Beyond 'Islam' vs. 'Feminism'

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Abstract Islamic feminism has gained currency since the 1990s and has become the label for a new brand of feminist scholarship and activism that is associated with Islam. But this article argues that the composite term 'Islamic feminism' has become so loaded with disputed meanings and implications, so enmeshed in local and global political struggles, that it is no longer useful in any kind of descriptive or analytical sense. I reflect on the term in the light of developments since the 1990s, and argue that the 'war on terror' has further complicated the situation. Alternative approaches to the study of women's activism are put forward, including the examination of the personal, sociopolitical trajectories of so-called Islamic feminists, in their own specific contexts. Such an approach to women's agency must be understood in an unfolding reality, in which both political Islam and international and secular feminism have manifestly failed in practice to secure justice for women and have lost credibility and legitimacy.

1 1 Introduction

The term 'Islamic feminism' gained currency in the 1990s as a label for a brand of feminist scholarship and activism associated with Islam and Muslims. There has since been much discussion and debate and a growing literature on 'Islamic feminism'. Inevitably, there are diverging accounts of the nature of this phenomenon and of its origins and development.[1]

The problems lie both in the explicit issue of how the term is defined and in the implicit meanings it has acquired in usage. This article offers some reflections on the term and the heavy political baggage that comes with it – as well as with its component elements, 'Islamic' and 'Feminism'. Both Islam and feminism are contested concepts that mean different things to different people and in different contexts. Each is the subject of multiple discourses and widely ranging perspectives that can be addressed at different levels. I shall argue here that the composite term 'Islamic feminism' has become so loaded with disputed meanings and implications, so enmeshed in local and global political struggles, that it is no longer useful in any kind of descriptive or analytical sense.

The aim of this article is two-fold. First, I want to set the record straight and to explain the context in which I have used the term myself, and the kind of feminism that is involved. I shall reflect on the term in the light of developments in the intervening years, culminating in two events in 2009, that I believe show how far the debate has moved on, globally and locally: the launch of Musawah, a 'Global Movement for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family' and the emergence of the Green Movement in Iran. Musawah, launched in Kuala Lumpur in February, brings Islamic and human rights frameworks together to build an overlapping consensus among Muslim women from diverse backgrounds and perspectives, and to push for legal reform.[2] The Green Movement in Iran started in June as a protest against a fraudulent presidential election, but it soon became a civil rights movement in which Iranian women have been the most prominent actors.[3]

Second, I want to explore the ambivalence that many women, religious or not, feel towards either the feminist or the religious aspects of their identities. It is this ambivalence, I argue,

that is the subtext of most narratives on 'Islamic feminism'; debates on this phenomenon often become a battlefield where the basic issues at stake are unspoken. Among them are the vexed relationship between feminism and religion and the common but implicit assumption that feminism can only emerge and flourish when religion is relegated to the private space that to a large extent shaped the development of feminism in Western contexts. The privatisation of religion became one of the main tenets of feminism, seen as a prerequisite for the development of a feminist consciousness and a movement. But in Jose Casanova's (2007) words, the process of 'deprivatisation' of religion has become a relatively global trend, while simultaneously we are also seeing the emergence of new feminisms.

2 Questions to ask

We need to start by asking: Whose Islam? Whose Feminism? These questions continue to remain unaddressed in most discussions of Islamic feminism, whether in academic or activist forums. This, in my view, to a large extent explains the lack of clarity in the literature on the subject, which is plagued by unstated agendas, anxieties and unresolved issues. We know little of the personal narratives and trajectories of the so-called Islamic feminists, whose scholarship and activism have been the subject of academic or journalistic narratives. How do they experience their faith? What is their understanding of Islam's textual sources? How do they engage with the patriarchal legal tradition? What were their inner thoughts, the experiences that shaped their feminist consciousness, their hesitations, their fears, their silences?

For nearly three decades, these questions have been at the heart of my scholarship and my life. I start with my own definition of the two components. I understand 'feminism' in the widest sense. It includes a general concern with women's issues, an awareness that women suffer discrimination at work, in the home and in society because of their gender, and action aimed at improving their lives and changing the situation. There is also an epistemological side to feminism: it is a knowledge project in the sense that it sheds light on how we know what we know about women's rights in law, including laws that take their legitimacy from religion, enabling us to challenge, from within, the patriarchy that is institutionalised in a legal tradition.

As for 'Islamic', I must stress that I firmly distinguish this from 'Islamist'. 'Islamism', as I have defined in print, is no more or less than 'political Islam' – a commitment to public action to implement what Islamists regard as an Islamic agenda, commonly summarised in slogans such as 'Islam is the solution' or 'Return to Shari'a'. 'Islamic', on the other hand, when attached to another *ism* such as feminism, means merely finding inspiration and even legitimacy in Islamic history and textual sources (Mir-Hosseini and Tapper 2010). Many people so inspired prefer to call themselves, if anything, 'Muslim feminists'.[4] There is no necessary association of 'Islamic' or 'Muslim' with 'Islamism' or political Islam, nor any necessary association of 'feminism' with lack of religious faith or inspiration.[5] I challenge those who implicitly make these associations to make them explicit and to defend them.

As for 'religion' more generally, the English word 'religion' is full of ambiguities. I argue that those who talk of Islam, or indeed of 'religion' in relation to Islam, often fail to make a distinction, now common, when talking of religion in other contexts, namely between faith (and its values and principles) and organised religion (institutions, laws and practices). The result is the pervasive polemic/rhetorical trick of either glorifying a faith without acknowledging the horrors and abuses that are committed in its name, or condemning it by equating it with those abuses. Similarly, it is better to avoid contrasting 'faith' with 'politics' (chalk vs. cheese) and rather to note that a term (*din*, as much as 'religion') that is so

ambiguous that it can encompass faith and belief, legal traditions and discourses, and organisational structures and positions, has enormous political potential – not least in the Islamist slogans just mentioned.

Here, I follow Abdolkarim's Soroush's distinction between religion (*din*) and religious knowledge (*mar'efat dini*). In his words:

> Our understanding of revealed texts is contingent upon the knowledge already set around us; that is to say that forces external to Revelation drag our interpretation and understanding of it in various directions … Believers generally conceive of religion as something holy or sacred, something constant. You cannot talk about change or evolution of religious knowledge. They stick to the idea of fixity. But as I have demonstrated in my work, we have to make a distinction between religion on the one side and religious interpretation on the other. By religion here I mean not faith, which is the subjective part of religion, but the objective side, which is the revealed text. This is constant, whereas our interpretations of that text are subject to evolution. The idea is not that religious texts can be changed but rather over time interpretations will change. We are always immersed in an ocean of interpretations. The text does not speak to you. You have to make it speak by asking questions of it.

> (Soroush 1996)

In many ways, it is the notion of Shari'a that is the problem. We all think we know what Shari'a is, yet its meanings are widely contested. In the Western context, and for some Muslims, Shari'a has become synonymous with patriarchal laws and cruel punishments; with polygamy, stoning, amputation of limbs. Yet, for the mass of Muslims, Shari'a is the essence of justice, while for Islamists, Shari'a is a powerful political ideology. In Muslim tradition, however, Shari'a is generally a theological and ethical concept more than a legal one; it is associated with the sacred, denoting the totality of God's will as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

In my own recent work (Mir-Hosseini 2009a), I have sought to keep the distinction clearly made and maintained in classical Islamic legal texts, between Shari'a and *fiqh* or jurisprudence – the process of human attempts to discern and extract legal rules from the sacred sources of Islam and the 'laws' that result from this process. What we 'know' of 'Shari'a' is only an interpretation, an understanding; *fiqh*, on the other hand, as in any other system of jurisprudence and law, is human and mundane, temporal and local. Any claim that a specific law or legal rule 'is' Shari'a, is a claim to divine authority for something that is in fact a human interpretation. I believe it is crucial to keep this distinction, to separate the sacred from the legal in the body of law that is commonly subsumed under the label of Shari'a or Islamic law. Without this distinction, reinterpretation and legal change become difficult or impossible.

3 The emergence of feminist voices in Islam

As I have argued elsewhere, two events made 1979 a turning point in the politics of religion, law and gender, and in time became catalysts for the emergence in Muslim contexts of a feminism that takes its legitimacy from Islam.[6] The first was the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which gave gender equality a clear international legal mandate. The second was the popular revolution that brought clerics to power in Iran and began the reversal of the process of secularisation of laws and legal systems that had begun in Muslim contexts earlier in the century. The decades that followed saw the

concomitant expansion, globally and locally, of two equally powerful but opposed frames of reference. On the one hand, the human rights framework and instruments such as CEDAW gave women's rights activists what they needed most: a point of reference, a language and the tools to resist and challenge patriarchy. The 1980s saw the expansion of the international women's movement and of women's NGOs all over the world, including Muslim countries. By the early 1990s, a transnational movement further coalesced around the idea that violence against women was a violation of their human rights, and succeeded in inserting it into the agenda of the international human rights community. In their campaigns, they made visible various forms of gender-based discrimination and violation rooted in cultural traditions and religious practices, and protection from violence became a core demand of women's human rights activists.

On the other hand, Islamist forces – whether in power or in opposition – started to invoke Islam and Shari'a as a legitimising device to reverse the process of reform and secularisation of laws and legal systems that had begun earlier in the century. Tapping into popular demands for social justice, the Islamist rallying cry of 'Return to Shari'a' led to regressive gender policies, with devastating consequences for women: compulsory dress codes, gender segregation, and the revival of cruel punishments and outdated patriarchal and tribal models of social relations.

All these developments widened the gap between religious and secular Muslims, and intensified the conflict between 'Islamists' and 'feminists'. While feeding (on) older stereotypes, old polemics between Islam and the West were reignited. Islamists continue to portray 'feminism' as an extension of colonial politics, as a Western plot to undermine the Muslim way of life, that had to be rejected in the name of Islam. Many women's rights activists, on the other hand, have attacked regressive Islamist policies using older Orientalist and essentialist narratives of Islam as a monolith inherently incompatible with modernity and gender equality.

By the early 1990s, the conflict between these bitterly opposed *isms* found a kind of resolution in the emergence of a new gender discourse that came to be called 'Islamic feminism'.[7] I originally used the term to refer to a number of Islamist Iranian women who after the 1979 revolution had played a crucial role in silencing other women's voices: e.g. Shahla Sherkat, the editor of the official women's magazine *Zan-e Ruz*; Azam Taleqani, who took over the pre-revolutionary Women's Organisation and destroyed all their books; Zahra Rahnavard, who wrote the seminal text on Hijab and denounced feminism. By the early 1990s, these women had become disillusioned with the Islamic Republic's official discourse on women, some of them in official positions had stood down and had joined the 'New Religious Thinkers', who later were the core of the reform movement. Sherkat started the feminist magazine *Zanan*; Taleqani founded another, *Payam-e Hajer*, and Rahnavard was a university teacher and artist. In my conversations with them in the mid-1990s, these women had no problem with being called 'Islamic feminists', which they found an apt description – even if some of them did not yet accept the feminist premise of gender equality. They still saw themselves as part of the Islamic Republic and retained close ties with the political elite.

The only women in Iran who had difficulty with the term were those activists who either were working with government organisations or remained loyal to the early gender discourse of the Islamic Republic. Notable among them was Mahboubeh Abbasgholizadeh, who wrote a four-part article[8] in the official magazine *Zan-e Ruz* (where Shahla Sherkat had been editor before founding *Zanan*), arguing there was no need for feminism in Islam. When I first met her in 1992, she happily called herself an 'Islamist'; she was not against equality but saw feminism as irrelevant to Iran and Muslims, since Islam provides women with all they need to argue for and to acquire equality. But after 1997, she joined the reform movement and by the mid-

2000s was adamantly calling herself a 'secular feminist'. This radical identity shift was typical of many women who were young and ardent Islamist activists in the 1970s and 1980s, especially those married to male Islamists who gained political office and power after the 1979 Revolution. There are many personal and political factors behind such a shift, including family situation (most of these women had divorced their Islamist husbands), disappointment with the gender policies of the Islamic Republic, and exposure to international feminism. Abbasgholizadeh, for example, had been among the official Iranian delegates to the 1995 United Nations Women's Conference in Beijing, where she encountered diaspora Iranian feminists and other scholars and activists, with whom she engaged in dialogue and interaction.

As the term gained currency in the late 1990s, most of those defined by academics and journalists as 'Islamic feminists' rejected either the 'Islamic' or the 'feminist' part of the term. If they came from a religious background and addressed women's rights within an Islamic frame of reference, they wanted to avoid any kind of association with the term 'feminism'; their gender activism was a mixture of conformity and defiance. If they came from a secular background and addressed women's rights from within broader feminist discourses, they rejected being called 'Islamic', even although many of them located their feminism in Islam. Those associated with political Islam took contradictory positions and made confusing statements with respect to gender equality. For them, the wider project of gaining power and establishing an Islamic state took priority over equality and democracy. Some, like Azam Taleqani (Mir-Hosseini 2002) and the Egyptian Zainab Al-Ghazali, in line with the dominant Islamist discourse, rejected gender equality as a 'Western' import (Cooke 1994) and instead advocated the 'Muslim values' of domesticity and motherhood. Interestingly, both these women live a very 'feminist' style of married life and have managed to free themselves from the constraints imposed by the very Islamist discourse they advocated for other women. Others, like Heba Rauf Ezzat and Nadia Yassin, who belong to the younger generation of Islamists, continue to reject in public what they see as the dominance of 'Western definitions' of equality, although in private they are much more nuanced in their arguments. Their public positions clearly have to conform with their place in the political movements and organisations to which they belong;[9] they are clear that for them, political Islam comes first; that the issue of gender equality must remain subordinate to this priority.

In the course of these encounters, I came to realise that the women I called 'Islamic feminists' did not speak with one voice. The positions they took were local, diverse, multiple and evolving. They all sought gender justice and equality for women, but they did not always agree on what constitutes 'justice' or 'equality' or the best ways of attaining them. I saw it as futile and even counter-productive to try to put these diverse voices into neat categories and generate definitions.[10] To understand a movement that is still in formation, I argued that we might start by considering how its opponents depict it, in other words, the resistance against which it has had to struggle. I saw three broad categories of opponents of what I defined as 'the feminist project in Islam': Muslim traditionalists, Islamic fundamentalists and secular fundamentalists. Muslim traditionalists are those who resist any changes in what they hold to be eternally valid ways, sanctioned by an unchanging Shari'a. Islamic fundamentalists – or Islamists – are those who advocate political Islam, seeking to change current practices by a return to what they claim to be a 'purer' version of the Shari'a, which they hope to implement through the machinery of the modern nation state. Secular fundamentalists deny that any religion-based law or social practice can be just or equal, or relevant to modern times; in my encounters with them in meetings and seminars, I found them as dogmatic and ideological as religious fundamentalists.

I have argued that what I called 'Islamic feminism' – feminism that takes its legitimacy from Islam – was the 'unwanted child' of political Islam; it did not emerge because the Islamists offered an egalitarian vision of gender relations. They did not. Rather, their agenda of 'return to the Shari'a' and their attempt to translate into policy the patriarchal gender notions inherent in classical jurisprudence, provoked women to increase criticism of these notions and spurred greater activism among secular feminists, who were now internationalised and had the legitimacy of human rights on their side. The Islamists' defence of patriarchal rulings as 'God's Law' and as promoting an authentic and 'Islamic' way of life, brought the classical jurisprudential texts out of the closet. A growing number of women came to question whether there was an inherent link between Islamic ideals and patriarchy; they saw no contradiction between their faith and their aspiration for gender equality. Political Islam gave them the language to sustain a critique of the gender biases of Muslim family laws in ways that were previously impossible, which opened a space, an arena, for an internal critique of patriarchal readings of the Shari'a that was unprecedented in Muslim history. True, there were always Muslim jurists and reformers who argued for an egalitarian interpretation of the Shari'a, but in my view, it was only in the late 1980s that we started to see the emergence of critical voices and scholarship from within the tradition in literature that deserves the label feminist in the sense that it is sustained and informed by a feminist analysis that inserts gender as category of thought into religious knowledge (Mir-Hosseini 2009a).[11]

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, the politics of the 'war on terror', the illegal invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq – both partially justified as promoting 'democracy' and 'women's rights' – the subsequent revelations of abuses in Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib and Bagram, and the double standards employed in promoting United Nations sanctions, have discredited international human rights ideals in the eyes of many. The gap between these ideals and the practices of their proponents increasingly invited accusations of hypocrisy. In the first decade of the new century, 'feminism' – now commonly identified with international human rights law and its politics – *and* 'Islam' – now often reduced to Islamists and their slogan of 'return to Shari'a' – lost legitimacy and moral authority in many quarters.

I myself started to have problems with the term 'Islamic feminism', when Valentine Moghadam wrote her 2000 piece, 'Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: A Note on a Debate'.[12] There she categorised me, along with Afsaneh Najamabadi and Nayereh Tohidi, as a 'protagonist' of Islamic feminism, set against Haideh Moghissi and Hamed Shahidian as antagonists, and sought to resolve the issue from what she presented as the meta level of 'feminism' – as though her own position gave her the right to do so.

It is interesting that some of those now classed as key 'Islamic feminist' thinkers or advocates are among those who once found 'Islam' and 'feminism' irreconcilable. Prominent among them are Fatima Mernissi and Haleh Afshar who in their earlier feminist incarnations sought to expose the patriarchal inner logic of Islamic texts; for them, patriarchy was inherent to Islam. But in their later writings they abandoned this position and adopted a new approach, going back to the sources to find feminists texts and readings (Mir-Hosseini 1999: 5–6). Neither has written about how this change of heart came about; both have been silent on their intellectual trajectories, although Mernissi has no qualms with writing about her personal life and has provided us with valuable reflections. Likewise, others who have written about Islamic feminism seem to feel that they have no need to talk about their own relationship with the faith into which they were born and raised.

I find this silence significant; it speaks of the ambivalence that many women, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, feel towards certain aspects of their identities. The silence has both strategic and epistemological consequences: strategic, because it allows old polemics, unhealed wounds, to fester, and divides women and progressive forces; epistemological, because

feminism, in addition to being a consciousness and a movement, is also a knowledge project, part of a critical engagement with all branches of knowledge, including religious knowledge. Feminist scholarship in Islam, as in any other religious traditions, has much to offer to both the understanding of religion and the search for justice. It can tell us how and why Islamic legal tradition became as patriarchal as it is, how the tension between the egalitarian and hierarchical voices and tendencies in the tradition played out; how, by the time that the *fiqh* schools emerged, women's voices were silenced in the production of religious knowledge. Space unfortunately does not allow elaboration here of this important issue.[13]

4 The personal is political

My own research now seeks to contribute to the production of feminist knowledge in Islam. I owe my current interest and focus to my involvement with Iranian feminism and 'Sisters in Islam' in Malaysia. I reflect briefly on my personal and intellectual trajectory – it is not that I consider my own story to be either important or representative, but because I believe in the feminist dogma that *the personal is political*, that it can show why and how the dichotomy between feminism (or gender policy) and religion, implicit in many discussions on gender and Islam, is unhelpful and even false. We all, as scholars and/or activists, are situated beings and must recognise that the legacy of colonialism and the Western hegemony does not allow any of us complete freedom of manoeuvre and analysis. The accident of birth and our experiences shape our feminism and sometimes chain us; they allow us to be effective only at certain times and in certain contexts; in short, we must recognise the politics of identity.

My own feminist consciousness is rooted in my birth, childhood and education in Iran between 1952 and 1974, and my experience of living in an Islamic Republic in the early 1980s. In the preface to *Islam and Gender*, I have written about my own trajectory: how, early on I was neither feminist nor political; I did not have the harsh and brutal experiences of many women activists in the years after the revolution; rather, it was through personal experiences in family and marriage that I came to experience the harshness of the system (Mir-Hosseini 1999). I see a number of turning points in my own involvement with the politics of feminism and Islam.

In the 1980s, my research focused on marital disputes and women's strategies in family courts in Iran and Morocco. My year of research in Morocco (1988–9) shaped my feminism. I came to know Fatima Mernissi, whose brand of feminism and work I admired and who was then my intellectual hero; I formed close friendships while working with Moroccan feminist organisations. But I was unsettled by what I saw as the gap between their worlds and those of the women I was meeting in the family courts; they spoke two different languages, both literally and figuratively. Mernissi's published work was in French and her work did not reach ordinary Moroccan women. In 1992, I completed a book on my research in the Iranian and Moroccan divorce courts, in which I tried to maintain the scholarly objectivity I had absorbed in my 1970s student days, and I kept myself out of the text. I was nonetheless experiencing a turbulent, transformative re-thinking of my identity as a person and an academic. Although the book was on the whole well received, I was upset by a number of insulting and distorted reviews by 'secular' Iranian feminists.[14]

In 1992, I returned to Iran after four years' absence, and did fieldwork in Kurdistan among the *Ahl-e Haqq* mystical sect. This was a transforming personal experience for me, which I have yet to write about. In Tehran the same year, I witnessed the emergence of a new gender discourse being published in the new women's magazine *Zanan.* In 1993, I began collaboration with Mohsen Saidzadeh, the cleric who wrote feminist articles (usually under a pseudonym) for this magazine and with his help, I also began an intense study of juristic texts

and practices. In 1995, I carried out several months' research among religious families and seminaries in Qom ending in the confiscation of my field materials by a security organisation in Tehran. In the preface to *Islam and Gender,* I describe this incident and how my way of recovering from the traumatic loss was a decision to write the book as a personal search for understanding and to put myself firmly on the page, which I had avoided in my earlier book, *Marriage on Trial* (Mir-Hosseini 1993).

In 1996, while writing *Islam and Gender*, I met the documentary film-maker, Kim Longinotto, and we decided to make a film in Tehran inspired by the court cases depicted in *Marriage on Trial* (Mir-Hosseini 1993). Over the next 18 months, extended negotiations in London and Tehran for permission to shoot the film helped me to cross the line between academia and activism (Mir-Hosseini 2002). The global success of *Divorce Iranian Style* following its premiere in 1998, and the good reception of *Islam and Gender* after its publication in 1999, completely transformed my status both in the academic field of Iranian studies and in the world of Iranian women activists and academics. My approach – in particular, my attempt to understand Islamic clerics without condemning them out of hand – was taken seriously by academics who had previously ignored or sought to dismiss my work, and I found that students and younger generation diaspora Iranians, in particular, found my work engaging and enlightening.

In 2002, I began working with the Malaysia-based NGO, *Sisters in Islam*. Trips to conferences and meetings in Malaysia and Indonesia opened a new world to me, where I was accepted without question. I did not have to explain my identities as a feminist and a Muslim. There were none of the tensions between religious and secular feminists that pervaded the circles in which I had been operating previously. I wrote a paper (published in the new journal *Hawwa* in 2003) on 'The Construction of Gender in Islamic Legal Thought', my first contribution to religious knowledge. I wrote, not as an academic anthropologist merely concerned to analyse and explain, but as an activist in a search of solutions.[15]

Between 2002 and 2008, I taught for a semester in alternate years as Visiting Professor in the Global Law Program at New York University (NYU). I found remarkable similarities between the language and mindset of academic lawyers at the NYU Law School and those of clerical jurists in the Qom seminaries. In 2004–5, I was a fellow of the Berlin Institute of Advanced Study, where I had the opportunity for sustained engagement with another fellow, Abdolkarim Soroush, a distinguished Iranian religious intellectual whose approach to Islam had allowed Iranian women like Shahla Sherkat (editor of *Zanan* magazine) to admit and articulate their feminism. I had started reading his work in 1995, and learned much from him. I later interviewed him when he came to London and listened to recordings of his lectures, which gave me a new language to talk about Islam. I could identify with his interpretation of religious texts but not his gender perspective (to which I devoted a chapter in *Islam and Gender*). In Berlin, I had extended discussions with him and also with another fellow, the feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser. At NYU I also began an engagement with Carol Gilligan, participating in her seminars on 'Resisting Injustice'. **In 2006, I began teaching with Amina Wadud and Khaid Masud in courses organized by Sisters in Islam to train activists on Islam from Rights Perspective….

These experiences and encounters with scholars of very different viewpoints have shaped my own approach and given me a language with which to engage with patriarchal interpretations of Islam's textual sources from within. In *Marriage on Trial* (Mir-Hosseini 1993), I had made no distinction between Shari'a and *fiqh*; indeed in popular discourse and among the Muslim women with whom I worked, there was no such distinction. But in 1995, in the course of my fieldwork in Qom and through my debates with Iranian clerics, I soon realised that the distinction was crucial. It allowed me to pose questions from within the tradition on

constructions of gender in Islamic legal thought. My later engagements with prominent American feminist theorists like Nancy Fraser and Carol Gilligan made me realise that I could identify with their feminism if not with their language and approach to religion, but that their knowledge of the politics of feminism in the Muslim world, and of Islam as a religion, was so limited that, for example, in her last book, Gilligan portrays Ayaan Hirsi Ali as the model of resistance to patriarchy in Islamic contexts (Gilligan and Richards 2009: 254). Their theories helped me to understand better the feminism that I was studying and now contributing to, even if I could not apply their solutions. Unlike them, I could not define my feminism and operate without the need to be mindful of religion; the resurgence of Islam in the 1970s as both a spiritual and a political force did not allow me to do so. But I felt a renewed confidence that it was possible to look beyond the traditional stand-off between religious and non-religious approaches, to take justice and equality to be absolutely good, no matter what path we choose to seek them.

5 New spaces, new voices

Before considering the implications of my personal journey through 'Islamic feminism' for the framing of gender policies and practices, let me try to make explicit what has remained implicit in my narrative.

First, the linkage between the religious and political dimensions of identity in Muslim contexts is, in my view, one of the key issues that Muslim women confront in their struggle for equality. This linkage is not new – it has its roots in the colonial era – but it took on a new and distinct expression in the 1970s with the resurgence of Islam as a political and spiritual force. With the end of the colonial era, the rise of secular and despotic regimes in Muslim countries and their suppression of progressive forces left a vacuum that was filled by Islamist movements. And these movements, dramatically strengthened by the success of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, gained momentum with the subsequent perceived defeat of communism. But it was not until the rise of the neo-conservatives in the USA, and their response to the events of 9/11, in particular the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and of Iraq in 2003 that Muslim women found themselves in the crossfire. Both invasions were partially justified in the name of 'saving Muslim women'; US neo-conservatives and rightist parties in Europe noisily promoted women of Muslim backgrounds such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Irshad Manji, who openly voiced criticism of what they understood as Islam, though their understanding of Islam was in effect as dogmatic and patriarchal as that of the Islamists whom they opposed.

It is telling that in this workshop we had a session devoted to 'Contextualising the instrumentalisation of religion on the ground'. Should there not have been one on 'The instrumentalisation of human rights laws, democracy and feminism on the ground'? I am particularly sensitive to this, coming from a country where foreign powers have twice in my lifetime frustrated the development of democracy. In 1953, the CIA and MI6 funded and orchestrated a coup to topple Mohammad Mosaddeq's democratic government after he had nationalised Iranian oil. My childhood and young adult life were formed by the sense of frustration of my father and his generation, who felt betrayed by this coup (not to mention earlier twentieth century foreign interventions since the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11). Without it, there would have been no Islamic Revolution 25 years later. Then, in January 2002, after Iran under President Khatami had firmly aligned itself with the USA after the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush placed Iran in the 'Axis of Evil' and restarted the rhetoric of regime change; once again the democratic momentum was frustrated. With the emergence of the Green Movement in the aftermath of the 2009 presidential elections, hopes for democratic change are again threatened by growing US–Israeli talk of bombing or invasion, on the pretext of Iran's supposed work on nuclear weapons. US-led western antagonism to Iran has

effectively boosted the hardliners in government and enabled them to silence the internal voices of reform and dissent.

Second, I want to question why some feminists are apparently unsettled by the engagement of Muslim feminists like me with a search for gender justice within Islam, while claiming and acknowledging our faith position, Margot Badran, for example, has recently stated that, in claiming our faith, we are excluding others:

> A Muslims-only endeavour, *Musawah* (Arabic for equality), which is directing its effort to reforming 'the Muslim family', narrows down the circumference of activism. Why, many are asking, should Muslims only direct and decide on issues in campaigns mobilising Islamic feminist discourse aimed at reforming *fiqh*-backed family laws?

> (Badran 2010)

As a scholar of 'Islamic feminism', Badran should know that, although Musawah made a conscious decision to be Muslim-led, it does not exclude other activists and voices. The Musawah Framework for Action was shaped by a planning committee that included several secularist women (e.g. Amal Abdel Hadi, Rabea Naciri, Pinar Ilkkaracan), and was greatly influenced by the successful campaigns for the reform of family law by Moroccan women, some of them staunch secularists.

Others see such efforts as doomed. Hania Sholkamy, for example, argues that they will face 'equally authentic' interpretations of the sacred sources, and, unable to 'oppose the divine will', will be defeated by the impossibility of judging whose interpretations are correct (Sholkamy 2010). Is this not defeatist? Women in Musawah seek just such engagements with proponents of supposedly authentic but patriarchal versions of the Islamic legal tradition. They believe that their own arguments are better grounded in both that tradition and the sources of International Human Rights law; above all they insist that any Islamic authority that denies justice as it is understood today cannot be authentic and should be challenged. This is why both scholar/activists like me, and Musawah as a movement, claim the tradition and place ourselves firmly within it. Faced by an apparent choice between the devil of those who want to impose patriarchal interpretations of Islam's sacred texts, and the deep blue sea of those who pursue a neo-colonialist hegemonic global project in the name of enlightenment and feminism, those of us committed to achieving justice for women and a just world have no other option than to bring Islamic and feminist perspectives together. Otherwise, Muslim women's quest for equality will remain hostage to different political forces and tendencies, as it was in the twentieth century and continues to be in the new century that began with the politics of the 'War on Terror'.

If my analysis and my hunches are correct, the year 2009 may prove to have been as important as 1979 in shifting the politics of religion and feminism onto new ground, both globally and locally. The launch of Musawah is not alone in marking a new phase in Muslim women's struggle against Islamist attempts to justify and revive gender inequality, patriarchy and autocratic rule. Another such marker is the emergence in 2009 of the Green Movement in Iran, where the debate has moved on and the political divisions are now clear-cut. Those who reject the feminist project in Islam are those who are aligned with the despotic and authoritarian elements in the Islamic Republic. After the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and the emergence of the first wave of the reform movement, they were aligned with the Islamic rightists, who were then known as 'Conservatives' but in 2005, when hardliner President Ahmadinejad was elected, called themselves Principlists (*usulgara'ian*), a euphemism for 'fundamentalists'. For increasing numbers, feminism is no longer a bad word and many leaders in the Green Movement, including Zahra Rahnavard (wife of Mir-Hossein Mousavi), openly claim it. The movement is still in its infancy, and it is not fully formed, but

it has moved beyond 'where is my vote?' to become an organic, colourful, fluid and grass-roots movement for civil rights. These developments have been catalysed by reactions to both the Islamist slogan of 'return to Shari'a' and the 'war on terror'. Both political Islam and international and secular feminism, having manifestly failed in practice to secure justice for women, have lost credibility and legitimacy. The new phase coincides with a shift in relations between religion and feminism that some have spoken of as 'post-Islamism' and 'post-secularism'.

There always have been, and will be, competing interpretations of Islam's sacred texts. The power of any interpretation depends, not on its correctness, but on the social and political forces supporting its claims to authenticity. Fully aware of this, feminist voices and scholarship in Islam are challenging, on their own terms and from within the same tradition, those who use religion to justify patriarchy. The women in Musawah and many of the reformists in the Iranian Green Movement insist that the Shari'a is an ideal embodying the justice of Islam, that justice today must include equality, and that consequently patriarchal interpretations of the Shari'a are completely unacceptable.

6 Conclusion

Let me conclude by clarifying an assertion I have made in public, which appears to have caused resentment and misunderstanding. At the 2009 meeting in Kuala Lumpur to launch Musawah, I repeated what I had written earlier in a published article: 'In my view, secular feminism in the Muslim world fulfilled its historical role by paving the way for women's entry into politics and society in the early twentieth century' (Mir-Hosseini 2006: 644). I was quoted in a *New York Times* report of the launch as elaborating that 'Secular feminism has fulfilled its historical role but it has nothing more to give us' (Tavernise 2009). The context that was missing, however, was a rather heated exchange with some 'secular feminists', who had questioned the possibility of an 'Islamic feminism'. Others have also rejected my apparent dismissal of 'secular feminism'. I will simply repeat here that rejection was not my intent, but rather, then as now, I call for a reconciliation and transcendence of the distinction. We are all heading in the same direction, but we also need to recognise and value the diversity in our approaches and create spaces where different feminisms and voices can work together towards the same goal.

Notes

1   See for instance, Yoginder Sikand's recent online interviews with Margot Badran, at http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/sikand090210.html, and myself at http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2010/sikand210910.html.

2   For the launch of Musawah, see www.musawah.org, in particular the pressroom and Mir-Hosseini (2009d).

3   For an analysis of the centrality of gender and the place of women in this movement, see Mir-Hosseini (2009c).

4   This is the case for many distinguished activists, for instance, Zainah Anwar in Malaysia and Shahla Sherkat and Fatemeh Rake'i in Iran. Anwar has stated, 'I prefer to call myself a Muslim feminist, because the term Muslim signifies human agency and how I, as a human being, understand God and religion' (Anwar 2009).

5   I hesitate to use the term 'secularism', for which there are many different definitions.

6   See, for instance, Mir-Hosseini (2006, 2009, 2010a).

7   There is now an extensive literature on this 'Islamic feminism'. For overviews, see Badran (2009) and Mir-Hosseini (2006).

8   Written under her married name, Mahboubeh Ommi; for a discussion, see Mir-Hosseini (1996: 160–1), and for her later stance, see Mir-Hosseini (2002: 112–13).

9   I have been at workshop meetings with both, and I have great respect for the work they are doing; in March 2010, I had a candid dialogue with Nadia Yassin, which will appear in a forthcoming book.

10   It is here that my approach and my account of the evolution of 'Islamic feminism' differ from those of Margot Badran.

11   On this point too, my analysis diverges from that of Badran.

12   I strongly protested that her account distorted my scholarship and misrepresented my position; these were partially addressed in the revised version (2002).

13   It is being addressed in the emerging literature of feminist scholarship in Islam; for a partial list, see Mir-Hosseini (2006), and for my own approach, see Mir-Hosseini (2007, 2009a, 2009e, 2010a).

14   See, for instance, reviews by Afary (1996) and Haeri (1995), and my exchange with the latter (Mir-Hosseini 1998).

15   I also claim the identity of 'native' anthropologist, which adds to my Iranian/Muslim identity a consciousness of the link between epistemology and politics; this consciousness, in my view, helps to bridge the gap between 'insider' or 'outsider' perspectives, see Mir-Hosseini (2010b).

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