Feminism versus Cultural Relativism:
Is There a Universal Muslim Woman in Need of Saving?

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Abstract

This paper attempts to apply a culturally-relativist lens to the question of whether or not a homogenous identity of 'the Muslim woman' exists. In doing so, it explores the various constructions of woman-centric identities, as per either First World feminism, or the idea of 'the Muslim woman' according to constructions predominantly stemming from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Within a modern context, these constructions are often pitted against one another, and fuel debates regarding the empowerment, agency, protection, and lives of the women in question. This paper posits the argument that a singular, definitive, or homogenizing identity of 'the Muslim woman' can neither exist, nor be fairly and universally representative.

Keywords: *feminism, cultural relativism, political Islam, Muslim women, identity constructions.*

Introduction

In her work titled *Feminism and Islamic Feminism*: *The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (1999), Moghissi articulates the extent to which women residing in Islamist regimes often face a disproportionate degree of oppression and brutality. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on regimes referred to as Islamist within the Middle-Eastern and North African region. These are ones wherein the social and economic ramifications of politicized religion, espoused by the state, are noticeably experienced. According to Moghissi, women under such regimes are caught between the crosshairs of the modernist debate between secularism and religious fundamentalism (Moghissi, 1999). Within the context of the twentieth-century shift toward heavily-fractured identity constructions, a globally consumer-driven society, and a general tone of relativism, long-sustained ideological movements—such as political Islam—have arguably struggled to maintain legitimacy and principal authority over the challenge of representation. This paper assesses the extent to which Western, secular feminism has established a hegemonic perspective on its subject, 'the woman'. In addition to this, it analyzes the attitude of modern Western Feminism's hegemonic interpretive apparatus towards Islamic feminism within contemporary society. In doing so, this paper interrogates whether such a concept is valid and authentic. As an extension of this argument, it challenges the ideological basis of a feminist movement which strives for the eradication of a globally-hegemonic patriarchy. Could such a movement manage to span uniformly across different cultures, identities, and modalities?

First World Constructions of 'The Woman'

It is crucial to pose here the question whether the 'universal woman', or otherwise the notion of a singular, globally-encompassing identity of the Muslim woman, carries a specific implication. The representation of a particular 'self', involves a relational 'other' against which to contrast this 'self'. This is arguably necessary not only in terms of defining the self, but also as a principal point around which to comparatively campaign and advocate for the subject. Here, the subject would manifest as 'the woman', against the relational 'other', 'the man'. In feminist discourse, and here I particularly refer to Western feminist discourse, there is an emphasis on criticizing numerable institutions, power structures, and social relations which enable man to navigate the modern age and world in a manner

inherently different—and arguably more privileged—than the woman. The question however, remains, of the validity of the singular, monolithic woman who is the site of patriarchal oppression.

The challenge of relativity must be approached with caution. How can the very parameters of morality and human rights be clearly defined and situated within such a thoroughly information-saturated global society? With the development of innumerable identity formations, subjective discourses, and improved means through which individuals are permitted to express and elucidate their lived experiences, the presumably 'clear' demarcations of what constitutes liberated and un-liberated women become a matter of debate/contention.

Perhaps Cooke (2002) encapsulates this concern most aptly with her perspective on the subject of women and cultural relativism. According to Cooke, the myth of the illiterate, oppressed, and hapless 'exotic' woman in dire need of the corrective and modernizing application of the West can be traced to colonial occupation, related practices and reforms. As Cooke argues, the decision of the colonizing British Raj to condemn and criminalize the Hindu ritualistic act of suttee in 1829 proved to be reflective of a wider discourse or understanding of the 'regressive' Third World, and its many social, cultural, and religious adoptions (Cooke, 2002). Regarding the aforementioned 'woman', it is important to acknowledge how this subject was constructed, in that it perceived the oppression of women within the Third World as a monolithic attack against a homogenous ideal of womanhood.

Indeed, even years on, the prevalence of this monolithic construction of the universal woman by First World feminists prevails. The sharp decline in popularity that the Afghanistan's Taliban government experienced by 1996 coincided with a general rise in the First World's perception of such culturally and religiously grounded symbols as the burqa, as encroachments and brutalities against 'the woman'. Consequently, Cooke states that the Afghan woman's burqa evolved into becoming emblematic of the 'gendered logic' of the neo-colonialist narrative (Cooke, 2002). Therefore, the veil was no longer an expression of the Afghan woman's personal agency fit to her socio-religious context, but rather, a rallying-point for the feminist movement in the First World to emancipate the Third World woman from the impositions of the veil, and as such, launch a neo-colonialist 'civilizing mission' within the Third World. As a direct consequence of such politico-militant strategies adopting the socially-conscious facet of 'women's empowerment', the women requiring any degree of rescuing would be granted

their 'inalienable human rights', liberty, emancipation, and access to modern-existence predominantly through Western education (Cooke, 2002).

It is worth noting here, however, that the solitary inclusion of Muslim women residing within Islamist regimes,as opposed to Muslim women and men,remains reminiscent of the 1829 condemnation of the suttee ritual; 'the woman',despite her preference, authority, context, or condition requires indisputable saving and protection. It therefore stands that the socio-political conditions and constructions which dictated the banning of suttee in 1829 would continue to find leverage and relevance in more recent events; the self-appointed purveyors of First World feminism—and the woman, as an extension—can pick and choose any symbolic act or deed to rally against, regardless of the unique cultural and historical forces which produce it within a given context.

Cooke's analysis is entirely valid and reasonable within the context of neo-colonialism, and the First World feminist movement's significant usage of gendered logic. However, when assessing the issue of cultural relativism, this analysis arguably only produces a one-dimensional construction of the ongoing crisis of multiculturalism, in that it fails to adequately take cultural relativism into account. Here, the essay will reference Moghissi's analysis on the subject matter which has been discussed previously, in order to illustrate the extent to which the debate over cultural relativism presents itself as the metaphorical double-edged sword.

A Muslim Woman?

As per Moghissi's argument, the postmodern movement's interpretation of 'the woman'—either as an entity existing within a specific cultural, historical context which must be respected and cautiously acknowledged, or, as Cooke has expounded, the Third World woman in prompt need of literacy and recovery—remains problematic in its homogenous singularity. Moghissi stresses the need to approach the issue of women existing or functioning within and under Islamist regimes as dialectically as possible (Moghissi, 1999). This would involve an acknowledgement of the negating and opposing forces or subjects at play within this wider discourse, that further fuel meaning to one another through the simple process of contradiction. A dialectical approach is perhaps one which Cooke

would also veer toward. However, Cooke and Moghissi primarily differ in their examination of the modern tension between First World feminism, and the question of women residing under Islamist regimes. For the former, relativism creates a specific power dynamic and rhetoric within the arena of international politics and affairs, pitting one culture's 'barbarity' against the other's 'reason' (Cooke, 2002). For the latter, a postmodern perspective on the subject would adopt a converse vein of reasoning. In its attempts to civilly engage with the multi-layered issue of multiculturalism, a culturally-relativist approach toward feminism and Middle Eastern women might systematically alienate, exclude, and 'other' the lived experiences of a Muslim woman (Moghissi, 1999).

Granted the two authors illustrate the question of cultural relativism through uniquely dissimilar lenses,however, Cooke and Moghissi's arguments situate a common ground and understanding in their exploration of the Muslim woman's identity. Here, it is important to note that both authors would argue against the construction of a homogenous Muslim identity, specifically one which fails to acknowledge, and hence ultimately eradicates, the very regional, cultural, and socio-economic differences which impact their everyday interactions and conditions as Muslim women living under Islamist regimes (Cooke, 2002; Moghissi, 1999).

To add further depth to Moghissi's perspective, Phillipson (2003) presents the exact profundity of the broader debate on the homogeneity of the Muslim woman's identity. According to her, feminism—specifically with regards to the 'sisters' residing within the Third World—must be critically approached, adopting a distinctly dialectical and intersectional tone (Phillipson, 2003). Such arguments are also ultimately crucial in understanding the sheer degree of variegation and difference which occurs between and amongst the women residing within such cultures and orders. The consistent narrative maintenance of the universal woman inevitably disregards for instance, how socio-economic differences and dynamics might result in unequal associations and relations between two women residing under a single Islamist regime.

Where Phillipson and Moghissi jointly concede to the power of subjective experience, this essay further employs Moghissi's reasoning in order to elaborate upon the writer's theorizations on the dialectical experience of the Muslim woman. For Moghissi, the measured creation of the homogenous, universal Muslim woman is rooted within a range of socially, culturally, economically, politically,

and historically bound processes (Moghissi, 1999). Moghissi expounds upon the variegated nature of the Muslim identity. She maintains that Middle Eastern women represented within a sizable majority of postmodern, academic writing are inadequately illustrated. Such women, similar to the women residing within a range of Islamist regimes, are not bound by a singular 'Islamic' meta-culture. In fact, even the politics and policies which dictate the everyday living vary from one Islamist regime to the next (Moghissi, 1999).

It is at this point where Moghissi's arguments begin to seamlessly connect with those placed forward by Volpp in *Feminism Versus Multiculturalism* (2001). As Moghissi argues, the contentiously-labelled neo-Orientalist motivations of most advocates of postmodern cultural relativism are not unlike the Orientalist portrayals presented by the imperialists of the late-eighteenth century. Whether one opts to label Islam as a religion of abject cruelty and inhumanity, or otherwise laud it as the flexible, progressive religion compatible with modern-day feminism, both ends of the spectrum—as this essay has maintained—fail to take into account the actual spaces the Muslim women in question occupy alongside their individual, dialectically-formed conclusions on the issue of feminist representation itself (Moghissi, 1999).

Of particular note is that Volpp and Cooke agree on the issue of the First World's perspective of women which seemingly require protection and empowerment. Volpp maintains how an overarching Western strand of the feminist movement, which consequently might not be as intersectional as the likes of Phillipson would hope for it to be, tends to handle the Third World (alongside an array of minority cultures and ethnic identities) as intrinsically inferior, and imperatively requiring the corrective application of postmodern influences, such as consumerism, or access to 'liberal education' and discourse (Volpp, 2001). Such articulations are reminiscent of Cooke's understanding of the First World's 'gendered logic' of emancipating oppressed women hailing from minority-ethnic or racial backgrounds through Western education and literacy (Cooke, 2002). Volpp additionally expounds on how certain factors, such as racial heritage, result in a disproportionate degree of challenge, oppression, and hindrance which women residing within the same Islamist regime have to grapple with, similar to Moghissi's arguments on the reasons about why such instances must be approached dialectically (Volpp, 2001; Moghissi, 1999).

Negating the 'Other'

The articulations of both Volpp and Butler (2015) are crucial in establishing this argument. Volpp maintains a stance against the reductive and restrictive binaries of pitting one homogenous half, the woman, against the other, i.e., the man, without taking systematic, structural, and symbolic forces into account when approaching the subject of First World feminism (Volpp, 2001). To add to this point, in *Gender Trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler aims to elucidate the limitations of postmodern feminism, specifically with its insistence upon the existence of a universally-dominant patriarchy. For Butler, not only is the narrative and discursive construction of 'the woman' as a subject entirely paradoxical, in that this formation takes place within the vacuum of the 'other', what is also paradoxical is the definition of 'the woman' as a subject requiring the movement's representational efforts in empowerment. Interestingly, this advocacy takes place within the very institutional structures the movement aims to ultimately dismantle and reorganize (Butler, 2015). Therefore, a number of authors have maintained the arguably weak foundational premise of this ideological movement, specifically if it fails to acknowledge the depth of intersectionality which remains an intrinsic segment of the lived experience of any woman residing under an Islamist regime.

Perhaps Abu-Lughod's ethnographic, intersectional analysis of Muslim women and a dominant strand of Western feminism is apt in its detailing of the Muslim woman not requiring the emancipation which is their apparent humane right. Abu-Lughod approaches her text dialectically, detailing the range of bureaucratic structures, organizations, and broader discourses which construct the Muslim woman through rather sweeping generalizations and sensationalism. While Abu-Lughod concedes that women residing under Islamist militant regimes face considerable adversity and challenge, the image and representation of the Muslim woman requiring immediate assistance is, to an arguable extent, entirely misleading (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Such arguments mirror those of Cooke (2002), who maintains that an array of political, social, economic, and legal considerations and implications dictate the experience of the Muslim woman, as opposed to her geo-political position alone.

As has been mentioned at an earlier point in this essay, the current-day analysis of the Muslim woman's identity—and her subsequent position and role as a possible

subject of the feminist movement—is intimately connected to her identity as a consumerist. As Mishra observes, publications and media based out of the First World tend to connect the emancipation of the oppressed Muslim woman with her ability to consume commodities, specifically in terms of lifestyle and fashion (Mishra, 2018). This is broadly a result of the modern intimate association with a capitalist economy, and the perception of the Muslim woman living under militant rule as one being unable to engage with consumerist structures and mediums freely. However Moghissi would arguably label this a neo-Orientalist attempt, either conscious or otherwise, to alienate the Muslim woman in question. Similarly, such postmodern discourse is often misguided in its attempts to construct a comprehensible, singular understanding of the Muslim woman to possibly empower and protect. Conversely, the cultural relativism (which just so happens to remain as a byproduct of a similar postmodern movement and era) often fails to acknowledge the genuine concerns of the women existing within legitimately oppressive regimes and structures. However, perhaps even cultural relativism cannot resist the lure of constructing the singular, homogenous Muslim woman.

Moving Forward: Is there a 'Muslim woman' in need of saving?

The longstanding debate of a Western, non-intersectional strand of feminism, against the postmodern tendency of adopting a culturally-relativist approach, as this essay has attempted to prove, possesses an equal number of unstable, fallacious, and universally inapplicable arguments. As Moghissi maintains, perhaps the plight and condition of the Muslim woman under an Islamist regime must be approached dialectically. Abu-Lughod might go so far as to argue that such an approach might determine whether such a woman exists within a state of plight or not. Indeed, both movements largely fail to cater to the very women they claim to solely represent and advocate for, despite arguably existing at two ends of an ideological spectrum of sorts. However, both cases exhibit a similar tendency to construct an erroneous, inauthentic identity of 'the Muslim woman', and often one which needs to be pitted against a similarly-homogenous 'other'— a process, this paper has argued, which presents a range of paradoxical hindrances. However, one conclusion this paper can confidently reach concerns the question of the universal woman in need of saving; she may not exist, but women do require

saving, and perhaps they can dialectically understand themselves and their own to arrange this rescue themselves.

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