



**APPROACHING FEMINISM FROM THE MARGINS:
THE CASE OF ISLAMIC FEMINISMS**

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ABSTRACT

This article tries to contribute to one of the most relevant debates within the framework of current Gender Studies and feminist activism: the debate dealing with feminism and religions. The aim is to provide these reflexions with some theoretical elements that help us to better understand some of the complex issues of this field, such as the meaning of considering secular feminism as the only acceptable feminist model, and the possibilities of building one feminist movement that takes into account all the diversity of women's needs, wishes and oppressions. The author goes in depth these questions through the analysis of the "Islamic feminism", which takes an element as the religion (historically discarded by the European hegemonic feminism) as its starting point. Firstly, the article puts it in context by analysing "new feminist currents from the margins" that, in the eighties, started to question the ethnocentric and classist visions of an hegemonic feminism that concentrated their struggles on the concerns and interests of western, white, secular and middle class women, leaving aside the specific claims of other women's profiles. Afterwards, the article goes deep into the characteristics shared by the different Islamic feminist movements, its areas of work as well as its main purposes. Finally, it highlights some of the most important Muslim feminist thinkers and activists emerged in recent decades in the United States, Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

Is it rightful to affirm that no monotheistic religion can be liberating for women because all them contain in themselves a patriarchal and sexist discourse? Considering secular feminist model the only one acceptable, does it help to make progress in the achievement of women's rights around the world? Is it possible to built one feminist movement that takes into account all the diversity of women's needs, wishes and oppressions? These are some of the complex issues the current Gender Studies and feminist activism think about, especially in the field dealing with feminism and religions.

In this chapter, I will go in depth these questions through the analysis of the "Islamic feminism", which takes an element as the religion (historically discarded by the European hegemonic feminism) as its starting point. Firstly, it will be put in context by analysing new feminist currents from the margins that, in the eighties, started to question the ethnocentric and classist visions of the hegemonic feminism. Afterwards, the chapter will go deep into the characteristics shared by the different Islamic feminist theories and movements, as well as its origins, areas of work and main purposes. Finally, I will highlight some of the most important Islamic feminist thinkers and activists emerged in recent decades in the United States, Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia.

1. FEMINISMS "FROM THE MARGINS"

In the eighties, while the historical feminist movement (based on the fight for educational and political rights) was being consolidated in many countries like Spain, new feminist currents in other countries (like the black feminism in the U.S.) started to redefine the hegemonic feminist theory and practice. These new and diverse currents have been named with different terms, such as "third wave of feminism", "postcolonial feminism" or "postmodern feminism". However, all of them shared one thing: the questioning of the ethnocentric and classist visions of an hegemonic feminism that concentrated their struggles on the concerns and interests of western, white, secular and middle class women, leaving aside the specific claims of other women's profiles. Although the so-called Islamic feminism appears later, it can be framed within these new feminist currents emerged "from the margins". Let's look at the characteristics shared by these new movements developed in last decades in different countries.

Characteristics

Firstly, they emphasize not only the differences and inequalities between men and women (the same as the dominant western feminism), but also the

differences and inequalities between women themselves based on their "race", religion and social class. They don't talk of "woman" but of "women".

Regarding their main claims, these new currents go beyond the traditional ones such as a secular state, sexual rights and access of women to the labour market, to propose new lines of thought and action that take into account the specific needs of African American women, Muslim women, lesbians or immigrants. Some of the issues addressed are: How can racism and classism influence in the building of gender experiences? Is it possible to practice a religion and to be feminist? Can immigrant women, low-class women or single mothers feel reflected in a supposedly "universal" model of feminism?

To these feminists, capitalism and current conditions of globalization are also widely criticized because, according to most of them, this hegemonic economic model tend to promote a new type of colonization of certain societies, and erase the particularities of "other" cultural, religious and social contexts. The concept of "border" is then a key category that allows them to collect the marginal and differentiated status of many women who don't feel represented by the mainstream currents developed in Europe and U.S.

Finally, the thought of these feminists is influenced especially by the work of Edward Said Orientalism, but also by Foucault's analysis of discourse and power, the deconstructionist thought of Gayatri Ch. Spivak and the postcolonial studies of Homi K. Bhabha. In fact, the reaction of these feminisms responds, among other factors, to the long tradition of racist and sexist discourses constructed by European colonization policies in order to reinforce differences between colonizers groups and colonized subaltern groups. For instance, the "wild colonized man" versus the "civilizing colonizer man", or the "women subjected to colonized men" versus the "western women protected by their husbands".

This differentiation between colonizing metropolis and the "wilderness" of the colonies was established largely around their different models of family. The colonial administration even defined what should be the ideal family model (with the white woman, mother and wife presented as the ideal of womanhood), when considering gender relations of the colonized people as cruel and unacceptable, especially for women (Nash et al., 2013). As it would happen more than a century later with the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the alleged harms done to the local women's rights became an essential argument to justify the invasion of these territories.

Tensions

Moreover, these feminist movements emerged from the margins share two kinds of tensions. On the one hand, they have tensions with a dominant western

feminism that speaks from a structural position of power and has succeeded in imposing its political agenda as the only valid schedule for the construction of gender equity in the world. The discourse of the advocate and Algerian feminist Wassyla Tamzali would be representative of this dominant feminism. According to her, "Islamic feminism is an oxymoron [...] Feminism is an ideology of liberation and Islam is obedience" (cf. Doria, 2011).

On the other hand, they have to deal also with nationalist and ethnic movements, which provide them spaces of resistance against colonial regimes of power (and/or against neoliberal globalization), but tend to engender at the same time constructions of an idealized femininity especially based on a conservative cultural structure of the tradition and a patriarchal and heterosexual family model. In fact, Chicano cultural nationalism and others such as the indigenous, the African and the Islamic ones are not only ideologies of cultural pride and racial or religious unity, but also gender constructions that regulate and control the bodies of women. In that sense, the Moroccan writer and feminist Fátima Mernissi has criticized not only the colonization, but also the nationalist movement's discourses about women's liberation, as well as the postcolonial state for its opportunistic use of Islam as a unifying discourse, its adoption of capitalism and its male-centred vision of development (cf. Rhouni, 2009). She has deplored, for instance, the fact that Moroccan nationalist movement claimed more political rights, but failed to take up the reform of the family code with the argument that "Islam was genuinely patriarchal".

Islamic feminism shares these tensions too. The Iranian Islamic feminist Ziba Mir Hussein summarizes in this way the three main oppositions "the feminist project in Islam" has to deal with: 1) The secular fundamentalists, who deny that any law or social practice based on religion may be just or equitable; 2) Muslim traditionalists, who resist any change in what they consider ways of eternal validity intangible sanctioned by the sharia; 3) and the Islamic fundamentalists, who try to change current practices by returning to what they claim to be a "pure" version of sharia through the establishment of an Islamic state (Mir Hussein, 2010).

Therefore, many Muslims maintain Islamic feminism has nothing to do with Islam, but using different arguments from secular feminists. One of the most used arguments is that the only intention of Islamic feminism is to destroy "from within" the traditional family unit, according to them, indisputable basis of the ideal Muslim society. However, this way of understanding Islamic feminism as a mere imitator of the most rancid secular feminism supposes, as it has been highlighted by Natalia Andújar (2014: 192), "to ignore the differences between them, to fake its native origin and to deny the great diversity existing within the secular feminism".

2. ISLAMIC FEMINISMS

Before analysing the origins and characteristics of the so-called Islamic feminism, it is important to clarify the meanings of the words "feminism" and "Islam", especially when, as happens in many societies, the association of both terms often causes amazement and even rejection. As we have seen briefly in the first part of the chapter, there are diverse theories and feminist positions, which have different political implications that are inserted in different historical contexts that evolve in turn. This historical and sociological dynamism shows how every definition of "feminism" should be subjected to constant revision.

Terminological issues

The term "Islam" is not univocal either. When mass media often raise debates about "the place of women in Islam" or about "the compatibility of Islam with feminism or democracy", is it possible to give a definitive closed answer? In the approach of these debates, it is implicitly assumed that "Islam" has a unique meaning; and few people wonder what dimension of Islam they are referring (a social, political or spiritual dimension), or at what point in history and where in they are talking about. The fact of identifying Islam as something ahistorical and monolithic leads to essentialist approaches that are not only conditioned by racist and sexist prejudices, but also are reductionist and does not help to understand the enormous complexity of social movements we studied (Navarro, 2008).

The relevance of the use of terms "Islamic feminism" is also controversial. In fact, some Muslim feminists are reluctant to come forward as "Islamic feminists" because of the negative charge involved in many Muslim majority countries where feminism is identified with colonialism and belligerent atheism. The position of Nadia Yassine, leader of the Moroccan Islamist organization al-Adl wa al-Ihssan (Justice and Charity), is representative of this position. However, other Muslim feminists claim their allegiance to the great feminist family, but by working within a religious framework, they need to contextualize their struggles with the adjective "Islamic". Despite these terminological differences (and indeed, strategic), as it is underlined by Natalia Andújar (2014: 173), all of these women "are joined by the belief that the Quran does not advocate patriarchy, and by the need to change discriminatory laws against women (laws made by men and not by divine inspiration)".

Origins

Islamic feminisms begin to become more and more visible in the nineties of the twentieth century. However, this does not mean that Muslim women did not

participate in associations or movements claiming for their rights before that date. As history shows, Egyptian women played a key role in the uprising against the British State in 1919. Later, in the 30s and 40s of the twentieth century, Arab women's organizations, led by Huda Shaarawi (founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union), created a pan-Arab union in which organizations of Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt planned conferences and supported organizations of Palestinian women, practicing in this way a proto "pan-Arab feminism". In the same way, thinkers like Aisha Abd al-Rahman (better known as Bint al-Sati) had already read the Quran some decades before the 90s in order to adapt it to her time and to contribute to Muslim women's emancipation. Even in the early days of Islam, as Andújar (2014: 176-177) explains, the *ummahat al-muminin* ("mothers of the believers", title which designate the Prophet's wives) not only contributed decisively to the interpretation of numerous passages of the Quran, but also were great *muhaddithât* (transmitters of hadith).

Nevertheless, it is only in the nineties when the term "Islamic feminism" starts to be used in a most usual way. For example, the South African Shamima Shaikh used it in her speeches and articles in the 90s. The Saudi scholar Mai Yamani in her book *Feminism and Islam* (published in 1996) and the Iranian writers of the magazine *Zanan* (founded in 1992) used it as well. Also in this decade, Turkish scholars, as Yesim Arat and Nilufer Gole, started to talk about "Islamic feminism" to refer to a new feminist paradigm that was emerging at that time in Turkey; and the first systematic productions by Islamic feminists as Amina Wadud started to be published. Before presenting the most representative figures of these Islamic feminisms, let's see how we can define Islamic feminism.

Definition

It is difficult to answer that question because there are many different currents inside Islamic feminism. However, all of them share one thing: the idea that the Quran can be a key source to question the patriarchal order. In this way, this feminism can be considered as a clear example of disruptive feminist approach, because it takes, as its starting point, an element that the European hegemonic feminism had discarded: the religion.

The Quranic hermeneutics of gender is, in fact, one of the main tools used by these feminists for their purposes. This hermeneutics has adopted three main approaches: 1) The revision of Quran verses in order to correct false stories that have been spread among most believers and used to justify male superiority (i.e., the verses about the Creation). 2) The search and value of Quran verses which unequivocally indicate equality between men and women. 3) The reinterpretation of other verses that have generally been interpreted in a way that justifies male superiority, but nevertheless can be examined in a new way that highlights its favourable elements to equality.

This kind of hermeneutics is part of the large feminist revision of the theology that other religions (including Christianity) have been experiencing for a few decades. According to Andújar (2014: 180), feminist hermeneutics "is a hermeneutics of suspicion: it shows that those traditional interpretations pretending to be neutral (mere transposition of the message of the Quran) were actually conditioned by the previous ideology of the readers". In the Islamic feminist discussion, some scholars choose to reject all those hadiths that contradict the Quran (it is the case of Fatima Mernissi), while other ones accept that some hadiths can be true but argue they must be taken into account within a historical context reflecting a patriarchal mentality (Saddiya Shaikh, Leila Ahmed).

In that sense, it is interesting to know, for instance, the deep study of Islamic classical texts conducted by Fatima Mernissi in her book *Political Harem* (2002) in order to analyze (and ultimately, to reject) many discriminatory hadith towards women, specially the famous hadith "A people guided by a woman not prosper". However, according to Andújar (2014: 181), "the fact of discarding some hadiths by that method, inevitably ends up reinforcing the discourse of authenticity because she follows the same logic. From her point of view, the aim should be to show the problematic nature of the authentication methodology made by the compilers of hadith, rather than simply showing that a particular hadith is invented. In other words, the goal should not be to prove the falsity of certain hadith, but to prove the hadiths cannot be taken as basis for legislation because they reflect the mentality of a particular time and they should not be normative.

Besides theology, many of these Islamic feminists are also using the social sciences in their work to counter sexist interpretations of the Quran and the Sunna, and to revise, in the light of the present circumstances, those aspects of the Quran that are not inherently discriminatory but would be linked to the situation of women in the time when the holy book was revealed.

That is why we can distinguish many areas of work of these Islamic feminists. Zahra Alí (2012) underlines three main areas. 1) One of them is, as we have just seen, the area dedicated to revise Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) and Quranic exegesis (tafsir) in order to refute the masculine and sexist readings of the texts. 2) A second one is focused on highlighting the role of women in the history of Islam and Muslim societies, as well as building knowledge by women and for women. 3) A third one, also very important, is dedicated to develop a feminist thinking about fundamental principles of justice and equality to contribute to reform the orthodox Muslim thought, and also the society.

Objectives

At the same time, feminists engaged in this kind of intellectual work do not have the same goals, hence again the relevancy of talking about "Islamic feminisms", in plural. Zahra Ali (2012) distinguishes three main positions. 1) The "traditional reformist": it is majority among the most egalitarian ulema (religious scholars) and defends the spiritual equality of women and men and conceives their roles, rights and duties as different but equivalent, not hierarchical. 2) The "radical reformist position": it stands up for returning to the fundamental principles of Islam in order to affirm the equality of men and women as subjects, without attributing social roles and functions differentiated. 3) The "liberal reformist position": it conceives Islam as a set of philosophical and ethical principles, which are lived and formulated subjectively beyond legal and formal requirements.

Although the different Islamic feminisms have different purposes, most share the aim of working for women's rights, from an individual point of view and from a social point of view. In fact, Islamic feminisms are based on a basic principle of Quranic ethics (the justice), which has to be applied not only to gender relations, but also to the social field in its broadest sense (economic, religious pluralism and democratic values). That is why these feminists attach a great importance to the education as an essential tool to fight for the Muslim women's rights.

3. ISLAMIC FEMINIST THINKERS AND MOVEMENTS

Islamic Feminisms have also global aspirations: they are interested not only in women living in Muslim majority countries (where they denounce discriminatory family codes), but also in all those Muslim women living in Western societies (where they claim for a social and political status with full rights). The priorities of social movements born from these feminisms are different depending on the contexts in which they are developed. However, within this diversity, there is an important nucleus of women that demands the same thing: full equality in all areas, that is in political, economic and social areas, but also in the religious one. Indeed, access to the female imamate will be one of the most controversial points, and more productive in turn, within the different Islamic feminist movements. The main trigger was the announcement in the mass media of the mixed prayer led by the African American Amina Wadud in 2005.

There are other issues promoted by this transnational feminist movement. For instance, the different international campaigns with a lobbying function, such as the "Stop Stoning and Killing Women!" campaign, aimed at eliminating these practices denouncing the manipulation of religion. Besides, the creation of

the first International Council of Muslim Women Shura Council in 2007 in New York, which aims to promote women's leadership and to form muftiyat (experts in jurisprudence), as well as the organisation of four international conferences on Islamic feminism, held in Spain since 2005 and focused on the analysis of the current situation of this movement and its future prospects. Also at the transnational level, it is very active the cooperation of these activists on the issue of family law; for example, the transnational movement Musawah proposes a package of resources on the rights of Muslim women in the family, the Karamah organization provides legal advice on family issues.

Locally, we can also highlight other movements as the one promoted by the organization "Sisters in Islam" in Malaysia, whose aim is to foster women's rights in the religious field. The activists of this movement criticize the keepers of the religious authority who, according to them, commit injustices against women in the name of Islam. They also appeal for the right to participate in the debates about religion and criticize the use of the religion in the political competition. Besides, in the post-revolutionary Egyptian context and after the victory of the Islamists parties (Muslim Brothers and salafists) in the elections, the women's rights activist and scholar Omayma Abou Bakr consider that the aim of Islamic feminism is keeping its opposition to the political and theological patriarchal authority, as well as preserving an independent and intermediate space between the Islamic conservative discourses about women and the secular liberal reactions to this political change.

In France (where the activists called "reislamised" are in the contexts where Islam is strongly stigmatised), the French activist Saida Kada contributed to start up the Union de soeurs musulmanes de Lyon in 1995. She has explained the barriers she found on the part of her co-religionist men, and on the part of the *féminisme à la française*. This Islamic feminism get close to the antiracism and the anticolonial feminism represented by the French-Algerian Houria Bouteldja, who works to protect "Arab women" from the real sexism of their community (and from the one of the French society), without forgetting the defence of "Arab men" from the racism that accuse them of being sexist by nature (cf. Benelli et al., 2006).

Regarding the most famous Islamic feminist thinkers, we can mention Asma Barlas, educated between Pakistan and the U.S., who defends democracy in close connection with the defence of women's rights; the Moroccan Asma Lamrabet and her work on re-reading the sacred texts from a feminist perspective; the Pakistani Ghazala Anwar, who focuses on controversial issues as homosexuality; the Iranian Ziba Mir Hosseini, who rely on the Quran to criticize government practices as well as the sexism of their colleagues of party; Nimat Hafez Barazangi, educated between Syria and the U.S., who emphasizes

the role of education; etc. Unable to delve into all the Islamic feminist thinkers, I will look at three of them: the Afro-American Amina Wadud, who is also a recognized activist who has led mixed prayers, renegotiating in this way the role of Muslim women in the public sphere; the Chilean Vanessa de la Fuente, an active defender of Muslim women's rights in Latin America; and finally, Natalia Andújar, one of the most active voices of Islamic feminism in Spain.

Amina Wadud

In her classic book *Qur'an and Woman* (1999), Wadud criticizes the traditional exegetical atomized methods, verse by verse, which prevents from entering into the universality of the text. She is representative of those Islamic feminists who consider fundamental to carry out an holistic exegesis of the Quran that relates both Quranic ideas and principles, and current social, moral, economic and political concerns, particularly the relations between men and women.

Wadud argues that the Quran establishes the ontological equality between men and women, and appeals to the recovery of the ethical and cosmological principles that have to frame the Quranic exegesis: the tawhid (oneness), the 'adl (justice) and the taqwa (the God consciousness), which constitute the main column of Islamic feminism. She invites all Muslims to reform their societies in order to carry out the equality inherent in the Islamic paradigm, where unity transcends any dualism.

Vanessa Rivera de la Fuente

She is considered one of the pioneers of Gender studies and Islam in Latin America. Her work is focused on gender, identity and communication; sharia and citizenship; and rights of homosexual people in Islam. In her blog *Mariposas en la tormenta* (Butterflies in the storm), she talks about all these issues.

She is a good example of how Islamic feminism has experimented a huge development in the last years thanks, to a great extent, to the boom of Internet, which has let many Muslim women become receivers and emitters of non traditional knowledge about the interpretation of the sacred texts. The Internet has made possible the rupture with the traditional Islamic leadership, and many collectives (like women), who could not make them heard before, can now access to first-hand sources that can help them to empower themselves.

Natalia Andújar

She is an active member of the Unión de Mujeres Musulmanas de España (Union of Muslim Spanish Women), one of the organisers of the International Conference of Islamic Feminism, and has been the director of the website *Webislam.com* for several years. Recently, she has created a training institute

specialised on Islamic issues: Educaislam, where she teaches courses about feminism and Islam.

In Spain, Islamic feminists as Natalia Andújar have started their work linked closely to the historical Muslim Spanish associations (developed after the end of the Spanish dictatorship) and, also, to new challenges appeared with the arrival of foreign workers from Muslim majority countries, specially, since the end of the nineties. One of these challenges has been the controversy around the use of hijab in the schools and the use of burka/niqab in public spaces.

Facing the Spanish feminists who are against the use of this items of clothing in the public space, Spanish Islamic feminists as Natalia Andújar consider that this positions are based on one ethnocentric idea: "our model of feminism is the best model for all women". She defends this secular feminist model is not the unique, and criticize how many Spanish feminists focus their discourses on cultural issues like hijab, deflecting attention from other important issues such as social and economic inequalities which are behind the discrimination of many Muslim women.

These feminists have also highlight the need of promoting women participation in the decision bodies and all the areas of society, as well as the need of involving men in the feminist movement. In fact, it was a feminist Spanish man, Abdennur Prado, who organised in 2005 the first International Conference of Islamic Feminism, which opened the door for a creation of a network that, today, bring together almost all the associations of Muslim women.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would like to remember some of the questions highlighted in the introduction of this chapter: Is it rightful to affirm, as many secular feminists do it, that no monotheist religion can be liberating for women because all them contain in themselves a patriarchal and sexist discourse? Is it possible to built one feminist movement that take into account all the diversity of women's needs, wishes and oppressions?

The theoretical and activist work of many feminists we have presented in this chapter not only makes clear that it is possible a subversive use of religion (in this case Islam) , but also shows the important role these new feminisms can play in the construction of a feminist movement that takes into account all the diversity of needs and oppressions suffered by women who do not fit the profile of "white", "Western" and middle class women. Indeed, as we have just seen, among the most important challenges of these Islamic feminists, there are not only the need of breaking the interpretive monopoly of the Quran and the fight against the ignorance and prejudices, but also the development of a women

emancipation project that turns into tangible improvements, as well as the opening of the concept of feminism in order to make it more inclusive.

Finally, I would like to highlight that, as it has occurred in most European countries, social change and the deterioration of patriarchal structures in Muslim majority countries can also be due more to the democratisation of the country, its economic development and the possibility of these societies to define themselves without having to be defined by "the West" (Martín Muñoz, 2005: 214-215). That is why feminist movements, in general, should not forget these economic and political dimensions. And that is why the dominant (secular) feminism, in particular, should made an effort to understand better how many Muslim women are forming their own discourses and movements, and what their specific problems and claims are.

As many historians and anthropologists have demonstrated (Nash, 2004), Indian, African and North African women, as historical subjects, have the power of action to establish strategies of resistance and to fight for changing the situation of inequality in which they live. In these strategies, it is very important that these "other" women may represent themselves, with their own discourses, their own language and their own categories and logics. It is necessary, thus, to seek feminist meeting positions for understanding and integrating the difference. As there are social fields where the patriarchy appears in most societies –such as the family, the labour market and the public life– we should value more these common points in order to promote the necessary dialogue "intrafeminist", and integrate the importance of the religion or the "race" as an element more of discrimination that should not isolate women, but join us together.

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