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# Progressive Muslims

ON JUSTICE, GENDER AND PLURALISM

EDITED BY  
OMID SAFI



O N E W O R L D  
O X F O R D

TRANSFORMING FEMINISMS:  
ISLAM, WOMEN, AND GENDER JUSTICE

*Sa'diyya Shaikh*

INTRODUCTION, POSITIONING AND CONTEXT

I will begin by making my positioning explicit. My name is Sa'diyya Shaikh, an Arabic name. I am South African, born and raised solely on the continent of Africa, and my ancestry is Indian. I have, to date, never visited India although the first language I learned to speak was an Indian language called Gujarati and the staple diet of my family is still curry. I am most fluent and comfortable speaking the English language. I am a Muslim woman, whose existential, spiritual, and ethical universe is based on an Islamic worldview, a religion whose roots are to be found in seventh-century Arabia. The first time I ever visited the Middle East was on pilgrimage at the age of nineteen.

My coming of age was formulated within the socio-political context of apartheid South Africa. The aspect of my religious tradition that resonated most strongly in confronting this reality was the fact that Islam spoke to a humanity that transcended boundaries of race and that demanded human agency in the quest for social justice. In my confrontation with patriarchy in my social and cultural milieu, sometimes paraded under the guise of religion and tradition, it was this same social justice imperative that urged me to struggle with what exactly constituted Islam and the Islamic legacy -- and what it means to be a gendered human being as well as a believer. My academic pursuit of Islamic studies is premised on a view of the integrity of the relationship between intellectual pursuits, social responsibility, and spiritual commitments.

By this extended introduction I am not only intending to situate my own ideological and personal positioning but also to make salient the notion of plurality and diversity encapsulated within the world of Islam, which encompasses

realities of people from varying socio-cultural and political realities. Therefore, my positioning is also an explicit rejection of those intellectual, political, and popular idioms that argue for a homogeneous religious civilization, a reductionist assumption that is most pervasively prevalent in depictions of Islam.

Within the diverse worlds of Islam gender issues have been indigenously engaged with, argued about, harmonized, problematized, synthesized, negotiated, and re-negotiated in varying ways throughout history. In this era there are Muslim women and men who find Islam to be a source of human well-being and profound social egalitarianism. There are also, however, Muslim women in many parts of the world who experience oppression and marginalization that is justified in the name of Islam. Currently, one can find Muslim leaders who hold forth endlessly about the fact that Islam accords women high status and liberation while simultaneously promoting hierarchical and discriminatory power relationships between men and women. There are, however, also Muslim leaders who contest sexism and resist the masculinist bias of inherited traditions, many of whom relentlessly strive on the path of gender justice in Islam.<sup>1</sup>

There are also some Muslim women who have internalized the patriarchal dimension of their heritage and become its proponents, while, at the other end of the continuum, there are those who have exited the religious tradition as a response to experiences of patriarchal realities. Moreover, different groups of Muslim women come from varying cultural and geographical backgrounds, so that Jordanian Muslim women are often grappling with very different realities from Indonesian or Senegalese Muslim women.<sup>2</sup> The realities of gender dynamics in Islam are as complex and polymorphous as the realities of women in other religious, social, and political contexts.

Among those unwilling to compromise on the Islamic imperative to gender justice, there are some who define themselves as feminists, while there are others who do not sit comfortably with such an identification. Let me define at the outset what I understand by the term "feminism." It includes a critical awareness of the structural marginalization of women in society and engaging in activities directed at transforming gender power relations in order to strive for a society that facilitates human wholeness for all based on principles of gender justice, human equality, and freedom from structures of oppression.<sup>3</sup>

However, the current debates on feminism, gender, and women's rights in Islam are ideologically charged, since they are embedded in a history of larger civilizational polemics between the Islamic world and the West.<sup>4</sup> Gender discourses in contemporary Islam are prefigured by the history of a political conflict between Islam and Christianity, the European colonial encounters in different parts of the Muslim world, and the nationalist responses by colonized peoples. The processes of globalization, in tandem with neo-colonial configurations of power, currently pervade not only the concrete economic and socio-political spheres of most parts of the world but also the areas of knowledge production.<sup>5</sup>

From the perspective of many Muslims, Euro-American cultural hegemony remains coupled with a xenophobia directed at Islam and Muslims. This is reflected in the enduring legacy of problematic types of orientalist scholarship on Islam and, on the popular level, the continuing stereotyping of Islam as a violent, medieval, and, especially, misogynist religion. In many Muslim societies, gender issues have acquired a symbolic field that extends beyond simply redressing prevailing injustices, to the politics of cultural loyalty.<sup>6</sup>

American scholar Gisela Webb points out that one of the unfortunate consequences of misrepresentations of Muslims in the West is the creation of a siege mentality among many Muslims.<sup>7</sup> This mindset reinforces a reactive and defensive posturing towards the West. Alternatively, in some parts of the Muslim world the overall ascendancy of Euro-American powers in an increasingly shrinking globe, together with a sense of economic and political frustration with local despotic governments that are sometimes financed by Western powers, also contributes to strongly anti-Western sentiment.

Abbar Ahmed suggests that Muslim religious leaders who adopt a blanket opposition to the West are "in danger of rejecting the essential features of Islam such as love of knowledge, egalitarianism and tolerance because these are visibly associated with the West."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, part of this siege mentality ironically contributes to an occidentalist view that perpetuates similar "othering" constructs relating to Western immorality, greed, and brute force. This type of dichotomous categorization of "Islam versus the West" à la Samuel Huntington results in monolithic constructions that efface the complex nature of realities and multiple ethical discourses prevalent in both Muslim and Western societies.<sup>9</sup> It also eclipses the reality that there are growing communities of Muslims in the West, many of whom are culturally Western as well as religiously Muslim. These contemporary socio-political dynamics have especially strong ramifications for discourses of gender and feminism in Islam.

#### LEGACIES OF IMPERIAL FEMINISM

Many Muslims view contemporary Euro-American feminist approaches that reinforce reductionist views of Islam as a peculiarly sexist religion as part of the broader Western enterprise to discredit and misrepresent Islam. Ironically, many of these same Muslims also misrepresent feminism by stereotyping it with all that is considered negative and problematic in Western culture. Azza Karam, a contemporary Muslim scholar, summarizes these tensions in describing some of the difficulties in using feminist discourse in the Muslim world:

The term "feminism" ... in post-colonial Arab Muslim societies is tainted, impure and heavily impregnated with stereotypes. Some of these stereotypes are that feminism basically stands for the enmity between men and women, as well as a call for immorality in the form of sexual

promiscuity for women ... some religious personalities ... have associated feminism with colonialist strategies to undermine the indigenous social and religious culture.<sup>10</sup>

Some Muslim scholars have reacted with blind defensiveness to this perceived Western feminist attack on Islam. In legitimately attempting to repudiate the unpalatable and inaccurate stereotypes of certain orientalist discourses, these Muslim scholars have unwittingly become equally reductionist by romanticizing the Muslim legacy as one that has unequivocally empowered Muslim women.<sup>11</sup> This stance makes it increasingly difficult to approach the questions of gender relation in an honest manner, seeking to identify and redress realities of injustice.

Moreover, those Muslims who have invested in the maintenance of a patriarchy use the civilizational polemic with which Western feminism has been associated in order to discredit and malign Muslim women who are involved in feminist activity as agents of Western colonialism.<sup>12</sup> These accusations are particular charged due to the legacy of imperial feminism, missionaries and other emissaries of the empires having justified their political attacks on Islam and Muslim cultures by suggesting that their colonial "civilizing mission" was also intended to free the poor oppressed women in Islam. The ideological hypocrisy of this colonial narrative is exemplified by the case of the British Consul General in Egypt, Lord Cromer, who in the late nineteenth century was the champion of Egyptian women's unveiling while in his homeland, England, he was the President of the men's league for opposing women's suffrage.<sup>13</sup> While this reflects some European men's manipulation of Western feminist discourse in furthering the project of imperialism, many Western feminist women were also enmeshed in the colonial mindset as reflected in their interactions with women from colonized nations.

A particularly illustrative case is the nature of relationships between the Euro-American and Arab feminists in the International Alliance of Women (IAW), an international feminist organization.<sup>14</sup> This group began as a Western suffragist alliance; in 1923 it expanded its focus to broader questions of women's empowerment and invited "Eastern" feminists to participate. The ideological tensions between Eastern and Western feminists came to a head in 1939 when Western members of the organization registered protests and appeals for the release of a Czech Jewish member incarcerated by the Nazis, but refused to do so when a Palestinian member was imprisoned by the British.<sup>15</sup> Arab women saw this as symptomatic of the double standards and ideological biases of Western feminists. For Arab women the limits of international feminism became apparent due to the "failure of western feminists to confront imperialism and its negative implications for democracy and feminist ideals."<sup>16</sup>

Dominant strands of Western feminism were subject to extensive and continuing critique into the latter part of the twentieth century, not only by

Arab women but also from a spectrum of other women outside of the centers of white, Euro-American privilege.<sup>17</sup> This body of criticism by various women, including African-American and Chicana women as well as women from the many parts of the Third World, sparked extensive debates that articulated some of the central problems with second-wave feminism well into the 1980s.<sup>18</sup>

### THIRD WORLD FEMINIST CRITIQUE AND ISLAM<sup>19</sup>

Many Third World women have argued that while the genesis and historical development of Western feminism primarily reflected Eurocentric realities, Euro-American feminists regularly assumed that they could speak for the experiences of all women.<sup>20</sup> Feminists from the Third World and African-American womanists argued that this presumption of a universal womanhood represented only the realities of a particular group of women, namely, First World, white, middle class women.<sup>21</sup> Such discourses marginalized and eclipsed the realities of women with different experiences and who came from diverse contexts. Subsequently, many Western feminists, particularly from the 1980s onwards, have acknowledged their own positioning and have significantly responded to issues of pluralism, representation, and hegemony.<sup>22</sup> However, I would argue that when it comes to issues of Islam and Muslim women, feminists more easily discard judicious analysis and reiterate negative stereotypes. Thus some Western feminists, who would otherwise be sensitized to questions of diversity, persist in making sweeping claims about Muslim women or Islam without engaging the necessary levels of complexity and specificity. Moreover, as I will illustrate, such Western discourses on Muslim women are predicated on unquestioned cultural and social assumptions that do not allow for the engagement of specific Muslim societies in their own terms. Thus I believe that some of the key critiques offered by feminists from the Third World continue to reflect the conceptual difficulties and ideological biases experienced by many groups of Muslims with regard to certain developments in Western feminism. I will explore two specific dimensions of a Third World feminist critique that apply to certain Western feminist discussions on Muslim women, particularly relating to questions of cultural hierarchy and representation.<sup>23</sup>

### CULTURAL HIERARCHY AND REPRESENTATION:

#### THE EXAMPLE OF VEILING

Firstly, within many Western feminist discourses about Third World women, the standards of First World women have often been used as the superior norms against which Third World and non-Western women are measured. Often, Western cultural ideals are imposed on women coming from very different religious and cultural traditions.

Secondly, the homogenization of women within dominant Western feminist paradigms relates to the construction of women as *a priori* victims and as "powerless."<sup>24</sup> This approach does not examine particular material conditions and ideological frameworks that generate a certain context of disempowerment for a specific group of women. Instead, various examples of disempowered women are used to prove the general thesis that women as a group are "powerless."<sup>25</sup> Women become identified as an oppressed group prior to the process of analysis. The crucial fact that groups of women are constituted through the processes and structures of social relations is obscured.

In exemplifying the way in which these two critiques of Western feminist analyses apply to discourses on Muslim women, I will examine some of the popular Western understandings of Muslim women's veiling, head covering, or *hijab*. While the term *hijab* literally means "barrier" or "curtain," in this context it has come to signify the notion of concealing garments that women wear outside their homes in keeping with an Islamic ethic of modesty.<sup>26</sup> Conceptually it encompasses a range of different forms of covering that Muslim women adopt which are contingent on socio-historical factors and range from a headscarf to loose clothing to a veil.

It is certainly true that some discourses of the *hijab* are based on the coercion, the "othering," and the subjugation of women. This is most apparent in cases where women are forced to veil and are punished if they resist, as in the case, for example, of Afghani women under Taliban rule. However, this type of coercive discourse is by no means universal. Those Western feminist discourses that represent the *hijab* as simply symbolic of Muslim women's subjugation miss both the particularity of such a phenomenon as well as the multiple levels of meanings that it may have for different Muslim women.

For example, during the British colonial occupation of Egypt many Muslim women adopted the *hijab* as a symbol of their resistance to colonial definitions.<sup>27</sup> During the 1979 Iranian Revolution many middle class Iranian women donned the *hijab* as a symbol of their resistance to the Shah and Western cultural encroachment. The latter represents a very different meaning of the *hijab* from the post-revolutionary Iranian enforcement of *hijab* on women. In a contemporary study of Islamist movements, anthropologist Fadwa el Guindi found that educated and professional Islamist women have deliberately donned the veil as an assertion of their identity which reflects a syntheses of modernity and tradition.<sup>28</sup>

*Hijab* within Muslim societies does not constitute a singular symbolic field. It has come to represent varying meanings within multivalent realities. On the one hand there are large numbers of women who believe it is a religious requirement exemplifying the Islamic requirement of modesty and they choose to wear it because they seek to be obedient to God. Other women have stated explicitly feminist and anti-capitalist motivations for their veiling. They argue that the veiling detracts from patriarchal prioritization of women's physical and sexual

attractiveness. Moreover it provides resistance to a perceived Western consumerism in which money and energy are constantly spent in keeping up with changing fashions that in reality keep women hostage to their appearance and to the market.<sup>29</sup> Finally, it is necessary to remember that norms for dress are socially and culturally specific and there is no reason that Muslim women's clothing needs to be measured against specific Western norms of dress.

Moreover, numerous sociological and anthropological studies have illustrated the ways in which veiling has increased female mobility in different parts of the Muslim world. In Iran and Egypt, for example, as in other parts of the Muslim world, the wearing of the *hijab* has neutralized public space for many traditional families, thus making it more acceptable for women to occupy such space.<sup>30</sup> This has led to a greater female presence in various aspects of public life, including the crucial areas of education and skills training, and has for the most part facilitated increasing participation of women in the public sphere.

It is worth considering the position that veiling reinforces the patriarchal assumption that public space is a sexualized, male space and thus women who enter it need to erase the femaleness of their bodies in order to be legitimately present. However, it should also be noted that the reality of a sexualized male public space is not unique to the Muslim world: in many parts of the Western world, one's visual space is constantly assaulted by pictures of scantily clad women advertising commercial products.

Ultimately in any study of dress and *hijab* among Muslim women, it is necessary to look at the complexity of the varying narratives and to treat Muslim women as subjects instead of objects of research. Such an approach will prioritize Muslim women's self-understandings, it will look at the varying ways in which veiling operates in relation to women's agency, it will recognize sites of resistance as well as contradictions and ambivalence within the discourses, instead of treating veiling as evidence of the monolithic victimization of women.

Furthermore, to the extent that Muslim women engage in this debate, there is much diversity in the ways in which we discourse upon the question, meaning and necessity of the particular forms of religiously appropriate dress, a diversity that has often remained unrepresented in many Western feminist discussions of veiling. One-dimensional Western feminist depictions of Muslim women as always oppressed by the phenomenon of veiling are thus both misrepresentative and reductionist. An example of contemporary feminist scholarship on Islam that most aptly encapsulates both misrepresentation as well as victim constructions of Muslim women is the 1997 edition of a sociology textbook by feminist sociologist Linda Lindsey called *Gender Roles: A Sociological Approach*.<sup>31</sup> Whereas the titles for the sections on Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism merely give the name of the respective traditions without any adjectives, the section examining Islam is titled "Islam and Purdah: Sexual Apartheid." This immediately reduces all the complexity of Muslim gendered practice to the issue



of the veil, a misrepresentative caricature of the complexity of Muslim societies and Islam. Moreover, it forecloses any serious engagement with aspects of this religious tradition that are potentially or actually liberating for Muslim women. These types of homogenization, generalization, and objectification of Muslim women result in the perpetuation of dominant patriarchal and colonial discourses that freeze women and the colonized into rigid categories. Such approaches suppress the ways in which particular groups of women challenge, subvert, and resist patriarchy at various points. They thereby undermine a politics of resistance and the construction of women as subjects capable of agency and transformation.

#### ALTERNATIVE PARADIGMS

In reviewing some of the alternative conceptualizations of women, Third World feminism offers a broader paradigm through which some of the concerns of Muslim women may be articulated. Indian feminist Chandra Mohanty asserts that there are no monolithic "Third World women," or "Third World situations" for that matter. Rather the term "third world" is utilized as "an analytical and political category" that makes connections in terms of the struggles of women in the Third World against racism, sexism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism in the context of particular balances of power in the world.<sup>32</sup> This definition thus refers to "a common context of struggle" which facilitates the formation of politically oppositional alliances and coalitions in the face of specific exploitative structures.<sup>33</sup> The alternatives posed by many Third World feminists are premised on the understanding that the gendered social subject has a number of simultaneous social identities that overlap, interlink, and position particular women at the nexus of different social hierarchies.<sup>34</sup> The recognition and representation of such heterogeneity is an initial and fundamental premise from which any study of Third World women may proceed.

Similarly, feminists working in the area of post-modern and post-structuralist theory have also contributed to the debunking of essentialist notions of "women" and "feminism." The post-modern approach underscores singular feminist narratives through embracing cultural diversity, recognizing multiple feminist epistemologies, and focusing on the specificities and particularities of the women's different contexts.<sup>35</sup>

Post-modernism, Third World feminism, and critiques from other women on the margins have resulted in the development of varying understandings and different articulations of feminism over the last two decades. Thus there is a reconfiguring of the contours of feminism, one that is more attuned to specificities of different groups of women and acknowledges the varying forms of feminist praxis. Within this type of fluid and dynamic understanding of feminisms, it is possible to detect a range of Muslim women's gender activism or Islamic feminisms.

#### ISLAMIC FEMINISMS

While some Muslims eschew the term "feminist," increasing numbers have begun to utilize the term to describe themselves. The value of retaining the term "feminism" is that it enables Muslim women to situate their praxis in a global political landscape. This in turn creates greater possibilities for alliances, exchanges, and mutually enriching interaction among different groups of women. These connections enable varying groups of women to share and learn from each other's experiences, whether this is an exchange of feminist tools of analysis, or of varying ways of implementing activist initiatives, or simply an exposure to other forms of justice-oriented gender praxis. Furthermore the use of feminist language is helpful in that it creates a finely tuned vocabulary for a constellation of ideas that are linked to a critical consciousness surrounding gender politics. To accept feminism as a Western concept is in the last analysis to concede the most visible discourses around women's rights and gender justice as the property of the West and to marginalize the indigenous histories of protest and resistance to patriarchy by non-Western women. Therefore I use the term "feminist" as a description of Muslim women's activities that are aimed at transforming masculinist social structures.<sup>36</sup>

Muslim women and men with feminist commitments need to navigate the terrain between being critical of sexist interpretations of Islam and patriarchy in their religious communities while simultaneously criticizing neo-colonial feminist discourses on Islam. The fact that Muslim women resist both narratives while sometimes moving between their critiques is a consequence of the way in which they are situated within this larger minefield. miriam cooke describes this adoption of different speaking positions as a "multiple critique."<sup>37</sup> I find her notion of multiple critique compelling in that it allows one to conceptualize the notion of dynamic and multi-layered subjectivities of Muslim women in varying contexts as well as the reality that one's speaking position is influenced by one's audience. However, cooke's position and theorization of this concept reflect some fundamental problems as well. She suggests that the "term Islamic feminism invites us to consider what it means to have a difficult double commitment, on the one hand to a faith position, and on the other hand to women's rights both inside the home and outside."<sup>38</sup> I would contend that implicit in this statement of a "difficult double commitment" is an acceptance of the assumption that Islam and women's rights belong to essentially different domains and that Muslim women bring them together strategically as "an act of radical subversion" as part of the "postcolonial women's jockeying for space and power" (as cooke puts it). I would argue that this account runs contrary to the self-definitions of many Muslim feminists who see their feminism as emerging organically out of their faith commitment and whose contestation of gender injustice is more than simply the result of a post-colonial power struggle.

Nonetheless the notion of multiple critique is useful in capturing the complexity of Muslim women's positioning. Most Muslim women reject those feminist discourses that have been implicated and continue to be implicated in attacking Islam and Muslim culture. However, in relationship to our own faith communities, we are positioned simultaneously as critics of the assumptions of male normativity, and as female believers who present an alternative way of understanding and approaching gender relations in Islam.

Among the most revolutionary elements in the works of Islamic feminism is the view that feminist commitment is integral to Islam and responsive to the core Qur'anic call to justice. The primary incentives for some feminist Muslim scholarship is the reality that there is dissonance between the ideals of Islam which are premised on an ontology of radical human equality and the fact that in varying social contexts Muslim women experience injustice in the name of religion.<sup>39</sup> Some look at the way in which Islamic teachings are subject to social contexts and argue that patriarchal interpretations are the result of the exclusively male constitution of much of institutional Islam.<sup>40</sup> Others acknowledge the tension between patriarchy and egalitarianism in the Islamic legacy but argue for the primacy of egalitarianism as representative of the spiritual and ethical ideals of Islam, ideals that need to be constantly worked towards.<sup>41</sup>

There is a significant group of Muslim scholars whose feminist work appears to be permeated with strong spiritual and religious bases. American feminist scholar Elizabeth Fernea also demonstrates this point on the basis of interviewing Muslim women in various parts of the world:

Islamic belief is also the stated basis of most behavior I felt to be feminist ... In Egypt, Kuwait, Turkey and the U.S., Islamic women begin with the assumption that the possibility for equality already exists in the Qur'an itself. The problem as they see it is malpractice, or misunderstanding of the sacred text. For these Muslim women, the first goal of a feminist movement is to re-understand and evaluate the sacred text and for women to be involved in the process, which historically has been reserved for men.<sup>42</sup>

Some Muslim women scholars have argued that while women indeed have multiple identities which are contingent on specific contextual realities, among many Muslim women there is an overarching sense that a belief in Islam provides a core existential ground for one's way of understanding the world, one's self, and the ultimate purpose of human life.<sup>43</sup> This then suggests that for some Muslim feminists Islam is not one among many equally weighted identities but rather a primary source of understanding one's very being in the world. This does not, however, imply that all Muslim women's understandings of Islam are the same or that there is a monolithic Islamic identity that stands unaffected by other social, political, and cultural factors. Indeed the manner in which Islam is

understood and experienced in diverse contexts is mediated by numerous factors, including national, ethnic, economic, and cultural forces. However, the essential components of belief and one's existential relationship to God and the world, the five pillars of Islam, are significantly shared dimensions of how Muslims experience their existence, cosmology, and eschatology.

Islamic scholar Maysam Faruqi points out that while many other dimensions of identity like race or gender are not necessarily subject to one's own choice, being Muslim in the world is a choice that implies a particular constellation of theological, spiritual, and religious beliefs.<sup>44</sup> In analyzing this paradigmatic assertion one may argue that this Muslim woman sees her religious identity as a primary identity which is then mediated by a number of secondary identities, including gender, nationality, ethnicity, and class.

Whether Muslim women see their religious identities as core to their self-definition or not, I believe that it is accurate to suggest that Muslim feminists are committed to

questioning Islamic epistemology as an expansion of their faith position and not a rejection of it ... and offer[ing] a critique of some aspect of Islamic history or hermeneutics, and [that] they do so with and on behalf of all Muslim women and their right to enjoy with men full participation in a just community.<sup>45</sup>

#### SCHOLARSHIP AND ACTIVISM

There is currently a vibrant presence of Muslim women scholars and activists in various Muslim communities around the world. In reviewing varying types of Muslim women's gender activism in different parts of the world, feminist scholar Margot Badran has identified different modes of feminist expression among Muslim women. These are, firstly, various types of *feminist writing* from scholarship to fiction; secondly, *everyday activism*, including initiatives in social services, education, and professions; and thirdly, organized *movement activism*, including political and even confrontational movements for women's emancipation.<sup>46</sup>

Particularly within the last few decades, Muslim women are engaging some of the primary sources of the religious legacy, namely the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, not only individually but also as a political initiative. Many of these scholars are deeply committed to their faith and religion and are invested in redressing the male bias of the inherited legacy. Here one finds radical and illuminating understandings of Qur'an, Islamic law, theology, and mysticism from the perspective of women. For example, in contemporary Iran, there is a plethora of emerging women's discourse on Islamic law and Qur'anic exegesis which contests women's marginalization in society. This has occurred most explicitly in the popular women's journal *Zanāan*, where feminist scholars have explicitly

contested and decentered the male clerics from the domain of interpretation and have advocated the reading of the Qur'an as a woman.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, African-American scholar Amina Wadud has authored a book that has gained international popularity: *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*.<sup>48</sup> This was published first in Malaysia and has since been translated into Indonesian, Turkish, and Arabic and used as a formative text in approaching gender justice in Islam. Fatima Memissi, a Moroccan sociologist, has provided a feminist detective work on retrieving the history of powerful women in Islamic history in her *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*.<sup>49</sup> In another work, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, Memissi has re-visited authoritative *hadith* regarding the Prophet and the early Companions.<sup>50</sup> Using traditional Islamic *hadith* methodology she illustrates that some of the misogynist traditions are inauthentic and have been fabricated to serve the interests of a particular narrator and respond to historical exigencies. In the book *Women and Gender in Islam*, Egyptian historian Leila Ahmed focuses on the ways in which gender discourses evolved historically within the formative Muslim communities and examines how both patriarchal and egalitarian gender discourses have since developed within some Muslim societies.

On the ground, organizations like *Sisters in Islam*, based in Malaysia, have provided a critique of wife battery from an Islamic perspective and have lobbied for stronger penalties for male offenders. They have also been actively involved in educational and consciousness-raising activities among Malaysian women. In South Africa, the *Muslim Youth Movement* and the *Call of Islam* have promoted women's leadership, including *inter alia* questions of sermon giving, mosque attendance campaigns, and gender egalitarian reformulation of Muslim personal law. In the United States, *Karamah* (Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights), whose members have varying levels of expertise in both Islamic and American law, has worked to protect Muslim women from sexist applications of Islamic law while simultaneously working to protect the civil rights of Muslim Americans.<sup>51</sup> These are but a few examples of the gender activism and feminist work of different groups of Muslim women.

I maintain that activities emerging from a commitment to the imperative of gender justice in Islam are crucial to the articulation of genuinely engaged and transformative Islamic feminisms. Rejecting colonial feminist representations of Muslim women as the "victimized" and voiceless "other," Muslim women are contributing to the re-definition of feminist discourse that includes the authentic self-representations of heterogeneous groups of women. This approach is one that embraces the particularity of context and the multiple identities of women. By definition it makes salient the question of religious identity in the experience of Muslim women. It allows for the collusion of feminist discourse with Muslim women's articulation of their engagement with gender issues. It also creates the space for meaningful dialogue and "horizontal comradeship" between groups of Muslim women and women from other

religio-cultural contexts. Islamic feminism and the broader gender activism of Muslim women are flowering in many parts of the Muslim world. In the last analysis, Islamic feminism is, in my view, one of the most engaged contemporary responses to the core Qur'anic injunction for social justice of our time.

#### ENDNOTES

\*An earlier version of this essay appeared as "Islam, Feminisms and the Politics of Representation," in *The End of Liberation? Liberation in the End? Feminist Theory, Feminist Theology and Their Political Implications*, ed. Charlotte Methuen and Angela Bertis (Leuven: Peeters, 2002).

1. In South Africa, the resistance of Muslim activists to patriarchy and sexism in their religious communities has been embraced as the "gender jihad."
2. For a discussion on the varying realities of Muslim women from different parts of the world see Azizah Al-Hibri, "Islamic Law," in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Iris M. Young (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 541-9.
3. Qur'anic scholar Amina Wadud describes feminism as the "radical notion that women are human beings." See the preface to the second edition of *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
4. Clearly neither "the Muslim world" nor "the West" exists as homogeneous or discrete entities. I am simply using them as descriptive categories to the extent that they reflect perceptions of shared identity among respective communities.
5. For an incisive analysis of Islam and post-colonial relations of power see Majid Anouar, *Unweaving Tradition: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
6. For a discussion of the politics of gender and identity see Lia Abu-Lughod (ed.), *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
7. Gisela Webb, "Teaching Islam as a World Religion to Undergraduates: Challenges and Opportunities in the Age of Globalization and Multiculturalism," *Religion and Education*, 25 (1-2), 1998, 31.
8. Akbar S. Ahmed, *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise* (London: Routledge, 1992).
9. Huntington's argument regarding the inherently conflicting relations between Islamic and Western civilizations was first articulated in his article "The Clash of Civilizations," *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, 22-49. Huntington's thesis - while no doubt influential - has been severely criticized by a host of anthropologists, political scientists, historians, and others. For one insightful example, see Roy Mottahedeh, "Clash of Civilizations: An Islamicist's Critique," *Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review*, 2(2), 1996, 1-26.
10. Azza M. Karam, *Women, Islamists and the State* (New York: St Martin's Press; Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1998), 5-6.
11. For a discussion of this type of apologetics see Barbara Stowasser's examination of Shaykh Sha'rawi's work in Barbara Stowasser, *The Islamic Impulse* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).
12. Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 24.
13. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 153.
14. A detailed account and rich analysis of the relationship between the LAW and Arab feminists is offered by Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and the Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).