

Is there an Emerging Muslim Constituency for Islamic Feminists in the West?

Written by Nicholas Glover

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Immigration of Muslims to Western societies and conversions to Islam in the twentieth century has given rise to strong Muslim communities comprising millions of diverse souls—more and more of them citizens (Ramadan, 2004: 103)—and the production of new Islamic identities in the West. Encounters between Islamic and majority Western communities are complex and highly pressurised. Matters of Islamic ideology and religious practice are particularly concerning for the majority society and immigrant groups react to such concerns in diverse ways. Two common reactions are: firstly to formulate more segregated communities and secondly to re-evaluate practices and social attitudes. Hence, religion is not static. Religious changes according to Knott (in Roald, 2002: 80), occur through immigration and diasporic settlement experiences, whereby beliefs, practices, social organisations and religious experiences adapt and develop as a result of new geographical, social and cultural milieu.

Within the polymorphous realities of Muslim communities in the West and Islamic societies, gender issues have been engaged with, argued about, harmonised, problematised, negotiated and re-negotiated (Shaikh, 2002: 148) in varying ways across time and space. Muslim women find Islam's social egalitarian message a source of spiritual, social and emotional well-being. They also experience oppression and marginalisation that is justified in the name of Islam, within their homes, communities and polities. The oppression of Muslim women has become the hegemonic concern of Western Feminist discourse on Islam, conjuring up enduring Orientalist images of violent and oppressive Muslim men and powerless submissive women. Such representations of gender dynamics within Islamic communities homogenise Muslim women within dominant Western Feminist paradigms, and obscure the varied realities of Muslim women constituted through the processes of social relations.

On the basis of Euro-American Feminist and popular discourse on Muslim women in the west, Islamic Feminism seems to be somewhat of an oxymoron. Likewise for many Muslims the label Feminism is not worn comfortably. Feminism is often construed as a Western project, carrying with it historical and ideological baggage, as well as racist assumptions pertaining to non-Western women and cultures. The dominant expression of Western Feminism has been criticised heavily by gender equality activists and Feminists from the South, for homogenising the oppression of women throughout the 'Third World' (Mohanty 1991). Such critiques are common to expressions of so called 'Third World Feminism', which challenges the cultural imperialism of Western Feminism in defining the meaning of gender in terms of a white, middle-class, secular positionality (Mohanty, 1991: 7). Regarding those who approach Muslim women's equality from Western Feminist rationales, Wadud (in Jeenah, 2006: 29) argues that although they address valid gender issues, they sometimes 'vindicate the position of women on grounds incongruous with the Qur'anic messages on women.

To explore the diverse expressions of Islamic Feminism in the West, one must begin with a fundamental understanding of Feminism. Badran's definition is useful in this regard, as she refers to:

"women coming into awareness that being female means a life very different to that of their male counterparts. This awareness begins to analyse patriarchy— questioning why men had accorded to themselves the power to make rules and to impose them on women to keep them subordinate. Feminism also entails ideas and actions expressed individually and collectively about personal life, family life, societal life—about being a woman in its totality and

Is there an Emerging Muslim Constituency for Islamic Feminists in the West?

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plurality of meanings" (Badran, 1996: 3).

Feminism then is more than just a political imagining—it is a constructive process of ideas and actions expressed about female identities. Islamic Feminism encompasses a multiplicity of perspectives and strands of thought; however Islamic Feminists unite in a common struggle against patriarchy and gender inequality and seek to challenge traditional, patriarchal gender systems which promote segregation between men and women (McGinty, 2007: 481). Their Islamic framework rejects the notion that the Qur'an sanctions patriarchy and seeks to promote a process of deconstruction, a form of hermeneutics with a Feminist narrative by which the egalitarian message of the Qur'an can be regained. Islamic Feminism must also be understood as a position of multiple critiques, requiring an engagement with religious identities, which renounce oppressive traditional ideas of appropriate male and female conduct and also reject colonial Feminist representations of Muslim women (McGinty, 2007: 480), as the "victimised" and voiceless "Other".

Through the exploration of complex negotiations and re-negotiations of Muslim identities within diverse Western contexts, this paper will posit that there is an emerging Muslim constituency for Islamic Feminists in the West, that is, an arresting space of diversity and integrated ideas where a religious identity as 'Muslim' lies not necessarily in the realm of patriarchy (McGinty, 2007: 483), but constitutes political and social demands for gender justice. The distinction between Islamic Feminism as an academic discourse and as a discursive identity is very important here. For Islamic Feminism can be an expression of a Universalist set of ideas, but also a form local activism or agency with particular needs and priorities. This paper will locate the construction of Muslim Feminist identities within the context of Islamic Revival in the west, examining the interplay between revived religiosity and gender dynamics amongst Muslim populations. Due to the limited scope, the primary focus will be on the changing formations of femininities, gender roles and social attitudes within Muslim communities in America and Britain. Within a milieu of inter-generational conflict, anti-Muslim sentiment, marginalisation, opportunity and massive diversity, Muslim women are trying to determine how they will define themselves in the twenty-first century.

American scene.

American Muslims comprise one of the most diverse groups in the history of Islam, with differences of language, ethnicity, gender, educational attainment, class, and ideological position (Haddad et al, 2006: 4). Significantly, the Muslim community in America comprises of indigenous African American Muslims and so called 'immigrant Muslims'—of which the South Asian community is the largest. These communities differ markedly in terms of religious identity and socio-economic status. Hence, the South Asian Muslim community occupies a very elevated position within the American economic system—with many of its members working as skilled professionals. Women from the South Asian community in particular are increasingly active participants in American society, playing major roles in most aspects of professional life (Haddad et al, 2006: 13). Encouraged by a primary and secondary education system mandated by law, South Asian-American Muslims are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of being educated, both in the conventional sense and in terms of being well versed in religious traditions and policies.

Despite the increasingly visible role of rising generations of Muslim women in American public life, some more Conservative families restrict their daughters/wives from further education or employment, for fear of exposing them to sociality antithetical to culturally constructed Muslim structures (Haddad et al, 2006: 13). Within a context of worldwide Islamic revivalism, a process of Islamicisation of South Asian communities is under way in America, facilitated by insecurity and deference to Sub-Indian Islam (Abdullah Saeed, 2010). Searching for 'certainty' in a new cultural context, first generation and increasingly young Pakistani American men are turning to Arabised Islam, seen as an 'authentic' expression of religiosity. This process is being cultivated by Conservative Muslim leaders—for example Syrian Ulama—who espouse dogmatic and Occidentalised conceptions of a corruptive Western culture, thus encouraging Muslims to remain isolated from wider society.

Subject to the internal pressure of patriarchal Arabisation, and the external pressure of racism, Muslim women struggle to determine what is possible and acceptable in an American setting. Nevertheless, according to Haddad et al (2006: 16), a growing number of American Muslim women are actively engaged in the effort to identify which

Is there an Emerging Muslim Constituency for Islamic Feminists in the West?

Written by Nicholas Glover

elements of Islam are essential, mandated by the Qur'an and those which are culturally determined rather than religiously proscribed. This separation of culture and religion is an important process in the construction of a Muslim Feminist identity, as it forces women to deconstruct the culturally constituted definitions of women's roles prevalent in their homes and community's, and facilitates their claiming of interpretative authority in terms of the Qur'anic position on women.

Religion provides women with a sense of identity and belonging, thus it is unlikely that women will abandon those structures that provide them with solace and security (Hashim, 2008: 8). Strongly connected to their Islamic heritage, Muslim women in America and in particular South Asian professionals, are responding to gender oppression through the conviction that Islam contains an inherent flexibility allowing it to be applicable to changing times and circumstances (Haddad et al, 2006: 153). Through the conceptualisation of Islam as a dynamic process to be constantly engaged with, these women are not challenging the validity of the text, but the interpretation of male scholars. In congruity with Islamic Feminism's rejection of androcentric traditional Qur'anic commentaries, in favour of gender inclusive exegesis, these women are part of what Amina Wadud (2002) has coined the 'Gender Jihad'—namely, the fashioning of new interpretations of Islam which provide an alternative to both patriarchal traditionalism and secular liberal Feminism.

Islamic Feminist discourse is the result of years of encounter with various forms of Western Colonialism and universal models of Womanhood, as formulated by American Feminists. One such Colonial encounter was the trading of African slaves to America, an important phenomenon in terms of Islamic Feminism, since the African American community provides a fertile province for the empowerment of women through the radical reconstruction of the Islamic tradition. According to Sherman Jackson (2005), Blacks relate to Islam as Blacks or "oppressed people". Contested and diverse, the most enduring feature of Black Religion in Jackson's (2005) eyes is its sustained and radical opposition to racial oppression. The coming together of Black Religion and Islam was a predominantly twentieth century phenomenon which took place in the socio-economically disadvantaged urban settings of the North. With African American migration to the well-educated, white, Christian North, where their racial and cultural minority identities were felt more deeply—the Blackamerican sense of belongingness to Christianity, the "White man's Religion"(Jackson, 2005), eroded. This erosion predisposed the uneducated, working class Blacks to an almost frenetic openness to alternative modalities of religious expression (Jackson, 2005:40). Armed with the resistant construction of Black Religion and galvanised by Charismatic Muslim leaders, many African Americans enlisted Islam to aid their existential and ideological struggle within racist America.

For many Black women in America, Islam has truly provided a vehicle for self-affirmation, participation in a welcoming community and the practice of faith within a manageable structure (Haddad et al, 2006: 45). In connecting the experiences of Black women to the construction of Islamic Feminist identities, we must not dislocate them from their history of slavery which precipitated the dismantling of the traditional family and resulted in ongoing economic discrimination. Such historical relations according to Wadud (2002: 103) have taught African American women an ethics of care indispensable to survival and empowerment. As Muslims, Black women express their religiosity and gendered identities through the development of collective help, families and communities. This grassroots 'care work' is intrinsically empowering, as it constitutes women struggling through untold hardships to sustain a place in their interpretation of Blackamerican Islam—a process which motivates and sustains their communal contributions (Wadud, 2002: 104).

African American women are significant contributors to public efforts to formulate Islamic identity in the Western milieu. Hence, the political and ethical agency of African American Muslim women must not be understood as merely oppositional, but rather as affirmative and geared towards creating possible futures. These ethical and political relations create possible worlds through the mobilisation of Islamic resources, which are the driving force that concretise in material relations, thus constituting a network of interconnections with others (Braidotti, 2008: 16). Representing a powerful constituency for Islamic Feminists, African American Muslim women construct faith as the hope for the construction of alternative social horizons, where otherness mobilises and allows for the affirmation of what is not contained in the present conditions (Braidotti, 2008: 18).

Of course African American Muslim women are not homogeneous, yet they all struggle to negotiate their religious,

Is there an Emerging Muslim Constituency for Islamic Feminists in the West?

Written by Nicholas Glover

gender, racial and socio-economic identities in conditions of persistent male control and structural racism. It would be reductionist to locate African American Muslim women's agency in direct opposition to Western Feminist notions of equality. Haddad et al (2006: 17) have postulated that since the seventies African American Muslim women in particular, have championed arguments for women's equality. This Feminist agency is not merely a type of resistance to the patriarchal family structure—as assumed by the Western Liberal Feminist model of agency—but rather conceives of the family as a source of freedom and equality, brutally denied them by slavery. As Muslims and African American women, their agency is enabled by the multiple cultures they are a part of (Mahmood, 2001).

Wadud's (2002) example of 'African American Muslim retreats' demonstrates how women are strengthened by the company of each other in their efforts to learn the truth about Islam. Emergently African American Muslim women are 'negotiating gender' through exegesis of the Qur'anic text (Rouse, 2004), which validates them as women and affirms their empowerment as African Americans. McCloud (1995: 147) argues that many African American Muslim women groups, who feel a sense of distance and marginalisation from mainstream Islam, are seeking support and affirmation through gender inclusive exegesis. This emerging process represents congruence with the Islamic Feminist demand for the right of all Muslims to exercise Ijtihad—individual interpretation of Islamic texts. These "new Muslim women" are pushing for greater interpretive inclusion, both as an act of equality against a history of near exclusive male authority over texts, and as a means for better self-understanding of those sources to fortify their female and Islamic identity (Wadud, 2002: 105).

British Scene

Muslim communities across Britain and Europe are dynamic and heterogeneous processes which engage in creative ways with their non-Muslim societies. The 1.6 million Muslims in Britain—68% of whom are from a South Asian origin—differ along lines of ethnicity, cultural traditions, educational attainment, social class, sect and ideological positioning. "New Diasporas" have been created in Britain by postcolonial migration (Hall, 1992). With 46% of all British Muslims born in Britain, diasporic identifications are increasingly about living in translation—learning to inhabit multiple identities, to speak multiple cultural languages and to translate and negotiate between them (Hall, 1992). This section will predominantly focus on the dynamics of intergenerational social change within Pakistani (largest and most disadvantaged Muslim Diaspora) communities in Britain, in order to explore the interplay between emerging forms of religiosity and gender relations.

The majority of South Asian Muslim Diasporas migrated from traditional and rural parts of Pakistan and Bangladesh, where religious and formal education was limited and gender roles highly unequal. The Islam of first generation South Asian Muslim immigrants was based predominantly on an oral tradition, thus it was heavily fused with patriarchal cultural artefacts and traditional practices. However, identities of religious minorities must not be conceptualised as primordial stamps, but rather as fluid and formulated continuously in a process of negotiation with a plethora of economic, social and political forces that transform across time and space (Aziz, 1995 in Basit, 1997: 437). Muslims of the rising generation are extremely mobile in linguistic, religious and cultural terms and draw eclectically on every tradition available to them and are strongly committed to ordering their own lives on their own terms (Ballard, 1994 in Basit, 1997: 437). To locate an emerging constituency for Islamic Feminists in Britain, we must move away from the discourse of 'cultural conflict' underpinned by the dichotomous constructions of "South Asian" and "British ways of life". Hence, whilst many of the first generation identifies themselves as Pakistani, the younger generation see themselves as 'British Pakistani Muslims'. This negotiation is not unproblematic however, as British Pakistani Muslims face ostracisation both from the Muslim community and wider society.

Educated within a system promoting problem solving and the questioning of taught knowledge, British Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are achieving more A-levels and degrees than any other ethnic group (Ansari, 2003: 271). Young Muslim women view their religious and gender identities through alternative lenses to their parents, and their increased visibility and participation in education and the labour market are producing new definitions of what is acceptable and respectable. Patriarchal notions of gender division and the division of labour persist in South Asian Muslim families; however gender equality for Muslim women is increasing (Ansari, 2003: 283), both through educational success and an increasingly self-conscious exploration of religion. The articulation of their situations from an Islamic perspective helps to challenge their parents' assumptions pertaining to gender relations, and helps Muslim

Is there an Emerging Muslim Constituency for Islamic Feminists in the West?

Written by Nicholas Glover

women to renegotiate their aspirations in education, employment, marriage and participation in public life (Ansari, 2003: 283). Sharpened by cultural racism in a post 9/11 epoch and by growing dissatisfaction with local Imams who are increasingly seen by the youth as imparting traditional 'village values' rather than 'true knowledge (Ijaz & Abbas, 2010: 11), emerging generations of Muslims are turning to their religious texts as part of a critical challenge to the dogma of traditional South Asian culture.

One manifestation of this dissatisfaction has been a movement towards literalist and conservative interpretations of Islam. Such interpretations are part of a new form of internationalist Islamic ideology, which presents a rigid rejection of the Western 'Other' and seeks the creation of a de-cultural, rule-based space where one asserts Muslim difference (Hermansen, 2006: 310) based on such practices as gender segregation. This phenomenon can be located in Britain and America, where Muslim youths face alienation both from their traditional families and the wider community, which since 9/11 and 7/7, has increasingly constructed them as the 'evil enemy within'. Vulnerable and threatened, a portion of the Muslim youth in the West—predominantly men—has found certainty in conservative religious revivalism, which provides them with a grievance-based identity and the politico-ideological framework in which to express faith and counteract their marginality. This energetic and destructive movement is antithetical to Islamic Feminism, since it derives from a Salafi school of thought which constructs female sexuality as the symbolic representation of Muslim identity (Moghissi, 1999)—something to be policed and controlled. Hence, this radical expression of religiosity can reduce the space for contestation and the formation of progressive and counter-hegemonic forces such as Islamic Feminist identities.

Nevertheless a productive resurgence of Muslim identity amongst British Muslim women can be located amongst both the professional elites and those from working class backgrounds. Young Muslim women are contesting patriarchal norms by referring back to the Qur'an and applying the method of Ijtihad to pursue gendered agendas (Ansari, 2003: 288). In her ethnographic study of young British Muslim women in West Yorkshire, Afshar (1998: 119) found that knowledge of the faith and Qur'anic positions on women could play a central role in bargaining with patriarchy and the materials of the family. Hence, emerging Muslim women are critically evaluating customary practices in light of Islamic textual injunction. For example, Islamic injunction is used to create space for social change (Samad, 2004: 20) in such realms as education and dress. Thus, women can endorse their right to higher education by emphasising the Qur'anic privileging of the search for knowledge and argue that only modest dress is religiously proscribed, not certain South Asian trends. Knowledge for these women could become power, the power to refuse and to broaden the scope for personal choice, all in the name of Islam.

An increasingly popular personal choice undertaken by young Muslim women across Europe is the choice to wear a hijab or veil. This twentieth century phenomenon has become one of the hegemonic aspects of popular discourse on Muslims in the West, and has often been framed as a symbol of women's subordination in Islam. The hijab debate has been particularly divisive in secular France, where Muslim women are challenging increasing political and social pressure to have Islamic headscarves banned in public spaces. Underpinned by the view of the Muslim female 'Other' as oppressed and docile, the condemnation of the hijab as a purely coercive device obfuscates the subtle dialect of cultural negotiation (Ansari, 2003: 216). Far from being merely a coercive process, the wearing of the hijab in the West can symbolise the assertion of female Muslim identity, a public statement which places some Muslim women in the public gaze.

Understood here as a liberating interpretation of their faith (Afshar et al, 2009), some women use the hijab as a way to loosen the bonds of patriarchy, resist cultural practices and demonstrate cultural loyalty. The veil has allowed more young Muslim women in the West to participate more easily in public life and in political, economic and educational pursuits, thus providing additional resources and enabling them to argue for their rights more effectively (Ansari, 2003: 290). Revealing the potentiality for an Islamic Feminist formation, British Muslims wear the veil comfortably with a multiplicity of identities, defining themselves in terms of faith and nationality. The veil in the West can represent a re-constructed emblem (Afshar et al, 2009)—blended with jeans, jackets and trainers—it reveals the forging of a new way towards social and political cohesion through hybridity. Significantly the veil is also a prominent emblem of religiosity for Muslim converts in the West.

Conversion

Is there an Emerging Muslim Constituency for Islamic Feminists in the West?

Written by Nicholas Glover

Islam is the fastest growing religion in Europe and the U.S. due to immigration and conversion. Margot Badran (2006: 201) has argued that converts to Islam play an important role when it comes to articulating a feminist understanding of the religion. Moreover, the formation of 'Western Islamic cultures' (Ramadan, 2002), encounters which have focused on gender relations and Islamic ideas on women, is being strengthened by converts. Focussing on female Swedish Muslim converts, McGinty (2007: 475) emphasises that Islam presents more rewarding ways of formulating femininity and roles as women. Drawing on both Western and Islamic ideas, the converts produce a feminist commentary criticising both Western ideals of femininity and patriarchal readings of Islam. Bringing with them prior "feminist" texts (Badran, 2006: 202), female Muslim converts deconstruct traditional Muslim ideas of appropriate gender conduct, through a feminist re-reading of the sacred texts and demonstrate how the Qur'anic spirit of human equality can be implemented in the contemporary West (McGinty, 2007: 482). For these converts, religious identity and belief in gender equality are far from contradictory (McGinty, 2007: 482), but rather the intermeshed core of their multi-layered discourse.

The first converts to Islam in America were African Americans, seeking a new identity in the wake of continuing post-emancipation racism. Later in the twentieth century Anglo converts began to embrace Islam, formulating a new Islamic movement which now attracts 20,000 people a year, 75% of them women (Haddad et al, 2006). The conversion of women in America—entailing personal contact with Muslims, consumption of information supplied by Islamic organisations and/or investigating discussions of Islam on the internet—presents a fertile space for Islamic Feminists. Hence, the responses of female converts to Islam are personal, social, spiritual and intellectual—often underpinned by studying translated versions of the Qur'an, where they first learn about the equal treatment of men and women and the special rights afforded to women in Islamic law (Haddad et al, 2006: 47). Seduced by this egalitarian interpretation of Islam, female converts negotiate a religious identity as 'Muslim', constituting a space in which resistance against patriarchal ideas can take form. Negotiating alternative femininities through the adoption of Islamic practices such as Veiling—which can be used to condemn the objectification of the female body in the West—converts engender an expression of Islamic Feminism against both Western gender norms and traditional Muslim ideas regarding the submissive role of the woman (McGinty, 2007: 480).

Conclusion

'New generations' of Western Muslim women are strong participants in the process of re-appropriation and affirmation of Muslim identity. In contrast to the particularistic socio-geographical identities of the first generation, rising generations construct multiple socio-cultural identities through the adaptation and adoption of cultural features (Dwyer, 2000: 437), both from their Muslim communities and wider society. Muslim women are increasingly negotiating their multiple identities through the affirmation of scriptural Islam which becomes an emancipatory strategy for prising open space for gender and generational debates. Young revivalist women born in the West fiercely oppose Islamophobia but also disagree with the cultural interpretations of their parents' Islam. From positions of knowledge rising Muslim women are creating the space in which to claim their rights and challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islam.

It would be too simplistic however to present Feminist interpretations of the Qur'an as an all-encompassing formula for the emancipation of Western Muslim women. Hence, Hashim (1999: 12) holds that many Muslim women in the West are politically and economically marginalised—a positionality which constricts the process of claiming rights of any kind. Those Muslim women, who occupy middle class and professional positions in society, find it easier to articulate and develop Feminist identities from within Islam. Nevertheless there is an emerging Muslim constituency for Islamic Feminists in the West. Hence, the encounter between Muslims in the West and such social transformations as women's education and employment, as well as their participation in politics and economics, introduces a platform for Islamic feminists. Thus, such changes render problematic the patriarchal control of Islamic interpretation and leadership, thus encouraging women to fight for inclusion in private and public spaces. Social control is still exercised over Muslim girls in the West by families, themselves and their communities. However women are becoming the protagonists of change, not necessarily through the rejection of Islamic structures, but through a gender inclusive re-interpretation of their faith.

The conversion of women to Islam in the West reveals the construction of radically alternative Muslim identities,

Is there an Emerging Muslim Constituency for Islamic Feminists in the West?

Written by Nicholas Glover

which point to possibilities beyond patriarchal status quo. For many converts, their search for meaning in Islamic texts is imbued with a feminist perspective, thus they appropriate Islam in terms of gender egalitarianism. Their Muslim identity provides a space in which they can explore alternative femininities (McGinty, 2007: 483) that are dissident from hegemonic ideals of Western sexuality and patriarchal ideas of the subordinate Muslim women. The construction of Muslim Feminist identities in the West is an ongoing and contested process, since sociality, religious beliefs, practices and organisations reveal sustained inequality in gender relations. However the changing roles of Muslim women within public and religious spaces in the West, suggests how Migration and conversion applies pressure on established institutional and cultural norms, and how gendered religious identities may be contested and transformed over time, in the context of Diaspora and conversion.

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Is there an Emerging Muslim Constituency for Islamic Feminists in the West?

Written by Nicholas Glover

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