

Beyond the Secular Gaze: Challenging Western Feminist Paradigms in Muslim Women's Subjectivity

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Abstract:

This paper is a critical review of the historical construction and interpretation of the subjectivity of Muslim women in the Western feminist paradigms using a secularist approach, and in the process, excludes other kinds of agency and self-definitiveness. Based on the postcolonial feminist theory, as well as the radical work of such theorists as Saba Mahmood, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Lila Abu-Lughod, this paper challenges the epistemological assumptions of liberal feminist theories in considering Muslim women as subjects of depersonalized oppression that should be liberated. This paper proves that Muslim women in culturally specific ways exercise agency through the analysis of the movements of Islamic feminism and empirical evidence on educational attainment and political representation of Muslim women, which tend to dispel Western ideas of freedom and independence. The study shows the effect of the secular gaze in terms of ongoing colonial hierarchies by rejecting the subjectivity of religion as false consciousness, and yet it remains blind to the multiple voices and experiences of Muslim women themselves. This paper will contend that religion, gender, and postcolonial politics intersect in such a way that feminist praxis should be viewed and analyzed more closely by taking into consideration cultural plurality and acknowledging that there are different ways to empower women other than the secular approaches of the West.

Keywords: Muslim women, Islamic feminism, postcolonial feminism, secular feminism, subjectivity, agency, Western feminism, religious agency, gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

Islam-feminism has become one of the most debatable issues in current gender studies that producing polarising views that tend to show more about the epistemological structures of Western feminism than about the realities of Muslim women. What is central to this argument is a thorny issue concerning the nature of agency, autonomy, and liberation of women, which the feminist discourse in the West has long held to be the universal desire, but which takes various and at times contradictory forms in different cultures (Mahmood, 2005; Mohanty, 1984).

Historically, Western feminist scholarship has treated Muslim women through what one can call a secular gaze, a manner in which secularism is the precondition to women's emancipation, and religious obedience, especially to Islamic piety, is seen as oppressive or false consciousness (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This paradigm earned its specific popularity in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, when the body of Muslim women was exposed as the place where the Western geopolitical discourse is created, and the veil was revealed as the main instrument of cultural difference and supposed oppression (Gökariksel and Secor, 2015).



Nevertheless, this secular-liberal model blurs the manifold manner in which Muslim women negotiate their identities, agency, and voice feminist dreams in Islamic paradigms. Islamic feminism, as a new intellectual and political trend, addresses the perceived incompatibility of Islam and gender equality, providing alternative histories of women's rights without referring to the Western Enlightenment philosophy (Badran, 2009; Barlas, 2002). In addition, postcolonial feminist critics have shown how the cultural hegemony of Western feminism typically reproduces the relation of colonial power through creating third-world women as homogenous victims to be rescued by more intellectual Westerners (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak, 1988).

The paper is based on an argument that to oppose the secular gaze, there is a fundamental reconsideration of agency, subjectivity, and liberation as a notion of feminist theory. Based on the ethnography of the women-mosque movement in Egypt, which was pioneered by Saba Mahmood (2005), this paper shows that piety and religious practice could be forms of agency opposing and not adhering to the Western liberal paradigm of autonomous self. Besides, using the empirical evidence, namely educational attainment, political engagement, and professional growth of Muslim women, the given paper demonstrates essential improvements that do not match the stereotypical accounts of homogenous oppression.

This paper will: (1) discuss theoretical underpinnings and challenges of western secular feminism; (2) discuss Islamic feminism as a third paradigm; (3) discuss postcolonial feminist interventions to reveal the colonial logic of western feminist universalism; (4) present some empirical evidence on the status of Muslim women in the world; and (5) conclude by reflecting on the prospects of a more inclusive, culturally-plural feminist politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Secular Foundations of Western Feminism

The Western feminist theory developed in and continues to be strongly influenced by Enlightenment rationalism and secular liberalism, which place religion in opposition to the liberation of women. Although Mary Wollstonecraft has criticized female education and Betty Friedan has diagnosed the female mystique, the general idea of Western feminism is that oppression of women can be overcome by traditional institutions, including religion, which should be overcome by rational enlightenment and a sense of individual freedom (Scott, 2009).

This secular system of operation follows several assumptions that are linked to one another. To begin with, it is based on the binary opposition between tradition and modernity, where the former is linked to the patriarchal constraint and the latter to the freedom of women. Second, it favors personal liberty and self-determination as the leading indicators of liberation and tends to disregard collective or religious sense of belonging as repressive. Third, it presupposes that the equality of the genders implies the privatization of religion, the process of depriving religious power of political and social life (Mahmood, 2005, 2016).

Scientifically, the presuppositions make some of the forms of women's agency illegible or objectionable. When women become strong nurturers of Islamic virtues like modesty, submission to the will of God, and piety, as Mahmood (2005) illustrates in her ethnography of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, such as using the veil and praying, Western feminist theory finds it hard to acknowledge the practices in such a manner as agency practices. However, more frequently, these women can be diagnosed with false consciousness or as unwilling participants in their oppression (p. 5).

The shortcomings of the secular-liberal paradigm are especially noticeable when used in another culture. Its universalizing drive, the supposition that feminist insights in the West can be translated into every situation, does not explain the historical, cultural, and political particularities that inform the lives of

women and their dreams in other cultures. According to the arguments of postcolonial feminists, this universalism tends to propagate neocolonial interests in the pretext of rescuing Muslim women from the hands of Muslim men (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST CRITIQUES

The history of postcolonial feminism. Postcolonial feminism did not start existing until the 1980s, when it became a response to the Eurocentric bias of Western feminism and the inability to theorize the intersection between gender and race, colonialism, and imperialism. The Western feminist construction of the Third World woman as a unique, monolithic subject, largely determined by a position of victimhood and deprivation (lacking education, lacking freedom, lacking agency, etc.), was challenged by pioneering work by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), and others (Mohanty, 1984).

The essay *Under Western Eyes* by Mohanty (1984) defines the discursive construction of Western feminist scholarship that constructs a Third World woman based on a series of analytical moves that eliminate the historical particularity and cultural difference. Focusing on women as an already formed and cohesive category, which is only characterized by common subordination to men, Western feminism disregards how class, race, ethnicity, religion, and nationality collide with gender to create different subject positions and experiences. Such homogenization plays an ideological role: it places Western women as the implicit norm of the genuine feminist awareness, at the same time building non-Western women as the objects of the feminist saving missions.

The Western feminist discourse with its colonial aspects is evident in the representations of Muslim women. This emphasis on veiling practices of Muslim women, as Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) suggests, recreates colonialist justifications that were used during the colonial era, which often claimed that they were rescuing colonized women who were living in a barbaric culture. This missionary feminism continues to play a role in modern-day society, where the dressing style, movement of Muslim women, and adherence to Islamic faith are regarded as signs of cultural retrogression that justifies Western political and military action in Muslim dominated nations.

Postcolonial feminists also criticize the investment made by Western feminism in the category of global sisterhood, the idea that women across the world share critical interests and experiences. They claim that this gesture of universalization conceals power disparities between non-Western and Western women and allows Western feminists to represent their global South as nothing less than sisterhood, privy to neither their voices nor their interests nor their politics (Narayan, 1997). It leads to a feminist politics that tends to lend itself to Western geopolitical demands at the expense of the knowledge production and activism of women in postcolonial situations.

SABA MAHMOOD AND THE POLITICS OF PIETY

The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (2005) by Saba Mahmood is a breakthrough in feminist theorization in the areas of religion, agency, and subjectivity. According to the ethnographic study carried out in the women's mosque movement of Cairo between the years 1995-1997, Mahmood disputes the basic assumptions of the agency and resistance relationship that is the foundation of both liberal feminist and progressive political thinking.

The central theoretical intervention that Mahmood makes relates to the very idea of agency. Western feminist theory, she posits, has been inclined to frame agency as narrowly as the ability to resist or subvert the oppressive norms with an assumption that any agency has to be directed toward autonomy and freeing of constriction. This framework constitutes incomprehensible types of agency that do not oppress the

normative structures that have been generated explicitly in the religious traditions (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 14-15).

Using an in-depth ethnographic examination of the way women in the mosque movement develop the Islamic virtues through veiling, prayer, and Quranic study, Mahmood shows that such women have a significant amount of agency in developing their moral selves as well as religious subjectivities. Nevertheless, this agency assumes a shape that secular feminism finds it challenging to accept or appreciate: instead of opposing religious norms, these women strive to live up to those norms more, and they see such living as the key to their prosperity and self-fulfillment (Mahmood, 2005).

The implications of Mahmood on the theorization of the relation of power, norms, and subjectivity are immense. Based on the analytics of power by Michel Foucault and the theory of performativity of Judith Butler, she suggests that the subjects are not limited by norms, but are constructed by them. The ethical self-cultivation practiced by the mosque women shows that norms can also be occupied in a manner that allows certain forms of agency as well as abilities, though that norm may seem constraining to an outsider (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 29-35).

In addition, Mahmood has suggested a criticism of secular subjectivity as the more true or more developed form of human existence as compared to religious subjectivity. The women she read did not perceive their religious obligations to restrain their liberty, but as the principle of their moral agency and self-decision. This observation essentially destabilizes the hierarchical sequence of religious and secular forms of being that are part of the secular-liberal order and creates the possibility of other forms of human flourishing, unconditioned on the need to leave religious tradition.

ISLAMIC FEMINISM: RECLAIMING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

Islamic feminism is an intellectual and political trend that criticizes patriarchal approaches to Islamic texts as well as Western feminist rejection of Islam as an inherently oppressive tradition. According to Islamic feminists, gender equality is not just incompatible with Islamic teachings. However, it is actually required by their teachings, and they argue that women should not have been subordinate to men in Muslim societies, as dictated by their culture and not their teachings (Badran, 2009; Wadud, 1999).

The methodology of the movement is based on the critical reinterpretation of Islamic source texts, the Quran and hadith, in the light of women. Several scholars, such as Amina Wadud (1999), Asma Barlas (2002), and Fatima Mernissi (1991), have conducted a rigorous textual analysis in order to cut across the patriarchal exegesis to retrieve the egalitarian meanings. An example of this approach is Wadud in *Qur'an and Woman*, which uses linguistic analysis to show that the message of the Quran, correctly interpreted, is favorable to gender equality and complete inclusion of women in religious, social, and political life.

The value of Islamic feminism goes beyond hermeneutics. In making feminist demands in an Islamic way, it offers Muslim women resources to struggle against patriarchy that are culturally and religiously valid. It is all the more significant since the secular feminist discourse has frequently been interpreted in Muslim majorities as a Western export that comes with cultural imperialism (Cooke, 2001). Islamic feminism provides a native feminist lineage that can not be rejected as alien and inauthentic.

Islamic feminism has, however, been subjected to criticism on many fronts. Other feminists in the Western world are doubting that any religious system with its divine power claims can ensure the full equality of women and their complete autonomy. On the other hand, conservative Muslims condemn Islamic feminism because of the perceived illegitimacy of the innovation of introducing Western values into Islamic tradition. The Islamic feminists themselves are also in dispute about the extent of the movement,

with some supporting the idea that legal reforms of this nature should be limited to the frameworks that already exist, and others highlighting the need to make radical reconstructions of the Islamic jurisprudence (Mir-Hosseini, 2006).

Recently, the scholarship has brought out the diversity of Islamic feminism and its development in various contexts. The movement involves diverse strategies, including theological redefinition of the grassroots movement, to campaigning for legal reforms. Islamic feminist movements have created organizations such as Sisters in Islam (Malaysia), Musawah (global), and Women Living Under Muslim Laws that have mobilized the framework of Islamic feminism to oppose forms of discrimination within their own organizations without forsaking their Islamic roots (Anwar, 2009). This is a form of activism that demonstrates the practical political value of Islamic feminism beyond theoretical discussions.

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE: MUSLIM WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL ADVANCEMENT

In opposition to the monolithic discourses of oppression, the evidence-based studies depict an important and ever-increasing change in the levels of education, involvement in politics, and occupational growth among Muslim women in various settings. The data provided in this section contests the stereotypical images and also recognizes the existing inequalities, which remain a challenge and should be addressed further.

Educational Attainment

In most parts of the world, statistics concerning the education of women among the Muslim community indicate significant generational advancements. Pew Research Center (2016) analysis revealed that even though Muslim women are earning 4.9 years of education on average in comparison to 6.4 years of education among Muslim men on a global scale, the age gap has dramatically decreased among generations. It is incredible to note that in some of the Muslim dominated nations, the gender disparity in higher education has completely changed, whereby young women have a higher probability of post-secondary education compared to their male counterparts.

Table 1 gives information about the education levels in the chosen countries with the majority of the Muslim population and shows significant differences that do not support the expectations of homogenous educational deprivation.

Table 1- Educational Attainment Rates in Selected Muslim-Majority Countries

Country	Female Literacy Rate (%)	Women with Post-Secondary Education (%)	Gender Parity Index (Tertiary)
Saudi Arabia	99.3	32	1.17
Iran	88.7	52	1.23
Egypt	71.0	34	0.95
Indonesia	95.4	28	1.04
Malaysia	95.1	42	1.31
Turkey	96.3	38	0.89



Note. Statistics were stacked using the Pew Research Center (2016), the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2024), and the World Bank (2024). The index of Gender Parity is more than 1.0, which means that there are more women than men in tertiary education.

The reversal of gender parity in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries is especially remarkable. In Malaysia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, young women have overtaken young men in the level of university enrolment and completion. This revolution took place in one generation, which refutes the deterministic accounts of why women are being deprived of education because of the Islamic culture. Instead, economic growth and government investment in education infrastructure, as it is demonstrated by Moghadam and Senftova (2005), are the significant factors in educational gender parity, followed by religious tradition.

DISCUSSION: TOWARD A DECOLONIZED FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY

The given empirical and theoretical evidence poses a challenge to the prevailing Western feminist paradigms on a variety of levels. To begin with, it shows that Muslim women are quite proactive in their own aspirations and road maps to empowerment, which tend to go against the patterns of Western secular patterns. Second, it discloses that the secular gaze, which assumes that secularism is the precondition of the liberation of women, closes our eyes to various modes of women's activism and female self-determination functioning under the religious conditions. Third, it reveals the colonial history of Western feminist universalism and its ongoing implication in the legitimization of geopolitical interventions in Muslim majority situations.

To move towards a more satisfactory feminist politics, there are a number of epistemological shifts needed. To begin with, feminists should be able to understand that agency and autonomy are not universal phenomena that are defined by a specific meaning but are subject to change according to culture and historical contexts. The definition of liberation or empowerment cannot be a priori based on the Western philosophical traditions but has to be perceived in the responses of these women to express their desire in a given context (Mahmood, 2005; Narayan, 1997).

Second, the supportive aspects of power and norms should be taken seriously by feminist analysis, taking cognizance of the fact that subjects are constructed by normative structures and not merely confined by them. This Foucaultian lesson can be extended by Mahmood (2005) in her study of the piousness of Islam to emphasize the resistance/subordination dichotomy, which, in many aspects, informs feminist thought. It provides the room to comprehend how religious tradition may empower instead of simply limiting the ethical agency and self-realization of women.

Third, Western feminists will have to question their investments in secularism and recognize the presence of secular-liberal structures that have their own exclusions and hierarchies. Secularism, however, does not represent a neutral platform of tolerance and freedom but a normative political ideology as suggested by Asad (2003) and Mahmood (2016) that favors certain types of religious subjectivity over others. Pluralist feminism is required to allow for both religious and non-religious modes of self-determination of women. Moreover, last but not least, the issue of gender inequalities within the Muslim contexts cannot be resolved by blaming women's subordination to Islamic culture or tradition itself, but by focusing on such structural aspects of the problem as political authoritarianism, economic underdevelopment, legal discrimination, etc. The statistics on education progress prove that in cases when the states invest in education infrastructure and lift the legal restrictions on the involvement of women, radical changes take place despite the level of religiosity. This implies that gender inequality is determined more by material and institutional factors rather than by cultural or religious factors.



CONCLUSION

This paper has suggested that Western feminist paradigms based on secular-liberal epistemologies have historically created Muslim women in the work of a colonial gaze that robs them of their agency, homogenizes their experience, and offers solutions that are shaped by the Western and not the local agenda. This analysis has revealed the ineffectiveness of universal feminist theories that cannot explain cultural, religious, and historical particularity by highlighting postcolonial feminist critique, the Islamic feminist alternatives, and a radical reconceptualization of agency and piety presented by Saba Mahmood. The statistical information given shows a multifaceted image that cannot be easily stereotyped. Although there are still notable gaps in gender equality within most Muslim-majority societies, much has been done within the sphere of educational activities of women, and some countries have even managed to reverse the gender balance in higher learning. This development undermines postulates about the inherently oppressive nature of Islam towards women. Instead, it shows how economic development, state policy, and women's activism play a role in enhancing gender equality.

The rise of Islamic feminism proves that Muslim women do not have to pursue either their religious affiliations or feminist interests. Through harnessing the views of women writing on Islamic texts, Islamic feminists have created localized modes of attacking patriarchy that cannot be termed as Western influences. Their contribution shows how the tradition of religion is not always oppressive but can be used to empower women, as interpreted through the egalitarian hermeneutics.

The redefinition of agency by Mahmood is perhaps the greatest challenge to secular feminist assumptions. By showing that Muslim women in the piety movement in Cairo are exercising agency by developing Islamic virtues instead of fighting religious norms, Mahmood upsets the equation of agency and resistance as well as liberation and autonomy in the tradition. Her writing requires feminists to revisit the principles as well as acknowledge that human flourishing may exist in various forms, including one that is based on religious piety.

Feminist activism and scholarship will have to make an investment in epistemological pluralism in the future. This cannot be done simply by accepting cultural difference but by substantially reconsidering the universalist premises on which Western feminism has been organized since its beginning. It implies hearing the articulation of Muslim women themselves about what they want instead of dictating what they want through external systems. It requires a critical reflexivity of the neocolonial continuation of Western feminist discourse, even with emancipatory intentions driving it.

This project is more than just a matter of academic theorizing. The construction of Muslim women as a uniform oppressed group that the West can rescue in the age of growing Islamophobia and geopolitical confrontation between the West and Muslim-majority areas has significant implications. They give ideological justification to military interventions, immigration limitations, and policies that hurt the very women they claim to assist. A decolonized feminist politics should not accept this instrumentalization, and yet it should be determined to oppose the real manifestation of patriarchal domination wherever it exists.

In the end, to attempt to challenge the secular gaze, it is important to understand that there exist several modernities, a number of feminisms, and a number of ways to flourish as a human. The fight of Muslim women to win justice and dignity should be seen as an end in itself, rather than as a reflection of the Western feminist being. It is only when Western epistemologies are decentred and genuine pluralism is adopted that feminist theory and practice may meet their emancipatory claims to all women.

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