

Four Stages of Denial, or, my On-again, Off-again Affair with Feminism:
Response to Margot Badran

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I'm going to begin my response to Margot Badran's very inspired and inspiring analysis of Islamic feminism with a double apology: first, for the levity of the title of my talk (which I'm calling "Four Stages of Denial or, my On-again, Off-again, Affair with Feminism") and, second, for the self-indulgence of my comments. However, since she locates my work within the framework of Islamic feminism, it's unavoidable speaking about it and from a different perspective than Margot.

I agree with her that that there may be nothing intrinsically Western about feminism and that many ideas transcend the imaginary geography of East and West, to borrow Edward Said's memorable phrase. But, of course, as she has also pointed out, many Muslims continue to associate feminism with the West and to use the term pejoratively to undermine critiques of Muslim patriarchies; that is how my own work is de-legitimized in some circles.

However, partly as a provocation and partly because I'm still not convinced otherwise, I will question Margot's conclusion that "Because feminism provides a common language, and for analytical reasons, the term Islamic feminism should be retained, firmly claimed and repeatedly explained." Using my own work as an example, I will argue that feminism doesn't always provide a common language and, more to the point, that common languages also create analytical and political problems. So we may need more than the shared discourse of feminism to understand Muslims and build solidarities with them.

Onto my four stages of denial. . .

First Stage:

When someone first referred to my reading of the Qur'an as feminist, I was upset because I'd gone to some lengths to differentiate myself from feminists. And I must confess my reaction was both visceral and monologic in that I went around saying "what!" in various tones of outrage quite a bit, as in: "What? How can people call me a feminist when I'm calling myself a believing woman?"

"How can other people tell me what I am and what I'm doing?"

"So what if I use some of the same language as feminists? Can't one do that without buying into an entire ontology or epistemology!"

“What?! Do feminists think that they discovered equality and patriarchy?!”

And, in the final stages, “so what if they did? I derive my understanding of equality and of patriarchy from the Qur’an, not from any feminist text!” So, there was much outrage and not much argument during this first stage.

Second Stage:

But the label didn’t go away and, if anything, stuck more firmly and so I was eventually persuaded to abandon outrage as a permanent political strategy. Instead, I began to explain why I was so invested in not being called a feminist and basically it boiled down to feeling that something about my encounter with the Qur’an was being elided, and even erased, every time I was called that.

I tried to express this sense of erasure by comparing myself to Muslim and other feminists whose critiques of Islam rest on that most egregious of all confluences: between Islam and Muslims and who believe that Islam “itself” puts a “sacred stamp onto female subservience,” as Fatima Mernissi alleges.

To these feminists Islam is by, definition, patriarchal, misogynistic, violent and fundamentalist and so too are those who practice it, like myself. To me, on the other hand, the fact that Muslims have read patriarchy and even misogyny into Islam and, more specifically, into the Qur’an has to do with agency, choice, context, and hermeneutics. By that I mean that historically the Qur’an has been read by male interpretive communities in patriarchies and by means of a method that fails to recover its egalitarianism. In fact, contrary to many feminists, I believe that the Qur’an is not only egalitarian, but that it is also anti-patriarchal.

For one thing, all the Qur’an’s teachings flow out of a conception of a God who is neither male, nor female and thus beyond sexual affinity with men or hatred for women. And, for another, the Qur’an doesn’t use the categories of sex or gender to privilege males and in fact it establishes the ontic equality of human beings by locating their origins in the same Self, or nafs.

So, even though feminists like Mernissi and I use the same analytical language of feminism about patriarchy and sexual equality, our epistemological approaches to, and understandings of, the Qur’an are radically different.

I was enjoying this stage in my affair with feminism until Margot arrived on the scene. Of course, she had always been there but she came into my life in a very immediate and personal way.

Third Stage:

I first heard from her from Cairo, Egypt, in 2002. She wrote an email saying she was listening to the muezzin's call to prayer as she was reading my book. And the part she was reading was my interpretation of Abraham's story in the Qur'an in which I argue that, far from being the patriarch he is said to have been, Abraham was not a traditional father, or a father in the traditional sense. This is because his rights as father—as indeed the rights of all fathers—were and are circumscribed by the rule of God and a God who is neither father nor son nor man nor male nor human nor even created.

This was another building block in my claim that the Qur'an is anti-patriarchal: that it doesn't privilege fathers or fatherhood and, indeed, subverts the concept of father-right and father-rule which is at the heart of traditional patriarchies.

Since that first exchange of emails, Margot and I have traveled some distance and some of it together in conversation.

Margot has been the first to define Islamic feminism as a "discourse of gender equality that derives its mandate from the Qur'an and seeks rights and justice for all human beings across the totality of the public-private continuum." Rather than locating the Qur'an within feminist discourses, then, Margot re-located feminism in the Qur'an. And, as she said, Muslim women had been engaged in recuperating this Qur'anic discourse much before the advent of full-fledged feminism as we know it.

I was, of course, utterly captivated by this masterly move both in the sense of being engaged by it and made captive by it. If my reading of the Qur'an is feminist because it is based in and on the Qur'an, then, clearly I'm an Islamic feminist! And so I've stood alongside Margot and said as much publicly about two years ago. But, here we are again today and I've been obliged to rethink my position once more in light of her developing analysis of Islamic feminism.

Current Stage:

In some ways Margot's presentation has led me back to the "what" mode, though this time I'm also asking some how and why questions.

Even if we must name patterns in order to see them, specially a historian like Margot, doesn't the naming also run the risk of flattening out differences, to use Zillah Eisenstein's language? As I've tried to show, one can use feminist analysis to recuperate the Qur'an's egalitarianism and also to represent Islam as patriarchal. While the plurality of feminism is often said to be its strength, how

useful is this big-tent pluralism that erases such fundamental epistemic differences between feminists?

Of course, Margot's definition of Islamic feminism gives one a way out of this conundrum by distinguishing between Muslim and Islamic feminists. But, given that most people don't make this distinction, how does calling myself an Islamic feminist render my work any more transparent or legitimate to Muslims? To me, this isn't an abstract existential anxiety but a practical issue in that I am trying to speak mainly to my own Muslim communities through my work.

If, as Paulo Freire says, to name the world is to change it, then how do we change something by naming it Islamic, or Qur'anic, or feminist? Do we redeem Islam and the Qur'an by calling it feminist? How so? After all, as Margot's work suggests some Muslim women have been encountering the Qur'an as liberatory without the language of feminism. Why not just call their stance Qur'anic or Islamic? Or, do we redeem feminism when we locate it in the Qur'an? If so, what are the implications of this redemption for feminist theorizing?

To me, one of the most attractive features about Margot's definition of Islamic feminism is that it de-secularizes the project of women's liberation. As she makes clear, it is not only a Westernized secular humanism, but, also a mode of God-consciousness that can lead us to emphasize justice and rights for all human beings by affirming the unity and equality of human life.

So, why then do I continue to dither in my embrace of feminism?

Perhaps because it was not a process of self-naming for me and the perversity of a post-colonial mentality balks at giving away the power even to define myself specially when this power is, once again, being taken away by that greatest purveyor of violence for the last half a millennium: a self-defined West that continues to define itself in opposition to Islam.

To the extent that feminism in any form is complicit with this process by reading oppression into Islam and reading liberation out of the West's imperialist depredations, I feel the need to resist it in all its forms. Of course, the West is now "everywhere, in structures and in minds," and there is simply no escaping it, as Ashis Nandy says, but I still seek to protect my sense of self from parts of it by refusing to speak some common languages. And, if in the end, this is really a self-defeating strategy, it shows how narrow the world grows daily for many of us, especially those who call ourselves Muslim.