

“The Antinomies of ‘Feminism’ and ‘Islam:’” the limits of a Marxist analysis  
(published in *Middle East Women’s Studies Review*; Vol. xviii, Nos. 1-2, Spring/Summer, 2003).  
by Asma Barlas

---

BOOK REVIEW:

“The Antinomies of ‘Feminism’ and ‘Islam:’” the limits of a Marxist analysis (published in *Middle East Women’s Studies Review*; Vol. xviii, Nos. 1-2, Spring/Summer, 2003).  
<http://www.amews.org/review.htm>

Asma Barlas\*

*Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: the Limits of Postmodern Analysis*, Haideh Moghissi, 166 pages, including index; London: Zed Books, 1999

Haideh Moghissi makes two simple but audacious claims in her second book: first, that contemporary Islamic feminism is an arm of Islamic fundamentalism which serves—sometimes unintentionally—the interests of Islamic patriarchies. This does not mean, however, that feminism is an in-house phenomenon in Muslim societies; rather, it has been imposed upon them from the outside. Second, rather than critiquing this worrisome nexus between feminism and fundamentalism, Western secular intellectuals, specially postmodernists, enable it by embracing a convoluted idea of cultural difference. In fact, their antipathy to Western modernity makes postmodernists the ideological bed-fellows of Islamic fundamentalists (hence the subtitle of the book).

In support of this argument, Moghissi traverses a lot of ground (in seven chapters) from a critique of Oriental sexuality to one of “Islamic feminism and its Discontents.” En route, she maps out the evolution in Western approaches to Islam from Orientalism to Islamic feminism, illustrates the pitfalls of postmodernism, exposes the dangers of Islamic fundamentalism (taking as a case study her country of birth, Iran), and deliberates on the implications of modernity for women and social change. As a feminist, she is open about her own political stance, which is Marxist, and, as a Marxist, she is open about her dim view of religion, specially as a driving force for meaningful social change.

For Moghissi, Islamic feminism is fundamentally flawed, even when it comes to naming it. “Is Islamic feminism a brand of feminism or a brand of Islamism?” (146) she wonders in the last pages of the book. However, she does not advance an answer, even suggesting that one cannot know with certainty because of the difficulty of analyzing “the discourse of ‘Muslim feminists’, for we can never determine whether the use of Islamic signs and vocabulary is a matter of faith or a self-protecting tactic. Are they truly Muslim women turned feminists or feminists using Islamic language against ‘Islamic’ state repression? Or are they, instead, Muslim women whose ‘feminism’ is constructed for the purpose of softening or sanitizing fundamentalist rule” (75).

Although she does not engage any of these questions, Moghissi is convinced that it is the last. Not only that, but she believes that Muslim (and she does not specify how Muslim is different from Islamic) feminism is “an indigenized and exotic version of Western feminism . . . put forward by exceptionally forgiving, postmodern relativist feminists in the West” (146). Even when she is obliged to concede, with respect to Egypt, that

“The Antinomies of ‘Feminism’ and ‘Islam:’” the limits of a Marxist analysis  
(published in *Middle East Women’s Studies Review*; Vol. xviii, Nos. 1-2, Spring/Summer, 2003).  
by Asma Barlas

---

“feminist awareness. . . was indigenously rooted” (129), she contends that after the 1960s there has only been a noxious form of “state sponsored feminism” under pressures from a worldwide feminist movement. However, even though, according to Moghissi, “Islamic feminism from the start was adopted and pushed from outside Islamic societies” (126), she discerns in it “the political and discursive influence of Islamic fundamentalism” (10). (If this sounds contradictory, it is not to her, given her view that postmodernists and fundamentalist are hand in glove.)

It is not until the last chapter that Moghissi attempts a definition of Islamic feminism; it is, she says, “connected with the question of the compatibility of feminism with Islamic teaching and scripture, and the social and legal frameworks which have evolved in Islamic societies” (126). However, she is unclear about what “the ‘Islamic’ in ‘Islamic feminism’” means (125). Not only is a religion based in gender hierarchies incompatible with “gender equity and . . . women’s rights” (146), but it has no liberatory potential either and anyone who believes otherwise is simply “banalizing fundamentalism” (99).

For Moghissi, Islamic fundamentalism, simply stated, is “Islam as a ruling system,” a tautology that says nothing about Islam or fundamentalism. She later fleshes this out by saying that fundamentalism is “‘an attitude towards time’ glorifying and idealizing the past” and emphasizing “‘correct’ interpretation of the scripture” (69). Additionally, fundamentalism is anti-modernity, anti-democracy, and anti-feminism.

If this definition leaves little doubt about how Islamic fundamentalists think, it does lead one to ask what “common ground” they share with postmodernists. Moghissi claims that, in addition to showing an “unremitting hostility to the social, cultural and political processes of change, originated in the West, known as modernity” (8), both “look at social, political and cultural experience in the West and see this historical experience as a damning judgment on the false promises of the Enlightenment” (74). Why Islamic (or other) fundamentalists would be invested in the Enlightenment or postmodernists in a “correct” reading of texts or in anti-feminism, she does not clarify.

She criticizes postmodernists on several grounds. They ignore “the role of Islamic legal institutions and practices in maintaining . . .the . . .patriarchal order which circumscribes women’s lives in Muslim societies;” they paint “an enviably rosy picture of women’s lives in Islamic societies” that does not correspond to reality; “in the name of validating women’s ‘self-perceptions’ and ‘hearing women’s own voices,’ only the voices of particular groups of women are heard . . .[and] broadcast as the unanimous expression of ‘women in Islamic societies’” (40-42); and, most importantly, they have abandoned “the secular democratic vision of feminism, sacrificing its hard-won achievements at the feet of an ‘Islamic’ vision of change” by attempting “to reshape and soften their ideas to fit the ideals of an elusive ‘Muslim feminism’” instead of “exposing its limits” (145-146).

While its strident tone makes the book a difficult read, much about the argument itself has merit. Moghissi is right to say that “We are not forced to choose between passively keeping silent and minimizing the consequences of Islamic fundamentalism or siding

with the bullying policy of . . . the United States . . . We can be against both” (6). She also is right to emphasize the “negative consequence of Islamic fundamentalism for women” (9). Her resistance to those who “attempt to push Islam on feminists in Islamic societies as the only ‘culturally suitable’ or workable project” (10) is also laudable, as is her stance that those who reject modernity in the Middle East have the obligation to offer “a more humane and egalitarian alternative” than fundamentalism (56).

However, much about Moghissi’s argument also is profoundly objectionable, like her relentless savaging of women who don’t share her ideological perspective, both Muslims and postmodernists. Muslim women in particular come across as wretched dupes, much like the haplessly inert peasantry in traditional Marxist theory; they have no agency or independence, being merely the tools of forbearing Western postmodern feminists and Muslim fundamentalists. This is not to deny women’s role in sustaining fundamentalism, and nor is it to argue that the interests of fundamentalists, feminists, and postmodernists can never intersect. But it does not follow from this that all Muslim women who are working for sexual equality within an Islamic framework are then instruments of fundamentalism and postmodern nihilism.

Moghissi’s scorn for Muslim women is a function partly of her specious and unrefined understanding of Islam itself. She begins by saying that, like other religions, Islam also “has a contingent nature and is the product of its articulation with indigenous cultures and societies.” She even suggests that Muslim women’s plight should be understood in the context of the “combined impact of socio-historical economic and political retardation of Islamic societies and its articulation with indigenous customs and patriarchal cultural values” (17). And, yet, in her own analysis she fails to consider these different modes of articulation of Islam, relying, instead, on an all-too-hackneyed re-presentation of the religion as an essentialized monolith.

Her references to “Islam’s obsessive concern with the rights and wrongs of female sexual conduct” (23) and “man’s God-given rights over woman” (20) fail to distinguish between different sources of textual authority in Islam, not all of which have the same approach to women’s issues. Such references also take patriarchal readings of the Qur’an and Islam as the only authentic readings even though, like all other texts, the Qur’an also is polysemic (has more than one meaning) and one reading cannot exhaust its meanings. Moghissi herself admits there are “significant differences between various interpretations of the Qur’an and the Shari’a” (17). As such, it becomes necessary to ask why Muslims have tended to embrace only some readings of the Qur’an and why different readings of the scripture and of law have not resulted in more flexibility on “women’s issues.”

To ask such questions, however, is to take Islam seriously but vulgar Marxism cannot do this because of its view of religion as epiphenomenal. Thus, in spite of her tendency to reify religion and her perfunctory nod to Gramsci, Moghissi can offer no more urbane understanding of Islam than to repeat the old Marxist line that “the masses” have been hoodwinked into believing in religion. (Gramsci, of course, ascribed a great deal of

“The Antinomies of ‘Feminism’ and ‘Islam:’” the limits of a Marxist analysis  
(published in *Middle East Women’s Studies Review*; Vol. xviii, Nos. 1-2, Spring/Summer, 2003).  
by Asma Barlas

---

importance and autonomy to the realm of ideology and treated it thoughtfully, which is to say, he did not believe that ideology was a contemptible hoax or subterfuge.)

Part of the problem might be that Moghissi is Iranian and if feminism has taught us one thing about standpoint epistemologies, it is that we need to take them seriously. As an Iranian who endured the real and imagined excesses of the “Islamic revolution” she finds it hard to approach Islam with an open mind. But to confuse Islam with one’s personal experiences of it, or, for that matter with Muslims—in effect, to collapse historical and normative Islam, as Fazlur Rahman used to call it—is to make a category mistake. That Marxists should make this mistake seems particularly ironic given their own long-standing insistence on separating Marx’s vision from actually existing Marxism.

As a Marxist feminist, Moghissi surely knows that there are always disjunctures between theory and practice and that the objective of critique should be to work towards an ever better understanding of theory in order to reform praxis. That is what a lot of Muslims, women and men, feminist and otherwise, are attempting to do. Moghissi doesn’t have to believe in Islam to respect their right to do that, but by arrogating to herself the only correct vision and understanding of social change, she ends up revealing that Marxists can be intractable fundamentalists, too, just not very self-aware ones.

\*Asma Barlas is associate professor and chair of Politics, at Ithaca College, New York, and the author of “*Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*, University of Texas Press (2002).