Islamic feminism: A contradiction in terms?

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Islamic feminism critiques Islamic patriarchy by historicizing and reinterpreting sources of scriptural authority. Secular feminists, however, rule out any possible compatibility between feminism and Islam. Belgian social scientist Ghaliya Djelloul reviews the arguments and suggests a way past restrictive dichotomies.

‘Islamic feminism’ is a relatively recent current of thought being developed by a transnational network of activists in widely contrasting socio-political contexts. [1] Islamic feminists are concerned with developing an ethical reading of the bases of Islam, namely the Qur’an and the Sunna, in order to find a form of religious exegesis that will support their feminist viewpoint. It is therefore legitimate to speak of the production of a new Islamic discourse and, in general terms, of the appropriation of the religious.

Islamic feminists are carrying out a critical review of classical commentaries to Islamic sources and providing new interpretations of the latter aimed at socio-political and economic equality with men. They take a dynamic, gendered approach that connects precepts contained in *ahadith* [2] – the words and actions of Muhammad written down by his early followers – to the social and political context of ‘revelation’, rather than to any concordance with a supposedly timeless ‘message’ and its ideal of equality and social justice. By historicizing the sources in this way, they relativize their legal consequences, thereby deconstructing the legitimacy of the traditional ‘patriarchal settlement’ [3] crystallized in the form of certain key concepts such as that of *qiwâma* (male supremacy). [4]

Writings on Islamic feminism often refer to its ‘paradoxical’ character or speak of it as an ‘oxymoron’. [5] Despite this, Islamic feminists publicly proclaim their feminist heritage, even though they see its foundation as being within a world of Islamic rather than secular sources. What, then, is the meaning of their actions? And who are they speaking to?

Drawing on post-colonial criticism, Islamic feminism reveals how the trope of ‘saving Muslim women’ is produced by the colonial nature of power. [6] However, any attempt to de-colonialize thought also requires transcending the notion of ‘post’ and looking at history ‘backwards’, as Achille Mbembe asks us to do. [7] This process of transcending requires us, from the outset, to recognize ways in which the past is present and then to
‘unlearn how to learn’, so as to free ourselves from colonial bonds and enable the emergence of new perspectives in political imagination ‘in common’.

Islamic feminism: ‘Everything’s in the name!’

Understanding Islamic feminism from a de-colonial viewpoint means considering how it is possible for it to exist at all. The emergence of Islamic feminist voices has only been possible through the process of de-colonization and the careers of women belonging to national elites in the South. The majority of these women have been educated to some extent in Europe and North America. Their critical approach derives from studies on gender that are cultural, postcolonial and subaltern. If, in order to have anything to say about the condition of women, they feel that they have to position themselves as being ‘from within’ Muslim societies or communities, they do so in order to resist academic, political and religious discourses that foster ‘phantasms’ (Mbembe) about the oppression of Muslim women. Positioning themselves as a marginalized social group, Islamic feminists claim their right to choose their identity rather than suffering it, and to maintain a multiple self-awareness both as women and as Muslim women facing a variety of forms of oppression.

This way of thinking has also been enabled by globalization and the possibility of connecting within networks. This has allowed Islamic feminism to become transnational: what was once a ‘resistance identity’ has become a ‘project identity’. [8] Islamic feminism speaks ‘in the name of’ women who refuse to choose between the ‘road to feminist emancipation’ and their ‘belonging’ to Islam as a culture and a religion. In positioning themselves as Muslim women who are not ipso facto blind to and passive towards patriarchy, they aim to produce an alternative to secular feminism, which excludes any form of religious reference. In this sense, Islamic feminism is not so much a ‘posture’ than a ‘performance’. [9] In affirming this ‘project identity’, these activists proclaim the existence of a point of view situated within religious communities. They attempting to focus their feminist and anti-racist struggle and efforts (djihad) on deconstructing and reformulating the supposedly mutually exclusive categories of ‘Muslim’ and ‘feminist’. Beyond the ‘trouble’ [10] produced by Islamic feminists, the tactic behind this term is the struggle to state that they will take charge of their own liberation. By extending the feminist slogan thus, they produce a discourse that assumes an endogenous viewpoint: in that it is simultaneously based on and professing their condition as Muslim women. In this respect, they challenge both the monopoly claimed by Muslim authorities and that of certain secular feminism that excludes them from feminist solidarity. Like self-fulfilling prophecies, both positions imprison both them and other members of their families and communities.

A postcolonial world to be inherited and feminist action to be shared

In secular contexts, Islamic feminists are often reproached for having altered the ‘discursive tradition’ of Islam in order to speak about political and social rights. [11] By involving themselves in what is the preserve of religion, Islamic feminists are accused of questioning one of the conceptual foundations of democracy, namely the separation of spheres. Legitimate though this criticism may be, it nevertheless fails to take account of the need for Islamic feminists to question religious laws. For even if they are lucky
enough to live under political regimes that already recognize their equal rights, their personal milieu is, at the very least, likely to be impregnated with patriarchal religious culture. When this culture is legitimized and enforced by the laws of the state, avoiding it becomes impossible.

Moreover, to see ‘Islam’ and ‘democracy’ as being in permanent conflict is to symbolically exclude part of the national community from being represented. Religious identity is ethnicized. This form of segregation promotes certain trends in political Islam. Self-appointed community leaders claiming to be the spokespersons use it to unite their public by fixing them in an ethnic-religious category.

In my view, this false duality of ‘Islam’ and ‘democracy’ is characteristic of the threshold moment of ‘postcolonial’ history in which we are living. We believe in an irreversible process of secularization and of societies becoming generalized, yet we appear to be surprised by the ‘return’ of the religious (assuming it ever left), in the form of ‘re-Islamization’ of Muslim societies and communities.

Islamic feminists may be a manifestation of a metamorphosis combining movements of secularization and Islamization. By waging their struggle against the patriarchy manifest in Islam and against the Islamophobia manifest in feminism, they are connecting the political and the religious in a way that de-sacralizes relations between genders and de-traditionalizes Islam. Over the decades, Islamic feminism has been a vehicle for different ways of conceiving of gender relations. It has made it possible for new religious practices and certain forms of judicial progress to appear.

By questioning their subordination, Islamic feminists are laying the foundations for an appropriation of rights aimed at the acquisition of autonomy for women on a religious level. Yet the secular criticism of Islamic feminists that refuses to accord them the epithet ‘feminist’ ignores the efforts of these activists to insert even a touch of democracy into the religious sphere.

Towards a hybridization of everyday norms

One of the symbols around which this confrontation is repeatedly played out is the veil. This debate raised its head once again in French-speaking Belgium in September 2016, following the appearance of a webpage entitled ‘Citoyennes, féministes et musulmanes’. [12] The reaction of Nadia Geerts, a Belgian secular feminist, on her blog ‘An open letter to Muslim citizens who are “veiled” and “feminist”’ was typical of the ‘dead end’ that this confrontation between ‘Islam’ and ‘democracy’ produces. [13]

The webpage was a reaction to the ban on burkinis on France’s southern beaches in July and August 2016, which aggravated the climate of anxiety triggered by acts of terrorism carried out by ISIS in France and Belgium. It took the form of an appeal: ‘In Belgium, measures aimed at excluding from social life Muslim women who wear the headscarf are on the increase. Do not force us to withdraw into our communities; let us become allies’. Geerts, however, rejected the hand that was offered, explaining that she considered the veil to be a symbol of oppression that advanced the cause of Islamism, which in turn constituted a threat to ‘democracy’. This, despite the fact that the collective behind the webpage was actually calling for women who chose to wear a veil to be able to do so on
the basis of their own, individual interpretation. By recognizing this individuality, they were denying any complicity with ‘murderers’.

If one considers women who wear the veil to be representatives of Islam and Islamism, rather than as people caught up in gender relations, one reproduces an ethnic and religious category in order to justify their exclusion from feminist solidarity. If, on the other hand, one accepts the choice to wear the veil in the name of the right to (and recognition of) difference, we allow the creation of a hybrid form of (discursive) religious tradition and a democratic political framework.

It is above all socio-economic conditions and lack of social and cultural capital that influence the forms of engagement of Islamic feminist activists. Those who have been particularly affected by spatial and social rejection, and who have experienced a sense of otherness ever since school, are active on the socio-political scene as committed members of a religious and ethnic community. Others who are more mobile spatially and socially, express their views on academic and religious platforms, expressing themselves as fully-fledged individuals both within and beyond their religious affiliation. French-speaking Belgian Muslim feminists make use of the religious repertoire both in order to reconstruct the ethnic bond (Islam as a driver of community solidarity) and to remove the bonds imposed by the ethnic and religious group (Islam as a generational link, accompanied by sexist practices). In all these examples, feminists find the source of their commitment in their ‘citizenship’, that is in their normative membership of a democratic system and in the principle of the equality of its members.

We live in a global context dominated by conflict, one in which ‘Islam’ and ‘democracy’ seem to have difficulty in finding a modus vivendi. Is not feminism, as a form of revolution, the bearer of a cross-cultural message, a message about recognition of an equal humanity? A fight against everything that makes women invisible, against legitimization of violence towards women? How, then, is it possible for certain strands of secular feminism to reject any solidarity with an Islamic feminism that is fighting against the culture of rape, for example, by rejecting the veracity or interpretation of sources that justify a man’s right to preside over his wife’s body and to punish her if she disobeys? By taking religious tradition seriously, Muslim feminists help enable it to evolve.

Decolonizing Islamic feminism?

Having discussed the contribution of Islamic feminism to feminist thought, let us turn to its postmodern and postcolonial limits. In her work Décoloniser le féminisme: une approche transculturelle, [14] Soumeya Mestiri criticizes Islamic feminism for replacing the figure of ‘Muslim women who need saving’ (the Scheherazade myth) with the figure of women who justify patriarchal authority (the myth of ‘Fat(i)ma’).

Although they use religious legitimacy as a tool, Mestiri argues, Islamic feminists are nevertheless involved in reproducing a form of coloniality that fixes people into ethno-racial categories, in this instance through religious adherence. Their position, characterized by a need to ‘justify’ Islam, acts as a brake on their ambitions to reform it. Mestiri criticizes Islam feminists for being willing to speak of a ‘complementarity’ of the sexes and, consequently, for putting the ontological debate before the political debate,
instead of rejecting it in the name of the struggle against patriarchal rule. In Mestiri’s eyes, Muslim feminists ‘state as a principle that patriarchal authority is an evil that we can overcome, providing that we read scriptural sources correctly. The problem is that this kind of thinking fails to take seriously the task of deconstruction that they ought to be undertaking’. [15]

So what is Mestiri suggesting? The coloniality of power, she argues, can be overcome by accepting that ‘the hiatus is not necessarily fated to disappear; its presence is not synonymous with defeat’. Her ‘frontier feminism’ requires that we adopt a shifting, frontier way of thinking, one that is not fixed: one in which we ‘think in terms of dichotomous concepts rather than arrange the world into dichotomies’. According to her, Muslim feminists have mistaken their principal enemy; they ‘try to deny the frontier’, whereas, she believes, ‘it is the necessary condition for any theoretical harmony’. Because they base their feminist action on a discursive tradition that reproduces the ethno-religious paradigm set up by the colonial nature of power, they are condemned to remain enclosed in the ‘post’. Consequently, the work needed to open up any prospect of de-colonial feminism that would include everyone, whether or not they are of Muslim culture, religion or tradition, would involve ‘unlearning how to learn’ and not relearning the same thing in some other way.

Basing itself on postcolonial studies in order to speak in the university context, Islamic feminism seems, first and foremost, a place for intellectual deconstruction of patriarchal authority and racism, a place where these researchers and activists have striven to remove the category of ‘Muslim women’ from a subordinate position in order to be heard and recognized, above all by other feminists and anti-racists. But, as Mestiri points out, they lack an audience. The fact that they have become transnational from the last decade onwards is not necessarily a sign that they are increasingly listened to by ordinary believers, whether male or female.

The frontier feminism that Mestiri advocates is interesting, inasmuch as it recognizes the contribution of Islamic feminism to a de-colonial approach. Mestiri proposes that we should not apply interpretations of societies whose political horizon is derived from a secular intellectual heritage to societies that originate from regions of the world that have experienced different political trajectories. Mestiri takes seriously the need to attack the religious field, since it holds the keys to the domestic sphere. In doing so, she makes it possible to combine the way in which Islamic feminism provincializes secular feminism by showing the limits of a way of thinking that claims to be ‘universal’. Simultaneously, she warns against ‘stopping there’, so as not to reproduce the process of alterization. It is in this sense that the de-colonial route provides material for imagining what it is we have ‘in common’ (Mbembe), which is necessarily pluriversal and which has to be constructed at the frontier at which these different perspectives meet.

**Footnotes**

1. Generally speaking, Islamic feminists draw on different religious disciplines to promote the equality of men and women on the basis of Islamic authorities: hermeneutics (*tafsir*),
prophetic tradition (hadith) and Muslim jurisprudence and case law (fiqh). Some refer to non-religious sources, such as international conventions on human rights. For an account of the diversity of their bases, see Ali, Z., Féministes islamiques [Islamic feminists], Paris 2012. For an account of the theoretical foundations of the movement, based on the founding texts, see Hamidi, M., Un féminisme musulman, et pourquoi pas? [A Muslim feminism, and why not?], La Tour d’Aigues 2017. And for an account of the careers of militants in Belgium, together with an attempted typology of their involvement, see Djelloul G., Parcours de féministes musulmanes belges: de l’engagement de l’islam aux droits des femmes? [The Career of Belgian Muslim feminists: involvement with women’s rights within Islam?], Louvain-la-Neuve 2013.

2. Whether they originate from Sunni or Shi’ite collections.


5. For a general introduction, see Critique internationale, ‘Islamic feminism today’, edited by St. Latte Abdallah, 46, 2010/1, 216 pp. See also Malika Hamidi, Un féminisme musulman, 2017.


15. Ibid. 72.

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