

Globalizing Equality Double oppressions; double critiques

Third International Congress on Islamic Feminism
Barcelona, October 25, 2008

Asma Barlas

I am very happy to be back in Barcelona for the Third International Congress on Islamic feminism and want to thank Abdennur Prado for including me in it.

This time, our focus is on globalization and the double oppression of Muslim women resulting from both neo-liberalism and religious fundamentalism, and our charge is to analyze how Islamic feminists (and I assume, Muslim women), are responding to these challenges. In particular, we have been asked to assess how they are contributing to “the construction of a new worldwide civil society based on a culture of human rights and universal values such as democracy, social justice, freedom of conscience and gender equality.”

I want to approach this charge by sharing with you parts of a paper I wrote for a lecture series on “Muslim Women in the Era of Global Communications” some years ago.¹ I do this for two reasons. First, that series also focused on women’s roles in building civil societies on the basis of “universal standards” like human rights and democracy. There are thus some overlaps between the issues I was invited to talk about then and those I’ve been asked to talk about now. Second, this will allow me to give you a sense of the kinds of conversations that are going on in my part of the world which, I think, is one of the goals of this Congress: to enable a form of knowledge-sharing that may not otherwise be possible.

Since the series took a very different view of globalization than this Congress is doing, I will begin by describing that view before outlining my response to it.

Context/ Text

One of the basic premises of the series was that there is a positive relationship between globalization, particularly the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), Muslim women’s roles, and the advent of democracy and human rights in Muslim societies. This argument was framed as follows: that a “quiet revolution” is taking place in the lives of Muslim women who are

¹ I have substantially rewritten this paper which appears as a book chapter, “Globalizing Equality: Muslim women, theology, and feminisms,” in Fera Simone (ed.) *On Shifting Ground*, NY: Feminist Press, 2005.

assessing leadership roles in some of the most future-oriented sectors of society. Information technology, satellite TV, business administration, public health, and higher education are attracting their talents. This transformation of roles will have an impact [o]n the future of democratization and development of vibrant, inclusive civil societies that could push forward gender equality and fundamental human rights.

Indeed, the series went on to claim that women are already “redefining Muslim public realities [and] recreating the public sphere as a domain of equality and inclusion” by reinterpreting and reappropriating religious texts and “working to transform . . . social, cultural and political structures” in Muslim societies. In effect, women are emerging “as major players in building vigorous civil society institutions.”

According to the series, ICTs have been key to this process because, for the first time ever, they have “connected the world instantaneously,” transformed “the nature of political participation” by allowing people to play “a larger role than casting a vote,” enabled “journey[s] without visa[s] or borders . . . to observe other cultures,” and thereby made cross-cultural dialogue possible.²

These are, of course, large claims to make and my response to them was also too lengthy to reproduce here in its entirety. So, I will focus on only two main elements of my critique that are pertinent to some of our discussions today.

One is that ICTs are not necessarily harbingers of equality or democracy and that technology can only transform Muslim women’s (and men’s) lives in meaningful ways if it enables a fundamental epistemic shift in how we interpret and practice Islam. That is to say, theology matters, and what we also need in order to build democratic societies is a Qur’anic hermeneutics and praxis of gender equality.

The second is that struggles for equality *within* Muslim societies must also extend to struggles for equality *for* Muslim societies in the global political-economy. In other words, it is disingenuous to highlight inequalities in Muslim societies while ignoring them at the global level. As I see it, the greatest impediment to building a democratic global society or public is not just U.S. hegemony but the language of rights itself when it acquires the form of a secular universalism; it is therefore necessary not only to use this language with discretion but to contest it as well.

In the rest of the time allotted to me, I will expand on these claims and I will start by looking at the relationship between ICTs, women’s roles and democracy.

² From the description of the lecture series emailed to me.

ICTs, democracy, equality

There is no doubt that the rapid pace of technological change is impacting people's lives in profound ways, or that activists are using the Internet to forge political solidarities, or that more and more Muslim women are taking up careers that were once considered off-limits to them and by them. It is also true that women in many societies are creatively reappropriating religious texts and struggling for inclusion in the religious and political spheres.

However, I do not believe that women's access to high-tech jobs or education alone will produce democracy or equality. For one thing, such a view seems to suggest that technology drives society and social change instead of recognizing that society and technology mutually shape one another.

For another thing, such a teleological view of progress seems to take the West's development trajectory as "a silent referent in historical knowledge."³ It may be true that in the West changes in technology, gender roles, and civil and political rights accompanied one another but there is no reason to assume that the West's developmental trajectory is universalizable. Then, too, many of the problems of Muslim societies, such as economic underdevelopment and repressive states, are an off-shoot of this very trajectory both in its past form of colonialism and in its present form of neoliberalism and "war on terror" that has gotten out of control.

Lastly, even though many of us are involved in struggles for equality, there is little empirical ground for claiming that women are already transforming the "public sphere as a domain of equality and inclusion" in Muslim societies. They are *struggling* to do so but such struggles continue to be politically marginalized as well as ideologically polarized since some women look to Islam and others to secularism for solutions (I will return to this issue later).

Similarly, while ICTs have obviously made certain connections possible, I do not believe that interconnectedness is a sufficient condition for democracy or for equality. Here I should note that an overwhelming majority of people will never have access to technologies like computers and therefore to the much vaunted freedoms offered by the Internet. And, for the tiny minority that does have access, what does it mean, for instance, to travel via the Internet? If the Internet allows journeys without visas, new technologies have also created new borders and enabled ever more invasive and brutal ways of policing existing ones.

More importantly for my argument, even though the Internet is opening up all sorts of political possibilities, it is not a signifier of a democratic global public or civil society. A public does not exist in any meaningful sense even in Western

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, 2000: 28.

democracies, if by public we mean a model in which people are free to engage in a mutually non-coercive dialogue from which emerges enlightened public policy. This model was fractured long ago when a society of masses came to replace the community of publics. Globally, too, a “public . . . does not yet exist” because those “who might become that public, cannot yet reach each other across the excluding boundaries of language, beneath the power distortions of global media, against the muffling exclusions of poverty and the disparities in information” and power. At best, we can be “members of partial publics.”⁴

What is one to make, then, of the argument that ICTs are allowing Muslims to create “a new form of imagined community, or a reimagined umma” as Peter Mandaville says? According to him, by fragmenting the “traditional sources of authority,” ICTs are making “the locus of ‘real’ Islam and the identity of those who are permitted to speak on its behalf ambiguous.”⁵ This is enabling the emergence of “new forms of Islam, each of which is redrawn to suit the unique set of sociocultural contingencies into which it enters.”⁶ It is also giving rise to a new type of Muslim for whom “neither the transmission of knowledge nor the place of this transmission is institutionalised. Everyone is ‘authorised.’”⁷

Clearly, one can regard such a development as democratic simply because, by challenging the monopoly of traditional authorities, it is de-privatizing Islam. (And here I should say that the problem isn’t tradition per se but how it has been institutionalized in a religion that abjures institutionalized authority.) On the other hand, however, the fact that anyone with access to the Internet can now publicize their views on Islam doesn’t make their views or the Internet itself democratic. One look at some Muslim websites should dispel such an illusion.

The conclusion I draw is that we need to distinguish between pluralism and democracy as well as between tolerance and democracy. As Marcuse argued, certain modes of tolerance can also be repressive.⁸ Then, too, I do not believe that an interface between technology and theology can dismantle patriarchal interpretations of Islam in the absence of a liberatory theology.

Theology, democracy, equality

This seems an appropriate place to shift from a discussion of technology to a discussion of theology and I should clarify that my point isn’t that theology matters to the exclusion of everything else. However, as long as most Muslims

⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror*, UK: Verso, 2003: 92.

⁵ Peter Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*, Routledge: 2001: 176.

⁶: Ibid., 170.

⁷ Roy quoted in *ibid.*, 176.

⁸ H. Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” in R.P. Wolff, B. Moore Jr., and H. Marcuse (eds). *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1965: 81.

continue to read inequality and patriarchy into the Qur'an, it seems necessary to continue to rupture those narratives that seek to establish a divine investment in women's oppression. This is for the obvious reason that such narratives serve to underwrite all sorts of gender hierarchies and inequalities in Muslim societies.

It is against this backdrop that I have offered a liberatory Qur'anic hermeneutics which involves historicizing patriarchal readings of it as well as recuperating its antipatriarchal episteme. This episteme derives from certain ontological claims about God's being in the Qur'an, the key one being that God is uncreated, hence beyond sex/ gender. To my mind, the fact that God cannot be patriarchalized also suggests that God's speech, the Qur'an, should not be patriarchalized.

Unfortunately, however, not just conservative but also many progressive and secular Muslims in the U.S. reject such an approach. This is because they both

share a similarly reductive view of the Qur'an as patriarchal. The more deterministic get to this position by arguing that its meanings are fixed and transparent (straightforward) and cannot be reframed without violating the text and the received traditions on how to interpret it. The more flexible, meanwhile, concede that language is polysemic but they also take patriarchal readings of it as a given. Muslim women are thus trapped between a large mainstream of conservatives and a small fringe of secularists and feminists who attack us for trying to un-read patriarchy from the Qur'an. (I have not even mentioned those non-Muslim Western liberals who are invested in illiberal readings of the Qur'an or who want Muslims to scrap it.) Where is the space here for believing women for whom the Qur'an is the liberatory speech of a just God?⁹

In spite of such challenges, however, as the work of many women shows, it is not only possible but also necessary to derive a theory and praxis of gender equality from the Qur'an. Margot Badran's definition of Islamic feminism¹⁰ offers one such theory, and I will speak more about it at the end of this talk.

As for the phrase "theology matters," which I have used a couple of times by now: this is a reference to an exchange between Khaled Abou el Fadl and Tariq Ali in a small volume, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*,¹¹ which offers different views of September 11, 2001. El Fadl's position is to try and delink the event

⁹ Asma Barlas, "Believing Women in Islam: Between religious and secular politics and theology." *Re-Understanding Islam: A double critique*, Spinoza Lectures, University of Amsterdam, Van Gorcum, 2008.

¹⁰ Margot Badran, "Islamic Feminism: Beyond Good and Evil, Beyond East and West," unpublished paper, 2003: 2.

¹¹ Khalid Abou El Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2002: 104.

from Islam by emphasizing the Qur'anic provisions on tolerance. Other contributors, meanwhile, frame the issue as having to do with U.S. policies rather than Muslim intolerance. It is in this context that Ali argues that theology is "useless" for resolving the "real problems" of Muslims who, he says, need to "move beyond discussing whether or not the Qur'an promotes tolerance and grapple with the urgent social and political problems that affect [them] today."¹²

In his reply, el Fadl points out that for millions of believers God is a "part of their moral and material universe. This is why theology matters. If theology does not matter, then they do not matter." It would, he says, be "unwise and immoral to imply that the perspectives of people whose theology is inseparable from their very existence simply do not matter." Moreover, it is only by engaging theology that Muslims can deny fanatical "groups their Islamic banner and . . . challenge their claim to authenticity."¹³

This exchange illustrates the ideological divide I about spoke earlier, between those Muslim women who look to Islam and those who put their faith in secularism to bring about democratic reform in Muslim societies, and I want to take a closer look at both strategies.

The former position approximates an internal critique since it seeks to challenge oppressive interpretations of Islam from within Islamic and Qur'anic paradigms. The assumption isn't that theology can resolve all the problems of Muslims but, rather, that it can be part of the solution given that, for most Muslims, Islam continues to shape their ethical sensibilities and social choices.

The latter position, on the other hand, is an external critique that seeks to bypass Islam altogether. In this view, not only is it difficult to win theological debates, but a theological approach can "reinforce the legitimacy of the Islamic system, help to reproduce it, and undermine secular alternatives." In effect, focusing "on theological arguments rather than socio-economic and political questions," by making "the Qur'an rather than universal standards . . . [a] point of reference, is to limit the efficacy of women's struggles."¹⁴

I understand the secular resistance to Islam but I am not sure how theoretically appropriate or politically useful it is to pit socio-political issues against theology since both are integral to people's lives. Then, too, there is no reason to assume that theological or hermeneutic projects have nothing to do with socio-political issues as is clear from the popular struggles mounted in Latin America in the name of liberation theology. In fact, theology can provide an incentive for

¹² Tariq Ali, "Theological Distractions," in el Fadl, *ibid.*, 41.

¹³ El Fadl, *ibid.*, 104-105.

¹⁴ Val Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents," http://www.iran-bulletin.org/islamic_feminism.htm p. 13.

change in Muslim societies by showing that inequality and discrimination subvert all that is egalitarian in, and about, Islam. However, we close down this option by authenticating oppressive readings of Islam and, on that ground, positioning Islam against democracy and the Qur'an against "universal values."

I find this positioning tendentious for several reasons. One is that, even though it means to edge Muslims towards democracy, it ensures that democracy is never presented as being compatible with Islam. It thus reproduces the very problem it views as an obstacle. Second, not only does this oppositional framing disparage Islam and the Qur'an but it also removes these "universal standards" from the domain of political contestation by privileging them at the outset. Last, any form of universalism, whether in the garb of secularism or religious fundamentalism, denies people "diverse ways of being human."¹⁵ It is thus not only undemocratic but potentially genocidal in its assimilationist urge. As Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, to be human is to live with "the infinite incommensurabilities through which we struggle – perennially, precariously, but unavoidably – to 'world the earth' in order to live within our different senses of ontic belonging."¹⁶

Globalization, feminism, secularism

Of course, to recognize that Islam offers one such sense of "ontic belonging," is to take it seriously which, as I have noted, most secularists are loath to do. This results in closing off "public discussion of how the many varieties of Islamism are challenging and extending the discursive field of political resistance."¹⁷ Yet, as Susan Buck-Morss argues, "Such a discussion . . . is there to be engaged within the *global* public sphere, as opposed to our own provincial one, and there is urgency to do so."¹⁸ (By "our" she means, of course, the U.S. and the West.)

For Buck-Morss, what deserves respect is "the intellectually critical and socially accountable power of Islamism . . . not its instrumentalized uses by groups in power to garner unquestioning support and to silence internal opposition."¹⁹ She also recognizes that the social power of "Islamism" lies in its function as an internal critique of Islam. "Just as in Western critical theory the great defenders of reason are those who criticize the rationalization of society in reason's name [she says] so today's progressive Muslims are able to use Islam as an immanent, critical criterion against its own practice, with similar effects."²⁰

¹⁵ Chakrabarty, *ibid.*, 254.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Buck-Morss, *ibid.*, 42.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

In fact, as her own analysis shows, not only does “Islamism” open up avenues for Muslim self-critique but it also provides the *West* a critical criterion against which to measure its practices. As she points out, secularization can be dogmatic and “Western-defined freedom [can bring] with it submission to Western power.” Thus, “what is involved” in Muslim resistance to Westernization “is not freedom but dignity. And in a postcolonial context, dignity matters. Better put, dignity is freedom in a different sense, as liberation from Western hegemony.”²¹

It is in this global political context, then, that we can most clearly see Islamism’s function as a “powerful source of critical debate in the struggle against the undemocratic imposition of a new world order by the United States, and against the economic and ecological violence of neo-liberalism, the fundamentalist orthodoxies of which fuel the growing divide between rich and poor.”²²

What I find most compelling about Buck-Morss’ defense of “Islamism” is not just its political audacity but the fact that she offers it as a Marxist. Although she is very much in the minority, her argument nonetheless reveals the latent possibilities in the West to renew itself by engaging Islam. It shows, in other words, that Western and Westernized secularists are not obliged to be complicit in the West’s hegemonizing projects by pushing so-called “universal standards.” They can also strive to articulate “a critical discourse adequate to the demands of a global public sphere, in which the hegemony of the colonizing discourses has been shaken.”²³ Until that happens, there can be no global civil society or public.

This is partly what I meant to convey by the title of this paper, “Globalizing Equality.” To reiterate, we, the “partial publics,” also need to struggle for equal rights in an emergent global public sphere in which it becomes possible not only to “think past”²⁴ U.S. hegemony but also to move past it.

Partly, however, by “Globalizing Equality” I meant to refer to the need to ensure equality for Muslim women *wherever* they live. To my mind, this involves not only insuring access to education, jobs, and ICTs, but also developing a theology that can generate a praxis of gender equality. This is not beyond our capacity. Among others, Badran points out that

Ideas of gender equality and social justice were introduced in early 7th century C.E. Arabia . . . and are embedded in the Qur’an; we are not speaking of these principles as products of ‘modernity’ understood as western modernity. People worldwide come to

²¹ Ibid., 46.

²² Ibid., 49.

²³ Ibid., 101.

²⁴ This is, of course, the title of Buck-Morss’ book. Ibid.

concepts of gender equality and social justice through different routes, through different texts – religious or secular.²⁵

That is why, in her definition, Islamic feminism is “a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an and seeks the practice of rights and justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum.” Significantly, this definition derives not just from an egalitarian reading of the Qur’an but also from the historical reality of Muslim women’s struggles over generations.

This struggle continues today through various means and in various venues and I am open to all of these means as long as they allow those of us who wish to keep the “company . . . of God”²⁶ to do so freely while also carrying out our charge to be socially responsible agents on earth.

²⁵ Badran, *ibid.*, 2.

²⁶ El Fadl, *ibid.*, 104.