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Transnational Feminism, Islam, and the Other Woman: How to Teach

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by Perin Gurel



MAYA AND PINTO. PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN AT THE AUDRE LORDE EXHIBIT OPENING AT TUFTS UNIVERSITY BY PEARL EMMONS

Let's admit it: feminism is always confronted by the other woman. No, not the "Other" woman, not the women of color, poor women, women of the Third World: to those, even the most traditional liberal feminist gives a sympathetic nod, a phenomenon Audre Lorde described as "the special Third World Women's Issue."¹ The other woman is the individual who seems to come out of the woodwork and to whom The Man suddenly begins to pay attention. If she is a Muslim woman, she denounces Islam with indignation. If she is a woman of color, she denounces her "culture" as a thoroughly patriarchal, oppressive, and static entity. Making a name for herself as the voice of freedom and feminism in the process, the other woman finds a willing and widespread audience in the United States, from Midwestern housewives in book clubs to men in policy think tanks.

All the complex and contextualized discourses transnational feminists have built around women and Islam seem to crumble when an aunt asks us during Thanksgiving dinner, with quasi-feminist indignation, whether we have read *The Infidel* or *The Caged Virgin* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Here is what we want to say: "Yes, I did, and I was amazed that Ali ignores the work of Leila Ahmad, Fatima Mernissi, Lila Abu-Lughod, or anyone who has done extensive research on Muslim women, and writes as if nuanced criticisms of political Islam by Muslim women do not exist." For my part, I only said "Yes, I did" last Thanksgiving, and let Aunt Sally give me the glowing look of a comrade-in-arms against "Islamofascism." This was a delicate moment, and one in which I believe I failed as a teacher.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticized the construction of "The Third World Woman" as a victim of her culture years ago.² More recently, Inderpal Grewal revealed how U. S . refugee practices require women of color to represent themselves as victims and their cultures as pathological.³ Yet, as transnational feminists, we still feel uncomfortable criticizing vocal, politically active women of color, whose monolithic denigrations of Islam and un-nuanced adoration of Western liberal feminism go against everything our movement and work represents. Like Ali, I am of Muslim extraction and I live in the West. As an academic feminist, I do not really want to silence an intelligent woman from a marginalized background who is denouncing practices I also criticize in my work. I cannot, in good faith, say that a woman who serves neo-cons has "false consciousness." To me, such moments reveal that transnational feminism is still an offshoot of Western feminism, and that modern western feminism was built upon the activism fault line between busting structures and aiding individuals. According to Nancy Cott, the successes of the American "woman movement" by the 1920s and the dissolution of gender-segregated "separate spheres" brought to the fore contradictions inherent in a movement that called for women's unity while trying to recognize the diversity among women.⁴ Of course women of color and working class women had long before questioned what it meant to base a politics exclusively on sex.⁵ The "globalization" of feminism, beginning officially with the 1975-1985 UN Decade of

Women, made these fault lines even more acute. So how do we teach about women and Islam to our Azar Nafisi-reading students and our Ayaan Hirsi Ali-reading Aunt Sallys, given this complex grounding of modern and, yes, transnational, feminism?

Here are a few preliminary suggestions, based on my experience co-teaching an upper-level/graduate seminar called "Women, Religion, and Representation in an Age of Globalization" with two influential feminist scholars, Laura Wexler and Sally Promey, in the spring of 2009.⁶ Regardless of other pedagogical aims, I believe the progressive scholar engaging women's issues in the Muslim world must strive to do three things: historicize feminism, historicize Islam, and highlight the complexities of representation.

Historicize Feminism

Historicizing feminism involves sharing not just the triumphs but also the crises of western feminism with our students. Beginning with the so-called First Wave of feminism, women of color like Frances Harper and Anna Julia Cooper challenged white feminist assumptions on the primacy of "sex."⁷ The internationalization and institutionalization of feminism with the Second Wave and the declaration of the first UN Decade of Women (1975-1985) accentuated the divides between Western and non-Western feminisms. Latin American feminists questioned Western visions of "a global sisterhood" devoid of materialist analysis as early as 1975. In 1978, a group of Third World feminists, including Fatima Mernissi from Morocco and Nawal El Sadaawi from Egypt, wrote an open letter to explode "the myth that the mere fact of being women can unite us."⁸ Transnational feminism developed out of these cathartic crises as a feminism that strives to organize around issues, encourage complex analyses of how gender and sexuality intersect with other sites of power, and support local actors. However, students must not forget that feminism continues to be non-monolithic, contentious, and in flux. Amrita Basu's concise introduction to *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (1995), read in opposition to Robin Morgan's introduction to *Sisterhood is Global* (1984), is an excellent starting point for such a project.⁹ Historicizing feminism also requires us to consider the long-standing connections between Feminism and Imperialism. Casting the "Third World Woman" as a victim to be saved by the white man has been a common rhetorical ploy of Western imperialism; feminists have all too often been complicit in the violence wreaked by colonial maneuvers predicated on "saving brown women from brown men."¹⁰ As Katharine Viner pointed out in *The Guardian* in 2002, U.S. President George W. Bush perfected the utilization of liberal feminist rhetoric in the service of neoliberalism when mobilizing Americans for war against Afghanistan and Iraq. Listing the fact that "the repression of women [is] everywhere and always wrong" as a central reason to attack Iraq, Bush tied orthodox feminist rhetoric directly to militarism and indirectly to oil-driven expansionism.¹¹ Acknowledging how certain feminisms have

historically aided and continue to aid Empire is an important part of historicizing feminism. On this front, Chandra Talpede Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" and Abu-Lughod's "Do Muslim Women Need Saving? Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others" have rightly become classic transnational feminist texts.¹² Reading Azer Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* alongside John Carlos Rowe's refreshing and enlightening "Reading *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in Idaho" similarly allows us to place the former text within the sociopolitical context of U.S. designs on the Middle East.¹³

Historicize Islam

As Edward Said showed in his ground breaking *Orientalism*, the tendency in Western scholarship has been to depict the so-called Muslim world as an ahistorical moral landscape, where time has stood still since Biblical times.¹⁴ Works like Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *The Caged Virgin* often reproduce that dynamic, assuming a monolithic and eternally oppressive Islam. It is a testimony to Said's perceptiveness about the entrenched schemata of Western Orientalism that, even in the twenty-first century, most popular texts refuse to acknowledge the impressive body of work on Islamic feminism and get away with it. Among the many excellent feminist histories of Islam are the works of Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmad, both of whom provide alternative historiographies of Islam as a moral code involving gender justice.¹⁵ Complex ethnographies like Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* and Yesim Arat's *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy* also do great work in examining the role women play in contemporary Islamic movements.¹⁶ In fact, the early twenty-first century has seen a veritable boom of work on gender, women, and Islam -- a fact the mainstream media's persistence in being shocked at anything that smacks of Muslim feminism belies.¹⁷ Still, few essays theorize the post-1970 transnational politics of Feminism and Islamicism as strikingly as Mino Moallem's "Feminism and Fundamentalism," in which the author skillfully deconstructs the binary oppositions set up between (Western) feminism and (Eastern) fundamentalism.¹⁸

Foreground Representation

Historicizing feminism and Islam requires the de-naturalization of the meanings and symbols associated with both concepts. Therefore, from Said's *Orientalism* on, the best texts on these subjects necessarily critique certain politics of representation. *The Colonial Harem* by Malek Alloula and Melanie McAlister's *Epic Encounters*, for example, self-consciously further and complicate Edward Said's project of deconstructing gendered representations of "the Orient."¹⁹ However, art and fiction are also necessary to provide positive examples of representational praxes that transcend Orientalism. As the practice of veiling never escapes Western eyes, the transnational feminist syllabus should include *Veil: Veiling, Representations, and Contemporary Art*, an edited collection of thought-provoking artwork by Muslim women, and several important essays, which counter simplistic equations of the veil with oppression.²⁰ Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir *Persepolis* is a similarly nuanced text that does not give Western

colonialism a free pass, even though it powerfully narrates the tragic consequences of extremism in post-revolutionary Iran.²¹ The Turkish documentary, *The Play (Oyun)*, about a group of village women who decide to put on a play about their own lives, will also generate lively discussions in class without demonizing Muslim men or invoking nothing but pity for Muslim women.²²

Allowing the students to interpret, historicize, and critique all texts, including neo-con bestsellers, is perhaps the best strategy in countering "the other woman." Given the entrenched Orientalist modes of thinking, it is not surprising that complex and contextualized texts by transnational feminists have not yet reached the broad audiences of *The Caged Virgin* or *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. There is, however, no reason why they cannot do so. The texts suggested above are not necessarily more difficult or less striking than those our aunts cherish. Sure, many American women will continue to get giddy with self-righteousness upon reading *The Infidel*; our transnational feminist pedagogy will succeed in so far as we can turn that response itself into an object of inquiry.

NOTES

- 1 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister/Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984).
- 2 Chandra Mohanty "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, edited by Chandra Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
- 3 Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 4 Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
- 5 Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford University Press, 1987).
- 6 The seminar was a part of Yale University's interdisciplinary Women, Religion, and Globalization Project.
- 7 Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford University Press, 1987).
- 8 Cynthia Cockburn, "The Women's Movement: Boundary Crossing on Terrains of Conflict," in *Global Social Movements*, edited by Robin Cohen and Shirin M. Rai (London and New Brunswick, NJ: Athlone Press, 2000), 87.
- 9 Amrita Basu, ed, *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995). Robin Morgan ,ed. *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (New York: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1984).

- 10 Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice," *Wedge* 7.8 (Winter-Spring 1985): 120-30.
- 11 Katherine Viner, "Feminism as Imperialism," *The Guardian*, September 21, 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,796213,00.html> (May 15, 2008).
- 12 Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Need Saving? Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104.3 (2002): 783-790.
- 13 John Carlos Rowe, "Reading Reading Lolita in Tehran in Idaho," *American Quarterly* 59.2 (2007): 253-275. 14 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- 15 Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) and Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
- 16 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2004), Yesim Arat, *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy: Islamist Women in Turkish Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).
- 17 These works are too various to be named in this essay. Mideast Web provides a partial bibliography on women in the Middle East: <http://www.mideastweb.org/womenbib.htm> (reached April 13, 2009). The Safra Project features an extensive one on "Sexuality, Gender and Islam," http://www.safraproject.org/bibliography_sgib.htm (reached April 13, 2009).
- 18 Minoo Moallem, "Transnationalism, Feminism, and Fundamentalism." In *Women, Gender, and Religion: A Reader*, edited by Elizabeth A. Castelli (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 119-45.
- 19 Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (University of Minnesota Press, 1986), Melanie McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East, 1945-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
- 20 David A Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, ed. *Veil: Veiling, Representations, and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).
- 21 Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis I & II* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).
- 22 *The Play (Oyun)*, Dir. Pelin Esmer, Documentary, 2005. 70 min. 35mm. In Turkish with English subtitles.



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