

Engaging Islamic Feminism:
Provincializing feminism as a master narrative¹

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I want to thank Anitta Kynsihelto and Renata Pepicelli for inviting me to this workshop and for putting the hard work and energy required to organize it.

As you know, both Margot Badran and I chose to offer our keynotes under the same title, "Engaging Islamic Feminism," even though we approach the subject rather differently. As a feminist historian, she theorizes, analyzes, and documents Muslim women's struggles for equality, and in particular, the advent of Islamic feminism. I, on the other hand, have been doing the kind of work she defines as Islamic feminism; i.e., trying to open up the Qur'an to anti-patriarchal readings. However, as a result of dialogues with her, some public and others not, I have become increasingly interested in trying to clarify why I resist being called a feminist.

This is always an awkward place to start at a conference on feminism since, to most people, my resistance seems inexplicable and even pointless given how useful some feminist theories are for engaging Islam in liberatory modes. Besides, the phenomenon Badran calls Islamic feminism seems to be an actually existing reality, so why obdurately refuse to accept it? This is the question I'm going to engage and, to give you a sense of the direction of my talk, I want to share its subtitle with you: "Provincializing feminism as a master narrative." (This is, of course, an homage to Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* from which I have borrowed some of my arguments.)

I should also clarify that most of this talk is based on an earlier response to Badran (in October 2006) which I had called, quite self-indulgently, "Four Stages of Denial or my On-again, Off-again, Affair with Feminism." Even though we've both moved on in our thinking since then (and I have revised my comments to reflect the changes in mine), I still thought it worthwhile to share that essay for two reasons. First, some of the issues I've been struggling with remain the same and, second, that talk gives a chronological account of the different stages in my approach to feminism and therefore provides a context for explaining my latest stance on it.

¹ Borrows from Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Princeton University Press, 2000.

First Stage:

The first stage was soon after my book was called feminist by some people, in both the positive and negative sense of the word. I was upset. This is because I thought I had acknowledged my debts to certain feminisms in the book but I had also tried to differentiate myself from feminists by calling myself a believing woman. So my reaction to being called a feminist was both visceral and monologic and it essentially boiled down to asking a whole series of "what" questions though mostly rhetorically, 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, eventually, "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 indignation and not much analysis during this first stage.

Second Stage:

But, of course, once labels get stuck, it's hard to shake them off and, over time, more and more people began to call me a feminist. Eventually, I had to abandon outrage as a permanent political strategy and start explaining more carefully than I had in the book why I resisted being called a feminist.

In part, my resistance was a displacement of frustration with real, live, feminists, all of them white. Although I'm sure they were and remain well-meaning, many of them seemed utterly blind to the racial politics of speaking for women of color like myself and that too in our presence, as if we didn't exist.

Anyone who has been silenced in the name of sisterhood can understand how strange and difficult that is and it wasn't until I read black feminists like bell hooks that I could give voice to my discomfort at being seen as the Sister Other.

So, it was hard for me to celebrate feminisms' liberatory stance when liberation entailed a loss of voice and sense of self for women like me and it has taken some practice to look beyond actual feminists to appreciate certain feminist principles. (I guess many of you must feel the same way when you hear me speak about the Qur'an's liberatory stance in the face of Muslim misogyny. It must be equally hard for you to look beyond the reality of Muslims to the theory and potential of Islam.) But, of course, there are always slippages between theory and practice

and, in theory, I have always been committed to the concept of sexual equality, which is at the core of feminist theory.

Even so, I felt that the insistence on calling my work feminist denied something very real and specific about my encounter with the Qur'an and I tried to express this by comparing myself to Muslim feminists who believe that Islam is a sexist and patriarchal religion that puts a "sacred stamp onto female subservience," in the words of Fatima Mernissi.

In contrast to such feminists, my own stance is that Muslims read Islam as a patriarchy partly because of how they read the Qur'an, who reads it, and the contexts in which they read it. In other words, I believe that texts are always read from and within specific material and ideological sites and that we need to be aware of these sites when attempting to understand readings of scripture.

In passing, I should note that in the years since I wrote my book I have come to appreciate its limitations in exonerating the Qur'anic text itself from charges of being anti-women. Still, I think that it is wrong and misleading to speak about texts without also considering issues of context and inter- and intratextuality. Especially where the Qur'an is concerned, a whole host of scholars has shown that it has been continually de- contextualized and re-contextualized in light of Muslim sexual politics. And this politics is overwhelmingly male-centric.

In any event, during this second stage of my response to feminism, I began to clarify the differences between myself and feminists like Mernissi and to point out that it was possible to speak the same feminist language, of patriarchy and sexual equality, and yet have completely different readings of Islam.

Third Stage (Toronto):

It was at this point that Badran and I began a dialogue via email while she was in Egypt. I specially recall an email in which she wrote that 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 which tries to show that, far from being the archetypal patriarch, 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 and nor even created.

That I didn't see the Qur'an as privileging fathers or fatherhood and, indeed, read it as subverting the concept of father-right and father-rule which is at the heart of traditional patriarchies was a building block in my claim that the Qur'an is anti-patriarchal.

It is precisely such arguments that Badran eventually came to view as evidence and incidences of Islamic feminism which she defines 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.”

In effect, rather than locate the Qur’an within feminist discourses, this definition re-locates feminism in the Qur’an though Badran is careful to point out that many Muslim women have been engaged in recuperating this sort of Qur’anic discourse much before the advent of feminism proper.

I was utterly captivated by her definition both in the sense of being fascinated by it and in the sense of being made captive by it. I was fascinated because it was the first time that anyone had offered such a concise and yet comprehensive definition of Islamic feminism. And I was made captive by it because, if my reading of the Qur’an is feminist simply by virtue of being based in and on the Qur’an, then, clearly I am an Islamic feminist and there’s no escaping that fact!

So I stood alongside Badran in Toronto some years ago and said as much publicly. I guess our dialogue could have ended at this point but then she and I decided to make a joint presentation in Ithaca, my home institution, last year and both of us brought some new thinking about feminism to that encounter.

Fourth Stage (Ithaca):

I describe this as the fourth stage of my affair with feminism and the point of departure for my response to Badran was her conclusion that “Because feminism provides a common language, and for analytical reasons, the term Islamic feminism should be retained, firmly claimed and repeatedly explained.”

Although I agree with her that Islamic feminism needs to be repeatedly explained I also argued that the language of feminism does not always allow us to explore commonalities and, more to the point, that shared languages also create analytical and political problems. Therefore, if we want to build solidarity with Muslim women, we need more than the shared discourse of feminism. We need to be able to understand the specificity of their movements and while I did not give a name to this specificity, I asked some new what and how and why questions in making my argument.

For instance, even if historians must name patterns in order to see them, doesn’t the naming also run the risk of flattening out important differences? As I’ve said, one can use feminist analysis to recuperate the Qur’an’s egalitarianism and also to re-present Islam as patriarchal. While the plurality of feminism is said to be its

strength, how useful is a big-tent pluralism that erases such fundamental epistemic differences between feminists?

Of course, Badran's definition of Islamic feminism gives one a way out of this conundrum by distinguishing between Muslim and Islamic feminists. Yet, given that most people don't know what this distinction even means, how does calling oneself an Islamic feminist render one's work any more transparent or legitimate to Muslims? To me this isn't just an existential anxiety but also a practical issue in that I think many of us who are working on the Qur'an are trying to speak mainly, though of course not exclusively, to our own Muslim communities. And the fact is that most Muslims do not make such fine distinctions between feminisms.

Just as importantly, if we change the world by naming it—as Paulo Freire says—then how do we change something by calling it Islamic, or Qur'anic, or feminist? That is to say, do we redeem the Qur'an by mapping feminism onto it? If so, how? As Badran's own work shows some Muslim women were reading liberation into and out of it much before feminism. Why not just call their stance Qur'anic or Islamic since, after all, it is both? 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?

Here again, Badran offers something tempting by de-secularizing the project of women's liberation. As she makes clear, it is not only Westernized secular humanism but, also a specific 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?

In Ithaca, I gave two reasons: first, calling myself a feminist was never a choice I was given. And, as I said, perhaps it was the combination of a perverse post-colonial sensibility and personal stubbornness that kept me from giving away my right to even name myself. Particularly at a time when a self-defined West has unleashed such bloodshed against Muslims everywhere there is some comfort in such seemingly small acts of individual resistance. Of course, as Ashis Nandy says, the West is now "everywhere, in structures and in minds," and there is simply no escaping it, but I still seek to protect my sense of self from parts of the West by refusing to speak some common languages.

Secondly, I said that to the extent that feminism in any form is complicit with this violence—which I believe it is when it reads oppression into Islam and reads liberation out of the West's imperialist depredations—I feel the need to resist it in all its forms. And, if in the end, this is a self-defeating strategy, it shows just how

narrow the world has grown for many of us, especially those who call ourselves Muslim.

Current Stage: (Tampere)

This is how I ended my response to Badran last year and here we are again, this time in Finland and, once again, I've had to stretch myself to engage feminism since I did not want to end on the same note as I did in the U.S.

In some ways, I'm clearer about why I resist the feminist label even though I don't pretend that the answers I have come up with are in any way definitive.

For one thing, I am clear that the focal point of my resistance has never been the idea that women and men share in an indivisible and equal humanity; rather, the focal points of my resistance have had to do with some of the accoutrements of feminism. Then, too, I understand that Islamic feminism as Badran defines it is liberatory in the sense both of being inclusive and being based in notions of justice that cut across spurious and unproductive binaries and divisions. And, I expect and hope that many Muslim women will continue to extend and refine this project of Islamic feminism in meaningful ways.

However, even though I believe deeply in Islamic feminism's advocacy of sexual equality and I recognize the very real political necessity of certain feminisms, I am troubled by the extent to which feminism as a discourse has foreclosed the possibility of theorizing sexual equality from within alternative paradigms. An obvious sign of this is the fact that one can't avoid being called a feminist any time one speaks about women's liberation or equality, no matter what sort of language one speaks in. In fact, feminism simultaneously usurps and silences critiques that fall outside its own discursive framework.

Even if we believe that reality exists independently of how we choose to define it, as we know, the very process of defining it also gives it a particular shape. So, when we call something Islamic feminism we close off the possibility of seeing it as anything else and it is this closure that I find problematic.

When we ignore how people choose to name themselves, their work, and their struggles, we necessarily do some epistemic violence to them. Besides, the autonomy to define oneself seems to be an important principle to defend irrespective of how honest self-definitions actually are. After all, naming other people, or the world on behalf of other people, isn't any more honest.

In a sense, then, it is the very inclusivity of feminism—its attempt, as a meta and master narrative, to subsume and assimilate all conversations about equality—that I find both imperializing and reductive.

Here, I'm reminded of Chakrabarty's argument that the Western "investment in a certain kind of rationality and in particular understanding of the 'real' means that history's—the discipline's—exclusions are ultimately epistemological."² It seems to me that we can make exactly the same argument about history's inclusions. That is to say, feminist history can only regard Muslim women's encounter with their religion and sacred text as being real in an ontological and epistemological sense if it can name that encounter feminism.

I realize that Badran is too careful a historian to be comfortable with how she names the world and too critical not to question her own naming. But, speaking more generally, one could argue that history's—the discipline's—inclusions as well as exclusions have become the ultimate marker of all our realities. To Chakrabarty it is clear that we cannot respect the "diversity of life practices or life-worlds" so long as we embrace the "universalizing political philosophies, which remain the global heritage of the Enlightenment"³

Granted feminism isn't a direct heritage of the Enlightenment, but, as long as it functions as a universalizing political theory, I don't think it can accommodate the "diverse ways of being human, 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."⁴

I guess where Chakrabarty and I differ is that, for him, provincializing Europe and hence it's universalizing narratives is a project born out of gratitude and love.⁵ I am less politically charitable than he is. While I have always acknowledged my intellectual debts to feminism, and to individual feminists, my critique isn't based so much in love as it is based in a sense of being wronged, and hence in some notion of justice. To me, justice in this instance means being able to give voice to my own loving engagement with my scripture in whatever language I find meaningful. So far, I have called myself simply a "believer." But this doesn't mean that I'm always comfortable with the epistemological closure that this term implies either. But then belief isn't so much about certainty as it is about an open-ended willingness to go on searching after what one considers the truth. Perhaps a more appropriate way to define myself therefore would be as a seeker of God's grace, a supplicant for it.

² Ibid., 98.

³ Ibid., 148.

⁴ Ibid., 254.

⁵ Ibid., 255