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Femin Ijtihad U.K. Chapter

Working Group Discussion to discuss the issues and significance of selected points raised in:


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F.I. Dialogue

A: How do we define the term 'Islamic feminism'?

“Regarding the use of the term “Islamic feminism” I am in accordance with Moghissi, who stresses that, “today, feminism has grown large and includes many brands, both conservative and radical, religious and atheist, heterosexual and non-heterosexual, white and non-white, issue-oriented and holistic, individualistic and community-oriented; and feminists hail from the North and the South. So the question, whether we can affirm a new brand of feminism which is self-identified or identified by others as ‘Islamic feminism’ is rather superfluous.” (35)

“.a global phenomenon. It is not a product of East or West. Indeed, it transcends East and West. . . . Islamic feminism is being produced at diverse sites around the world by women inside their own countries, whether they be from countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities. Islamic feminism is also growing in Muslim Diaspora and convert communities in the West. Islamic feminism is circulating increasing frequency in cyberspace.” (36)

AD: The author wonders if it is possible to talk about Islamic feminism. She suggests that it can be a broad definition that avoids a narrow application that is not useful in a diversified world. But she also gives a definition of what she means and she did include women feminists that identified themselves as Muslims and those who did not…and those women in power and those who were not.

ML: I attended a conference on Islamic feminism. And they could not really identify what Islamic feminism was - and this is the problem of feminism in general, because there are so many conflicting identities within feminism.

B: Using a hybrid of secular and religious methods and discourses

“Well-known scholar of gender and Islam Margot Badran has noted that “Islamic feminist discourse in Iran draws upon secular discourses and methodologies to strengthen and extend its claims.” Iranian Islamic feminists have opened up the domain of interpretation to nonbelievers and non-Muslims, insisted on equality of women and men in all domains, and disconnected “natural/ created differences” between women and men from cultural and social constructions of womanhood and manhood.” (45)

“Multiple truths, multiple roles, and multiple realities are part of postmodern feminists’ focus. Iranian Islamic feminists favor postmodernists’ rejection of an essential nature of women. That postmodern feminism offers a useful philosophy for diversity in feminism because of its acceptance of multiple truths and rejection of essentialism is just what Islamic feminism needs for legitimizing itself in the feminist discourse.” (48)
SD: This paragraph talks about the act of essentializing women as having certain immutable characteristics. The argument of modern feminism is that this *category of a universal woman does not exist any longer*. It is important in the context of Islamic legal reform for negotiating women's rights because it makes us understand the *diversity of manners by which Islamic women approach the issues* they are concerned with.

NS: I think breaking down essentialism is useful. The acceptance of multiplicities is important as it *marks the intersection of western and indigenous feminism in Islamic contexts*. Also there is no particular reason for them, secular and religious feminism, to be opposed to one another. There will be difficult points of contention. But activists can be mobilized to *use a larger range of discourses under the umbrella of Islamic feminism*.

NL: It is an important point because it pushes us to *liberate our methodological constraints*. As an example, I am Singaporean Muslim. So I may naturally tend to use the discourse and methods that is commonly used in my context. Yet that is a constraint I place upon myself due my unconscious ignorance or negligence of other methods that have been commonly used in other context; other countries, other histories, other situations; other philosophies. I think this inspires me to think of how I can *push my boundaries of mix-matching discourses by looking at the range of discourses available to me and strategically picking from this range*.

**NL: What are some hybrid methods - secular and religious, and non-religious?**

ADM: What I do not understand of countries that oppress sections of their community, is that all countries in the world are competing for development and progress in the world. If you then disqualify a whole section of the population, then how can you successfully compete in the world? To *compete economically is a good enough reason to empower women*.

NL: This is an example of an analysis that is outside the debate of religion, for promoting women’s empowerment; an economic analysis of the positive externalities and economic competence that could result in a nation where women are being strategically empowered in the political and economic sectors. So certainly that is one method of arguing for reform.

**What other mix-match methods of the religious and secular and the non-religious that you can think of?**

SD: In case of legal reform like the Muslim Family Law Ordinance in Pakistan, that would be a complex negotiation between personal law and faith made law in an attempt to implement reform in a cautious space. I could cite that as an *instance of using secular methods in religious country*.

NS: Using the example of polygamy, for instance in Tunisia, they have completely abolished it through a textual analysis. Polygamy was theorized from the Quran as being incompatible to the
Islamic institution of marriage. In other countries like Morocco and Pakistan it was instead mediated and further restrictions were placed on the right of polygamy through religious interpretations. Turkey however used a secular approach of legal reform.

**C: Differentiating historical contingent forms of the Islamic religion from its revealed essence.**

“According to Arjomand, Soroush’s doctrine on accidentals of history “offers a radical critique of contemporary Islamic thought for mistaking the historically contingent forms of Islamic religion for its revealed essence; and for disregarding religious pluralism as the inevitable result of the reading of revealed texts in specific human languages and socio-historical contexts.” (40)

AD: We have to be aware that the Quran was written in a precise social context and specific historical moment. And when we extract what is pertinent to the religion, we have to make a distinction between what is called the “accidents of history” and what is the “essence of religion”. This is the concept that empowered women in Iran who based their feminism on this idea that they had to return to the essence of Islam and unread patriarchal ideas.

**D: Islam's doctrine of social pluralism**

“Soroush argues that any claim to the absolute truth of Islam transforms it from a religion to an ideology. Soroush accepts the doctrine of “social pluralism” and affirms that “a pluralistic society is a non-ideological society—that is, [a society] without an official interpretation and [official] interpreters—and founded on pluralist reason.” Likewise, he characterizes the view of the ruling clerical elite as “the fascist reading of religion” and presents them as the “bearers of religious despotism.” (41)

SD: I also think that it is important that she talks about pluralism because it opens the scope for debate within the religion; that within the Islamic religion pluralism is encouraged, and there is a place to debate notions of gender and consider more enlightening interpretations.

This is important because this could be used as a counter argument against those who are appropriating Islam to impose a patriarchal order. This discourse of pluralist reason can be used to encourage open discussions. Islamic legal reform can be premised on the fact that Islam in itself has encouraged pluralism of thought.

NL: We discussed before how Iranian feminists used secular and religious methods and discourses to push for reform. What I take from this is encouraging the pluralism of options; that includes merging secular methods and discourses with indigenous and Islamic ones. This allows for a basket of options to design multiple strategies for multiple types of situations for multiple types of audiences.
Within the religious discourse itself, there are various methods for creating an argument for gender equity. For instance, the study of hermeneutics is the study of interpretation of religious texts and how such interpretations came into being. We look at the narrowness of discursive methods, and textual biases that at the time of its creation could not avoid prevailing assumptions about women.

When we study historical productions of interpretations, then from the historical lens, we understand that interpretations were not ready made, signed by God with love. It was made, then disputed, recreated and they continually evolve through history.

E: Systems of domination

“One essential point in postmodern feminist critique is that it focuses not only on the power hidden in relations of domination, which many face in everyday life, but also on the ideological forces that authorize and sustain these relations of domination.” (48)

NL: This has been another way of attributing the position of women; not that as a given but that as been produced by systems of domination. There are structures of domination that allow for the perpetuation of these ideologies and there are ideological forces that authorize these structures. By exposing these institutional deficiencies and unwarranted monopoly held by such structures, can we then expose the situation of women is not a natural outcome of human relation but a production of a system based on domination and inequality.

We also look at how politics have influenced discourses. There are historical, hermeneutical and infrastructural methods of analysing women’s rights. And we can tap a mix of these methods depending on the situation and local context that demands for a certain hybrid of analysis.