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Within, Without: Dialogical Perspectives on Feminism and Islam

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Abstract

This paper offers an ontological and literary review of Muslim women's religious practices across the Muslim *ummah*, in considering the development of an epistemology of faith and feminism within the Islamic schema. Our aim is to explore the diverse constructions of autopoiesis in reference to feminism, faith and spirituality in relation to Islam as both a religious and a cultural phenomenon. To this end, global examples of faith-based practice are reviewed, where issues of dominant and minority cultures and values refer to how Muslim faith practices are enacted within the local context. The authors use a dyadic, auto-ethnographic methodology to explore their own personal, political and spiritual positioning as feminists from a Muslim, immigrant and secular British background. The significance of women's spiritual and feminist dimensions in the context of faith, nationhood and embodiment of ideological positions are analysed. Additionally, religious, cultural and geo-political implications of feminism and Islam are considered regarding identity, culture and tradition, and religious resurgence, together with forms of feminist resistance to religious doctrine. Finally, the search by women for spiritual authority and authenticity is discussed.

Keywords

Islam, Muslim, feminist, faith, auto-ethnography

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Introduction

In order to consider the diverse ways feminism is experienced and enacted in the Muslim world, this paper consults the ontologies of women's positions in contemporary Islam. It serves to contribute to the compelling debates on feminist analyses of the Abrahamic religions, with a specific focus on Islam as implicated in powerful, contradictory discourses equally enacted both within the faith and externally, relating to both female subservience and empowerment. Accordingly, these discourses are examined in the diverse statements of women's practices in the *ummah*, the community of believers. This is followed by a dialogic approach, grounded in auto-ethnography, from which to develop an epistemological self-reflexive discussion in reference to the themes revealed by the literature. Here we use our own personal and political positioning reflexively in order to explore our own understandings of spirituality and feminism, and to develop an epistemological understanding of the intersecting paths of faith and feminism for Muslim women. To this end the authors consider their own position as a British, Muslim feminist of migrant Pakistani heritage in dialogue with a British/European, White, non-Muslim feminist. Both authors have written widely on faith-based practices and they each have extensive experiences of living and working in different Muslim societies which serve to underpin and inform the debate. Accordingly, the authors pose and seek to address the following research aim: to scope and critically examine diverse female-centred discourses and social representations of women's quest for spiritual fulfilment within

Islam, drawing upon an individually situated, spiritual autopoiesis, which is informed by our own encounters and familiarity with culture and context.

An epistemology of feminism and faith

Maleiha Malik argues that Western feminists have positioned themselves in a masculinized and orientalized stance in viewing non-Western woman as enveloped in religion and tradition as opposed to committing themselves to autonomy and personal choice.¹ Implicit in this stance is a perception of hierarchy and associated value judgments in which non-Western women, such as those from Muslim nations, are deemed to have yet to progress from subjugation to patriarchal authority to the enlightened position of Western feminists.

Minoo Moallem considers the concept of 'Muslimwoman' from which to analyse patriarchy and imperialism.² Notwithstanding the deliberate abstraction and essentialization inherent in this overarching notion, Moallem raises important questions regarding the issue of who speaks on behalf of Muslimwoman and regarding the contestation between the patriarchal systems of an 'imperialist West' and Islamist nationalism over the terrain that is the 'Muslimwoman'.³ This icon, however, is counterpoised with that of the modern 'Westoxicated' woman, defiled by the material and moral corruption of the symbolic West.⁴ These ubiquitous and anonymous icons, particularly that of Muslimwoman, are unlikely to provide a nuanced account of the socio-historical context and specific circumstances of individuals and their communities to create a constructive and insightful autopoiesis.

In reference to the *othering* of non-Western women, Malik challenges 'First World' feminists by pointing out that claiming an elite position over other women does not enable such feminists to analyse their own condition in comparison to these 'others'.⁵ In response to this point, Lila Abu-Lughod has, in her turn, ruefully commented on her own desire to

¹ M. Malik, 'Feminism and its "Other": Female Autonomy In An Age of "Difference"' in *Cardozo Law Review* 30: 6 (2006), 2613-2628.

² M. Moallem, 'Muslim Women and the Politics of Representation' in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24: 1 (2008), 106-110.

³ Moallem, *ibid.*

⁴ L. Deeb, 'Piety Politics and the Role of a Transnational Feminist Analysis' in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (2009), 112-126.

⁵ Malik, *ibid.*, 2618.

find commonalities between the experiences of women.⁶ Moreover, the feminist movement has traditionally been based on questions concerning the inevitability of women's oppressed position within patriarchal systems regardless of differences between women, premises which are now jeopardized.⁷ Nonetheless, the critique levied against Western, White feminism has ensured recognition that the specificities of such oppression – and equally those of emancipatory strategies – primarily are, and must be, culturally based.

In reference to the creation of a conceptual discursive space, such as that formed by gendered iconography, the deconstruction of hegemonic discourses has been liberating in facilitating a gender-based analysis of textual and material phenomena in society.⁸ Additionally, the plurivocality of perspectives that postmodernism and feminism have embraced do not invalidate the epistemological enterprise for feminist scholarship, which typically has involved what Stanley and Wise referred to as the 'feminist consciousness'.⁹ This involves a subjective but shared understanding of the collective (albeit discretely distinctive) oppression of women, enabling the individual experiences of the oppressed to be appreciated and comprehended. However, in relation to the issue of faith, feminism and the revision of religious doctrine, some would attempt to apply the status of 'feminist' to those active in this area, whether female or male, such as the Shi'ite *Ayyotallah* Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah.¹⁰ It is additionally contested among Western feminists whether the inability to access the feminist consciousness, due to the ramifications of gender construction in patriarchal society, would invalidate male claims to feminism.

Alongside the subjective understanding of women's oppression, a parallel but distinct ideology of womanhood is expressed within Muslim

⁶ L. Abu-Lughod, 'Can there be a feminist ethnography?' in *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 5:1 (1990), 7-27.

⁷ S. Harding, 'The Method Question' in *Hypatia* 2:3 (1987), 19-35, Criticized in e. g. F. El Guindi, 'Gendered Resistance, Feminist Veiling, Islamic Feminism' in *The Ahfad Journal* 22: 1 (2005), 53-76; F. El Guindi, 'Gendered Resistance, Feminist Veiling, Islamic Feminism' in *The Ahfad Journal* 22: 1 (2005), 53-76.

⁸ C. Bacchi, 'Discourse, Discourse Everywhere: Subject "Agency" in Feminist Discourse Methodology' in *Nordic Journal of Women's Studies* 13:3 (2005), 198-209.

⁹ L. Stanley and S. Wise, *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology*, London/New York: Routledge 1993, 2-31.

¹⁰ S. Chamas, 'Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah: Muslim Cleric and Islamic Feminist: Muslim Cleric and Islamic Feminist' in *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*, 1:2 (2009), 246-257.

cultures and nations. Cultural, ethnic and national practices within these societies or local ummahs are underpinned by a common conceptual thread, which creates a distinct image of what it means to be a Muslim woman within the global and local Muslim community. This shared and essentialized understanding of Muslim women is then juxtaposed within East-West political, cultural and emancipatory discourses.

Here, the epistemological discussion is developed from an anthropologically based review of the ontological regional practices of Muslim women in terms of faith, identity and feminism. This forms the foundation for the development of a flexible, feminist-orientated methodology, conforming in this case to an auto-ethnographic methodology.¹¹ However, because our approach involves self-reflexive narratives from both authors, auto-ethnography becomes expanded into a fluid, dyadic process, analytically exploring the personal and political dimensions of faith and feminism, where 'selves' remains the subject of the study.¹² A process, moreover, where personal experiences are juxtaposed with the constraints and influences of the external world.¹³

Reflexivity in this auto-ethnographic account enables the reflective process to 'move back and forth between personal narratives, encompassing contexts, and social forms' to quote De Freitas and Paton, citing Ellis and Bochner.¹⁴ For the purposes of this paper the 'social forms' relate to the diversity of feminist practices, within the overarching schema of Islam, as enacted globally. This provides a rich backdrop against which to foreground the authors' reflexive examination of their own understanding and experiences of feminist practices in Muslim contexts.

Norman Denzin describes auto-ethnography as constituting an emancipatory analytical tool, because the radical reflexivity of this methodology offers a challenging counter to ideological and political discourses.¹⁵ Furthermore, Dori Grinenko Baker considers the use of auto-

¹¹ K. E. King, 'Method and Methodology in Feminist Research: What Is the Difference?' in *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 20 (1994), 19-22.

¹² C. Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, London: Routledge 1999; S. Sambrook, J. Stewart and C. Roberts, 'Doctoral Supervision... a View From Above, Below and the Middle!' in *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 32:1 (2008), 71-84.

¹³ R. Muncey, *Creating Autoethnographies*, Los Angeles: Sage 2010.

¹⁴ E. De Freitas and J. Paton, '(De)Facing the Self: Poststructural Disruptions of the Autoethnographic Text' in *Qualitative Inquiry* 15 (2008), 483-498: 483.

¹⁵ N. K. Denzin, 'Performing [Auto] Ethnography Politically' in *The Review of Education, Pedagogy & Cultural Studies* 25 (2005), 257-278.

ethnography to research feminism and religious education.¹⁶ Here Baker notes methodological strengths pertaining to the interrogation of authorial experiences and motivations of the framing and exploration of the subject. Thus, facilitating situational transparency and effecting change. The dyadic, auto-ethnographic methodology we employed considers authorial perspectives through contextualized conversation, in which both the personal and the political characteristics of each author are considered in relation to the themes of the paper. Difference and dissent are explored in the accounts, together with commonality and congruence of interpretation and vision.

As our accounts do not stand for those of all Muslim or non-Muslim feminists, we seek to avoid the appropriation of the narrative of others. Auto-ethnography provides a dialogical and discursive space to situate the self and to engage with discourses germane to the subject of faith and feminism. However, this is not to suggest that an overarching epistemology can emerge from such an enterprise, as we recognize the liminal nature of our own identities in relation to the vexed question of how to reconcile faith and spirituality with feminism, and vice versa. Any emerging epistemology therefore must be viewed as a tentative and fallible exercise, in which self-reflexivity provides a conduit to sift through the anthropological archives of collectivities of experiences, and to compare, contest, reconcile and position these alongside our personal, subjective ones.

A literary overview of the ontologies of feminism and Islam

Commensurate with the postmodernist trends towards plurivocality, we learn from Haideh Moghissi that a unified, coherent feminist philosophy does not exist in the Muslim world and that the label of 'feminist' is not widely used, despite the works of such notable Muslim feminists as Fatima Mernissi.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Muslim women are prominent in politics and social development issues across many Muslim nations, and so-called women's issues are, and have been, prevalent in the literature on the Muslim world since the nineteenth century.¹⁸

¹⁶ D. G. Baker, 'Future Homemaker and Feminist Awakenings: Autoethnography as a Method in Theological Education and Research' in *Religious Education*, 96:3 (2001), 395-407.

¹⁷ H. Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, London: Zed Books 1999, 130-145.

¹⁸ S. Ashencaen Crabtree, 'Maternal perceptions of care-giving children with developmental disabilities in the United Arab Emirates' in *Journal of Applied Research*

Increasingly, the participation of Muslim women in social development initiatives across the 'Muslim world' is being recognized as an essential, if often insufficiently tapped, human resource. The progress of Muslim women in public spheres in predominantly Muslim societies remains intimately connected to negotiated paths in Muslim schemas within national settings. Islam has also influenced indigenous gendered traditions, such as matriarchy in Senegal, which is said to have been eroded by the combined patriarchal forces of Islam and colonialism.¹⁹ This situation is comparable to that affecting the Minangkabau Muslims of Indonesia, where cultural tradition adhered to matrilinear customs but are contradicted by Islamic principles governing the hierarchical relations between the sexes.²⁰

In Senegal, Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam, is prevalent, but in its local manifestation it tends to relegate women to a status of religious 'disciples' rather than leaders.²¹ Self-advancement for women, in terms of social position and entrepreneurship, is most likely to take place through alliances with the more powerful religious Sufi brotherhood, using strategies that Codou Bop describes as a mixture of subversion and exploitation. Equally, in Peshawar, Pakistan, Shi'ite Muslim women are described as not resisting 'strict gender rules', but having adapted Islamic religious forms in sex-segregated group environments. In this way, by creating female validating rituals and messages they develop a level of mastery.²² Feminism, in deed if not in name, could be attributed to the responses of mothers of children with disabilities in the United Arab Emirates, where the mantle of blameless piety may be taken up by them,

in Intellectual Difficulties, 20:3 (2007), 247-255; Z. Mir-Hosseini, 'Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari'a in Post-Khomeini Iran' in M. Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam*, New York: New York University Press 1996, 285-319.

¹⁹ C. Bop, 'Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal' in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73:4 (2005), 1099-1119.

²⁰ E. Blackwood, 'Senior Women, Model Mothers, and Dutiful Wives: Managing Gender Contradictions in a Minangkabau Village' in A. Ong and M. G. Peletz (eds.), *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, Berkeley: University of California 1995, 125-18.

²¹ Bop, 'Roles and the Position of Women in Sufi Brotherhoods in Senegal', 1108.

²² M. E. Hegland, 'Shi'a Women's Rituals in Northwest Pakistan: The Shortcomings and Significance of Resistance' in *Anthropological Quarterly*, 76:3 (2003), 411-442.

‘as good Muslims’, in order to safeguard the status of themselves and their disabled child within the family.²³

Malaysia provides an interesting example of the crucial dichotomy between forms of Muslim ‘feminisms’. Here, the pressure group Sisters in Islam have focused on the need to provide alternative interpretations of the Qur’an, beyond those offered by supposedly fallible and bigoted male theologians, who have reduced the status of Muslim women to that of inferiors.²⁴ Such movements are congruent with Moghissi’s separation of ‘Islam as a belief and personal choice, and Islam as law, as state religion.’²⁵ Accordingly, for those who reject a masculinized *Shari’a* Muslim self-identity is viewed in its cultural and spiritual sense, as well as within a broader feminist ethos of greater equality between the sexes in the material (if not spiritual) world. The Sisters in Islam are one of several similar groups engaged in the attempt to revise sacred texts to incorporate the female voice across the Abrahamic mono-religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism.²⁶ These moves, however, have been viewed as potentially self-defeating if it is accepted that such texts are fundamentally anti-feminist. Yet both Davary and Harrison, citing the work of Amina Wadud-Muhsin, consider the distinction between the exclusion of women’s voices in the interpretation of the Qur’an and their inclusion within the message of the sacred text.²⁷ The significant point for Wadud-Muhsin lies in the concept of the ‘prior text’: the background and baggage of the individual interpreter, and the ‘mega-text’ of the ‘universal message’ of Islam.²⁸

In contrast to movements like the Sisters in Islam, Islamic resurgence in the form of ‘fundamentalism’, as it is viewed in the West, attracts many Muslim women in both the Middle East and Africa. For example, citing a study by Sondra Hale, Dunya Maumoon notes that in Sudan the highly conservative Islamist organization, the National Islamic

²³ S. Ashencaen Crabtree, ‘Culture, Gender and the Influence of Social Change Amongst Emirati Families in the United Arab Emirates’ in *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, XXXVIII: 4 (2007), 575-587.

²⁴ S. Ashencaen Crabtree, F. Husain, B. Spalek, *Islam & Social Work: Transforming Values into Practice*, Bristol: Policy Press 2008, 19-40.

²⁵ Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, 139.

²⁶ V. S. Harrison, ‘Modern Women, Traditional Abrahamic Religions and Interpreting Sacred Texts’ in *Feminist Theology*, 15:2 (2007), 146-159.

²⁷ B. Davary, ‘Muslim and Christian women, the Image of God and the Common Legacy of Patriarchy’ in *Pakistan Journal of Women’s Studies*, 15, 2 (2008), 1024-1256; Harrison, ‘Modern Women, Traditional Abrahamic Religions and Interpreting Sacred Texts.’

²⁸ Davary, ‘Muslim and Christian Women’, 70.

Front, has received 'enthusiastic mass support' from Sudanese women.²⁹ Such phenomena that seemingly undermine attempts to liberate women from oppression represent a puzzling and even disturbing fact to many Western feminists. Yet, as Haleh Afshar argues, this is reframed as Islamic 'revivalism' and symbolizes a return to a purer and 'golden age' of Islam – a vision that is perceived as inherently empowering to women.³⁰ This is especially the case as the Prophet Mohammed is credited with having raised the status of females in Arab society from an abject position. Western feminism, claims Afshar, has been spurned by these women as being associated with foreign colonialism, as well as offering a spurious liberation to women.

The embodiment of Muslim values within both Muslim and non-Muslim societies is manifested in the use of Islamic dress (the *hijab*) as symbolic of an authenticized religio-cultural expression.³¹ Myra Macdonald argues that the issue of the hijab, and particularly the headscarf and veil, has 'hijacked and belittled' more important debates surrounding women and Islam.³² She traces this Western obsession within an aggressive colonial discourse, where subject Muslim nations were associated with the orientalized and veiled female form conquered by a superior and masculinized colonial paradigm. Equally Tayyab Basharat draws the historical distinctions between, on the one hand, the overt signal of a Muslim woman's right to inviolability through the wearing of the loose head and body drapery of the hijab, and, on the other, the availability to sexual exploitation of uncovered slave girls (carrying some inevitable resonances in relation to the icon of the immoral Westoxic woman).³³

Mernissi, however, firmly situates the discussion of the *hijab*, as a quintessential signifier of social representation of Muslim womanhood, within socio-historical and linguistic contexts, setting out the varied meanings of the word and explaining its use during the life of Muhammad,

²⁹ D. Maumoon, 'Islamism and gender activism: Muslim women's quest for autonomy' in *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 19:2 (1999), 269-283.

³⁰ H. Afshar, 'Islam and Feminism: An Analysis of Political Strategies,' in M. Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam*, New York: New York University Press 1996, 197-216; Ashencaen Crabtree, Husain and Spalek. *Islam and Social Work*.

³¹ Maumoon, 'Islamism and gender activism.'

³² M. Macdonald, 'Muslim women and the veil' in *Feminist Media Studies*, 6:1 (2006), 123.

³³ T. Basharat, 'Hijab as an Instrument of Taking Women Off the Sex Economy' in *Guidance & Counseling*, 21:4 (2006): 201-209.

the Prophet of Islam.³⁴ She contends that a word that is intrinsically related to delimiting areas and setting boundaries between distinct spaces such as the profane and the sacred, and the public and the private, has been appropriated and reduced to a primary symbol of what it means to be a woman of faith, a Muslim woman.

The issue of the *hijab* and separately the veil indicates that Islamic female dress seems to have also become the primary symbol for difference and dissent between Muslim and Western, non-Muslim feminists, judging from the amount of space devoted to the subject. Yet clearly by the same token this is an issue that does preoccupy feminists and has become, post 9/11, the most visible, embodied sign of cultural and spiritual distance from the hegemonic discourse of dominant Western society. Jasmin Zine asserts that the *hijab* clad Muslim woman's body has been appropriated as a fearsome image of 'global terrorism', fanaticism and sexist oppression.³⁵ In her study of Turkish women residing in Germany, Rita Chin comments on the perceived 'unbridgeable chasm' between the cultural, gendered values of German feminist discourses and the threatening, embodied alien values of these othered Muslim women.³⁶

The 'owning' of the *hijab* by many Muslim women, in terms of its colloquial and Islamic implications, to paraphrase Basharat, stands in opposition to the objectification and exploitation of Western female sexuality, and creates complex social representations in terms of gender and identity politics.³⁷ By contrast, it is argued by Basharat that the practice of wearing the *hijab* conspicuously removes the wearer from the 'sex economy', enabling her to assert her personhood but not that of projected sexualized femaleness, as the assumed essential characteristic of the non-Muslim female. Zine, however, points out that donning the *hijab* is not necessarily a religious mandate for all Muslim women, and that it may be worn, as in her own case, as a form of identity, politically as well as religious and culturally.

³⁴ F. Mernissi *A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Reading: Berkshire Addison Wesley Publishing Company 1992.

³⁵ J. Zine, 'Creating a Critical Faith-Centered Space for Antiracist Feminism' in *Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2:2 (2004), 167-187.

³⁶ R. Chin, 'Turkish Women, West German Feminists, and the Gendered Discourse on Muslim Cultural Difference' in *Public Culture* 22:3 (2010), 557-581.

³⁷ Basharat, 'Hijab as an Instrument of Taking Women Off the Sex Economy'; S. Moscovici, 'Notes Towards a Description of Social Representations' in *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18 (1988), 211-250.

In Southeast Asia, studies of Javanese women record how the donning of the veil acts as a strategy of self-transformation in demonstrating women's outward commitment to Islam.³⁸ In the Indonesian context, therefore the veil symbolizes a means towards the remaking of the social order in the closer image of Islam. At the same time, the wearing of the veil in Malaysia is interpreted as a consciously employed means of empowerment, where Muslim women are enabled to participate in the advantageous, upwardly mobile professional milieu, without challenging the patriarchal social order or risking insult to their person.³⁹ The use of Islamic dress as a political statement is therefore used to convey a number of important socio-cultural theistic messages, as Afshar conveys in viewing it as 'the public face of their revivalist position'.⁴⁰

Regardless of the enforced usage of the veil in Iran and Afghanistan, for example, it is clear that the consenting self-habituating of concealing Islamic dress, whether this involves a face veil or not, represents an issue for feminism. The stereotypic portrayal of Muslim women in the Middle East as that of 'veiled, secluded, ever-passive ... mute, immobile and obedient creatures', has rankled with Muslim feminists, particularly when this notion has been one promulgated by Western, non-Muslim feminists.⁴¹ Despite the multiple meanings attached to the adoption of the *hijab*, and in particular the veil, the cloistering and segregatory practice implied by concealing Islamic dress nonetheless conflicts with the personal values of many Western feminists. This was brought into the foreground by the media images, disturbing to a majority British audience, of the Royal Navy Able Seaman, Faye Turney, being humiliated by being forced to wear female dress during her captivity by the Iranian Public Republican Guards in 2007.

On the other hand, within Europe the enforcement of the no-*hijab* rule in universities in Turkey, as a means to maintain a secular education space, has meant that young Turkish *hijabi* women who do not want to remove their *hijab* may find themselves excluded from Turkish higher educational institutions. This type of 'reverse oppression' has reportedly

³⁸ A. Mansson McGinty, *Becoming Muslim*, Palgrave MacMillan: New York 2006.

³⁹ A. Ong, 'State Versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies, and the Body Politic in Malaysia' in A. Ong and M. G. Peletz (eds.), *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, Berkeley: University of California 1995, 159-194.

⁴⁰ H. Afshar, R. Aitken and M. Franks, 'Feminisms, Islamophobia and Identities' in *Political Studies*, 53 (2005), 262-283.

⁴¹ Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, 138.

led to some Turkish women, with financial means, to pursue their tertiary studies in the UK, where they can freely wear a *hijab*.

In turn, other studies note some interesting developments taking place among British Muslim women, particularly the veiled *mohajabeh*, whose compliance with conservative Islamist activists and their value systems is assumed by patriarchal Islamist groups.⁴² The significance of this lies in how outward displays of pious conformity empower these Muslim women to be able to maintain personal autonomy and control over their futures on terms more closely associated with the values of the dominant British culture. However, such women may find their own values reflected more closely in moderate, progressive Islamist views, while young British Muslim women, particularly from South Asian heritages, successfully embrace and adapt personally interpreted Islamic principles to their own ends.

The head cover, which has been worn by young women, particularly in the West, is very much the product of the late twentieth century. It is a reconstructed emblem that allows them to combine jeans and jackets and the latest style in kitten heel shoes with the new tradition of the *hijab*.⁴³

The ingenuity of the contemporary Islamic fashion statement among Western Muslim youth apart, the adoption of the badge of piety in terms of the head scarf is coupled by a commitment to and knowledge of the Muslim faith. The paradox is that these South Asian/British young women consequently stand in a stronger position to negotiate the traditional arranged marriages that continue to be highly prevalent in minority ethnic communities and are culturally accepted.⁴⁴ This is also reflected in the use of the headscarf among European, Muslim Moroccan schoolgirls in Amsterdam, which enables them to negotiate the insider/outsider social and ideological spaces of minority/majority belief systems.⁴⁵ The insider/outsider dichotomy is replayed in a distinct way particularly within more orthodox Muslim communities, where those women who wear a *hijab*, and are therefore 'on the inside', are more likely to be considered devout and with a deeper faith than the non-*hijabi* 'outsiders' – with potentially 'weaker' faith.

Nevertheless, the significance and meanings associated with Islamic dress, together with the issue of gender roles, is one that is not easily

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Afshar et al., 'Feminisms, Islamophobia and Identities', 278.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ E. Bartels, 'Wearing a headscarf is my personal choice' (Jasmina, 16 years)' in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 16:1 (2005), 15-28.

avoided by feminists, Muslim or otherwise. It is one that is therefore discussed from our own personal, cultural and political locations in the following sections of this paper, along with the Islamic framing of the issue of equality between the sexes in the sacred and the tangible world.

Auto-ethnographic Reflections: Quest for a Spiritual Autopoiesis

Identity and social representation

Fatima Husain: As a Muslim woman of South Asian origin living in the West, who I am and what I represent is an ever present consideration. A constant irritant is when I am asked, 'Where are you from?', and the response, 'here', is not sufficient or satisfactory. This type of interchange signifies the otherness of colour: I am not White so I must be from somewhere else. Where that somewhere else is, is unclear in my mind. I was born in Pakistan, a *Mohajir* (refugee/migrant), the 'ethnic' label given to all Pakistanis whose forebears migrated to the newly created nation of Pakistan after 1947. I left Pakistan at the age of six moving from country to country but travelling with a Pakistani passport until 2002. Other than England (nearly 15 years), the longest I have lived in any other country is eight years, in the USA. But in my heart, though without any legal right of abode or claim to the nationality, I feel quite Canadian, where I lived four years. My children are half-Danish but I feel no connection to Denmark (two years). My links to Pakistan are tenuous; my last visit to the country was in 1999, but I duly tick the 'British Pakistani' box on all ethnic monitoring forms. The common threads weaving together the layers of ethnicity, nationality, and migrant status are my colour, my gender and my religion, each problematic in its own right.

Sociologists such as Modood have discussed ethnic and faith identities as being fluid and situational, with individuals exercising some level of freedom to decide what aspects of their identity they more strongly express in diverging situations.⁴⁶ However, in practice, visual identifiers such as colour and clothing remain the most significant, because self-identification does not take place in a vacuum of individualized

⁴⁶ T. Modood, 'Ethnicity and Intergenerational Identities and Adaptations in Britain: The Socio-Political Context' in M. Rutter and M. Tienda (eds.), *Ethnicity and Causal Mechanisms*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, 281-300.

existence but is responsive to socio-political processes and to the essentialist and reductive gaze of the other.

Within the context of minority ethnic and minority faith communities, the added aspect of gender reveals multiple layers that influence situational identities. Even though some aspects of identity might be situational and may have transformative value, others, such as gender or skin colour, are in most cases fixed and cannot be hidden. As I ponder the different aspects of my identity and what each might mean, the thought at the back of my mind is whether a White middle-class English woman subjects herself to the same level and frequency of questioning about her own situational identity.

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree: In response to Fatima I would say that those many years I spent as a non-Muslim in Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates have invited me to reflect more closely on my own positionality within those societies, and later upon returning to Britain. For me, the heterogeneity contained within the pared down category of 'White, British woman' is so wide and diverse that no easy assumptions about personal identity can be made. My own mixed ancestry and background does not lend itself without difficulty to any ready identity, particularly as globalization and devolution processes have divided Britain into the so-called 'four countries' of the UK, which has further compromised my chosen identity. Instead, my identity is one that is continually negotiated and mediated in my own interpersonal relations and changing political and personal concerns. The liminal states I experience are therefore in this sense not unique: we are all involved in similar shifts and transitions, whether we belong to minority or majority groups in society.

Fatima Husain: The other ever present question is, if as a woman my situation is always that of a 'minoritized' citizen. Phoenix and Husain, in their research on identity and ethnicity, prefer to write about minoritized communities, that is, communities or individuals that are a minority because of their lack of power in society.⁴⁷ As minoritized individuals, with little power to define themselves, women have throughout our history been used as symbols – symbol of the rise and fall of nations, the downfall of man, the nurturer, and so forth. Nowhere is the symbol of women as keepers and protectors of values more pertinent than in the intertwining of

⁴⁷ A. Phoenix and F. Husain 'Parenting and Ethnicity: A review paper' in Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2008, 1-57.

gender and religion.⁴⁸ This is exemplified within the context of many contemporary Muslim communities as they strive to reconstruct an 'authentic' *ummah*.

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree: As a feminist scholar I remain open to Muslim feminist interpretations of their own condition. Like Fatima, I too have struggled with the notion of equality between the sexes in the Islamic schema, where if Muslim souls are of equal value, the contradiction is that this does not necessarily have to translate into social practices in the material world, much as is the case in traditional Christian, patriarchal societies.⁴⁹ On the face of it at least, however, the Islamic equality of souls appears to represent a small consolation to women subjugated to apparently oppressive practices, such as *purdah* (the public seclusion of women from non-related men). This is especially so when one learns that it is likely to be more rigorously practised in the Northern English town of Bradford than in Bangladesh.⁵⁰ Because *purdah* must necessarily limit women's participation in the public and civic sphere and reinforces their dependency upon male relatives, it is very hard to see this as in any sense liberating to women. In all fairness, however, there are few Muslim feminist arguments put forward in support of *purdah*. This, on the other hand, is not the case in relation to the veil, where it has been argued to be empowering. In so doing, it probably represents the most visceral challenge to any quest to identify and oppose global sexist oppression by collectivities of women.

Fatima Husain: The power to construct meaning and impose it on the 'Other', whether that other is defined by gender, race, sexuality or class, is the basis on which most social, religious and political systems are maintained. The 'Other' is defined and objectified, becoming a symbol on which rests the continuity of both social and religious structures. The most powerful symbol of such systems is the 'majority other', women, who are minoritized and imbued with essentialist meaning. In no other religion are

⁴⁸ A. Basu, 'Appropriating Gender' in P. Jeffrey and A. Basu (eds.), *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, New York: Routledge 2006, 3-14

⁴⁹ F. Mernissi, *Scheherezade Goes West*, New York: Washington Square Press 2001.

⁵⁰ R. Mohammad, 'Negotiating Spaces of the Home, the Education System and the Labour Market' in G-W Falah and C. Nagel (eds.), *Geographies of Muslim Women*, New York/London: The Guilford Press 2005, 178-202.

women as potent a symbol as they are in contemporary representations of Islam, with Western objectification complicit in maintaining Muslim women as the symbol of otherness. The scrutiny of the space occupied by such women, as well as the clothes they wear, all contribute to creating an image on the one hand of the 'strange other' within (Western society) and on the other hand of the 'protector of values' – symbols to be defined, controlled, fought over and appropriated.

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree: If ethnicity is not perceived by the Anglo-Saxon majority to apply to them but only to others, living as a 'minoritized' person in another culture is enlightening. Unfortunately, where sexist stereotypes are associated with the notion of White, Western woman this also serves to underline the oppression inherent in that category. If the bodies of Muslim women are symbolized as terrains of ideological contention between the Muslim world and the secular Imperialist West, then so too, I would argue, are those of White women, who are in turn viewed as embodying the flaws and weaknesses of a degenerate and diminishing power, illustrative of the stigmatizing notion of the 'Westoxicated' woman. My point here is to assert that, despite the demolition of complacent notions of sisterhood by First World women, these notions can form important areas of commonality and solidarity between feminists across cultural and faith divides, and need to be recognized and openly accommodated, as Lila Abu-Lughod has argued.⁵¹

Fatima Husain: My musings about who I am, what I believe, what I reject as patriarchal imposition, how I express that belief, and how I aim to help my children understand this complexity, were dramatically interrupted this year by my ten-year-old daughter during Ramadan, 1430 (the Islamic calendar). One evening my daughter wrapped one of my scarves over her head in the manner of a *hijab* and said, 'Mum, I want to be a proper Muslim and go to the mosque'. Recovering from my initial shock, I realized that it is not just Islam that is imposing specific notions of how Muslim women should clothe themselves to be 'proper Muslims', but also how wider society is internalizing and promoting this. My daughter attends the local primary school where there are female Muslim teachers who do not wear a *hijab*, and while some of the Muslim mothers I see in the playground wear a *hijab*, none of the girls do so. I wondered where this

⁵¹ Abu-Lughod, 'Can there be a feminist ethnography?'

idea came from, but my daughter could not explain why she thought as she did about what it means to be a 'proper' Muslim.

My conclusion for the moment is that perhaps my daughter is seeking a sense of community, something that I have not been able to give her as I walk that fine line myself as a woman, an immigrant and a Muslim. Her situation as a child of a mixed race and interfaith relationship makes her situation highly complex and extremely vulnerable.

We do not go to a mosque to pray, and regular prayers in my home take place only when my parents visit. I have not encouraged religious belonging, but I understand that Islam is the religion she has been most exposed to. I wonder if she is starting to internalize (through some false sense or desire to 'belong') the representations of Muslims and Islam that are presented during religious education classes, which are representations often promoted by increasingly dominant orthodox trends and readily accepted by British social, political and educational structures as the normative social representation of Muslim women and girls.⁵²

I also recognize the insidious social conditioning taking place where both orthodox Islamic interpretations and Western societies continue to exploit women and their clothing as symbols in order to promote a hegemonic ideal, be that to promote an ideal Muslim or an ideal citizen in a 'secular democracy'.

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree: I understand that modesty and propriety in all matters relating to contact between the sexes is very important in the Islamic framework and applies to both men and women. Accordingly, revealing dress for both sexes is prohibited. Nonetheless the greater onus for bodily concealment is placed upon women. One major justification put forward for this is that Muslims regard women's sexuality as dynamic and powerful and therefore in need of overt curbing strategies to prevent social discord. By contrast, the approved model of female sexuality in the Christian framework has historically been a passive and inert one that is subject to the inherent controls of the 'castrated state'.⁵³ Regardless of the assumed sexual liberation of young women in the West, and the increasing and abhorrent commercialized sexualization of our pre- and pubescent girls, subversion of traditional, gendered sexual mores still carries demeaning and stigmatizing approbation and repercussions in Western society.

⁵² Moscovici, 'Notes Towards a Description of Social Representations'

⁵³ F. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, Cambridge, Mass: Schenkman Publishing Company 1975.

Although arguably the Islamic conceptualization of women's sexuality seems more appealing than the Christian one according to Mernissi's analysis, both remain subject to infantilizing, repressive social mores that do little to enhance women's identity as being both sexual and morally responsible. Personally, I found the social disapproval and indeed often incomprehension of platonic friendships between men and women in certain Muslim societies difficult to deal with and indeed repugnant. The segregation of men and women in many Muslim societies, beyond that of permitted kinship networks, saturates all other relationships between the sexes with the taint of prominent sexual consciousness. Enveloping robes and the veil, in consequence, become an overt symbolic and physical barrier that conspicuously signals to these social constructions of gender relationships in such societies that might in others be viewed as redundant and even as offensive to the moral and spiritual sensibilities of adults. Here I would add that it is worth recalling the ancient Greek sources that have watered the roots of the Abrahamic religions. These sources sought to distinguish between the forms of love known to imperfect humans in terms of *eros*, *philia* and *agape* – the deep, generous and selfless (and in the case of *philia*, unsexual) love between people, regardless of gender.

Gender and Religion

Fatima Husain: Understanding my own identity, what it means to be Muslim and more importantly what it means to be a Muslim woman living in a supposedly secular society, requires a disentangling of the complex web that constitutes my identity. How does my being a woman fit in with contemporary yet traditional trends within Muslim communities? Where is my faith and spirituality within the religious whole? Furthermore, does cutting through the intertwined layers of society, community, culture, nationality (nationalities) and religion reveal a spiritual space where a women's relationship with a supreme being, the divine, is free of socio-cultural impositions? The key principles of Islam, after all, centre on an individual's relationship to a supreme being, empathy with the poor and oppressed and more generally in becoming a 'better' human being. As a woman, this distilled essence is very appealing; I can relate to it, I believe in a supreme being, I have faith. This, according to my interpretation, is Islam at its purest. It all comes unstuck when interpretations are imposed and surrounding rituals are emphasized – rituals and practices that are considered crucial to developing a relationship to a supreme being.

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree: The feminist forms I was influenced by in England were informed by White feminists on both sides of the Atlantic, and grounded in political and pragmatic concerns relating to the sexist structure of society, the battle for equality in the workplace and the struggle for personal autonomy. The tone, particularly in England, was secular and if modes of spirituality were being explored by women seeking the roots of metaphysical female power, especially in terms of the so-called New Age philosophies, Wicca and indeed feminist theology, then organized religion by contrast seemed as firmly entrenched in patriarchal misogyny as ever, and consequently unable to inform the feminist perspective to any degree. It seemed that the choice before feminists was limited to accepting religious dogma, however objectionable to women, or to reject organized religion. The idea of reclaiming and transforming these religious forms as a legitimately subversive feminist path seemed unlikely. And yet, this is the route that many Muslim feminists have chosen, rather than opt for apostasy.

Fatima Husain: Separating the spirituality within Islam from the religious institutions that define and proscribe meaning and interpret the spiritual is critical to my understanding of spirituality and faith as a woman. I tread a difficult path in questioning the deeply embedded assumptions of my cultural and religious upbringing which is constructed on an established patriarchal hierarchy. The interconnected layers position, silence and contain women while making them believe that what has been imposed on them is the 'right way' and often the 'only way'. The 'analytical lens of feminism' has helped me peel away the layers of female objectification that are at the root of social and religious institutions.⁵⁴ I have often heard people emphasize that women and men are spiritually equal in Islam. I ask why that 'equality' is hidden away beneath layers of socially defined notions of what a believing woman should be and how a believing woman should behave.

Another persistent question focuses on the interpretation of religious texts. Mohammed Arkoun's analysis aptly discusses who within the Muslim context has had the power to define and control meaning,

⁵⁴ D. I. Riddle 'What is Feminist Spirituality, and Why Should We Care?' paper given at the *Centre for Women and Gender Studies*, University of British Columbia, 23 January 2008. Accessed on 5 November 2009:

<http://www.servicegrowth.net/documents/What%20Is%20Feminist%20Spirituality.net.pdf>

exploring the reasons why particular interpretations were accepted in creating a homogenous orthodoxy.⁵⁵

I have managed to slowly question layer upon layer of culturally constructed notions of women's position in Islam – rejecting preconceived ideas of who represents a 'believing' woman and analysed why that was. I feel that I walk a fine line between faith and practice – separating the wheat from the chaff – to seek out the essential nature of Islam. And to appropriate a much maligned notion: to seek out Islam's true fundamentals. In my household, comprising myself and my daughter and son, Islam is 'practised' as a personal faith, a faith that centres on striving to be a good person and seeking the supreme being in one's own heart and nurturing that relationship. This fits well with my desire to bring my children up to believe that all faiths in their essence are the same, and that rules and rituals are imposed by those in power to control and enforce compliance of selected interpretations. My personal journey to scrutinize and question religious rituals and practices in order to find the spiritual essence of Islam is now taken over by the huge task of actively assisting my children to walk their own fine line between faith and practice and to ensure that their vulnerability and confusion is not exploited.

Sara Ashencaen Crabtree: Amen to that for the sake of all our children.

Fatima Husain: But I also know that irrespective of what I teach my children and how open and non-judgemental they become, the 'objectifying other' – Muslim or Western, or Muslim and Western in collusion with each other – will be actively judging, labelling, constraining and reducing their 'whole' to limited, essentialist characteristics and qualities.

An epistemology of faith and feminism in Islam

In a postcolonial landscape shaped by the pervasive and often unwelcome influences of globalization that is also fractured by separatist and nationalist political agendas, the bona fide quest for spirituality devoid of sexist connotations may become a fraught enterprise, as our reflexive accounts convey. This is particularly the case where in many Muslim societies the reverberations of international conflict have been directly felt,

⁵⁵ M. Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common questions, uncommon answers*, Boulder, Co.: Westview Press 1994.

through warfare in the Middle East or via global and localized terrorism. In this vein, it is worth reminding ourselves that the West is viewed as an aggressor for the most part, or at least heavily implicated in many of these cataclysmic turmoils. It is therefore unsurprising that inflammatory articulations reworking the notion of a crusade have been heard on both sides, where the West has been essentialized as the Christian 'Other', persistently pitched against the Islamic *ummah*. Additionally, as we have learned, women's images, both Muslim and to some extent Western, have come to symbolize this Manichean division of righteousness and damnation. This is explored through the situational dynamics of the politicized self, where the discursive process, as epitomized within this dialogic, auto-ethnographic paper, seeks to draw out these discourses as ontological realities continually confronting women. Against this combustible backdrop, the search by Muslim feminists for religious values that reflect a personal and spiritual integrity, and one that is not fenced in by patriarchal messages, is both problematic and potentially dangerous. For Muslim women who wish to practise Islam beyond the interpretations of *Shari'a*, secular feminism is liable to be read as an attack upon religion, tradition, culture and indeed national interests.⁵⁶ However, what becomes apparent is that the search for spiritual authenticity, uncontaminated by masculinist agendas, requires Muslim women to negotiate highly contested theological-political terrain, where the symbolization of Muslim womanhood is exploited in the gendering of politics across the Islamic *ummah*.

This situation remains as true for Muslim women living in Muslim societies as for those who reside among non-Muslim majority populations, since similar forms of oppression are experienced by women across the Abrahamic communities. However, in reinforcing an attempted demand for the submission of Muslim girls and women to embrace orthodox practices, these conservative discourses promote a strong minority message of rejection of dominant 'Western' values, while seeking to ensure the compliance of women in upholding patriarchal, conservative values.

In conclusion, the additional factors of faith diversity contribute to the emergence of multiple forums representing the interests of Muslim women. The Islamic *ummah* is furthermore a heterogeneous collectivity, welded together by adherence to an overarching Islamic framework, but distinguished by cultural, theological and political differences. The feminist

⁵⁶ R. Foley, 'Muslim Women's Challenges to Islamic law' in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 6:1 (2004), 53-84.

forms that are emerging will struggle to disentangle women's focused agendas from the wider socio-political context that underwrites Islamic identities as they are manifested locally. Such a projected outcome may be premature or perhaps quite an inappropriate expectation with respect to indigenized women's action groups premised on particular faith-based morphologies. Nonetheless, these struggles will provide a rich source of knowledge and inspiration for the development of a feminist theory seeking to shrug off the ethnocentric constraints of First World preoccupations to create a more nuanced, female-centred hermeneutics. An epistemology of Islam and feminism therefore cannot be a definitive outcome but must remain open to the vectors of political and cultural change across the *ummah*. This community of believers are in turn engaged with the vexing question of what it is to be a Muslim in the face of geo-political upheavals and of, for many, alien cultural values. Perhaps only in the second instance can the issue of what form Muslim feminism should take be addressed; a feminism which is congruent with fundamental Islamic principles upholding the welfare of the whole and the equality of Muslim women and men.