists plead for the preservation and the innovative exploitations of traditional jurisprudence's categories and purposes, while others propose a radical reform of the fundamentals of Islamic disciplines. Another category of Muslim feminists prefers to adopt and integrate the discourses, approaches, and terminologies of Western feminists; some translate these in the referential Islamic system, others import them and use them as such, sometimes even from a secular perspective. In the following article I will very briefly outline some of the main determinations of this complex contemporary phenomenon – Islamic feminism(s).*

**Key words:** Islamic feminism • reform • Muslim women • Qur'an • Islam

### **Introduction**

Islamic feminisms propose a series of more or less courageous reforms are disputed in the traditionalist and neo-traditionalist Islamic world. However, these feminisms, constructed within a general Islamic paradigm, are continuously developing new methods and interpretations, and their diversity allows them to be classified according to various criteria. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke identify three critical periods of feminism in the Arab world: (1) the period of invisible feminism, based on a critique of social gender roles, which take place from the beginning of the 1860s until the middle of the 1920s, especially in Egypt, where middle and upper class women expressed their ideas through literature and poetry; (2) the period of social activism, between the 1920s

and 1960s (in Egypt – 1920-1950; Lebanon, Iraq, Syria – 1930-1940; Sudan – 1950), marking a development of the organized, public feminist movements focused on recovering the rights of Muslim women; (3) the period of resurgent feminism, starting in the 1970s until present day. Through the distinction between visible and invisible feminism, Badran manages to steer clear of reducing feminism to an explicitly, exclusively public phenomenon, and manages to use it as an analytical framework inside of which diverse historical feminist experiences can be located and explained. Women's claims, specific to all these three types of feminism, were universal, focusing on the right to education, the right to work, to vote, to participate in elections, to be socially and politically involved, to travel freely, to eliminate gender segregation, as well as focusing on expansions of rights inside of the family, marriage, or, in case of divorce, mother's right to child custody.<sup>1</sup>

The "Islamic feminism" phrase became visible and was used more and more insistently in the 90s by the Iranian feminists involved in *Zanan* magazine, the Turkish Göle Nilüfer, Yesim Arat, Feride Acar, as well as the Saudi Mai Yamani<sup>2</sup>, in her collection of feminist articles from 1996, that offered the following definition: Islamic feminism represents the ideology which describes the discourse and the actions of those who protect women's rights within the context of authentic or well-understood Islam<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, critique of the *Islamic feminism* terminology emerged, from a double perspective: modern-secular – being denounced as an oxymoron – or Islamic-critical – meaning the actual status of Muslim women does not reflect the Quranic or prophetic tradition normative prescriptions, therefore the criticism belongs to the legitimate perspective of justice restoration (*'adl*), but does not belong to feminism as an ideology that is meant to serve the presumptions of a paradigm epistemologically different from the Tawhidic / Islamic one.

Regarding Islamic feminism, Moghissi Haideh does not contest, from a modern-secular perspective, the compatibility between the two ideologies, feminism being sufficiently varied and flexible to include the Islamic position. She does, however, contest Islamic feminism as the only culturally suitable solution for Muslim societies, as

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<sup>1</sup> Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, "Introduction". In *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), xv-xvii

<sup>2</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam. Secular and Religious Convergences*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 243-245

<sup>3</sup> Mai Yamani, "Introduction". In *Feminism and Islam. Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Mai Yamani (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 1-2

Muslim women being again reduced (as in the clearly disavowed orientalist scheme) to their “Islamic” identity, their regional, ethnical, religious, cultural, and class differences being ignored. Moreover, the political and discursive influence of Islamic fundamentalism is visible in the elitism of this approach and in the impairment of the secular, liberal, or socialist intellectuals’ agenda. Even though feminists from countries with fundamentalist, theocratic political regimes (Iran) have found inventive ways of rejecting official projects, their analyses, focused exclusively and functionally on the Islamic perspective indirectly legitimize the official discourse and ignore its negative consequences on women, religious minorities, ethnical minority groups, secular nationalists, and socialist intellectuals. Islamic feminism has its limits which need to be explored through a complicated and delicate process, not apologetically maintained; Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxis do not always support the theses of Islamic feminism. Equally essential and difficult is the articulation of a particular and complex specific feminist language, in a way that it would not allow it to be assimilated by the dominating discourse and subordinated by opposing tendencies. Moghissi concludes that this project is only possible through the creation of a space in which women and other socially excluded groups can create opposing interpretations, counter-discourses and heterogeneous policies, but theocratic regimes are always authoritarian.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, contemporary debates regarding feminism inside Islam or Islamic societies still have remained, at least in certain cultural spaces, strongly ideological, mainly because of the history of political conflicts and past disagreements between the West and the so-called Oriental space. The pressure created by the orientalist hegemonic discourse of oppression has limited the representation of women from Islamic cultures at the level of two intercorrelated experiences: the colonialist experience imposed by the hostile, insolent and anti-Islamic imperialist forces, and that of nationalist belligerents confined to a populist discourse, exclusively (therefore reactively) apologetic. The coercive force of the conceptual framework imposed by this major debate has consecrated Islamic gender issues to the intersection of the analyses about modernity and Islam; women have become the central subject of cultural loyalty policies, their interests and voice being ignored in the process. The artificially-created

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<sup>1</sup> Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism. The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*. (London & New York: Zed Books, 1999), 125-147

political and historical centrality of this gender theme, far from being flattering, paradoxically represents the monopolization of research in an analytic framework conditioned by the alien conceptual framework (of the secular perspective) or by the opportunistic and defensive neo-traditional Islamic one (of the Islamic revival nationalist movements). The nationalist and colonialist discourses, although anachronistic, continue to be contested, deconstructed and reiterated in a contemporary styling. Neglecting them leads to an inadequate comprehension of the generating causes of this superficial oscillation between two artificially constructed and supported ideological extremes, and, implicitly, of the redefinition and clarification of the gender debate in the current context. Summarizing very well the belligerent dynamics of this type of dialogue, Sa'diyya Shaikh underlines that the reactions of some Muslim scholars to the offensive orientalist discourses that, by presenting Islam as a fundamentally sexist religion, intended to undermine Islam itself, were unfortunately dominated by the same reductionism, detrimental to objective analysis, that generated the romanticization of the traditionalist Islamic perspective on Muslim women, exclusively presented as one responsible for the magnificent elevation of their status.<sup>1</sup>

Excessively apologetic tendencies of the traditionalists, neo-traditionalists and Salafis who rely on an opportunistic and selective perspective upon Islamic tradition are doubled by a vehement denunciation of Islamic feminist endeavors. Azza Karam considers feminist ideology as perceived through a narrow scheme of stereotypes in Arabic-Muslim post-colonialist societies. Feminism becomes associated with the enmity between men and women, with the immorality and promiscuity of women, with the colonialist strategy to undermine local religious and social culture. As such, feminism is attached to all these negative and condemnable aspects from the Western society, regardless of their cause and source.<sup>2</sup> A recent example of this type of attitude was the Muslim Brotherhood official reaction (Egypt, March 2013) to the CEDAW proposal, the discourse following the justification of refusing to adopt the egalitarian principles promoted by the organization eloquently evoking most of the rebarbative clichés presented above. The “deceptive” and “destructive” rights ensured by CEDAW were perceived as a threat to the family institution, Islamic community and as an equivalent

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<sup>1</sup> Sa'diyya Shaikh, “Transforming Feminism: Islam, Women and Gender Justice”. In *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 150

<sup>2</sup> Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 5-6

to a return to the period of ignorance (the pre-Islamic period), a violation of Shariah. Muslim women were hysterically urged not to abandon Islamic morality and principles.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, one of the widely-spread, reactive Muslim preconceptions is that feminism, be it even Islamic, represents a subversive manifestation of imperialism and neo-imperialism meant to destabilize local societies and destroy cultural identity, undermining the religious basis of family and society through its anti-Islamic, anti-nationalist, and elitist character. These accusations could be understood if we take into account the characteristics of the societies from where these Muslims hostile to feminism come, regardless of whether they are part of the religious elite or not: societies with a high rate of illiteracy, dominated by misogynist religious perspectives, hard to deconstruct in the context of the decisive impact religion has in defining identity and in regulating daily life. Muslim feminists need to face both these discursive attacks that sometimes develop into physical aggressions, assassination attempts (once the feminists are accused of apostasy), as well as the inheritance of past centuries' colonialism and current cultural imperialism<sup>2</sup>, recently manifested into the process of globalization, supported by neo-colonialist power structures which influence and direct not only the development of economy and politics, but of the sociology and fields related to the production of knowledge as well.<sup>3</sup>

Following this line of thought, Margot Badran identifies the mechanisms that allowed the discreditation of Muslim feminists and their association with agents of Western colonialism, comparable to the strategies of the nineteenth century colonialists who used the feminist discourse and missionary activities in order to justify political attacks against Islam and occupation. However, the author insists to underline that the above mentioned explanations are irrelevant in the context of contemporary debates, especially when taking into consideration the instruments and will of present day Muslim feminists.<sup>4</sup>

The way in which Islam is perceived, understood, assumed, and experimented is mediated by diverse nationalist, ethnical, economic, and cultural aspects, as there is no

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.amnesty.org.uk/blogs/womens-action-network-blog/alarmed-statement-muslimbrotherhood-egypt-cedaw-calling-it-against>

<sup>2</sup> Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, "Are We Up to the Challenge? The Need for a Radical Re-ordering of the Islamic Discourse on Women". In *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 143

<sup>3</sup> See also Majid Anouar, *Unveiling Tradition: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World*. (London: Duke University Press, 2000)

<sup>4</sup> Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and the Nation*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 24

monolithic Islamic identity, but a set of essential components of the belief, shared by the entire Muslim world. Maysam Faruqi considers the source of the Muslim female identity as conferred by the status of being a Muslim, which involves a choice dependent on a series of theological, spiritual and religious beliefs, unlike the other secondary dimensions of identity which are inevitable and given, like gender or race. Moreover, the author asserts, "(...) to discover the spirit of equality in Islam is not a *feminist* project, but the correct *Islamic* one. The status of women in Muslim communities is not given by Islam itself, but by the Islamic interpretations and the application of Islamic laws."<sup>1</sup> Kecia Ali adds another nuance to the debate and criticizes the phrase "the status of women in Islam", pointing out that the status of Muslim women is so diverse depending on class, ethnicity, age, geographical area, marital status, and education, that the generalization becomes nonsensical, regardless if it takes into account the actual experiences of women or the suppositions regarding an idealized uniform tradition, which grossly contradicts the complexity and the heterogeneity of real textual inherited interpretations. The fact that often this phrase is used to suggest the idea of an existing necessary correlation between Islam and certain specific injustices that would unrelentingly determine the life of all Muslim women should not be neglected.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary Islamic feminisms, already quite diverse, deconstruct the previous Islamic interpretations, proposing more egalitarian re-readings and reconceptualizations of the tradition while preserving the centrality of classical textual sources (Qur'an and *Sunnah*) as fundamental references, the valoric hierarchies being reorganized according to the principles of Islamic ethics. The integration of social, economic, political analysis that can explain power dynamics, alienation, marginalization, and the liberation of women is another defining dimension of Islamic feminisms. Some Muslim women feminists plead for the preservation and the innovative exploitations of traditional jurisprudence's categories and purposes, while others propose a radical reform of the fundamentals of Islamic disciplines. Another category of Muslim women feminists prefers to adopt and integrate the discourses, approaches and terminologies of Western feminists; some translate them in the referential Islamic

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<sup>1</sup> Maysam Al Faruqi, "Women's Self-Identity in the Quran and Islamic Law". In *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 74-76; 100

<sup>2</sup> Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 12-13 intro



system, others import them and use them as such, sometimes even from a secular perspective.

Together with feminists from other third world countries and by exploiting the facilities created by poststructuralism, postmodernism, during the last decades, Muslim women have contributed to redefining feminism by constructing multiple feminist epistemologies and by articulating alternative conceptualizations of women that include authentic self-representations of heterogeneous groups of women. Emphasizing the multiple identities of Muslim women and the major role played by the plurality of specific contexts in which they exist clarifies the complex and sophisticated aspects that determine gender analyses in the Muslim space. A defining premise of the feminist perspective is constituted by the presence of some simultaneous social identities of the gendered social subject, dynamic identities that inextricably overlap and are interconnected. According to Sa'diyya Shaikh, this fluid and dynamic understanding of feminism allows the integration of Islamic feminisms. It represents a classification that is beneficial to Muslim women who can integrate their practice in a global political environment through the formation of fruitful alliances and the creation of mutually advantageous exchanges and cultural interactions, regardless of whether they concern the feminist *praxis* in the sense of implementing the projects of the activists, or if they aim for the articulation of a common language and the knowledge of varied instruments of theoretical analysis. The author considers that according to this extended definition, the term "feminist" is "a description of Muslim women's activities that are aimed at transforming masculinist social structures". Islamic feminisms, organically rooted in the Islamic belief following their emergence as an answer to the fundamental Qur'anic call to ensure justice, promote a critical analysis of both sexist readings of Islam and their patriarchal manifestations within some specific religious communities, as well as of the neocolonialist feminist discourses regarding Islamic religion.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, gender studies focused on the analysis of the Islamic thought systems have strategically, theoretically, and empirically accepted an inter-disciplinary, trans-historical, and trans-national approach. We can conclude that Islamic feminisms materialize in various modalities the contemporary projects of proposing reforms compatible with Islamic idiom and perspectives and consequently they have to face the

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<sup>1</sup> Shaikh, *Transforming Feminism*, 154-156

same criticism, obstacles and rigors as the extended reforms in which they take shape as a specific application from a gender perspective.

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 New Series. Issue No. 4 (18)/ 2015