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Networking for power and change: Muslim women activism and the transformation of Muslim public sphere

Riham Ashraf Bahi
Northeastern University

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NETWORKING FOR POWER AND CHANGE: MUSLIM WOMEN ACTIVISM AND
THE TRANSFORMATION OF MUSLIM PUBLIC SPHERE

A dissertation presented

by

Riham Ashraf Bahi

to

The Department of Political Science

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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in the field of

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Boston, Massachusetts
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

At the dawn of the 21st century, a “critical mass” of educated, enlightened, and empowered Muslim women have emerged around the world. Their fundamental questions about Islam and women may help in transforming Islamic laws and bringing about modern, egalitarian Muslim societies. In this research, I argue that Muslim women scholar-activists are playing a key role in the reinterpretation of their religion and the modernization of their societies.

This study probes and explores a complex, evolving, transnational Muslim dialogue about gender equality, in which the underlying concern is about empowering Muslim women to claim the public sphere as their medium of struggle for justice and inclusion. The study argues that this emerging public sphere projects attributes of civility, engagement, pluralism and voluntary participation. Muslim women activism redefines the public role of religion in motivating people to engage in what, in democratic theory, is referred to as the “politics of presence”, as distinct from the “politics of representation”. Their critical discourse demonstrates that Islam is not isolated from the more general endeavors searching for new mechanisms for democratic presence.

To provide insights into the significance of the “new” form of Muslim dialogic engagement and activism, the study advocates the need to broaden our political imagination to incorporate religious perspectives as well as alternative (discursive) forms and spaces of politics that were previously overlooked because they did not fit a predetermined, Westphalian notion of the ‘political’.

This dissertation concludes that in order to counter the dialectical dynamics of hegemony and extremism that define and regulate the rhetoric of Muslim women's liberation, Muslim women scholar-activists are engaged in new transnational discursive practices and spaces. Muslim women are engaged in redefining Islam as well as creating a post-statist, post-hegemonic, post-national, and transnational or "translocal" public space. Not only Muslim women are redefining the normative tenets of Islam, but they are redefining the normative content of a global civil society and a peaceful global ethos as well.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ontology lies at the beginning of any inquiry. We cannot define a problem in global politics without presupposing a certain basic structure consisting of the significant kinds of entities involved and the form of significant relationship among them (Cox 1992:132).

There is a gathering critique of the Westphalian interstate order, as well as the nation-state from which it is built, as suitable grounds to imagine a truly civil international society. There is also a search for new forms and spaces of politics in a post-hegemonic, post-Westphalian order. My research makes the case for envisaging new forms and spaces of the political community, in which higher levels of universality and difference can be realized, thus transcending the limitation of the Westphalian era (Linklater 1998:16). My dissertation is also a search for the prospect of a post-hegemonic order that “derives its normative content in a search for common ground among constituent traditions of civilizations” (Cox 1992:141). I use “hegemonic” to mean “a structure of values and understandings about the nature of order that permeates a whole system of states and non-states entities. In a hegemonic order these values and understandings are relatively stable and unquestionable..... The hegemonic order derives its universals from a dominant society, itself a product of a dominant civilization (Cox 1992:140-141). Hegemony and domination are believed to be “secreted within moral and political universalism” (Linklater 1998:47). Hegemony is established through “the interplay

between the construction of the Western identity and the representation of non-Western societies” (Linklater 1998:47). The West employs the negative representation of non-Western people and societies in order to “construct its own identity as the highest civilization and to legitimate its project of global domination”¹ (Linklater 1998: 48).

On the one hand, scholars argue that globalization creates new forms of hegemonic power that threaten cultural differences. The homogenizing tendencies of globalization; that is the West’s efforts to universalize its conception of politics and society, fuel the politics of identity and community (Linklater 1998: 32). This argument acquired new relevance with the global resurgence of religion, which is often described as a “revolt against the West”.

On the other hand, present developments and trends strongly suggest that globalization and fragmentation “will continue to frustrate these homogenizing tendencies” (Linklater 1998: 43). Globalization facilitates the creation of new communities with the aim of creating universal norms and establishing the principle of respect for cultural differences and social variety².

Theoretically, Critical international theory has been centrally concerned with the prospects for and the character of new forms and spaces of politics that transcend Westphalian limitations. Critical international theory supports “the development of wider communities of discourse which make new articulations of universality and particularity possible” (Linklater 1998: 49).

¹ See my analysis of Samuel Huntington’s the “west versus the rest” formulation (page 7).

² I rely on Andrew Linklater’s work as the theoretical support for my discussion of the emerging Muslim discursive/dialogic community and its implications for local and global politics.

The Third Debate: Critical Theory and Social Constructivism

During the late 1980s and early 1990s the debate between positivists and post-positivists became the dominant debate in international relations theory and has been described as constituting the Third “Great Debate” (Lapid 1989). Scholars of the Third Debate have been concerned with the weakness of the Positivist analysis. In the contemporary era of global transformations we are faced with new sets of questions and problems that the embedded structures of international relations are unable to account for. Robert Cox argues that positivism “is less well adapted to inquire into complex and comprehensive change” (Cox 1992:133). The dominant analytical construct of realism and neo-realism is inadequate to confront the challenges of global politics today.

Critical international theory has been challenging and criticizing the dominance of neo-realism in mainstream international relations. Prominent among this criticism is the claim that the dominant nation-state system is the main source of resistance to the restructuring of international relations (Cox 1981). Equally important, creative theoretical and political efforts to create alternative political arrangements have been systematically discounted or ignored (Linklater 1998:21). This limited imagination of international relations is afforded through the systemic exclusion and suppression of difference (Linklater 1998).

In addition, constructivism makes a vital contribution by offering crucial insights into the “socially constructed” nature of the human world, and human knowledge of that world. Constructivism has employed interpretive methodologies in order to engage in much needed analyses of the normative content of international politics and the

constitutive functions of norms in world politics. The greatest contribution of constructivism appears to come from the strength of its socio-historical explanations of “how social and political norms emerge, both domestically and internationally, and how these norms affect the actions of governments and individuals” (Price and Reus-Smit 1998:287).

Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit argue that the dialogic engagement between constructivism and critical international theory enables critical theorists to mount a more powerful challenge to positivist theories (Price and Reus-Smit 1998:259). This critical possibility is exemplified in the normative approach outlined by Andrew Linklater. Linklater’s investigation into the problem of community can not be undertaken without the type of research provided by constructivism. Constructivism contributes empirically viable interpretations of practices of inclusion and exclusion, and the dynamics of how these change over time. This approach is central to realizing the “critical” goal of “emancipation”, especially if it is understood as the inclusion in moral community³.

Focusing on the question of community in its normative content, Linklater argues that universalism and fragmentation, resulting from contemporary global forces, offer an unprecedented opportunity to transform the international order to be “more universalistic, less unequal and more sensitive to cultural differences” (Linklater 1998:7). In short, changes in the modes of social and political interaction, usually studied under the rubric of globalization, are forcing us to rethink categories of politics and community.

³ For a detailed analysis of the vital contribution of constructivism to the development critical international theory, see Richard Price and Christian Reus-Smit.1998. “Dangerous Liaisons? Critical International Relations Theory and Constructivism” *European Journal of International Relations* 4 (3): 259-294.

The social processes of “imagining the community” have important consequences for envisioning alternative spaces and forms of the politics. Recognizing with Benedict Anderson that the nation is an “imagined community”, it is important to note that the critical outcome of this insight is that this imagination “will have to carry us beyond the nation” (Appadurai 1996: 337). Moreover, as Peter Mandaville argues, the hegemony of a particular configuration of state and society is being challenged by a variety of transformative forces, most important among them is the emergence of new forms of public spaces whose boundaries do not conform to those of the territorial nation-state. These spaces are translocal in the sense that they refer to “activities which occur in the interstices between bounded communities” (Mandaville 2001: 12).

In this regard, there would appear to be some degree of overlap between Mandaville’s argument about the new Muslim transnational public sphere (*ummah*) and Anderson’s argument about the “imagined community” and how people become “cognizant of themselves as part of social collective” (Anderson cited in Mandaville 2001:150) as well as Appadurai’s argument of translocalities as a non-national or post-national social formations (Appadurai 1996:337-338).

Mandaville argues that translocality opens up the possibilities for the *ummah* to become a social reality (Mandaville 2001:150). The Muslim *ummah* is imagined as “the global Islamic public sphere or civil society that represents an increasingly visible critical mass of Muslim intellectuals, laity, and clergy (*ulama*)” (Sharify-Funk 2003). Transnational encounters allow Muslims to partake in discourse about the nature of community, politics and gender in Islam. In this sense, the community is imagined as a

dialogue of transnational social networking in which participants negotiate boundaries and meanings. These dialogues and encounters within the Muslim community in translocal spaces play an important role in Muslim identity formation.

Thus, globalization is facilitating the formation of world wide dialogic communities. In the dialogic community, social and political norms are established through ongoing dialogue in which multiple needs and concerns (especially those needs and concerns of subaltern groups) may finally gain voice.

Islamism as a Post-Hegemonic Discourse

The question of Muslim transnational dialogic community is relevant to other forms of international relations, namely inter-civilizational interactions, and the prospects for greater universality, in which different civilizations (cultures and religions) thickly engage in theoretical and political debates concerning the normative content and structure –global ethos–of post-hegemonic world politics. It is becoming clear that if the normative structure or the global ethos is to represent a genuine universality and not just reinforce liberal and Western-centric global order, it needs to thickly engage with worldwide religious perspectives and traditions (Hatzopoulos and Petit 2003:11). Universality cannot be but the result of dialogical engagement, in which different moral claims can be expressed freely. Cultural differences are no barriers to equal rights of participation within a dialogic community. The dialogue, in which no moral position is excluded, overcomes the forms of power and exclusion imposed on different cultures; redefines the dominant conception of modernity; and envisages a post-hegemonic order. For a genuine universality, Václav Havel argues:

[i]t is not enough to take a set of imperatives, principles, or rules produced by Euro-American world and mechanically declare them binding for all. Different cultures or spheres of civilizations can share only what they perceive as genuine common ground (cited in Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003:8).

The difficulty with this conception of universalism arises from the fact that the “universal” discourse conveys global intolerance of multiculturalism and a drive for homogenization. In his clash of civilizations thesis, Huntington argued that in the post Cold War global order nation-states were no longer relevant category of analysis, civilizations emerged as primary actors. Cultural differences are becoming the main source of conflicts because “people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views on the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority and hierarchy” (Huntington 1993:25).

The West is characterized through emphasis on social pluralism, the protection of individual and civil liberties and the separation of religious and secular authorities (Huntington 1996:70), whereas “the rest were analytically lumped as negatively representing the opposite, which in turn, reinforced the superiority of the West” (Hatem 2006:23). Huntington’s “West versus the rest” formulation underlines the “continued privileging of the West in the definition of its “other”” (Hatem 2006:23).

Mired with ethnocentrism, the Western conception of ethical universality has “singled out” Islamic civilization and Muslim women as obstacles and threats to civility and modernity, “subjecting them to withering intellectual and physical attacks” (Hatem

2006:22). Huntington asserts that the most serious challenge to the West is the Islamic civilization. The civilizational fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations explains the current source of conflicts.

The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and belief that their superior power, if declining power, imposes on them an obligation to extend that culture throughout the world. These are the basic ingredients that fuel conflicts between Islam and the West (Huntington 1996: 27-28).

Mervat Hatem argues that more than the recent rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the West's problem with Islamic civilization lay in the Islamic civilization's belief in its own universalism and superiority (Hatem 2006:23).

The search for a universal common ground for a post-hegemonic order "can best begin with an effort to understand those perspectives that have appeared most to challenge the existing hegemonic ways of understanding and acting in world politics.... The Islamic tradition is the "other" in relation to the Western tradition which is both the closest and the most difficult for the Western-conditioned mind to understand" (Cox 1992:142).

Islam provides a post-hegemonic discourse that derives its normative content mainly from the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions. The Islamic civilization "is asserting its presence in the shaping of any future world order" (Cox 1992:147). Islam emerges as the most coherent, non-Western alternative to the Western conception of modernity (Mandaville 2001:68).

Islamism, as a political discourse, provides a compelling critique of the way “modernity” has been experienced by Islamic societies. Islamism is “a contemporary discourse of opposition and debate, dealing with issues of social justice, legitimate powers, and ethical life in a way that challenges the hegemony of Western political and cultural norms” (Buck-Morss 2003:2).

But what will be the point of access to understanding the Islamic civilization? I suggest that the critical discourse articulated by Muslim intellectuals, whose analytical insights merit discussion and debate within the global public sphere, to be the point of access to understand the Islamic civilization. The efforts of those intellectuals ensure that the struggle for a civic-pluralist politics will remain a central theme in the Muslim discourse for years to come. Whether this civic-pluralism in contemporary Muslim discourse will spread and become the model for a broader pluralistic reformation of Muslim politics will depend on many factors to be discussed in a later chapter. The interacting voices of Muslim intellectuals have contributed to the emergence of a global Islamic public sphere, which fulfills “a crucial political function insofar as it offers a discursive space in which Muslims can articulate their normative claims (i.e. Islam) from multiplicity of subject positions” (Mandaville 2001: 186). Many reformists associate this public space with the Western concept of civil society as an alternative public space which is autonomous vis-à-vis the state, wherein Muslim men and women are freely practicing their innate human right of *ijtihad* (Mandaville 2001: 25). According to Fazlur Rahman, *ijtihad* is the “critical spirit” of “free intellectualism”, which is “genuinely

Islamic and creative”” (Buck-Morss 2003:10). The principle of *ijtihad* can be compared to the Western conception of freedom of thought and expression.

New explorations in what we might term a “critical Islam” are emerging through a reassessment and re-interpretation of traditional textual sources. Going back to the early traditions is hence not a throwback to “fundamentalism,” but, in the case of these new Muslim discourses, an attempt to critically re-read the ethical core of the founding texts directly into contemporary contexts without the mediation of centuries of dogmatic theology. The emergence of a new Muslim public sphere has also meant a significant change of personnel in terms of who is authorized to undertake this critical renewal of Islam.... [D]ebates over the political imperatives of translocal Islam—and also over who can legitimately set this agenda—serve to create new Muslim public spheres in which formerly disenfranchised voices (e.g. ‘deviants’, ‘moderates’, and women) are empowered to articulate alternative interpretations of Islamic authenticity (Mandaville 2001: 4).

I chose to focus on the debates, conversations and contestations occurring within Islam instead of focusing on the debate between Islam and the West because they are vital for gaining insights that the Western hegemony is not the only obstacle contemporary Islam needs to negotiate; there is also the internal hegemony regarding interpreting the ethical claims of Islam (Mandaville 2001:179). Mandaville correctly argue that “the debate between Islam and the West is certainly important, but we have allowed it to over-determine our perception of Islam that crucial contestations and negotiations within Islam go unnoticed” (Mandaville 2001:1).

These debates demonstrate the clash *within* Islam between two types of interpretations: traditionalist and reformist. In this clash/ debate, Muslim women are engaged in social criticism and social action. Muslim women are rereading and reinterpreting the sacred text. In so doing, Muslim reformists are trying to transcend what

Robert Cox calls the “embeddedness”, with a directive force, of patriarchal ideas, conceptions and practices in public and private life. Cox argues that “[t]he ontologies that people work with derive from their historical experience and in turn become embedded in the world they construct. What is subjective in understanding becomes objective through action” (Cox 1992:133). Patriarchal hegemonic behavior is rooted in social relations. However, any ontological standpoint is open to question. In Islam today, there is a critical reformist movement that challenges the traditionalist interpretation of the Qur’an and the patriarchal hegemonic behavior it reproduces.

A theory of critical Islamic interpretation, like Western critical theory, is exposing the picture of hegemonic power in order to achieve an ideal of human emancipation. However, a critical Islamic theory is founded upon a different claim than Western critical theory’s general tendency to assume that religion is more likely to have a counter-progressive agenda, and hence remain silent or indifferent in the face of injustice. Critical Islamic theory must challenge hegemonic claims of absolute, context-free knowledge by putting forward an alternative approach to communal values and focuses on the interaction among text, interpreter and context (Sharify-Funk 2003).

Debates within Islam demonstrate that “[m]ultiple, contested, and coexisting meanings of Islam are integral to the struggle for justice in Islamic reform today” (Wadud 2006:5).

Having recognized the value of the dialogue among Muslims searching for common ground by re-examining what Islam means in more inclusive ways, the case of Muslim women “scholarship-activism” is instructive as an access point for understanding the Islamic civilization. The Western hegemonic discourse sees “Islamic” gender politics as one of the main difference between the West and Islam. Oppressed, secluded, and veiled Muslim women became the focal point of representational discourses on the Middle East, which fueled racism and Islamophobia (Zine 2006). The “true clash of civilizations”

thesis developed by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart claims that “the deep-seated cultural divisions between Islam and the West will revolve far more strongly around social rather than political values, especially concerning issues of sexual liberalization and gender equality” (Norris and Inglehart 2002:5). In testing the “clash of civilizations” thesis, they concluded that with regard to gender equality and sexual liberalization, “the West is far more egalitarian and liberal than other societies, particularly Islamic nations”, therefore, “[t]he most basic cultural fault line between the West and Islam does not concern democracy- it involves issues of gender equality and sexual liberalization” (Norris and Inglehart 2002:11).

In the West, the dynamic interacting Muslim voices have been often rendered invisible, or obscured by stereotyped representation of Muslim women. Muslim women are often depicted as passive victims, rather than as agents who are actively engaged in efforts to reshape their identities and their societies. The ‘new’ Islamic discourses geared toward activism, engagement and participation in the public sphere and the rational, progressive and critical scholarship by Muslim women can correct this narrow narrative for a better understanding of the Islamic civilization that is different from the stereotypical views of Islam as static, patriarchal, un-modern, and violent.

Islamism as a political discourse embraces far more than dogmatic fundamentalism and terrorists violence that dominate in the Western press. It is also a powerful source of critical debate in the struggle against undemocratic imposition of a new world order by the United States, and against the economic and ecological violence of neo-liberalism, the fundamentalist orthodoxies of which fuel the growing divide between the rich and the poor. This is to say that secularization is no guarantee against dogmatic beliefs and that even foundational religious texts are open to multiple interpretations (Buck-Morss 2003: 49).

Buck-Morss's argument reveals the possibility latent in the Muslim intellectual activity to demonstrate that Islam is capable of articulating a critical discourse adequate to the demands of global public sphere in which the hegemony of the secular discourse has been shaken or eroded (Buck-Morss 2003: 101). The erosion of the Western hegemonic discourse of political modernity, enabled by what Bobby Said calls the "decentring" of the West, allows Islam to be articulated in new ways through reform and *tajdid* (renewal) (cited in Mandaville 2004:68).

Democracy on the global level necessitates understanding and engaging this "other" discourse, "emanating from a "civilization" that is intrinsically different from "our own"" (Buck-Morss 2003:4). As long as the Western hegemonic discourse remains unwilling to accept the right of Muslims to tailor their own version⁴ of modernity, the global arena will not be conducive to equality and democracy. As Asma Barlas eloquently puts it: "globalizing equality means that we cannot speak about sexual equality in Muslim societies without speaking about equality in the global arena...the language of rights needs to be employed not only to ensure women equal rights in Muslim societies but also to ensure Muslim societies equal rights in an emergent global public sphere in which we can not only 'think past' U.S. hegemony but actually move beyond it" (Barlas 2005a:106).

Deconstructing the foundations of Western discourses and texts opens up the space for other cultures, religions, and (sacred) texts that were previously overlooked by Western social theory (Jacques Derrida cited in Kubálková 2003:86).

⁴ This version of modernity is rooted in the Islamic faith.

A Genuine Common Ground?

The policy question for this approach is how to promote conditions that are conducive to a genuine common ground among civilizations? The mutual recognition of the norms and values of other civilizations is a good starting point. This means the readiness to try to understand others on their own terms (Cox 1992:141). This could be quite difficult to achieve because of the homogenizing tendencies of the Western discourse and its negative representation of non-Western societies. Difficulty also arises from the way political change outside the West is reported in the West (Cox 1992:141). There is a tendency to analyze everything through Western concepts, which has led to mystification and has left the West ill-prepared for understanding the current transformations of Muslim politics. For example, reformist Islam is mostly viewed and tested based on the Western concepts of liberalism and secularism. Several studies that will be discussed in the literature review show the disconnection between liberalism and secularism and develop an alternative concept of secularism suitable for the analysis of Muslim politics⁵.

Genuine common ground also demands trust. There is a need to trust the ability of non-Western people and societies to “think through the logic of their cultural beliefs and to carefully sift out weak arguments from strong” (Rorty cited in Linklater 1998:77).

The normative content of genuine universalism is determined by a process of internal discourse within different constituencies of global civil society and a dialogue between

⁵ For details see Heba Raouf Ezzat and Ahmed Mohammed Abdalla. 2004. “Towards an Islamically Democratic Secularism.” In *Faith and Secularism*, ed. Rosemary Bechler. London: Counterpoint, 33-54.

them in order to promote an overlapping consensus about the normative content (An-Na'im 2002:70). The process of negotiation and dialogue presupposes mutual respect and appreciation of cultural and contextual differences. It also entails an appreciation of the need for consensus-building, instead of trying to impose Western views on others. This consensus must be actively sought by all sides, "instead of passively waiting for religious communities to succeed or fail in the test of inclusion" (An-Na'im 2002:71).

Two factors can obscure the efforts of creating a universal global ethos. 1) The "pre-judgments" that we carry with us as indispensable and unavoidable starting point in any dialogical engagement" (Gadamer in Haztopoulos and Petito 2003:11). 2) The differential power relations between the developed and developing countries. Regarding the second factor, I want to stress the role of religion and religious ideas as an intervening variable between structural conditions and actors' interests and preferences (Risse-Kappen 1994). We need to take into account the positive contribution of religion in mobilizing believers to challenge oppressive structures for emancipation and true universality (An-Na'im 2002). Richard Falk describes the relationship between power and faith as follows:

A belief in the transformative capacities of an idea that is sustained by spiritual energy lends itself to nonviolent forms of struggle and sacrifice, thereby challenging most secular views of human history as shaped primarily by governing elites, warfare, and a command over innovative military technology...The central founding narratives of the world's great religions are preoccupied with liberation from oppressive social and political arrangements (Falk 2003: 198-199).

Islam exhibits an emancipatory potential and a strong tendency to self-universalization. By asserting itself on the global stage, Islam disturbs the notions of territoriality and

power as defining features of the Westphalian order. “The intellectually critical and socially accountable power of Islamism” (Buck-Morss 2003:46) is legitimizing Islamic discourses, if not Islam itself, in the global arena (Mandaville 2001 and Barlas 2005a).

The New Islamic Intellectuals and “Globalization from Below”

When applied to the question of Muslim women’s rights, genuine universality can be a useful approach not only to challenge the voices that justify the violation of women’s rights under the guise of single interpretation of Islam imposed by a patriarchal religious authority (Tohidi 2003:181), but also to challenge the using of women’s rights as a tool for the West to impose its hegemony and values on Muslims. Undermining the universal and the particular polarity, Muslim women are opting for a reflexive path of “multiple critique”. The contextualization of Muslim women’s rights can lead to creative theoretical and political endeavors of “multiple modernities” and multiple *asalas* (authenticity)⁶.

The hegemonic Western discourse tends to represent itself as universal, objective and natural in promoting a set of ideas, values and standards that should be binding to all humankind. This claim removes these “standards” from the domain of political contestation “by privileging them at the outset and treating these “universal standards” as the most authentic, universally valid expressions and beyond critique” (Barlas 2005a:104). Barlas argues that “just by giving the denotation “universal” for these standards at the conclusion of certain international deliberation does not guarantee their universality” (Barlas 2005a:104). There is a heated debate of whether “women’s rights” is a universal or a Western concept. Western discourse scarcely values any political

⁶ See chapter seven for details

endeavor that does not operate according to its own secular terms. Barlas argues that “secularism in its garb of “universalizing reason”, keeps [feminists]...from realizing some simple truths about Muslims, [that is]...the Qur’an, nonetheless abides in our consciousness so enduringly that we are unlikely to toss it aside in the name of sociopolitical values or “universal standards”” (Barlas 2005a: 104). Muslims see “secularizing Islam” as “too high price to pay” to be accepted and included in the global civil society (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:53). We need to acknowledge that rejecting the unconditional embrace of modern secular discourses on human rights as universal and absolute is different from the reductionist approach of merely accepting medieval constructions of law and interpretations of text as final and absolute.

At this juncture, it is important to note that Western hegemony and its totalizing discourse is not the only type of hegemony that Muslims are negotiating. There is also the totalizing discourse that claims the right to represent the “true” Islam. In the Islamic hegemonic discourse, the historically conditioned understanding of Qur’an has been promoted as objective and absolute. By emphasizing the impact of historical contexts on human interpretations (as suggested by the work of Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud and others), advocates of women’s rights can claim their right in developing an alternative interpretation and participate in the articulation of normativity suitable for contemporary Muslim life. The new Muslim “textual activism” differentiates between what is absolute and what is relative in Islamic *sharia*⁷. The result of their hermeneutical endeavor has been a challenge to local religious ideas and practices long taken for granted to be “Islamic” as well as a challenge to authoritarianism. Muslim “new thinking” has led to

⁷ This argument is developed by Heba Raouf Ezzat in her interview by Karim El-Gawhary (1994:26).

the fragmentation of religious and political authority. It resulted in an increasingly open discussion of issues related to democracy, gender and the common good (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: x).

Issues of Muslim women inform the analysis and politics of women's liberation movements. My analysis sustains a running argument with and against key analytical concepts in Western social theory. In my dissertation, I probe some of the conceptual challenges that Muslim women activism poses to Western social theory.

First: Islam has been influenced by the emergence of new ideas and new breed of intellectuals that aim at the creation of a peaceful global ethos- too easily dismissed because their premises are not Western. Muslim intellectuals play an important role of articulating new concepts and paradigms in domestic and international politics.

The role of intellectuals -Gramsci argues- is to "eradicate the illusions from the mind and imagination", disclosing hegemonic behavior and interests embedded in them that draw sustenance from the dominant ideology (cited in Moghissi 1991:147). The role of intellectuals is particularly important in the emerging critical Islamic movement and its implication for women. Muslim reformist intellectuals struggle to construct and maintain a "counter-hegemonic" discourse and movement. They "play a key role in developing critical awareness as well as actively engaging in the formation of political and ideological consensus" (Sharify-Funk 2003:18). This critical awareness, Gramsci argues, develops "through intelligent reflection...on the reasons why certain situations exist and on the best means of transforming [these situation through] social reconstruction" (Gramsci cited in Moghissi 1991:147). Muslim intellectuals are deconstructing traditional

percepts and practices and reconstructing more democratic, gendered–balanced ones, challenging the process of knowledge itself. Thus, reformist thought contributes to the emancipation of Muslim women through developing the idea of gender as a continually constructed identity and the idea of the legitimacy of the female voice.

Reformists call for the creation of public space for producing a stable group identity that empowers women to effect change. This space is not devoid of hegemony. The struggle against hegemonic understanding waged in the public sphere or civil society is quite a difficult task, especially where “legal framework protecting civil discourse is always liable to be shattered” (Moghissi 1999:147) and where the discursive arena for articulating a counter discourses is monopolized by a religious discourse that negates, excludes, and narrows women’s options.

The discourse of the new Islamist intellectuals “seeks to question the legitimacy of the state, the institutions and even society... the new Islam exists in spaces which institutionalized forms of politics cannot reach ... The new Islamist intellectual thus represents an interstitial political identity, one which inhabits the gaps between institutional forms” (Mandaville 2001: 177). The new Islamic intellectuals demonstrate the interconnectedness of hermeneutical and political questions. Their contribution opens up avenues for rethinking and reformulating Islamic thought and practice. Muslim women scholar-activists argue that reconstructing Muslim religious knowledge opens the doors for reconstructing Muslim societies (Barlas 2005a and Wadud 2006). It is important to note that these new Islamic intellectuals are very popular among educated young Muslims (Mandaville 2001). Young Muslim women see Islam as a progressive

force, which will allow them to move from patriarchal interpretation of Islamic percepts and practices but at the same time avoid submission to Western cultural norms.

Second: The tensions and transformations occurring with Islamic societies have had an impact on Muslim women. Women are analyzing the kind of Islam that would help empower them instead of limit their capacity. Gender represents an area where the influence and efficacy of traditional authority and practice appear to be diminishing. More and more Muslim women are “taking Islam into their own hands” (Mandaville 2001). The expansion of the public sphere and the use of new technologies make awareness and interaction possible for women across the Muslim world⁸. This empowerment is occurring from a popular base. The major impetus for change is coming from individuals who participate in transnational networks and movements for reinterpreting their religion and reconstructing their societies from within their own context. One new aspect of Islamic globalism may be the shift in the nature and location of the recent Muslim diaspora experiences in Western Europe and North America which will properly have far-reaching consequences for Muslim identity and views of the ‘other’ (Mandaville 2001: 66). The encounters between the Muslim and the Muslim ‘other’ play an important role in the process of identity formation. The dialogue with the Muslim “other” involves “new social capital that draws on contemporary intellectual styles and uses different communication technologies to circulate ideas and views about “what is properly Islamic”” (Eickelman and Anderson 2003: x).

⁸ The Term ‘Muslim world’ refers to “a discursive entity rather than to a geographic region. In This sense, the Muslim world is defined by communicative action framed in terms of or in relation to the Islamic discursive tradition. Similarly, therefore, ‘Muslim society’ is constituted in social relations between actors sharing normative boundaries defined by the same discursive tradition” (Mandaville 2007:113).

This new aspect of Islamic globalism is also giving the periphery an increasing influence over the historically dominant center. Reform and ideas originating in the West among Muslim diaspora may be reversing the flow of ideas from the diasporic periphery to the Muslim core (Mandaville 2003a). However, that is not to say that innovative ideas and reform come only from Western Muslims⁹.

Third: Western social science remains unwilling to treat religion as important social factor on par with secular forces. This view lacks the respect and appreciation of cultural and contextual differences. This research attempts to transcend this conception in order explore how the engagement with religion might lead to creative theoretical and political endeavors. Given the central role of religion in the political culture of Islamic societies, it is critical that conceptualizations of the public sphere and civil activism take into account the public role of religion. By reasserting itself in public space, Islam is disrupting the conventional accounts of modernity and challenges the dualism of public and private. Islam, as a discursive field, provides a post-hegemonic, post-Westphalian alternative approach to the secular international politics.

For my ontological starting point, I propose to focus on alternative form and spaces of the politics. In later chapters, I show how new discursive forms and spaces in translocality, especially the dialogic community, is more relevant to our understanding of contemporary Muslim “politics”, defined as the “negotiation of meaning” (Mandaville 2001). From such an ontological beginning, I proceed to examine my case study of the contemporary Muslim discourse and debates on gender justice in Islam and the role of

⁹ Chapter five discusses innovative ideas and reform originating in Egypt.

Muslim women scholar-activists in the emerging transnational Muslim public sphere. My case study is an example of a particular movement whose discourse imagines non-statist, dialogic forms of political community. I chose to focus on Islam and Muslim women because Islam represents a prominent non-statist, post-hegemonic discourse which today claims global validity as an ethical construct (Mandaville 2001). My goal is to provide an empirical portrait of Muslim women activism as a form of transnational grassroots politics organized around these themes: agency, participation and engagement. Muslim dialogic engagement provides a much richer picture of how Muslims come to define and experience their political identity. I conclude this section by reasserting my original claim that the limited imagination of politics can be expanded and transformed as a result of contemporary Muslim forms and spaces of political practices.

The Research Problem

First, with the end of the Cold War, theorists started to analyze what global politics is likely to become in the new era. Francis Fukuyama asserted that the end of the Cold War has led to “the end of history” that is the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. Fukuyama’s assertion that “triumph of the West, of the Western idea, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism” (Fukuyama 1989) is being challenged by the global resurgence of religion and the assertion of traditional and indigenous cultures in the new world order that replaced the Cold War (Bull 1984). What is happening on the global stage does not implicate the end of history but the “initiation of a new era of conflicts and reconciliations” (Cox

1992:145). In order to understand the future of global politics, we need first to consider the sources of conflicts in this new era. Samuel Huntington (1993 and 1996) assumes that international conflicts in the post-Cold War era are taking place between civilizations, which according to his definition are based mostly on religion. One may disagree with the bulk of Huntington assumptions, but most importantly Huntington posits culture and identity (especially religious identity) as important factors that influence world politics and political behavior. But to look at the current resurgence of religion through the lens of “the clash of civilizations” is misleading. From my point of view, the current Islamic resurgence is not a “revolt against the West” (Bull 1984) as much as Muslims’ aspiration and struggle for authenticity and cultural liberation as well as an attempt to indigenize modernity (Thomas 2003:22).

Second, the challenge of Islamic fundamentalism to peaceful global ethos and global civil society arises from its supranational appeal and aspiration and its specific vision of the public good that negates people’s ability to make their own moral and political choices. Public discourse in the West tends to equate Islamic globalism with pan-national fundamentalist networks that is conservative and intolerant. In the transnational Muslim public sphere, no particular ethical claim is negated or excluded; “difference is negotiated, rather than eradicated” (Mandaville 2001:181). But the emerging transnational public sphere has been overlooked or dismissed because its activities did not fall into the range of activities associated with the traditional conception of global civil society (An-Na’im 2001 and Mandaville 2001).

Third, there are a number of gaps and silences in the literature on social change in the Muslim world that must be addressed for a fuller understanding of contemporary Muslim realities. For example, the Muslim experience in the Western Europe and North America, which has far-reaching consequences in bringing about democracy and change in the Muslim societies. These gaps in the literature have impoverished the Western political imagination and left ill-prepared for understanding the current transformations of Muslim politics.

Fourth: there is an increased international attention to, but not a deep understanding of, the status and rights of Muslim women in Islamic societies. Women's rights and status dictated by religious precepts are seen as another form of the clash between religious values and international standards/ imperatives. The different treatment of women is seen as manifest proof of the anti-equality nature of the Qur'an. The Western discourse focuses mainly on Islam's compatibility, or lack thereof, with Western conception of democracy and human rights as well as Muslim policies' conformity to "universal standards". The West bases its claims regarding women and Islam on generalized assumptions about an undifferentiated mass of Muslim women as passive, secluded victims of their misogynist religion, who are equally oppressed by patriarchal men. There were a number of attempts at introducing modernity and gender justice to Islamic societies but they mostly failed to interest Muslim women because they were clearly from *without* the Islamic tradition. Secular modernist approaches and programs failed to recognize the deep-rooted commitment to piety and authenticity among Muslim women. Muslim women take Islam to be the first source of their identity. It is not enough to

recognize the problems facing Muslim women. I argue that the correct framing and definition of the problem makes a great difference (see chapter two). Secular approaches were unsatisfying to Muslim women because they failed to identify their real problems and, consequently, failed to provide adequate answers and solutions.

Fifth: the role of women in Islam is invested with diverse meanings and discourses. The state, religious authorities, traditional Islamists and reformist intellectuals all claim the right to define the role of women in the Islamic society. This contestation over the meanings attached to women makes the issue of gender a key dimension of contemporary Muslim politics. Traditional Islamic discourses on women seeks to uphold authenticity and draw boundaries not only between Muslim and non-Muslims (characterized as morally inferior) but also between the “true” guardian of Islam and the “internal other” (characterized as deviant and Westernized) (Kandiyoti 1991:7-8).

Six: Muslim women navigate between two discursive arenas: neo-imperialist, secularist McWorld and andocentric, extremist *jihad* that script the way their stories and identities are narrated. Muslim women refuse to be caught up in radicalized, gendered politics between the guardians of universal secular modernity and the guardians of Islam that construct a discourse of power based on false oppositional dichotomies and binaries that invoke a “clash of civilizations”. Muslim women who are committed to their Islamic identity develop a ‘third space’ in which they can speak for themselves and reject the passive characterization of their experience. They are also creating a transnational dimension of their Islamic identity and resistance. Through hermeneutical and political activism in the public sphere, Muslim women are opening up new possibilities and forms

of engagement and activism and creating new knowledge to challenge the patriarchal distortions of the rights granted to them by Qur'an and *sunnah* (prophetic tradition). Muslim women, committed to their faith, are struggling to prove that gender justice is an integral part of their faith.

Muslim women's discourse moves beyond the binaries (East/West and secular/religious) that invoke the clash of civilizations. Their discourse challenges and undermines the fundamentalist discourse by addressing the concerns of Muslim women for justice *and* piety and for social change rooted in their faith, not alien to their culture or imposed from outside. Muslim women are claiming Islam and the public sphere in order to speak against marginalization and distortion. Muslim women activism "disturbs the calculations of power and knowledge producing spaces of subaltern signification" (Bhabha cited in Cooke 2001:152).

My core argument is that by escaping the constraints of the territorial nation-state, new forms of public space and political community are emerging. Globalization, especially in its reflexive and communicative dimensions, has created an environment conducive to dialogue and exchange, which have led to the emergence of a transnational Muslim public sphere. This new public sphere provides wider avenues and alternative forms of participation and engagement. *A combination of critical ideas and transnationalism has been transforming the Muslim public sphere toward a pluralistic, negotiated exchange of the sacred meaning.* In this emergent public sphere, Muslim women are becoming the catalysts for transformation in Muslim thought and practice related to gender issues. Muslim women groups are well positioned to challenge

authoritarian, oppressive regimes and to create a peaceful global ethos putting an end to the “clash of civilization” and the threats of fundamentalism and international terrorism in the same way new ideas and transnational networks brought an end to the Cold War. The contribution of Muslim women working from *within* to transform Muslim societies should affect the way the West thinks about Islam and Muslims ending the clash/jihadist paradigm and creating a peaceful global ethos with a genuine universality.

My main research questions, then, might be stated as follows: what is the role of transnational ideas and networking in generating and transforming the Muslim public sphere (global civil society)? How is transnational social public sphere affecting the way contemporary Muslim women perceive their identities and engage in activism? To what extent intellectual scholarship by Muslim women can be designated as a site of resistance, or a “counterpublic” that challenges dominant publics? What is the relationship between religious knowledge and social agency?

Significance of the Study and the Nature of Contribution

This research was triggered by the State of the Art in international relations, the field that claims to be global, yet it managed to be narrowly focused on a single form of political community, i.e. the nation-state. Conventional international relations theory failed to take account of different forms of politics, community and identity by being mainly state-centric. I also observed another striking void in international relation literature, that is; the neglect of the role of religion as well as the perspectives and the traditions of worldwide religions. Much of the literature maintains a curious silence on

the role ideas and transnational processes and instead offers a predominately structuralist account of social change that focuses on localized impact of global forces.

This research aims at presenting a scholarly contribution in which the concept of the Islamic *ummah* is employed as the level of analysis. The concept of the *ummah* imagines alternative forms and spaces of politics and community. *Ummah* is a civilizational space; the world Muslim community. *Ummah* is “a bearer of witness to the truth before all mankind” (Qur’an 2:143). *Ummah* transcends race, language and geography. It is “a universal order enclosing the entire collectivity of Muslims inhabiting the globe united by the bond of strong and comprehensive ideology of Islam” (Moten 1996:3). In functional terms, Muslims within the *ummah* are to act as judges to determine extremes (diagnostic function) and as modifiers to smooth out those extremes (practical activity) (Moten1996:3).

There are three levels of interactions among elements of the *ummah*. The first is the organizational level, where Islamic states are members of global organizations such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The second level is the formal relations and foreign policies among Muslim states. The third level is the transnational relations among Muslim societies, which are referred to as the global Muslim public sphere or civil society. This public sphere represents “an increasingly visible critical mass of Muslim intellectuals, laity and clergy (*ulama*)” (Sharify-Funk 2003). Focusing on this third level, my research addresses the question of how this transnational Muslim public sphere is playing a role in rebuilding or “reimagining” the Muslim *ummah*- to use Mandaville’s term.

Muslims are living through an era of profound social transformation. The new Muslim public sphere is shaped by increasingly open contests to reconfigure the nature of religious thought and actions. The transnational Muslim public sphere encourages debates over meaning, values and different issues such as democracy, civil society and women's rights. Narratives that limit transnational Islam to "fundamentalism", "clash of civilizations" or "international terrorism" are of little use in understanding these transformations (Eickelman 1999). My research seeks to move beyond this narrow narrative in order to provide an alternative reading of transnational Muslim spaces and politics and their impact on social change in the Muslim societies.

For this purpose, I seek to draw attention to an emergent phenomenon of transnational interpretive activities and interpretive possibilities for gender justice that could easily be ignored or overlooked in Western scholarly and policy debates because they do not fall into the range of activities associated with the traditional definition of politics and civil society.

My approach transcends conventional labels and goes beyond simply transposing Western categories. The arguments developed in this research could prove helpful in grafting a better understanding of Muslim politics, which in turn could have an impact on Western views and policies toward the Muslim world. My modest contribution aims at constructing a partial knowledge that can be helpful in thinking about Muslim politics. Partial knowledge is helpful in guiding action and in channeling the direction of events towards a desired option (Cox 1992:139).

Methodology

History generates theory. History provides us with a set of viable working hypotheses. History provides “a form of knowledge that transcends the specific historical epoch that makes the epoch intelligible in a larger perspective” (Cox 1992:135). This knowledge becomes the heuristic for strategies and guidelines for action in the in post 9/11 era of major transformations.

So while appreciating the differences between the Cold War era and our world today, I borrow theoretically from Thomas Risse-Kappen’s case study that demonstrated the contribution of a combination of new thinking and transnational networking to the changes in the Soviet foreign policy and to the transformation processes in Eastern Europe and, thus, to the end of the Cold War (Risse-Kappen 1994, 1995, 2000 and Chilton 1995). I claim that a combination of new ideas promoted by new breed of Muslim intellectuals and transnational Muslim networks can contribute to social and political changes in Muslim societies and to transforming Western attitude toward Islam and Muslims and, thus, to the end of the clash of civilizations and the conflicts associated with it.

Risse-Kappen argues that realist and liberalist theories need to be complemented by approaches that emphasize the interaction between international and domestic factors and take seriously the role of ideas- knowledge, values and strategic concepts. Risse-Kappen’s main argument, therefore, is that under certain domestic and international circumstances, transnational coalitions and actors who attempt to change policy outcome in a specific issue-area succeed to achieve their goals. Domestic structures such as the

nature of political institutions, state-society relations, and political culture determine the ability of transnational networks to gain access and to build winning coalitions in various societies (Risse-Kappen 1994: 186).

My approach integrates domestic structure and politics, transnational networks and the role of ideas in order to understand recent changes in Muslim thought and practice. My thesis differs from and explains the deficiencies in the prevailing theories on social change in Muslim societies. It also draws from and integrates a variety of theoretical perspectives and research fields, such as civil society, social movements, gender identities and culture studies.

I probe and assess the transnational Muslim public sphere in the light of two independent variables, one domestic and one international. By domestic structures I mean, the nature of political institutions, state-society relations and political culture, which determine the ability of transnational networks first to gain access to a country and second to build winning coalitions with like-minded thinkers and activists (Risse-Kappen 1994: 185). The transnational variable is the extent of coalition building with like-minded groups. The dependent variable is the transformation occurring in Muslim societies in terms of social change and the widening of Muslim public sphere.

The notion of dialogue and Muslim intellectual discourse in the public sphere invoke Jürgen Habermas's theory of "communicative action", that is the processes of argumentation, deliberation and persuasion that constitute a distinct mode of social interaction to be differentiated from both strategic bargaining (the realm of rational choice) the rule-guided behavior (the realm of institutionalism) (Risse-Kappen 2000).

My research focuses on Muslim women scholar-activists engaged in claims and counter-claims related to gender relations in Islam as a discursive lifeworld. It is a form of transnational Muslim public sphere or civil society in which Muslim women negotiate a normative agenda related to the role of women in Muslim societies. In order to answer my research questions, data are collected and analyzed based on the penetration of the literature and scholarship written by Muslim women intellectuals in order to document their contextual interpretive practices as a form of resistance and social engagement. This dissertation also utilizes qualitative methods of discourse analysis and participant observation to investigate the impact of transnational social interactions on Muslim women residing in diverse national and cultural contexts. It is an effort to understand how we and our ideas interact between and across social spaces, constructing new political spaces, new discursive communities, and new political identities. I carried out participant observations among mosques in Egypt and the United States and also of conference and lectures organized around the themes of Muslim women “textual-contextual” activism.

Difficulties in conducting this research should be noted. First and foremost, the Muslim public sphere is a project that is still under construction. Second, while we can identify tendencies in Muslim women activism in the transnational public sphere, analytically, it is harder to develop propositions and direct causal linkages about the transnational effects of ideas, values and norms that cannot be measured empirically. Third, the linkage among transnational Muslim women intellectuals and activists is global in scope. It is also informal and ad hoc (see chapter 4 and 5). This feature

contributes to an “aura of uncertainty” in terms of the scale and the breadth of their activities, impact, and geographic coverage (Mandaville 2005a:305).

Organization of the Study

Chapter one introduces the ontological background of the research. It establishes the theoretical and practical significance of the research and the relevance of the research question in the contemporary global context.

Chapter two surveys the growing academic literature on women in Islam and presents two oppositional interpretative and analytical categories: secular modernist and Islamic reformist that both address the traditional, patriarchal Islamic discourse. The dichotomy between the two scholarly discourses emanates from differences in their frames of reference, methodology and outcome. It also presents arguments for synergy between secularism and Islam.

Chapter three aims at constructing the conceptual and theoretical framework of the dissertation. It starts with deconstructing the secular, state-centric claims of international relations, and then it reconstructs a new understanding of the role of ideas, intellectual communities and communicative action in widening the Muslim public sphere. It envisions an alternative conception of community and civil activism that take the role of religion seriously.

Chapter four explores a form of transnational Muslim public sphere; namely a global advocacy of normative agenda related to the role of women in Islam. It explores the nature and the origin of Muslim women’s pro-faith discourse and “textual-contextual” activism, their agenda, by whom and how the agenda is determined, the dialogue about

the elements of that agenda and how they negotiate their position in relation to other discourses.

Chapter five explores the various voices and scholarship of Muslim women, the interpretive possibilities of their hermeneutical approach as well as their transnational activism. The chapter also explores the gender debate in Egypt in order to test Risse-Kappen's proposition that the degree of civil society development and the domestic structures of political institutions, state-society relations and political culture determine the ability of ideas and transnational networks first to gain access to a country and second to build winning coalitions with like-minded intellectuals.

Chapter six is concerned with recovering Muslim women's voice through communicative empowerment. The chapter discusses the efforts of Muslim women to create a counter-hegemonic discourse and claims and the challenges they face in the creation of public sphere of justice and inclusion.

Chapter seven reflects on the major arguments that this research purports to make as well as the findings of the study. The chapter elaborates on the suggested approach as the best response to the threat of international terrorism by addressing the underlying grievances that motivate terrorists and their supporters. Finally, it relates the argument made in this research to the broader debates in the field of international relations and identifies areas of future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: FRAMING THE MUSLIM “WOMEN QUESTION”

If “women are the sisters of men” as one *hadith* suggests, then the Islamist occupation with the question of difference and the (secular) feminist claim that Muslim women have gender-specific concern miss the point (Zaynab Al Ghazali cited in Hatem 2002: 45)

As stated in chapter one, my main argument is that a combination of new ideas promoted by new breed of Muslim intellectuals and transnational Muslim networks can contribute to social and political changes in Muslim societies. On this basis, I borrow the concept of “frames” from the social movement theory in order to explore the role of ideas and social networks. Frames consider the role of ideational factors, including social interactions, meaning and culture. Frames represent “interpretive schemata that offers a language and cognitive tools” for making sense of experiences and events (Wiktorowicz 2004:15). Framing describes the “process of meaning construction” through interpretive lenses. These schemata are important in the production and dissemination of *interpretations* and are designed to mobilize participants and support. In the framing process, the signifying agents are “engaged in the social construction of meaning” (Wiktorowicz 2004:15). They “articulate and disseminate frameworks of understanding that *resonate with potential participants and broader publics to elicit collective action*” (Wiktorowicz 2004: 15 *emphasis*

mine). In addition to the strategies, processes and structural dimensions, social movement theory is interested in the way meaning is produced, articulated and disseminated by actors through interactive processes and how potential participants are actually convinced to participate (Wiktorowicz 2004:15).

I rely on this definition of framing in order to explore lenses through which the “Muslim women” question has been identified, defined, and thus, framed in the scholarly debate. This is not only an analytical point, but also reflects a political imperative born out of the realization that the definition of the “Muslim women” question is very crucial in determining the appropriate course of action. The literature on women in Islam incorporates many controversies and disagreements. From surveying the growing academic literature on women in Islam, one can discern two oppositional interpretive categories: Secular modernist and Islamic reformist that both address and challenge the traditional, patriarchal Islamic discourse and disposition regarding Muslim women.

For the issues of democracy and tolerance, the “women question” has been a key issue in developing the Western critique of Islam. In seeking to understand the role of religion in the Muslim world many scholars and commentators have turned to Samuel Huntington’s controversial thesis of a “clash of civilizations”. The clash of civilizations thesis advances three central claims: (1) culture matters and that contemporary values in different societies are path-dependent; (2) societal values in contemporary societies are rooted in religious cultures and (3) the most important

cultural division between the Western and Islamic world relates to differences over democratic values (Norris and Inglehart 2004:135).

Increasingly after 9/11 and through the “clash of civilizations” lens, Muslims have been positioned on the global stage as anti-democratic and anti-liberal. Islam and the Muslims have become “the foils for modernity, freedom and the civilized world” (Zine 2006:2). From this understanding of the interplay between politics and religion in Muslim context, a number of scholars developed their analytical framework and interpretative categories regarding Islam and gender.

Testing the clash of civilizations theory, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart assert that the key difference between the Western and Islamic worlds revolves around the issues of gender equality and sexual liberalization, rather than the democratic values that are central to Huntington’s theory (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 5).

In their study, attitudes were compared towards three dimensions of political and social values: (1) support for democratic ideals and performance, (2) attitude towards political leadership and (3) approval of gender equality and sexual liberalization (Norris and Inglehart 2004:8). The comparative study found the following: when political attitudes are compared, “far from a ‘clash of values’, there is minimal difference between the Muslim world and the West” (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 12). However, support for religious authorities is stronger in Muslim societies than in the West. Muslim publics did display greater support for a strong societal role by religious authorities than do Western publics (Norris and Inglehart 2004:10). Significantly, there is a substantial cultural cleavage in social values towards gender

equality and sexual liberalization between the Western and Muslim societies. The gap has steadily widened as the younger generation in the West has gradually become more liberal, while the younger generation in Muslim societies remains deeply traditional (Norris and Inglehart 2004:13). Norris and Inglehart argue that “the trends suggest that Islamic societies have not experienced a backlash against liberal Western sexual mores among the younger generations, but rather that young Muslims remain unchanged despite the transformation of lifestyles and beliefs experienced among their peers living in postindustrial societies” (Norris and Inglehart 2004:149). According to Norris and Inglehart “the most basic cultural fault line between the West and Islam does not concern democracy—it involves issues of gender equality and sexual liberation” (Norris and Inglehart 2004:155).

From such an understanding, their proposed solution for gender equality and sexual liberalization in the Muslim world is based on the version of human development and modernization theory developed by Ronald Inglehart, which proposes that human development generates change in cultural attitudes in virtually any society. Modernization brings systematic, predictable changes in gender roles. This modernization operates in two key phases (Norris and Inglehart 2004:133):

First: Industrialization brings women into the paid work force and dramatically reduces fertility rates. Women attain literacy and educational opportunities. Women are enfranchised and begin to participate in representative government, but still have far less power than men.

Second: The postindustrial phase brings a shift toward greater gender equality as women move into higher status economic roles in management and the professions, and gain political influence within elected and appointed bodies. Only the more advanced industrial societies are currently moving on this trajectory.

These two phases correspond to two major dimension of cross-cultural variation: a transition from traditional to secular, rational values and a transition from survival to self-expression values. The decline of the family is linked with the first and rise of gender equality is linked with the second (Norris and Inglehart 2004:133).

Although I disagree with these reflections because I think that they do not take us far in explaining the complexity of the women question in Muslim context or how their gender and religious identities are intertwined, I find them useful as a point of departure because they highlight some of the tensions, controversies and disagreements incorporated in the literature on women in Islam that I will be discussing in this chapter, namely the dichotomy between two scholarly discourses: secular modernist and Muslim reformist. This dichotomy emanates from differences in their frames of reference, methodology and outcome. The literature on women in Islam has become so polarized with oppositional binaries: theology versus social issues, Islam versus democracy and Qur'an versus universal standards. The polarization of the discourse is further reinforced by the so-called conformation with the West coupled with the growing demand for cultural self-determination in terms of an Islamic collective identity (An-Na'im 1995: 54, 56).

For several decades women activism and liberation in Muslim societies have been perceived as a largely secular phenomenon that relied mainly on secular, universal discourses for gender equality. Islamic revivalism has altered the character of women activism and liberation in two ways. On the one hand, by mobilizing against the notion of women's rights as a Western, imperialist construct, which denied feminists the vital support of the masses in Muslim communities. On the other hand, it opened up the space to a number of scholars and activists who have elected to engage in and elaborate an Islamic discourse on gender justice.

In her book *Women, Islamism and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt*, Azza Karam demonstrated thoroughly the corollaries and contradistinction between secular feminism and Islamist feminism, a distinction previously unclarified in Western and some Muslim literature. She also defines "Muslim Feminism" as women activists using Islamic sources like the Qur'an and the *sunnah* "to show that the discourse of equality between men and women is valid, within Islam", since "feminism that does not justify itself within Islam is bound to be rejected by the rest of society, and is therefore self-defeating" (Karam1998:11).

In her article *Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name?*, Margot Badran brings a clarification to the distinction between secular and Islamic feminisms as two "discursive categories mobilized" for gender equality in terms of their strategies and ideologies. As she puts it: "the distinction between (secular) feminist discourse and Islamic feminism is that the latter is a feminism that is articulated within a more exclusively Islamic paradigm" (Badran 2002).

Margot Badran is known for her contribution to the history of secular, national and cultural feminism. In a chapter entitled *Toward Islamic Feminisms: A Look at the Middle East*, Badran astutely shows how the earliest feminist movement in Egypt formulated its discourse in cultural and Islamic terms and how subsequent feminist movements strove to remain secular and were allied with the secular nationalist movements. In the late twentieth century, the feminist discourse is once again being constructed within an Islamic paradigm by women claiming their rights to reinterpret this paradigm. This critical reformist movement is based on the awareness that the patriarchally interpreted religious laws are responsible for the oppressive Muslim practices against women (Badran 1999). It is a movement that aims at challenging traditionalist interpretation and the patriarchal cultural patterns it reproduces (Sharify-Funk 2003).

Secular Feminism and Religion: Rejection and Dismissal

The major scholarly as well as policy debate regarding women in Muslim societies has been framed within the secular modernist paradigm. Feminists who view religion as a key factor in the subordination and oppression of women have rejected, dismissed and fought against religious traditions (Tohidi and Bayes 2001:47). This dismissal is based on a perceived incompatibility between feminism and Islam, a religion that is based on gender hierarchy (Moghissi 1999:126) and their view of the *sharia* as “not compatible with the principles of equality of human beings” (Moghissi 1999:141). According to this approach, theology is useless in addressing real problems facing Muslim women. Valentine Moghadam argues in her essay, *Islamic*

Feminism and its Discontents, that as long as Islamic feminists remain focused on theological arguments rather than the socioeconomic and political questions and as long as their reference is the Qur'an rather than the "universal standards", their impact will be limited at best. It is difficult for Muslim women trying to reform Islam from within Islamic framework to win theological argument because attempts to do so can reinforce the legitimacy of the Islamic system, help to reproduce it and undermine secular alternatives (cited in Barlas 2002: 102).

Similarly, in her book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, Haideh Moghissi is concerned that celebrating Islamic feminism highlights only one of many forms of identity available to Middle Eastern women, overshadowing forms of struggle outside religious practices and silencing secular voices raised against "Islamification" policies (1999:137-138). Moghissi asserts that feminism is a secular ideology and Islam rests on "fundamentalist foundations" (1999:143). She also argues that by advocating feminist projects conducted within Islamic framework, Muslim women help legitimize the political-religious dictatorship. Moghissi writes that Islam is a religion that is based on "gender hierarchy" and therefore cannot be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women's equality with men (Moghissi 1999:126).

Prominent secular and Muslim feminists claim that Islam is a patriarchal and misogynistic religion. Fatima Mernissi in her book *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory* claims that Islam "professes models of hierarchical relationships and sexual inequality and puts a sacred stamp [onto] female subservience" (Mernissi 1996: 13-14

cited in Barlas 2005b:13). Because of this view of Islam, secular and Muslim feminists do not find it meaningful to engage the Qur'an in their struggle for women's rights. But this did not keep some of them from using it to win an argument or from making false claims about it.

For instance, Nawal al-Saadawi, who is well-known for her aversion to all monotheistic religions wrote that "the Qur'an advocates stoning to death for adultery", though, in fact the Qur'an does not prescribe stoning for any sin or crime, asserts Barlas (2005b: 13). Nawal al-Saadawi hastily makes use of a couple of Qur'anic verses or a *hadith* sometimes just to win an argument (Abou-Bakr 2001).

Secular and other Muslim feminists focus mainly on the socioeconomic and political barriers that work against modern changes in gender roles and women's rights in Muslim societies (Tohidi 2003). Nayereh Tohidi stresses that "[t]hough a very important factor, religion is only one determinant of women's status and rights and its impact is mediated and modified through state policy, the educational system and other socio-cultural institutions (2003:166-167). She also asserts that any claims to cultural relativism render more harm than help women's empowerment (2003: 185). Historically, she adds, Muslim women activists were often able to bypass cultures of religious interpretation through participation in powerful secular nationalist and socialist movements. Today, the resurgence of Islamic identities and cultures brought about by the revivalist countermovement has placed women's activism in a new context.

In a lecture delivered at the American University in Cairo (April 10, 2001), Deniz Kandiyoti was asked about “Islamic feminism” and “she quickly dismissed it as an “Arab-centered debate”, too “theoretical and textual”, as opposed to “living Islam”. She also opined that it is better to leave such a debate on the Qur’an and Hadith to religious scholars” (quoted in Abou-Bakr 2001). Kandiyoti is among the scholars who believe that political and socioeconomic conditions are more important in determining women’s status and role in society. In her book *Women, Islam, and the State*, Kandiyoti placed the state at the center of her analysis because it “highlights the reproduction of gender inequalities through various dimensions of state policy, through ‘gendered’ construction of citizenship and through the dynamics of incorporation of national and ethnic collectivities into modern states” (Kandiyoti 1991:1).

[T]he treatment of women and Islam has for a long time been dominated by ahistorical accounts of the main tenets of Muslim religion and their implications for women. A predominately exegetical approach is shared by fundamentalist apologists defending what they see as the divinely-ordained inequality of the sexes, Muslim feminists attempting a progressive reading of the Qur’an, the *Hadith* and of early Islamic history, and a few radicals who argue that Islam is intrinsically patriarchal and inimical to women’s rights.....This tendency has produced a rather paradoxical convergence between Western orientalists, whose ahistorical and ethnocentric depictions of Muslim societies have been the subject of an extensive critique, and Muslim feminists and scholars with a genuine interest in radical change. *Whatever the strategic merits of engaging with conservative ideologues on their own terrain, this approach is ultimately unable to account for the important variations encountered in women’s conditions both within and across Muslim societies.* More it is able to conceptualise [*sic*] the possible connections between Islam and other features of society such as political systems, kinship systems or the economy (Kandiyoti 1991:1 *emphasis mine*).

Islamic Feminism: Revision and Reconstruction

During the past two decades, reform-oriented Muslim women scholar-activists, also known as Islamic feminists, started “speaking for themselves”. Their voices seek to correct the narrow representation of their struggle and craft a better understanding of how to engage in a two-front battle (against Islamic traditionalism and Western imperialism) and the difficulties they endure. As Elizabeth Fernea discovered in her *Search for Islamic Feminism* that Muslim women activism is alive but may be in different forms than expected in the West and that she has to recast her own definition of feminism in order to incorporate the strategies these women are using to address their problems (Fernea 1998: 415, 422).

It seems important at this point to clarify my use of Islamic/Islamist feminism. I employ Islamic/Islamist interchangeably and broadly to mean anything pertaining to Islam. The term Islamic feminism is an uneasy one. It has been created by Western scholars in order to categorize or label Muslim women activism, which Omaila Abou-Bakr (2001) calls the “hegemonic naming of the ‘other’”. Some Muslim women activists see the term feminism attached to Islam as “redundant and offensive” (Abou-Bakr 2001). Others, like Omaila Abou-Bakr, look at the term ‘Islamic’ attached to feminism as a “necessary qualification in our present time to clarify that the concerns over women’s conditions, rights, and roles is in the context of our cultures and their social, historical, and religious background. Hence, it qualifies our feminist agenda, drawing lines of demarcation among trends and orientations” (Abou-Bakr 2001). Another group of Muslim women engaged in

activities and research on women's rights rejects this labeling (Wadud 2000, 2006; Barlas 2002; Ezzat 1995). So while some Muslim feminists openly use the term, others evade it opting for "Believing women" (Barlas 2002) or "Muslim women scholar-activists" (Webb 2000).

The term Muslim women scholar-activists is the term that I use throughout the dissertation to describe Muslim women engaged in the revision of Islamic traditions, the constitution of new modernity in the twenty-first century, the transformation of the Muslim public sphere and probably the transformation of feminism itself (Badran 1999). All these activities are within an Islamic framework. The term "Muslim women scholar-activists" is used by Muslim women to avoid hegemonic labeling and to actually put the concept into practice, demonstrating the connection between theory and practice. Hence, this term addresses the criticism that pro-faith activism is basically an intellectual project that does not represent the political and socioeconomic realities of Muslim women (Moghissi 1999). Muslim women scholar-activists are engaged in a movement of Islamic reform in Muslim societies both "within predominately Muslim states and societies, in old Muslim minority communities, and in new diasporas" (Badran 1999:165).

With the rising influence of multiplicity of factors such as globalization and fragmentation, the Muslim world is witnessing waves of revivalism and reformation. A group of critical Muslim women intellectuals and activists are now challenging the predominant conservative interpretive practices in an attempt to reconstruct Islamic social norms and structures, whether religious, cultural or legal. To achieve this

reconstruction, emphasis is placed on methodology while simultaneously acknowledging constraints or shortcoming within it vis-à-vis the realities of today. Islamic authenticity and legitimacy are maintained in such a way as to respond to the needs and aspirations of Muslim women in today's world. This is fundamental to the issues confronting Islamic thought and reform today (Wadud 2005:179).

According to Amina Wadud, "the Qur'anic text must be continually interpreted in accordance to the interpreter's present situation" (Wadud 2000: 11). Asma Barlas's contribution illustrates the liberatory potential of theology for women by giving a reading of the Qur'an that challenges its appropriation by religious patriarchies. According to Amina Wadud, the term 'patriarchy' means "a hegemonic presumption of dominance and superiority that leads to the eradication of women's agency". It is a situation when women are treated as object of *sharia*, not as a discussant (Wadud 2006).

Muslim women scholar-activists argue that liberation must be reformulated within Islam, especially the Qur'anic text. They stress that the liberation of women that began with the Prophet's message in seventh-century Arabia should not end with his death (Wadud 1999). By engaging meaningfully with the Islamic tradition, Muslim women are trying to avert the failure to perpetuate the spiritually-based liberatory and democratic ideas initiated by Prophet Muhammad.

In her latest book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Amina Wadud describes her intellectual and activist *jihad* (struggle) against gender prejudices. She is simultaneously critical of conservative or traditional Islam as well as of progressive

Muslims and feminism. She describes the ways in which the Divine authority, text, or law are transformed into instruments exploited by those in power in order to erase and marginalize women. She shows that patriarchy, which leads to the eradication of women's moral agency, is an offense against Islam and negates a true surrender to God. She asserts that the Islamic texts must be the foundation for continued debate, interpretation, re-interpretation and contestation. This process guarantees the continuity of these texts as sources and that these sources are not static but *salih* (sound) for all times and places (Wadud 2006).

Likewise, Asma Barlas (2002) believes that liberatory theology can challenge and reform oppressive Muslim practices against women by critiquing Islam from within. She articulates a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an (Barlas 2005a:106). Barlas and Wadud argues that by reflecting upon Islamic theology and hermeneutics as a methodology, one can discern some ideas about a theory of female inclusiveness(Wadud 2006) or a theory of sexual liberation in Islam (Barlas 2002) which will then require political structures and programs to ensure that it is activated.

Faced with Islamic revival, more and more Muslim women are finding it necessary and beneficial to engage in the dialogue about their religious and gender identities. They articulate a gender-sensitive discourse within an Islamic framework or paradigm. They use *ijtihad* (independent investigation of the religious sources) and *tafsir* (interpretation of the Qur'an) as their basic methodology in order to establish a new gender-sensitive hermeneutics that "render a confirmation of gender equality in

the Qur'an that was lost sight as male interpreters constructed a corpus of *tafsir* promoting a doctrine of male superiority, reflecting the mindset of the prevailing patriarchal cultures" (Badran 2002).

Many Muslim women intellectuals from different generations, orientations, and locales, challenge the political and discursive influence of Islamic hegemonic discourse. Their actions and scholarship "bridge religious and gender issues in order to create conditions in which justice and freedom may prevail" (Cooke 2001: 59). Their activism represents a "double commitment" that leads to the emergence of a new, complex self-positioning that confirms "belonging in a religious community while allowing for activism on behalf of and with other women" (Cooke 2001: 59-60). This self-positioning "informs the speech, actions and writings, or the way of life adopted by women who are committed to questioning Islamic epistemology *as an expansion of their faith position and not a rejection of it*" (Cooke 2001:61). Muslim women intellectuals occupy the space between identities that appears to be "mutually exclusive", trying to demonstrate their "continuity". They are engaging in a provocative and oppositional act of political insubordination, because they refuse the boundaries others (traditionalists or secularists) try to impose on them (Cooke 2001: 60). Islamic feminism is an "attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women" (Cooke 2001: 61). Muslim women claim their right to be strong women within their tradition, regardless the accusations of being deviants or westernized. What is meant by Islamic feminism in this context is a "rather contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning" (Cooke 2001: 59).

During the past two years, books, anthologies and edited volumes by Muslim women themselves have begun to appear. To mention only a few: Fereshteh Nouraiie Simone's *On Shifting Grounds* and Gisela Webb's *Windows of Faith*. They contain a collection of articles on intelligent, reform-oriented Islamic and feminist scholarship written by Muslim women themselves. Their dynamic, civilized reflection and open dialogue are not only crucial for the empowerment of women, but also for the initiation of reflexive change in Muslim societies.

To sum up, despite a rapid expansion of research *on* Muslim women, until recently there was an absence of research *by* Muslim women themselves. Faced with a transnational Islamic revival movement, more and more Muslim women are finding it necessary and beneficial to engage in a dialogue about Islamic identity and culture. The goal of this research is to trace the emerging tendencies of intellectual scholarship and transnational activism in different localities throughout the Muslim world and assess their impact on the lives of Muslim women. In this section, I covered a small sample of the rich multiplicity of women's voices as an indication of the vital potential for change that women, individually and collectively, possess. The arguments and methodology of Muslim women scholar-activists are explored in details in a later chapter.

Religion and Social Change: Women Negotiating Islam and Modernity

The intellectual exchange between secular feminists and faith-based scholar-activists symbolizes the public and policy debates on Muslim women. Traditional Muslims argue that gender equality is a Western ideal and thus alien to Islam and

Western discourses identify Islam with “oriental despotism” (Mernissi 1995:33), asserting that gender justice is impossible in Islam. On the compatibility between Islam and feminism, there seems to be a convergence between Islamic and Western hegemonic discourses. Islamists consider women’s liberation to be a Western secular idea, which prevented them from making their own interpretations about women’s problems (Ezzat 1995). Secular feminists are critical and dismissive of attempts for exegetical reform to “extract liberatory mode of feminist theorizing and praxis” from the Qur’an (Zine 2006:15). By dismissing alternative, liberatory readings, “secular feminists uphold the most rigid and dogmatic narrations as being the authoritative voice. They, therefore, fall into the same trap as fundamentalists who derive only static and literal meanings from the Qur’an” (Zine 2006:16).

As mentioned earlier, the dichotomy between Islamic and secular discourses emanates from the difference in their frame of reference, methodology and outcome. One derives its discourse from the Qur’an and other derives its discourse from universal standards. The problem with secular feminism lies in that its arguments conflate Islam with a patriarchal reading of it. Focusing only on secular feminism ignores significant and lively debates and activism within Islam committed to the feminist goals of combating patriarchy and transforming the ideological and material conditions that sustain the subordination of women. Such extreme dismissal inhibits political solidarity across feminist divides (Zine 2006:17). Secular feminists need not to treat Muslim feminists as rivals or foes (Bayes and Tohidi 2001:51). Abdullahi An-Na’im argues that it is imperative to reconcile the two types of discourse in the

interest of promoting women's rights (An-Na'im 1995). He posits an urgent need for a positive engagement of religion in social change. Advocate of women's rights need to take religious discourse seriously and to educate themselves in its concepts and techniques. Once they have done that, they will gain the confidence and competence to challenge the traditional Islamists on their own grounds (An-Na'im 1995:56). Advocates of women's rights have no alternative but to engage in an Islamic discourse because Islamic groups have already succeeded in "Islamizing" the terms of reference of the public discourse in most Muslim societies (An-Na'im 1995:59). For effective strategizing, Muslim women not only need to challenge traditional doctrine about women's rights, but also to develop an alternative discourse and articulate an Islamic justification for it (An-Na'im 1995:51).

Muslim women take Islam seriously. Contrary to Inglehart's version of modernization, modern scientific advances and secularism have not eroded religion or spiritual needs from the lives of Muslim men and women (Tohidi and Bayes 2001:44). Muslim women have been critical of Western-oriented modernism, which has been uneven, distorted, and polarized. Muslim women associate this modernism with Western imperialism to the extent that they have joined the Islamist movements (Tohidi and Bayes 2001:41). Heba Raouf Ezzat (2001) argues that contrary to what secular feminists believe, Muslim women join Islamist movements not to return to subservient and secluded roles but "to find a legitimate and sanctioned milieu for social presence and political activism". It is a detour toward modernity, but one that is rooted in their Islamic faith (Tohidi and Bayes 2001:42). Therefore, a realistic

assessment and understanding of the role of religion in women's lives and in shaping their status are necessary for effective strategizing for women's rights.

The civilizing and liberating gender policies of the West have proved counter-productive, creating more resistance than would have been otherwise the case (Moghissi 1999:35). By making Muslim women and their rights central to imperial policies in the Middle East, Muslims, as a reaction, have turned traditional practices into symbols of Islamic identity and authenticity in defiance of cultural imperialism (Ahmed 1992 and Tohidi 2003). A positive engagement of religion ensures that the debate about the status and role of women in Muslim societies are local, indigenous and a culturally-rooted critique of traditional practices. It also protects the right of Muslims to understand and adopt modernization and women's rights on their own term.

The faith-based approach to women's rights does not suggest that we "pin the entire project of sexual equality and women's rights on theology alone" (Barlas 2005a:102). However, adopting the right discourse is integral to the political struggle for the protection and the promotion of women's rights, and not as a substitute for it (An-Na'im 1995:60). This approach transcends and destroys the old religious/secular, socioeconomic factors/religious prescriptions and public/private binaries that have been conceptually and practically misleading in the current discourse on women's rights in Islam.

From Islam versus Secularism to Islamic Secularism

Despite their divergences, a certain commonality remains between secular and faith-based woman activism; that is the interest in the promotion of women's rights. An-Na'im stresses the need to build bridges between secular and Islamic feminisms. Secularists need to critically reexamine their views of Islam and seriously reconsider the public role of religion as a force of empowerment and liberation. Secularism must be understood in a dynamic and deeply contextual sense for each society, rather than through Western analytical categories, such as the so-called strict separation of "church and state", to be transplanted from one setting to another (An-Na'im 2002, Ezzat and Abdalla 2004). In this regard, it is important to discuss a creative endeavor to avoid the polarization between traditionalists and secularists. This endeavor rethinks the concept of secularism not merged with liberalism, not confused with the marginalization of religion and not imposed by neo-colonialism.

In an attempt to redefine secularism, Heba Raouf Ezzat and Ahmed Mohammed Abdalla (2004) suggest "Islamic secularism" as a "third option" between secularism and Islamism in which Islam "will express itself as a moral ethos [in some spaces], while in others it has a legal contribution, and in a third category, it can become a vehicle for social change by inspiring social movements for peace and social justice or the liberation of women" (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:46). What is required to advance Islamic secularism is a "collective civil ijihad".

Islamic secularism ensures that Islam and Muslims are always concerned with issues of human rights, democracy and social justice and that Islam is not reduced to

rituals and penal codes. Islamic secularism also empowers people in civil society by facilitating their engagement in grass-roots politics and grass-roots *ijtihad* (what Ezzat and Abdalla prefer to call the “politics of presence”). It also empowers local communities by retrieving a lot of functions from the state and redefining the public role of religion in empowerment and social change. Hence, this approach re-imagines politics and civil society in a way that encompasses the centrality of religion and move beyond the “power-centered statist paradigm”.

An example of the positive cross-fertilization between secular and Islamic women activism is that Muslim scholar-activists examine issues that were raised by Western and secular feminists that called into question the validity of many Muslim practices concerning women. However, they ask these questions not as feminists but as Muslim women concerned with Islam as practiced based on its ideals. Asma Barlas’s intellectual and “textual activism” is a case in point. She writes:

I dispute the master narrative of feminism that claims this insight as a peculiarly feminist discovery....In my own case, for instance, I came to the realization that women and men are equal as a result not of reading feminist texts, but of reading the Qur’an. In fact, it wasn’t until much later in my life that I even encountered feminist texts....But I do owe an intellectual debt to feminist theorizing about patriarchy and for having given me the conceptual tools to recognize it and talk about it (Barlas 2005b:13).

Islam and Civil Society

The previous section demonstrated the difference between secular and Islamic feminisms in terms of the frame of reference and conclusions. I want now to discuss the implication of that frame of reference on their strategies and outcome. Secular feminists dismiss the role of religion in women’s liberation, focusing mainly on

political and socioeconomic problems within the narrowly defined Western epistemological foundations of women's rights discourse (which claims to be universal). Conflict is the main concept of the feminist theory. Secular feminists fight male domination, struggle for the "empowerment" of women over men, view religion as an obstacle to women's rights and concentrate on women's superior nature as well as on women's participation in state institutions as channels of "empowerment" (Ezzat quoted in El-Gawhary 1994: 26). Therefore, as Asifa Qureishi argues, "feminism to most Muslims means Western imperialism, which means attacking Islam and destroying Muslim women's identity and replacing it with secular identity and agenda" (quoted in Fernea 1998: 378). Feminism's negative anti-religious and neo-colonial associations among the Muslim public explains the limited policy impact of the transnational activities of Western feminism despite their networking, coalition-building and financial capabilities.

Alternatively, the new Islamist framework provides better grounds than secularism and feminism for securing the rights of women in Muslim societies. Muslim women scholar-activists, like Heba Raouf Ezzat, focus more on the society and the public sphere instead of the state, which they view as a barrier rather than a catalyst for women's activism. The state, in their point of view, is a static entity that does not provide much hope for participatory engagement¹.

¹ I developed this argument based on my understanding of Heba Raouf Ezzat's various interviews and writings.

According to the Islamist approach, the development of a discourse on Islam, civil society and women's rights is crucial for social change through the empowerment of women to engage in public sphere dialogue. Muslim scholar-activists

aim for a dynamic reconciliation into a system for a moral society that recognizes the benefits of modern civil society while yet sustaining Islamic traditions without succumbing to the consequence of patriarchal interpretations that marginalized women's public and private roles (Wadud 2005: 171).

On this basis, it is critical that any conceptualizations of global civil society facilitate a positive engagement of religious perspectives. In his article *Religion and Global Civil Society: Inherent Incompatibility or Synergy and Interdependence?*, Abdullahi An-Na'im (2002) proposes a synergic and interdependent model of a mutually supportive relationship between religion and civil society. He believes that a sharp dichotomy between the religious and the secular is not necessarily the best way of conceptualizing the relationship between religion and the state of politics (An-Na'im 2002:59). He discusses attempts to reframe three set of relations that are central to the discourse of civil society, namely, those between the religious and the secular, between individual and the social, and between the private and the public spheres. His main concern is how the concept of global civil society can engage and encompass the centrality of the religious and cultural identity for most people and communities throughout the world.

Reformist thinkers, such as Khaled Abou El-Fadl, argue that "it is in the interests of predominantly Muslim states not to suppress independent civil society groups because, in the end, progress comes from the dialectical as well as dialogical

interaction amongst the Muslim state and Islamic civil society groups” (Sharify-Funk 2003). The forming a new Muslim public sphere would “enable both men and women to hold the hegemonic state and its substructure accountable for their actions” (Sharify-Funk 2003).

By entering the public arena, Muslim women scholars-activists reclaimed, revived and reshaped the concepts of civil society, politics and activism without inscribing the exclusions on which they have been based, such as the exclusion of the role of religion and different forms and spaces of activism. Muslim women activism is crucial in unpacking stereotypes of women in Muslim societies by focusing on how Muslim women perceive their status, rights and identities. Their approach reflects the diverse and varied realities of Muslim women and Muslim societies. Their activism promises a more inclusive, pluralistic, civic, and voluntary civil society that rejects the false essentialism, defines an authentic identity, and maximizes women’s participation and engagement.

This research provides an empirical portrait of a creative political and theoretical endeavor that promotes the consistency between religion and global civil society. Much has been written about the development of civil society and its impact on democratization and political culture in the Muslim world (Al-Sayyid 1995; Brynen, Korany and Noble 1995; Ibrahim 1993), but none of them examined the possible contribution of the interdependent model of the relationship between religion and civil society; whereby each is understood in a way that supports the other².

² This model is suggested and developed by Abdullahi An-Na’im (2002).

Transnational Networking and Activism

For effective strategizing, the importance of dialogue and coalition-building cannot be overemphasized. However, little has been written about how dialogue among Muslim women from different contexts shapes their activism. Much of the literature of women and Islam “offers pre-dominantly structuralist account of social change that focuses only on analyzing traditional, economic, neocolonial, and revivalist barriers to women’s advancement as well as on localized impact of global economic factors” (Sharify-Funk 2005:230). While there is a number of studies about the efforts of various women’s organizations and groups to achieve change in local contexts, there has been an absence of studies examining how these efforts are increasingly linked together via transnational networking and how they contribute to the emergence of a transnational Muslim public sphere (Sharify-Funk 2005: 230).

Muslim women scholar-activists take advantage of transnationalism to empower themselves. Meena Sharify-Funk (2005) explores how women from diverse contexts feel empowered to approach their local work with greater confidence and creativity, hence, becoming “cocreators” of an emergent, transnational public sphere that projects civil, pluralistic attitude towards Muslim identity politics (Sharif-Funk 2005: 261).

As a final point, I want to discuss the role of male advocates of the rights of women. An-Na’im (1995) believes that male advocates have a contribution to make. Khaled Abou El Fadl, an advocate of Muslim women’s rights, provides a great support for Muslim women intellectuals. He believes that it is about time that we

trust women with our intellectual and public lives. He also speaks against those who accuse reformists, seeking to recognize women's rightful place in Muslim society as being westernized. He asserts that "[f]ar from being westernized, Muslim women intellectuals are fully anchored in Islamic jurisprudence and morality than traditionalist attitudes towards women" (Abou El Fadl 2005: 273).

Conclusion

By exposing the dichotomies and gaps in the literature on women in Islam, I hope I have uncovered the tensions and blind spots that limit our ability to understand gender in non-Western societies. My research is a suggestion to rethink the role of religion in contemporary feminist debate in order to formulate an informed political judgment regarding the status of women in Muslim societies. Arguably, an encounter with the voices of Muslim women as active agents of an authentic modernity rooted in their faith may lead to the transformation of feminism itself. My point is not to suggest that there is no injustice towards women in Muslim societies, but that the reductive character of the framing of Muslim women's issues needs to be questioned.

Situating themselves at the nexus of religion, gender and translocality, Muslim women scholar-activists simultaneously challenge hegemony and extremism. Muslim scholar-activists assert that the liberation for women must be reformulated within Islam, especially the Qur'anic text as the starting point. They provide new interpretation of the status of Muslim women and challenge the Western, secular, and liberal definition and assumptions of feminism and modernity. This positive, forward-

looking, Islamic modernist project for women's liberation within the Islamic framework will be- Margot Badran argues- the new radical feminism of the future in Muslim societies (Badran 1999:184).

My main argument in this chapter is that searching for the appropriate framework is vital in understanding women activism in non-Western societies. The appropriate framing of the "Muslim women" question is needed not only for itself, but also because it carries important policy implications (to be discussed in chapter seven). Instead of subsuming the "Muslim women" question directly under the feminist theory, like most scholars do, I argue that we may use the well-developed theory to pose telling questions about the phenomenon, but without supposing that the answers will be the same and without insisting on strict correspondence.

CHAPTER 3

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: RECONFIGURING THE PUBLIC SPHERE

As individuals and societies struggle to make sense of the global processes of rapid social, economic, political, and technological changes, standard conceptual maps of the social and political world become obsolete and the necessity for new guideposts obvious (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:136)

The aim of this chapter is to construct the broad theoretical and conceptual framework of the dissertation. I will begin by arguing that Muslim politics is complex and Muslims have been “reshaping their identities and political agendas while becoming increasingly mindful of the manifold economics, communications, and social links among them” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: 138). It is part of my contention that for the most part mainstream international relations has not been very effective in accounting for the various transformations occurring in Muslim thought and practice. Arguably, this introduction explains the limited imagination of mainstream international relations theory and explores new way for making sense and interpreting the interplay between religion and politics in Muslim context. Such alternative trajectory to think and read Muslim politics that goes beyond conventional categories and assumptions promises theoretical and empirical progress.

By imagining alternative forms and spaces of the ‘political’ as well as by recasting conventional definitions of what constitutes civil, democratic politics, I concretely show how new forms and spaces of engagement lead to the emergence of

new forms of Muslim activism and Muslim public space that may well precipitate civic pluralism in the Muslim world. This transnational/translocal approach is better placed to provide us with effective ways of thinking about the nascent 'Islamic Reformation' and the emergence of a transnational Muslim public sphere. After reviewing the nature of the 'new' Muslim transnationalism, I go on to examine the projects of Islamic reformation through the work of Muslim women intellectuals. This research is a beginning of an investigation into the major themes of an emergent, critical reformist movement in Islamic thought and practice. It promises fresh insights with regard to the 'women question' in the Muslim context and it is likely to overcome the shortcomings of the current debate on Muslim women.

With the rising influence of multiplicity of factors such as mass communication and mass education, the Muslim world is witnessing waves of revivalism and reformation within and across various layers of Muslim society. A variety of Muslim liberal and critical intellectuals and activists -both men and women- are now challenging the predominant conservative interpretive practices for the reconstruction of Islamic social norms. In order to understand the dynamics of this transformation, the conventional assumptions of international theory requires rethinking, mainly because international relations theory tends to work within predetermined limits of what can legitimately be called politics (Mandaville 2001). I argue that a set of presumptions and dichotomies of social analysis deflects attention from major contestations and debates currently taking place within the Muslim world.

International Relations Theory: Beyond limited Imagination

I begin this section by arguing that the conception of politics found in the mainstream international relations theory is incapable of accounting for forms of politics enabled by the current climate of rapid, global sociocultural change. In the context of contemporary global transformations, a variety of ‘translocal’ forces, such as diasporic communities, transnational social movements and information technology are challenging the traditional, state-centric “political imaginary” of international relations (Mandaville 2001:5). By rethinking conventional categories of politics and community, we can discover that the field of international relations has much more to gain from engaging religion and other forms of communities.

According to Jacques Derrida, deconstructing modernist, secularized discourses (and texts) creates a space for other (religious) discourses and (sacred) texts. After deconstructing the foundations of Western secular theory, other cultures and religions would be considered more relevant to the theories and analyses of politics (cited in Kubáľková 2003:85-86). My discussion is organized according to four themes: state-centrism, religion, culture and Islamic fundamentalism; each of which illustrates a different aspect of the challenge facing the hegemony of the Western conceptions of political community and modernity from a variety of transformative forces. This approach allows us to remove the constraints placed on religious discourses, cultures and identities by the Western social theory and opens the door to analyze these factors on their own terms without attempting to fit them into a positivist framework.

State-centrism: Rethinking the Political in International Relations

Because the state never fully contains the everyday experience of politics or political community, conventional IR theory fails to account for a great deal of political activityThe state-centric nature of traditional IR theory has blinded it to any form which does not conform to the requirement of political science *qua* state science (Mandaville 2001:24-25).

International relations theory tends to ignore the linkage between societies and societal actors across national boundaries and recognize only one single form of political community that is the Western nation-state (Risse-Kappen 1995:16). It was taken for granted that what we understood by international relations were really relations between governments. This limited imagination of the ‘political’ prohibits our appreciation of important new forms of international politics located outside the traditional realm of the state.

Theories of international relations have tended to assume that proper politics is something involving particular form of decision-making by particular actors within specific institutional spaces. However, there are other forms of world politics to which IR theory is effectively blind because it has only been taught to recognize a limited range of shapes and colors as political (Mandaville 2001: 8).

In this sense, Mandaville questions the extent to which the imagination of political identity remains nationalized- that is, whether political identity remains “the exclusive reserve of a single national-territorial referent” (Mandaville 2001:49). He argues that the declining efficacy of the nation-state means that ‘the national’ no longer possesses a monopoly over the description of political identity. This fact has allowed non-or post-national formulation of political organization to enter the picture.

It has been argued that certain global transformations are forcing us to reassess how we think about the ‘political’. These transformations include the global flow of

peoples and cultures, transnational social movements and the globalization of media technology. These global sociocultural transformations and processes represent a challenge to the nation-state model because they “disembed peoples and cultures from particular territorial locales and spread their social relations across space and time. As a result, political identities no longer inhabit the exclusive container of the nation-state and must be seen as configured in and between multiple political spaces” (Mandaville 2001: 188). This condition, which Peter Mandaville termed ‘translocality’, is an increasingly important form of political space and interactions which fall between bounded communities.

Thus, global sociocultural transformations are calling into question the hegemony of national and statist forms of political identity and are giving rise to new forms of transnational politics as alternative visions of non-Western politics and polities which conventional readings of the political- especially the realist tradition in international relations theory- are incapable of accounting for (Mandaville 2001: 188).

This critique of the state-centric nature of international relations is nothing new. Theorists of interdependence and world society have sought to challenge and downplay state hegemony. Various scholars within mainstream international relations have offered theories to explain the transformations mentioned above. James Roseau (1990) describes these developments as a form of “turbulence in world politics”. Nevertheless, these theories did not envision alternative, more effective ways of thinking about non-Western politics and the state remained a very important actor in world politics (Mandaville 2001: 26). As mentioned in chapter one, critical scholars

like Andrew Linklater and Robert Cox have challenged the conventional foundations of international relations theory and began to investigate forms of post-Westphalian, post-national as well as post-hegemonic politics.

Having recognized the value of the critical turn in international relations theory and taking much of its insights as a departure point, I have followed Peter Mandaville's framework and suggestions in order to undertake a study of a new movement whose discourses imagine non-statist forms of political community. Through the concept of the *ummah* (the global Muslim community), Muslims are revising their ideas about how, what, and where political community can be. In this sense the political is the "negotiation of identity and meanings" (Mandaville 2001).

Escaping conventional approaches provides us with a richer conceptual framework for thinking about Muslim politics since applying the criteria of political modernity when attempting to study Muslim politics has been very misleading. Modernity and its conventional dichotomies (public/private and secular/religious) and assumptions about the location of political activity have overlooked certain activities because they do not fall into the range of activities we usually associate with the political or because their premises are not Western. I try to overcome that by endorsing an alternative trajectory focusing on alternative forms and spaces of politics and community. My examination of transnational Muslim women activism, which will be elaborated in later chapters, can be seen as attempt to move beyond the limited boundaries of conventional politics in order to craft a better understanding of transnational social relations and interactions constitutive of new political identities.

Religion: the Missing Dimension

Following on from the challenges to state-centric politics alluded to above; I want to discuss another striking void in the international relations literature, which is the neglect of the role of religion in the “social scientific accounts of world affairs”. (Kubáľková 2003:79). Kubáľková argues that “Western social science remains unwilling and unable to treat religion as an important social factor on a par with secular terms”. This void is even more serious if we acknowledge that the global resurgence of religion holds important implications for thinking about international relations. Traditional international relations theory considers that “any politics with reference to religion became the ultimate threat to order, security and civility”, the notion upon which modernization theories have been based (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003:5).

The opposite can in fact be argued. Religion can play a pivotal role in the modernization of any society. The global resurgence of religion confronts international relations theory with a theoretical challenge and calls for the elaboration of new interpretative categories and analytical frameworks for understanding the interplay between religion and world politics. It should be understood that “this exploration of religion does not imply the substitution of reason and rationality with faith” (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 15).

I want to make the point that in the Muslim context, religion is an important dimension of Muslims world views and a source of normative guidance. Religious aspects are inseparable from the expression of cultural, political and social values.

Religion could itself be the motivator as well as the mode and the medium of political action and expression. Religion could become an agent of social construction, both in the domestic as well as in the international sphere (Kubálková 2003:101). Therefore, I argue that engaging religion promises creative theoretical and political endeavors in international relations.

As Abdullahi An-Na'im points out, the central role of religion in the political culture of Islamic societies makes it critical that conceptualizations of civil society facilitate the engagement of religious perspectives and promote understanding of religion that are more inclusive, civil and voluntary to enhance conformity with the essential qualities of civil society (An-Na'im 2002:59). This notion of religion offers new possibility of full membership in, and engagement with, civil society, local, national and global.

According to the conventional accounts of modernity, religion is relegated to the domain of the private. But, by reasserting itself in public space, Islam is disrupting the conventional accounts of modernity and challenges the dualism of public/private and tradition/modernity. This understanding of religion can enhance the normative underpinning of civil society; local and global. Developments in the public sphere of Muslim societies support my claims. For example, volunteer study groups or *Halaqas* have formed in many countries, where women meet weekly to discuss the implications of Islam on their lives. This is one of the expressions in which the gendered notions of public and private are gradually being eroded.

In recent years Islam has been influenced by the emergence of promising ideas- too easily unnoticed or dismissed in the West- that aim at the creation of universal norms that establish the principle of respect to cultural differences as well as the creation of a peaceful global ethos. As a consequence, issues of democratization, civil society and gender equality have become common themes of competing discourses *within* Islam. These developments challenge and refute the underlying assumptions of the modernization theory. This argument becomes evident when we realize that the Muslim world is undergoing transformations and that our understanding of these transformations is limited. Again, these transformations are forcing us to reassess how we think about Muslim politics, identity and community.

Having stressed the pivotal role of religion in the modernization of Muslim societies, it is important to clarify what I mean by Islam in the context of my research. When speaking of Islam, I refer to Islam as a discursive field- a lifeworld or as a “discursive construct which operates as an important bearer of social meaning within particular communities” (Mandaville 2004: 57).

Culture and the Configuration of Political Identity

Without endorsing any cultural determinism, the return of culture and identity to international relations serves as an important correction to international relations scholarship in the era of turbulent global transformation. As Eickelman and Piscatori correctly argue “[m]isleading in other respects, Huntington’s provocative formula reintroduced the concept of culture- albeit a dated and deeply flawed one- to the study of foreign policy and international relations and underscored the notion that nation-

states are no longer the sole source of identity in politics” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:162). The clash of civilizations thesis associates the resurgence of religion with the danger of fundamentalism or global terrorism. Similarly, public discourse in the West often tends to equate Islamic globalism with pan-national fundamentalist networks (An-Na’im 2002: 66). The Muslim *ummah* is understood as the global notion of *Jihad* or as a transnational model of militant Islam. The clash of civilizations ‘paradigm’ deflects attention away from the cultural dynamics of political change.

Lapidary formulas such as the “West versus Rest” (Huntington 1993) are deceptive in their Manichaeic simplicity. This “essentializing” of civilizational traditions deflects attention from their internal and historical variations and from the vigorous internal debate among their adherents” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:162).

Contemporary views on religious identities as uncompromising are highly unenlightened and unenlightening because they ignore significant and lively debates within Islam that includes issues of civil society, democratization, pluralism and tolerance. Mandaville describes the ease with which “Islam becomes *the* explanatory variable” of Muslim sociocultural conditions:

For example, when women are discriminated against in predominately secular societies (e.g. the United States or the United Kingdom), the culprit is usually seen to be something called ‘patriarchy’ (i.e. a historical- structural explanation is given); however, similar discrimination in predominately Muslim societies is usually immediately ascribed to Islam. In this sense, Islam often offers the easy way out, both for analysts seeking quick explanations and for the policy-makers of the societies in question who want to sidestep the structural causes of gender inequality and the mistreatment of women by referring to ‘cultural’ causes which are conveniently ‘out of their hands’ (Mandaville 2001:58).

It is becoming increasingly apparent that one cannot easily map peoples and cultures today as something static and fixed. In contrast, Lila Abu-Lughod warns against “the danger of taking the particular situatedness of a few individuals as representative of an entire culture”.

When one generalizes from experiences and conversations with a number of specific people in a community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenize them. The appearance of an absence of internal differentiation makes it easier to conceive of a group of people as discrete, bounded entity who do this or that and believe in such and such (Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Against Culture* quoted in Mandaville 2001:41).

Misleadingly, culture is sometimes whatever is left over when all other explanations have been exhausted. However, to conceive of culture as some form of explanatory variable is to miss the point. Culture is not a thing. Alternatively, culture refers to “the negotiation, articulation and inscription of meaning within and between social context” (Mandaville 2001:38).

In his study of Muslim communities in translocal spaces, Mandaville extends the notion of culture by putting a great deal of emphasis on how cultural forms change over time and how they are modified through the act of moving from one social context to another. Culture emerges from the “negotiation of meaning” (Mandaville 2001:39).

An assessment of transnational Muslim public sphere beyond this limited view on culture and identity can help us discover how transnational and globalizing forces affect the configuration of Muslim political identity. My research provides an alternative reading of transnational Islam, focusing not on militant movements and their struggle against the West, which typically over-determine how Islam is

perceived in the West. Alternatively, I focus on crucial contestations and negotiations *within* Islam that usually go unnoticed in the Western discourse on Islam. Expanding the line of inquiry can reveal a richer picture of how Muslims come to define and experience their political identity.

Thus far I have argued that Muslim politics is so complex that any attempt to reduce to a single formula is misleading. Of particular relevance to the present study is the work of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart. In their research on religion and politics in the Muslim world, Norris and Inglehart (2003) state that

Huntington is correct when he argues that cultural differences have taken on a new importance, forming the fault lines for future conflict. Although nearly the entire world pays lip service to democracy, there is still no global consensus on the self-expression values—such as social tolerance, gender equality, freedom of speech, and interpersonal trust—that are crucial to democracy. Today, these divergent values constitute the real clash between Muslim societies and the West (Norris and Inglehart 2003:73).

In their book *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, which draws on a massive base of new evidence generated by the four waves of the World Values Survey executed from 1981 to 2001 in eighty societies covering all of the world's major faiths, Norris and Inglehart argue that support for religious authorities is stronger in Muslim societies than in the West. There is a substantial cultural cleavage in social values towards gender equality and sexual liberalization between the West and Muslim societies. The gap has steadily widened as the younger generation in the West has gradually become more liberal, while the younger generation in Muslim societies remains deeply traditional (Norris and Inglehart 2004:13). They concluded

that the most basic cultural fault line between the West and Islam does not concern democracy; it involves issues of gender equality and sexual liberation.

In the light of our previous discussion, Norris and Inglehart's analysis leaves me dissatisfied. Their approach suffers from two major shortcomings. First of all, it reduces Muslim politics to a single formula by referring to cultural causes or Islam as the explanatory variable. They also excluded from their analysis how cultural forms change over time and how they are modified through the act of moving from one social context to another; that is the significant and continually growing Muslim reformist voices in the West itself (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:162). Second, and more importantly, they fail to account for the internal debates and contestations taking place *within* Islam regarding issues such as democracy, modernity, the role of *ulama* (religious authorities), and the role of women in the society. In the present era, Islam is witnessing a decline in the efficacy of the religious scholars and an increased confidence on the part of the individual Muslims with regard to (re)interpreting the ethical claims of Islam for themselves (Mandaville 2004:81). Muslims- men and women- in translocal spaces publicly debate, contest and rearticulate the ethical claims of Islam, especially among younger generations. Young voices committed to Islam are now calling for self-criticism and revision of the founding concepts in the Islamic discourse (such as the dominant reductionist definition of *shari'a*) (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:51). As a result, the popular Muslim political discourse is being transformed toward inclusiveness and pluralism.

Finally, the tendency in Western literature to posit a monolithic Islam and compare it with an equally undifferentiated West is misleading. The tendencies of hegemonic discourses in the West can be outlined as: (1) Instruments of classification which permit us to define various societies according to a binary opposition, West or non-West. (2) Sets of images or systems of representation which serve to associate particular cultures and people with normative categories – e.g. Western democracy = good, non-Western ‘oriental despotism’= bad. (3) Abstract standards of comparisons which allow us to determine the extent to which non Western societies and cultures are “close to”, “far away from” or “catching up with” the West. (4) Determination of the criteria according to which societies are ranked and judged (Mandaville 2001:62)¹.

The current discourse on liberal Islam is representative of these tendencies in the Western discourse. The Western discourse is overwhelmingly concerned with the relationship of liberal Islam to the Western conception of liberalism and secularism, despite the fact that, according to An-Na’im, Islamic liberalism cannot be explained in terms of Western liberalism and that secularism is not a prerequisite for liberalism (An-Na’im 2002). To impose one model of liberal secular democratic politics that refuses the public role of religion as a constructive force in active citizenship and civility is to deny Muslims the right to tailor their own version of civil, pluralistic ideals rooted in their faith, which elicits a strong negative reaction from the Muslim public (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004: 44,53). Secularism need not to be a stagnant concept, it should be subject to different interpretations like any other concept. There are

¹ This list is adopted from Peter Mandaville. 2001. *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the umma*, p.26.

voices in the Muslim world which advocate a form of Islamic secularism, in which Islam claims its social and political dimension as valuable assets in building an Islamic democracy. Islam becomes “a vehicle of social change by inspiring social movements for peace, social justice or the liberation of women” (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:46). What is needed to advance Islamic secularism is “a process of juristic scholarly deliberation combined with constructive public debate to reach an overlapping consensus” (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:46). It is a process of “grass-roots politics and grass roots *ijtihad*” (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:47), in which the relationship between the scholars of Islam (*ulama*) and the lay Muslims is not one of authority and blind obedience, but a partnership whereby religious scholars serve the spiritual and social needs of the people, as well as educating and empowering them to advance their knowledge of Islam. In this interactive encounter with the *ulama*, lay Muslims have the right to debate and argue, thereby, becoming rational adherents of faith (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:46). Democracy will not then be an alien notion enforced by foreign powers. On the contrary, Muslims are empowered to fulfill their religious-civic virtues through civil engagement and democratic participation (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:49).

The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Challenge of Islamic Fundamentalism

The recent resurgence of religion has been looked at through lenses such as the “clash of civilizations”, the revolt against the West and a threat to modernity (Thomas 2003:22-23). Recent coverage of contemporary Islam has tended to emphasize “the prevalence of highly radical and militant tendencies at the core of those Islamic

movements whose activities cross national border” (Mandaville 2005a:302). Groups such as Al-Qaeda appear to be constituted by cells on virtually every continent and “have managed to catapult themselves to the forefront of transnational Islam in the eyes of the public” (Mandaville 2005a:305). The events of September 11 and a series of smaller scale attacks in multiple countries have all served to reinforce this image. Since these events, the public discourse on transnational Islam has focused exclusively on global militant networks (Mandaville 2005a: 305).

Peter Mandaville asserts that “[i]t should be clear by now that radical groups with violent agendas constitute the marginal fringes of transnational Islam” (Mandaville 2005a:306). Focusing only on militant networks does not inform us about the complex realities of Muslim transnationalism. There are Islamic movements and lines of communication and coordination that have nothing to do with militancy and revolution. Mandaville affirms that “in global communication forum on the internet and in the activities of a growing number of Muslim NGOs, we find evidence of a transnational Islam whose agenda is organized around themes such as education, human rights and gender equality” (Mandaville 2005a: 302).

Instead of being analyzed as a “revolt against the West”, the global resurgence of religion should be looked at as a “struggle for authenticity” that became so powerful that it began to rival modernity and development as the political aspiration of the non-Western world (Thomas 2003:22).

In this research, I am making the assumption that transnational Islam is conducive to discourses of political civility, pluralism and democracy. A discursive analysis of

the intellectual and social dimension of Muslim transnationalism in a globalizing world is used to test this assumption. My research examines social movements that represent trends in transnational Islam that are compatible with civil, pluralist norms and are better socially positioned to scale up their influence over the next generation of Muslims. It describes and analyzes social movements/networks organized around the themes of gender equality, justice and civil pluralism. I agree with Peter Mandaville that “scaling up” democracy “requires sensitivity to rapidly changing contingencies within and across numerous layers of Muslim society, which is lacking in the Western scholarship on Muslim politics” (Mandaville 2005a: 304). In this regard, and given the scope and diversity of contemporary Muslim politics, “we are required to rethink the conventional notions and boundaries of what constitutes democratic politics” (Mandaville 2005a: 304).

Unlike statist perspectives, democratic politics should not be reduced to issues of representation, quotas and conflicts, but we should rather develop an understanding of “the politics of presence, deliberation, communication and negotiation in daily life”, in which Muslim women play an active role in local communities. In this regard, current Muslim debates on democratic Islam can be compared to and networked with debates about the reform of democracy in the Western world (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:59).

To conclude this section, I would like to assert that international relations would benefit from engaging with non-Western civilizations and religious perspectives. If international relations is to represent a genuine universality and not just reinforce a

liberal and Western-centric global order, it needs to thickly engage other cultural and religious traditions. Globalization seems to be opening up the possibility of alternative forms of political practice and new forms of political community. The approach of the *ummah*, which recognizes the public role of religion as a force of empowerment and liberation, introduces avenues of participation and engages Muslims in building a strong civil society or a civilized public sphere. Consequently, the Muslim conception of political community (*ummah*), the bond of the faith of Islam, previously a utopic category of political thought, is becoming a social reality (Mandaville 2001) in an age when Islam as a world view and a civilization is becoming a global force (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004: 52).

Transnational Relations: Changing the Nature and the Boundaries of the Muslim Political Community

Transnational relations are defined as “regular interactions across national boundaries when a least one actor is a non-state agent or does not operate on behalf of a national government or an intergovernmental organization” (Risse-Kappen 1995:3). The emergence of transnational social movements is one of the key sociocultural transformations, which question the hegemony of state as the dominant construct in international relations. These transnational social movements “occupy a particular political *space*, in the sense of an agenda dealing with issues such as gender and human rights but not necessary a specific *place* (Mandaville 2001:16). Many of these movements “operate across borders and without exclusive reference to a specific state,

nation or a region..... They often engage in activities which are explicitly critical of state regimes and/or traditional aspect of state sovereignty” (Mandaville 2001:16). These interactions have to occur with regularity over time. Transnational alliances and networks “operate on the basis of both implicit and explicit rules based on formal agreement as well as informal understanding” (Risse-Kappen 1995:11). An example of informal networks is the knowledge-based transnational networks (also known as epistemic communities). Transnational epistemic communities, i.e. “networks of professionals with an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge”, seem to have a major impact on the global diffusion of values, norms and ideas in such diverse issue-areas such as human rights, gender issues, international security and the global environment (Risse-Kappen 1995:11).

Various examples suggest that neither institutionalization, nor economic power alone is decisive for the policy impact of transnational actor (Risse-Kappen 1995:11). My case study challenges the proposition that “the degree to which transnational relations are institutionalized or the economic clout of transnational actors alone determine their political impact on state practices” (Risse-Kappen 1995:13). I argue that the success of the transnational movements I am interested in depends on “the power of the better argument” and their ability to persuade and forms coalitions with domestic actors of like-minded intellectuals.

It is true that not all transnational movements promote “good” causes. Transnational terrorism poses serious threats to international security and cooperation. Some scholars, like Samuel Huntington (1996), have identified Islamic

fundamentalism (a form of transnational social movement) and other radical groups, organized around the principle of “reestablishing a global Islamic polity or *khelafa*” as a major source of future inter-state conflicts (Mandaville 2005a).

My research aims at better understanding the impact of transnational social movements on state policies and international relations. Transnational relations do not seem to have the same effect across cases and countries. For example, the spread of democratic values, promoted by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and transnational alliances has affected some countries more than others. Therefore, the domestic and international conditions under which transnational relations and networks promote and achieve social and political change in a specific issue-area should be taken into consideration when studying the impact of transnational social movements. Domestic conditions include political culture, which is “the collective self-understanding of actors in a given society that are stable over time”. It defines actors’ “collective identity and provides them with a repertoire of interpretations of reality as well as of appropriate behavior” (Risse-Kappen 1995:21). Differences in domestic structure determine the variation in the policy impact of transnational networks. In order to affect social change, transnational actors have to overcome two hurdles. First, they have to gain access to the society of the target state. Second, they must be able to persuade and form coalitions with domestic actors. These transnational networks are purposeful in the sense that they attempt to achieve specific political and social goals in the target “state” of their activities (Risse-Kappen 1995).

This research does not deal with Muslim transnational relations in an all-encompassing sense. For the purpose of a meaningful discussion, I will focus on transnational advocacy networks related to the role of women in Islam maintained by identifiable actors of Muslim women scholar-activists. It is a type of intellectual transnational network promoting principled ideas of gender justice and liberation.

Contemporary Muslim Transnationalism

In his insightful book, *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma*, Peter Mandaville provides a compelling portrait of the liberal movement within Islam. This movement is comprised of public spaces wherein Muslim men and women are freely practicing their innate human right of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning and judgment). The agglomeration of these disparate public spaces creates one, transnational or “translocal” entity (Sharify-Funk 2003). This discursive entity, i.e. the *ummah*, became a lived reality through the interacting voices of Muslim intellectuals, laity and clergy across the globe.

New intellectuals, university students and lay Muslims—men *and* women—can to some degree all be seen as sources of *ijtihad* and purveyors of authentic Islam. Their debates and critiques, I want to argue, constitute a dramatic widening of the *Muslim public sphere*. Furthermore, its emergence can be explained to a large extent as a consequence of translocality—in other words, the traveling theories, hybrid/diasporic identities and media technologies which Muslims are embracing. This public sphere also fulfills a crucial political function insofar as it offers a discursive space in which Muslims can articulate their normative claims (i.e. ‘Islam’) from a multiplicity of subject positions (Mandaville 2001:186).

We can identify a number of Muslim Intellectuals engaged in an assertion of justice and civic pluralism from within an Islamic framework such as Khaled Abou El Fadl, Farid Esack and Abdolkarim Soroush. In the next chapters, I limit my

discussion to the hermeneutics of gender justice characterizing the work of Muslim women intellectuals such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Azizah al-Hibri and Heba Raouf Ezzat. The voices of these intellectuals “seek to protect spaces of alterity. It also gives renewed credence to the notion of the *umma* [*sic*].... It is also interesting to note that the bulk of these intellectuals are operating in environment that is highly multicultural and transnational in nature” (Mandaville 2005a:315).

These Muslim networks are different from the fundamental networks in that their discourse is characterized by a pluralist orientation to religious sources; in terms of their reading, understanding and interpretation of the textual sources. The notion of *ikhtilaf*, which refers to the differences of opinion within the *ummah*, is seen as a sign of divine favor and not disunity and confusion. This is not something new to Islam. Throughout Islamic history, translocal spaces have provided Muslims with discursive environment conducive to diverse range of interpretation and schools of thought. Therefore, the multiplicity of *asala* (authenticity) has already been institutionalized in Islam. In Muslim translocal spaces,

an opinion is not inherently true simply by the virtue of having emanated from the *ulama*, rather these opinions enter the ‘public sphere’ that is to say, they become contestable and open to re-interpretation..... In translocal spaces, no particular conception of Islam is negated. Difference is negotiated, rather than eradicated..... The political community should have the right to vote for or against the political implications of any given textual interpretation (Mandaville 2001:181-183).

Thus, in this new Muslim public sphere, the requirements of democratic politics and civil society, which are inclusion, civility and freedom of choice, are being fulfilled.

It is important to add that the current globalizing climate serves to amplify these transnational pluralist practices and disrupt the totalizing discourses that seek to

monopolize the discourse of legitimacy and authenticity by claiming the authority to represent the ‘true’ Islam and by opening up new public spaces in which alternative political and religious views can be articulated (Mandaville 2001:179).

There is enough contemporary evidence, then, to make Islamic “transnationalism” worthy of attention. Debates within the Muslim community are questioning not the authenticity of the Qur’an or *hadith*, but the dogmas developed over the centuries. Muslims are rethinking Islam in terms of politics, community and gender. Moreover, Muslim transnationalism is reinforced by the way it draws on two elements, historical and ideational, of the Islamic world.

Historically, transnational activities, whether commercial, financial, political or religious, have been common in the Muslim world for centuries. In fact, it is the recently created modern state, with its boundaries, that broke ties of scholarship, mystical orders, and trading groups that had existed for centuries (Halliday 2005).

Doctrinally, the history of Islam has been one of ideas and thought produced in one country and then being applied in very different ones. For example, the 19th-century reformer Jamal al-Din al-Afghani influenced Ottoman Turkey, Iran, and (via his follower Mohammad Abduh) Egypt. A more recent case of cross-boundary and cross-national fertilization was the use made by the Egyptian Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb of the writings of the Pakistani writer Maududi (Halliday 2005).

As mentioned in chapter one, there are levels of Islamic transnationalism that runs from highly personalized intellectual linkage between individuals to the high diplomacy of Islamic intergovernmentalism of the Organization of the Islamic

Conference (OIC). In exploring Muslim transnationalism, I chose to portray the informal networks of Muslim intellectuals and Muslim *transnational grassroots politics* seeking to create a new form of Muslim public sphere and leading to the emergence of new forms of critical Islam. I did not focus on the level of Muslim *governments* because of the forceful divisions among Muslim political entities. Islamic governments tend to manipulate religious discourse to bolster its legitimacy (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:157).

Islamic governments use transnational linkages to solidify or advance their own influence and interests, not the interests of the Muslim public or the Muslim *ummah*. For example, Saudi Arabia utilizes the Muslim World League in order to advance its relatively conservative brand of Islam, particularly to counter Iranian-inspired movements and ideas (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:151).

On the level of *interstate organizations*, the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC)² is committed to advancement of solidarity among its members (the first objective indicated in Article 2 of the OIC charter). However, the OIC has been undermined by the ideological, political and economic differences between its members and its clear inability to resolve intra-Islamic disputes.³ In addition, the charter of OIC is transparent on the need to defend the individual sovereignties of its members. Article 2 affirms the principles of respect for “non-interference in the

² OIC is an interstate organization of the Muslim world that consists of fifty-two members. It was founded in response to the attack on al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem in 1969 and, in a larger way, to the alignments of Arab and Muslim politics following the Arab defeat in the 1967 (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:139-140).

³ For example, the OIC was unable to resolve the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) or defuse Iraqi-Kuwaiti tension that led to the second Gulf crisis (1990-91). It has been bypassed in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process and it did little to settle the civil war in Somalia (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:140).

domestic affairs of Member states”. In short, OIC, like other interstate organizations, “is a creation of its sovereign members and survives as long as it fulfils their national interests” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:139-141).

For these reasons, I believe that the emergence of transnational Muslim public space enables the reformist Muslim discourses constituting and reaffirming Muslim civic pluralism. These discourses reconfigure the boundaries of civic debate and political life. The political implications of this transnational public sphere will become evident when I move on to explore Muslim women transnational activism.

Muslim Transnationalism: the Deficiencies of Prevailing Theories

International relations theory has not been very effective in accounting for the above-mentioned transformations in Muslim politics. The prevailing explanations for Muslim politics cannot adequately address these transformations mainly because they were unable to deal with the role of ideas, religion, culture and identity without trying to subordinate them to the assumption of Western social theory. Asma Barlas warns against trying to universalize “the developmental trajectory of the West”. She argues that the spectacular failure of modernization attests that the domino theory of progress in which the West works as a ‘silent referent in historical knowledge’ is not very helpful in understanding social changes in Muslim societies (Barlas 2004:3).

Rather than trying to universalize the Western modern secular perspective, we need to elaborate new interpretive categories and analytical framework that can accommodate the specificities of Muslim politics and societies. Imagining new forms and spaces of politics corrects the ways we interpret the interplay between religion

and politics in the Muslim context. So far, I have made the case that given the central role of religion in the political culture of Muslim societies, the terms for negotiating social change and modernity in the Muslim context must be reframed in order to avoid being locked in debates about liberalism and secularism.

In search for a more adequate approach to analyzing the critical reform project of Muslim women (and Muslim societies in general), I have discovered the work of Jürgen Habermas on communicative action and public spheres. Habermas observed that “human subjects make claims about the truth, rightfulness, sincerity and intelligibility of their views whenever they are involved in an attempt to arrive at an understanding with each other” (Linklater 1998:119). The commitment to discourse and dialogue is guided by “the unforced force of the better argument” (Linklater 1998:119).

Communicative Action: Arguing in the International Public Sphere

The processes of argumentation, deliberation and persuasion constitute a distinct mode of social interaction to be differentiated from strategic bargaining- the realm of rational choice and the rule-guided behavior–the realm of constructivism⁴. Apart from utility- maximizing action and the rule-guided behavior, human actors engage in truth seeking with “the aim of reaching a mutual understanding based on a reasoned consensus” (Risse-Kappen 2000: 1-2). Truth-seeking arguing “furthers our understanding of how actors develop a common knowledge concerning both the definition of the situation and an agreement about the underlying rule of the game”

⁴ The controversy between social constructivism and rational choice has become one of the most significant recent debates in the field of international relations (see Risse-Kappen 2002).

(Risse-Kappen 2000: 2). Arguing is relevant for problem solving in the sense of seeking an optimal solution for a commonly perceived problem. Arguing for common normative framework helps actors overcome any collective action problems. Arguing also provides actors with a mode of interaction that enables them to mutually challenge and explore the validity claims of norms and identity (the constitutive role of norms and identity). Arguing takes place in the public sphere which has to be distinguished from the realm of diplomatic negotiations (Risse-Kappen 2000:2). This mode of interaction is also different from other types of arguing such as strategic bargaining and rhetorical action.

Through a collective communication process, truth-seeking actors try to figure out their assumptions about the world (realm of theoretical discourse) and whether norms of appropriate behavior can be justified and which norms apply under given circumstances (the realm of practical discourse). Actors are open to being challenged and persuaded by the better argument and the relationship of power recedes in the background. Arguing is as goal-oriented as strategic/ rational interactions, but the goal is not to attain or maximize one's fixed preferences and interests, but to seek a reasoned consensus (Risse-Kappen 2000: 7).

Communicative action challenges the validity claims and seeks a communicative consensus as well as a justification for the principles and norms that guide actions. Communicative action in the Habermasian sense is based on several preconditions. First, communicative action requires the ability to empathize; that is to see things through the eyes of one's interaction partner. Second, actors need to share "a common

lifeworld”. A common lifeworld consists of shared culture, common system of norms and rules and a collective interpretation of the world and of themselves. It provides arguing actors with a repertoire of collective understanding to which they can refer when making truth claims. Finally, actors recognize each other as having equal rights concerning making an argument or challenging a validity claim and have equal access to the discourse. In this sense, the relationships of power, force, and coercion are assumed absent in communicative action (Risse-Kappen 2000:10). On this basis, I suggest that we can shed the light on some important issues in transnational Muslim politics when we incorporate communicative action theory. The question is how to make this empirically applicable to transnational Muslim relations. I answer this question in chapter six.

Debates in international public spheres differ from diplomatic negotiations in various respects. First, they are more open in terms of access and not confined to state actors. Second, debates in the international public sphere are more likely to invoke identity-related issues. Third, the public discourse has a “civilizing” effect on actors. Fourth, less privileged actors have access to the discourse armed with the “power of the better argument”. Moreover, actors who claim authoritative knowledge or moral authority should be able to convince a skeptical public audience (Risse-Kappen 2000:21).

In chapter six, I argue that the following conditions conducive to truth-seeking arguing exist in the Muslim world: (1) The existence of a common lifeworld. (2) The absence of international institutions or regimes that enable actors to communicate. (3)

Lack of knowledge about the situation among the actors. (4) Dense informal, network-like interactions (Risse-Kappen 2000).

There are two major arguments against the claims that arguing plays a substantial role in international relations: first; there is no “common lifeworld” in international relations and second; relationships of power are never absent in international relations (Risse-Kappen 2000:10). In my study of Muslim transnationalism, I argue that Islam provides a “single discursive space”—a common lifeworld for Muslims that consists of shared culture, norms and rules. As for power relations, I agree that the discursive arena is not devoid of both Western hegemony (discourses repudiating any ethical claims if their premises are not based on Western secular modernity) as well as Muslim hegemony that is “the totalizing discourses which claim the authority to represent ‘real’ Islam” (Mandaville 2001:179). However, I argue that in the discursive field, power depends on the cogency of the intellectual argument and the extent to which various Muslim groups are able to coordinate transnational activities and command support. In this case, the power struggle is the struggle for the heart and minds of the Muslim publics that is taking place around the world.

Finally, I agree with Risse-Kappen’s argument that this mode of interaction can shed the light on some important issues in international relations. Unfortunately, this mode of interaction has been overlooked in the mainstream international relations (Risse-Kappen 2000: 33).

The role of intellectuals and Ideas

In this section, I argue that the communicative action theory needs to be complemented by approaches that emphasize the interaction between international and domestic factors and the role of ideas as an intervening variable between structural conditions and actors' interests. Originally developed in the field of comparative foreign policy, Risse-Kappen's approach explains the "end of the Cold War", "that is the systemic transformation of world politics that started with the turnaround in Soviet foreign policy in the late 1980s" (Risse-Kappen 1994:1). He argues that the liberal and the realist explanations could not adequately explain such transformations. These theories need to be complemented by approaches that emphasize the interaction of international and domestic influences and take the role of ideas—knowledge, values and strategic concepts— as intervening variables seriously (Risse-Kappen 1994:1). New ideas were causally consequential for the end of the Cold War. Some of these ideas originated in the Western liberal internationalist community. This community formed transnational networks with "new thinkers" in the former Soviet Union. Gorbachev, as a domestic reformer and thinker was open to these ideas because they satisfied his needs for coherent and consistent policy concepts. As a result, the new ideas became causally consequential for the turnaround in Soviet foreign policy. Moreover, these ideas had an impact on the Western reactions to the new Soviet policies (Risse-Kappen 1994:1).

From Risse-Kappen's approach and analysis, I inferred that transnational networks of the "new Muslim intellectuals" could be similarly consequential in the

turnaround of Muslim policies and societies. In Muslim societies, Muslim intellectuals may be more receptive to reformist ideas because they satisfy their needs for piety, self-definition, authenticity, justice and reform. I propose that this approach can be used as an analytical framework to read the debates and contestation currently taking place in the transnational Muslim public sphere.

So far, I have suggested that theories of international relations need to be complemented by approaches that integrate domestic politics, transnational relations and the role of ideas in order to understand contemporary Muslim politics. The arguments developed in this research could prove helpful in analyzing the impact of transnational networks and how ideas matter in international relations in general and in understanding Muslim politics in particular. Over and above, these ideas, debates, and interactions could also have an impact on the Western views of the Muslim world and its politics.

Transnational Muslim Networks: *Ummah* as a Political Project

Precisely because Islam is not homogeneous, it is only through the prism of Muslim networks –whether, they are academic or aesthetic, historical or commercial- that one can gain a perspective on how diverse groups of Muslims contest and rearticulate what it means to be Muslim (Cooke and Lawrence 2005:2).

The term Muslim networks offers a more complex and advanced view of Islam and Muslims than the post 9/11 paradigm that demonizes Islam and promote a clash of civilizations by seeing Muslim politics as only acts of terror in the name of Islam. While the case of al-Qaeda, as a network of hard-line Muslim guerrillas, has become

compelling in the aftermath of 9/11, there are many cases that demonstrate that changes in Muslim societies and politics can be peacefully channeled through Muslim networks.

Muslim networks, in terms of “both the networked nature of Islam and the impact of Muslim networks” on world politics, are pivotal. However, neither has received proper attention from scholars (Cooke and Lawrence 2005:1). Public discourse in the West often tends to equate Islamic globalism with pan-national fundamentalist networks (An-Na’im 2002:66).

The *ummah* (the Muslim global community) frames the medium for constructing Muslim networks; it also suggests a method and a level of analysis (Cooke and Lawrence 2005:2). The history of the *ummah* stretches back to the seventh century (CE). Early Muslim networks were made possible by the exchange of goods, ideas and people in the early phases of Islamic civilization. One particular sociohistorical context in which the concept of *ummah* has been articulated as a political project is the context of Prophet Muhammad’s new Medinian society. During this period Muhammad brought a “socialist and feminist revolution to the feuding, patriarchal tribes of Arabia” (Cooke 2001:120), created a community of equals united by their spiritual bonds (Mernissi 1987:38-39) and preached for a democratic revision of norms and practices. In this community “women had their place as unquestioned partners in a revolution that made the mosque an open place and the household a temple of debate” (Mernissi 1987:11). In this community, “Muhammad maintained a total monopoly over the articulation of Islam” as it was revealed (Mandaville

2001:189). It is important to note that the failure to perpetuate this democracy was the fault of his followers who did not implement his democratic, spiritually-based ideas (Mernissi cited in Cooke 2001:73).

What I am interested in is the *ummah* as a politicized community in the wider multi-cultural, multi-regional Muslim world. The colonial era of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked the emergence of the *ummah* as a key concept in Muslim political discourse in the face of the challenge posed to Islam by the West. During this period, Muslim intellectuals and activists traveled throughout the Muslim world seeking to inspire fellow believers in their struggle against European colonialism (Mandaville 2001:74).

In this regard, early modern struggles of the colonial era serve as a key point of reference for Muslims today, many of whom view the continued dominance of the West as the perpetuations of European imperialism. There is thus an intrinsic link between the Muslim voices of the early colonial period and the contemporary Muslim post-colonial discourse (Mandaville 2001:74).

This period was a catalyst for Muslim intellectuals and their organized political activism. During this period, Muslim intellectuals came from outside the exclusive circles of religious scholars. Instead, they were educated, professional, middle class (Mandaville 2001:75). One important thinker was the Egyptian intellectual Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905). As an Islamic modernist, the dominant themes of his activism were education and social reform. Abduh stressed the need for a more liberal attitude toward the role and the rights of women (Mandaville 2001:76). He supported women's education, involvement and rights in marriage and divorce (Ezzat 2001:233-234).

Regarding the role of women, up until the twentieth century, Muslim networks of travel, trade or knowledge seeking privileged men. These networks were mainly “networks of men on the move. The only network in which women’s participation was traditionally acknowledged was the annual Hajj” or pilgrimage (Cooke and Lawrence 2005:2-3).

Today, through the concept of the *ummah*, Muslims -men and women- are discussing and revising their ideas about their political identity and community. These critical debates and discussions are leading to the emergence of a wider Muslim public sphere, which provides a forum for marginalized or disenfranchised Muslims to assert their understanding of Islam. Thus, understood as “metaphor of process, contingency and variability” (Cooke and Lawrence 2005:11), the concept of *ummah* seems to be of theoretical as well as empirical importance.

Transnational Muslim Public Sphere: The Better Outcome

In this section, I argue that transnational networks combined with new critical ideas will contribute to the creation of a wider, more civilized Muslim public sphere that exists “at the intersection of religious, political, and social life” (Eickelman and Anderson 2003:1). Muslim public sphere is situated outside the realm of formal state control, wherein the “Muslim public can challenge or limit state and conventional religious authorities and contribute to the creation of civil society” (Eickelman and Anderson 2003:1). Thus, the public sphere is a crucial dimension of civil society. The public sphere is a “medium of social integration”, a “form of social solidarity”, as well as an “arena for debating possible social arrangements” (Calhoun 2005:4).

In this sense, civil society can be defined as “the space where people and transnational entities debate and negotiate the rules of their relationships and pursue accountability for those rules, in furtherance of their respective concerns” (An-Na’im 2002: 56). This notion adds a transnational dimension to the concept of civil society through organizations, telecommunication networks and a public sphere for sharing common goals and agenda and cooperating in pursuit of shared objectives (An-Na’im 2002:71).

Abdullahi An-Na’im (2002) argues that for global civil society to perform its role, it has to have a minimum normative content by which it sets its own agenda. For him, the critical question is by whom and how that normative content is to be determined. He suggests that the way to an overlapping consensus among different constituencies about the normative content is to engage in an internal discourse with the constituencies and in a dialogue between them about the elements of that content. This idea of overlapping consensus presupposes ideological and other differences, but also requires agreement on a core set of values for the negotiation process to achieve meaningful results. These core values include mutual respect and appreciation of cultural and contextual differences. Most importantly, all constituencies of global civil society must appreciate the need to construct an overlapping consensus over the normative content of their solidarity and cooperation rather than seek to impose their own views and agenda on others (An-Na’im 2002:57).

An-Na’im also believes that religion and religious identity can be included in the conceptualization of global civil society “precisely because current conditions of

globalization clearly show that religion everywhere is socially constructed, dynamic and implicated in socio-economic and political power-relations to varying degrees in different contexts” (An- Na’im 2002: 59).

Thus, An-Na’im sets out some considerations that are relevant to the process of creating a transnational Muslim public sphere. My case study on Muslim politics will contribute to the redefinition of two sets of relations that are central to the discourse of civil society, namely between the religious and the secular and between the private and the public (discrimination against Muslim women is formulated in terms of the public/private distinction). On this basis, the definition of the public sphere accounts for “those aspects of civil life which are integral to the self-understanding and identity of members of the Muslim society ... that may not necessarily translate into objective indices that measure a *linear* ‘progress’” (such as the increasing responsiveness of political institutions) (An-Na’im 2002:57, *emphasis his*).

In the Muslim context, “social, political and cultural issues are inextricably tied to perception of religious identity in local context as well as to religious rationale of social institutions and behavior” (An-Na’im 2002: 57). An appreciation of the role of religion in motivating people to forge alliances is an important aspect of the contextual dynamic of the formation of networks. Such an appreciation can facilitate “cooperation across religious and ideological divides around issues of shared concerns”. Appreciating the public role of religion can “empower believers to claim global civil society as their own medium of struggle (*jihad*) for justice and human dignity” (An-Na’im 2002:57).

Therefore, such appreciation is important for two reasons. It challenges the Western conception of global civil society that seeks to define political action and state-society relations in a manner that empties them of their specific local content (An-Na'im, 2002:67) and it provide an effective solution to the threat of fundamentalism and global terrorism by avoiding the clash of civilizations trajectory.

The significant outcome of Muslim critical ideas and transnationalism is a dramatic *widening of the Muslim public sphere*. This public sphere fulfils a crucial political function in terms of offering a discursive space in which Muslims can (re)articulate their normative claims about Islam.

The Public Sphere as a Framework: Premises and Promises

I chose “public sphere” as the framing concept of my dissertation because the concept provides an analytical space that integrates research fields that are currently fragmented, such as civil society, social movements, gender identities and culture studies. The concept of the public sphere is helpful in “understanding the diversity of civil society, of resistance practices and democratization processes, as well as opening up the notion of politics to capture boarder terrain of human thought and practice” (Shami 2006:27).

The concept of the public sphere promises a more positive reaction among Muslim publics, especially when compared to the term civil society. The term civil society suffers from “having being “tainted” due to its close association with various kinds of political and development projects popularly seen as imposed” on Muslim countries (Shami 2006:27). Public sphere, on the other hand, has the benefit of

“freshness and unfamiliarity” (Shami 2006:27). Moreover, the public sphere as an analytical concept focuses on innovative forms of engagement and activism, unlike civil society, which tends to narrowly focus on certain forms of associations and activities and ignores other forms of mobilization that does not fit the Western definition of civil society (Shami 2006: 27).

Nevertheless, the Habermasian notion that sees secularism as central to the development of the modern public sphere is too narrow to capture the emergence of the Muslim public sphere. Under the increased presence of religious issues in the public sphere, Habermas’s idea of the democratic public sphere as a secular sphere is being challenged. Moreover, Islam offers an arena of global communication, which adds a transnational dimension to the concept of the public sphere. Thus, through the lens of the public sphere, we can reconceptualize the notions of civil society and democratization, as well as the notion of politics.

Features of the emerging Muslim public sphere

The emerging Muslim public sphere opens up a discursive space in which Muslims can challenge totalizing discourses and provide discursive environments conducive to alternative articulations of Islam. This space is envisaged “as an interstitial site at which discourses of tradition and innovation can be creatively negotiated” (Mandaville 2001:180). In this public sphere, authenticity can be defined as a critical search for a ‘third space’ that is neither associated with the imperatives of Westernization nor with theories of a static and single-minded traditionalism (Radhakrishnan cited in Mandaville 2001:180). This oppositional stance to

Westernization and fundamentalism is what Miriam Cooke (2001) termed “multiple critique” as a discursive strategy to respond to the silencing moves of both Western and Muslim hegemonic discourses. This multiple critique also “involves alliances and various forms of networking activities” (Cooke 2001:113).

In this public space Muslim are using *ijtihad* or free thinking in determining a correct course of action to counter unjust hegemony and extremism. In this space, Muslims encounter a diverse range of interpretation and schools of thought, wherein Muslims can negotiate their different ethical claims. No conception of Islam is negated or excluded (Mandaville 2001:181). In this space, public debates are primarily devoted to problems facing Muslims today and not locked in anti-Western rhetoric that simply serves to reproduce Western hegemony. Critical scholars, men and women, are re-reading the traditional texts so that they speak to the political imperatives of contemporary Islam (Mandaville 2001:181).

In the emerging Muslim public sphere, a religious opinion is not “inherently true simply by the virtue of having emanated from the *ulama*, rather these opinions enter the ‘public sphere’ that is to say, they become contestable and open to debate and re-interpretation..... The political community should have the right to vote for or against the political implications of any given textual interpretation” (Mandaville 2001: 179). The authority to articulate and interpret Islam is no longer reserved for a class of clerics. In this space, there is a myriad of ranges of Muslim voices debating and reformulating Islam. This space, in which a “multiplicity of *asala*” (authenticity) has

already been materialized by means of contestation and debates, constitutes a dramatic widening of the Muslim public sphere (Mandaville 2001:179,183).

Having the qualities just specified, the transnational Muslim public sphere promotes understandings and practices of religion that are more inclusive, pluralistic, civil and voluntary, which enhances conformity with the essential qualities of democratic politics and civil society, thus promoting the possibility of consistency between religion and civil society.

Unfortunately, this public space is not devoid of forces working to narrow the boundaries of political community and seeking to monopolize the discourse of political legitimacy. Therefore, I would like to devote the following section to the discussion of the challenges and opportunities facing this critical Muslim public sphere.

The Contemporary Context of Muslim Transnationalism: Challenges and Opportunities

.What is the contemporary context within which transnational Muslim public sphere exists or can be expected to emerge? My discussion of the challenges and opportunities facing Muslim transnationalism is organized according to three themes: post 9/11 global context, the challenges of fundamentalism and the domestic structure of the nation-state.

The events of 9/11 brought renewed attention to the Muslim world. The terms of the current public discourse in the West, particularly in the United States, have put Muslims in a difficult position. The discourse is “framed in stark moral dichotomies:

‘with us or against us’, religious or secular, leaving little space to articulate the complex contours of contemporary Muslim identities” (Mandaville 2001:1). Suspicion, discrimination and persecution of Muslims living in Europe and North America were also a result of 9/11 events. Moreover, in the post-9/11 world of Islamophobia, Islam and Muslims face the challenge of stereotypical views. Islam is presented as static, fixed, traditional and non-modern. Muslim men are regarded as misogynists and violent (or terrorists). Muslim women are regarded as voiceless, oppressed and invisible. The policies the United States chooses to pursue in the Muslim world militate against reformist discourses especially those originated in the West. It also gives credence to radical Islamic discourses manipulating the grievances of the Muslim public.

On the other hand, the post 9/11 context served as an important catalyst in the acceleration of the development of critical Islam. It urged Muslim to reassess the status quo and engage in self-critique. For Example, within Muslim communities in the West, there are sharp divides, polarization and debates about what it means to be Muslims and who speaks for Islam (Mandaville 2001:186).

This issue brings us to the nature and the role of the Muslim Diaspora. Mandaville (2001) argues that the shift in the nature and location of the recent Muslim diaspora experiences in Western Europe and North America will properly have far reaching consequences for Muslim views of themselves and of the “other” (2001:66). Muslims in diaspora “come face-to-face with myriad shapes and colors of global Islam, forcing the religion to hold a mirror up to its own diversity” (Mandaville 2001:114). The

encounter with the Muslim 'other' plays an important role in process of identity formation, prompting Muslims to rethink their understanding of Islam. The "Muslim urge to relate internationally" becomes an "impetus to negotiate differences and to reformulate Islam in the face of globality", which provides Muslims with greater capacity to "communicate, interact and bridge the difference between them" (Mandaville 2001:187). Transnational Muslim public sphere is enabling Muslim reformist discourse as well as providing the spaces for its elaboration.

In the global era of mass education and mass communication, the Muslim public has more ways of building and sustaining its constituency. Education and communication play a significant role in fragmenting and contesting political and religious authorities, creating a wider public sphere that is "discursive, performative, and participative and not confined to the formal institutions recognized by the state" (Eickelman and Anderson 2003:2). Mass education means "wider, competing repertoires of intellectual techniques and authorities and the erosion of exclusivities that previously defined communities of discourse" (Eickelman and Anderson 2003:11).

Thus, as a result of globalization, Muslim communities encounter each other in translocal spaces negotiating and pursuing common concerns. However, these spaces are not neutral in its perceptions of Muslim communities or Islam in general, for many reasons, which could include ignorance, indifference or even prejudice (An-Na'im 2002:67). Such an environment can complicate the transition to a civil Islam.

There is also the challenge of Islamic fundamentalist movement and their tendency to be totalitarian in seeking all resources of a community for the realization of their own specific version of the public 'good'. One of the chief obstacles to critical thinking is the totalizing discourses of Islamic fundamentalists, which claim the authority to represent the 'real' Islam and label and classify other Muslims as 'deviants'. Islamic hegemonic discourses are not limited to theological debates. They are also apparent in the political arena. Political and social movements, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, portray themselves as the only movements pursuing a 'truly' Islamic political agenda (Mandaville 2001:180). It is important to note that the diversity of views among the schools of Islamic jurisprudence implicates that whatever view they try to enforce violates the religious freedom of other Muslims. The fundamental discourse is overwhelmed by the struggle against Western hegemony, which serves to reproduce Western hegemony. Mandaville (2001) argues that, by devoting their discourse to anti-Western rhetoric, Muslim hegemonic discourses do not engage with the substantive issues facing their constituencies (Mandaville 2001:181).

The main features of Islamic fundamentalist movements are their supranational appeal, aspiration and their negation of people's ability to make their own moral and political choices, which is inconsistent with an inclusive and civil public sphere (An-Na'im 2002:61). For these reasons, Islamic fundamentalism constitutes a challenge to a civil, pluralist public sphere. In order to overcome their challenges, the concerns of fundamentalist movements need to be taken seriously. An-Na'im argues that the fundamentalists' "[s]killful use of rhetoric and symbols that resonate with the Muslim

public worldwide affords them a constituency that, while not always supportive of their militant tactics, identifies with many of the issues that constitute their discourse of resistance.... It important to understand such concerns not only to deny fundamentalism the use of such grievances in mobilizing political support for their own political end, but also such issues are integral to what civil society is supposed to rectify” (An-Na’im 2002:62). The important point is that the fundamentalist understanding of religion is unable to provide an appropriate response to the problems Muslims face.

Islamic fundamentalists seek to influence events at home and abroad in favor of their own version of the public good. In relation to civil society concerns, these movements are problematic on two accounts. First: it is difficult for the majority of Muslims to openly oppose their views and claims, especially in the light of the current conditions of Western hegemony (An-Na’im 2002:62). Second: efforts to implement their totalitarian schemes will do great harm to society. The more the radicals press for a fusion of religion and state, the more they remove the checks and balances necessary for maintaining the integrity of not only the political process, but of religion itself, creating the conditions of religion’s abuse (Hefner 2005: 27).

The radical groups share certain common themes. They seek to 1) render the worldviews of local Muslim more global, but not in a cosmopolitan, tolerant sense, 2) promulgate Islam as a higher order of identity, and 3) to understand the suffering of the Muslims and to intervene in the name of the *ummah* as obliged by their religion. The “clarity of the vision and moral certainty” of *salafi* Islam becomes more

attractive to some members of the Muslim public than the “indeterminacy and relativism” of more moderate, pluralist approaches. (Mandaville 2005a:314).

Religious fundamentalism is the product of particular circumstances and not inherent to Islam as such. Islamic societies tend to become defensive and conservative when it perceives itself to be under attack and that the rule of international law is undermined, in particular the failure of the international community to check that unilateral use of force by the United States. This situation encourages Islamic fundamentalist perception of *jihad* as the aggressive and unilateral use of violence. Islamic fundamentalists use religious symbols and discourse to mobilize disadvantage groups politically against perceived internal or external threats to their identity (An- Na'im 2002:63).

As a result of its own historical growth, the *ummah* is “no longer capable of distinguishing -among the values in which they consider Islamic- those that are transcendental from those that are temporal” (An- Na'im 2002: 64). Therefore, an “interpretive approach” is needed that contrasts the historical context of the original formulation of religious doctrine to the modern context in which it is to be understood and applied. The new reformist discourse enabled by globalization and translocality articulates a “new thinking” well-suited for the circumstances and problems of contemporary life.

Domestic structures in Muslim societies present another challenge facing Muslim transnationalism in terms of the domination of the centralized state and the traditional ideas embedded in the political culture. Any thinking about transnational relations

among Muslim communities requires simultaneous thinking about the nation-state in which these communities exist. The nature of political institutions, state-society relations in the Muslim world determine the ability of transnational networks to gain access to the society and their success in building winning coalitions with domestic actors. The long-held views embedded in the political culture appear to account for the endurance of traditional values and the domination of the traditional Islamic discourse.

I want to conclude this section by saying that the challenges and opportunities facing the emergent Muslim public sphere necessitate negotiating the differences between Islamic communities and finding common ground by re-examining what Islam means in a more inclusive ways. It also requires an inter-civilizational dialogue through which higher levels of universality and difference can be realized (Linklater 1998:45).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have challenged the conventional assumption of Western international relations theory for being unable to account for the global sociocultural transformations that gave rise to new forms of transnational Muslim politics. In so doing, I opened the space for religious perspectives and texts to enter the picture. Breaking away from the conventional assumption and boundaries of statist politics enables an empirical exploration of the transnational Muslim community under contemporary global conditions.

There is an evidence of a contemporary shift in much of the Muslim world towards a greater awareness of religion. Today, Muslims are increasingly willing to take Islam into their own hands, relying on their own readings and interpretations of the classical sources or following reformist intellectuals who question traditional dogmas and challenge the claims of the *ulama* to be the privileged source of religious knowledge (Mandaville 2001:178). Consequently, the religious community is becoming the political community (Mandaville 2001:185).

The critical reformist discourse contributes to the emergence of a new Muslim public sphere, in which Muslims are able “to publicly contest, debate, and rearticulate ethical claims. This public sphere “allows those who were formerly subjected to the hegemony of a particular ethical vision to now politicize their Muslim identities” (Mandaville 2001:185).

It is from this perceptive that I will address the Muslim “women question”. My main goal is to examine the project of Islamic reformation through the work of Muslim women scholar-activists. Having established my theoretical and conceptual framework, the case of Muslim women is extremely instructive as an analogy for understanding the process of the creation of a transnational Muslim public sphere. Muslim women political and hermeneutical activism is a different form of participation and engagement that could easily be overlooked because it does not fall into the range of traditional political activities in the sense of addressing the state.

CHAPTER 4

CLASH OF INTERPRETATIONS: THE POLITICS OF MUSLIM WOMEN ENGAGEMENT IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Globalization has led to a paradox visible in the area of culture, identity and transnational movements. This paradox has particularly important implications for Muslim politics. In this global era, Muslims have been engaged in a significant process of self-identification. The role and the status of women are among the topics of concern in this process. More than any time in history, Muslim women themselves are directly involved in this process. In this process, Muslim women participate in the creation of social order in which they are agents and not subjects in the Islamic discourse.

In the ever increasing Muslim debate between traditionalists and reformists on how to achieve both an authentic modernity and an authentic Qur'an-centered Islam, gender issues continue to hold center stage (Stowasser 1998: 42). The clash that is happening *within* Islam is a clash between two types of interpretations: traditionalist and reformist. A variety of Muslim liberal and critical intellectuals and activists- both men and women – are now challenging the predominant conservative interpretive practices in order to reconstruct Islamic social norms. This chapter examines the emerging reformist social movement aiming at transforming Islamic societies and structures (religious, cultural and legal).

Muslim women and their collective mobilization around their rights, status, and how to bring about positive change in their communities constitute one important aspect in

this reformist movement that is rooted in the religious discourse. To provide insights into the significance of transnational dialogue for identity formation and activism among Muslim women, this chapter draws on Jürgen Habermas's communicative action theory and Thomas Risse-Kappen's analysis of transnational relations and the role of ideas to map out the dynamics of the "textual and contextual activism" of Muslim women residing in diverse national and cultural contexts and their responses to Habermas's call for the creation of "public sphere".

In the previous chapter, I have discussed the global space of Muslim politics and what the transnational and global dimensions of Muslim politics look like, showing the extent to which we have a wide range of idioms of transnational Islam at work with rather different conceptions of politics and a different normative agenda. In this chapter, I discuss a form of transnational Islam that is inherently about the global advocacy of a normative agenda related to the role of women. I am going to identify the actors who developed the "new thinking" that began to circulate in public discussions and debates, creating new discursive communities and networks and producing important publications and research in exercise of their innate right of *ijtihad*. This chapter draws the attention to the ambiguities of Muslim women's simultaneous attempts to alter, and to maintain, to protest, and to accommodate Islamic social norms.

The 'Women Question' in the Muslim Context

In this section and before we proceed by discussing the emerging reformist intellectuals, I need to highlight few points about the nature and complexity of the 'women question' in the Islamic context. It is very important to realize the considerable historical, geographic, socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural diversity and heterogeneity, especially as related to women, within as well as between each society of the Muslim world. As Nayereh Tohidi puts it:

There has never been a single category of identity of "Muslim women" for besides religion, many other factors, including time, space, ethnicity, age, class or social status and state policies have made women's roles and experiences significantly different from each other (Tohidi 2003:155).

Therefore, the variety of attitudes, practices, and laws found within Muslim countries and communities explodes the myth of "one homogenous Muslim world and the immutability of Muslim law" (Balchin 2002: 127).

Religion, among other factors, shapes women's rights and status in Muslim societies. As a religion, Islam has no centralized organization or leader who can serve as the official voice of the religion. However, Islam does have a sacred written text: The Qur'an. The Qur'an is the divine speech (kalam Allah). Aside to being the word of God, the Qur'an addresses issues of social reform. The Qur'an is also the primary source for the reconstruction of *sharia* through the opinion and interpretation of the jurists.

The Qur'an and the Islamic doctrine are usually blamed for the oppression of women, despite that fact that the Qur'an clearly addresses the issue of "the well-being of women, as individuals, members of the family, and members of the society" (Wadud 2005:173). The Qur'an states that men and women are equal before God. According to some Muslim

reformists' readings, the Qur'an affirms clearly the fundamental right for women to actualize their human potential that they share equally with men (Wadud 2000). Paradoxically, the Qur'an has passages that are generally cited to support the belief that women are inferior to men. The conventional interpretation of *Surah An- Nisa'* verse 34 is among the most often cited to support women's inferiority.

Men are the managers of the affairs of women because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because men spend of their wealth on women. Virtuous women are, therefore, obedient; they guard their rights carefully on their absence under the care and the watch of Allah. As for those women whose defiance you have cause to fear, admonish them and keep them apart from your beds and beat them. Then if they submit to you, do not look for excuses to punish them; note it well that there is Allah above you, who is Supreme and Great (Qur'an 4:34 in A.A. Maududi's translation quoted in Tohidi and Bayes 2001:25).

Certainly, there are significant various interpretations of the Qur'an (to be discussed in chapter 5). Meanwhile, gender inequality has continued both in practice and in traditional interpretations of the Qur'an. It is important to note that the two largest branches within Islam, *Sunni* and *Shiite*, differ little in their gender ideologies (Tohidi and Bayes 2001:24).

Women in Islam do have certain rights under the Qur'an, the extent of which has depended not only on different interpretations, but also on actual enforcement in various historical, sociopolitical, and cultural context (Tohidi and Bayes 2001: 26). Leila Ahmed argues that women's exclusion from the major social domains of activity is the result of "the combination of the worst features of a Mediterranean and Middle Eastern misogyny and an Islam interpreted in the most negative way possible for women" (Ahmed 1992: 128).

The influence and the penetration of Western modernization created acute intellectual and spiritual problems for pious Muslim women. As a reaction to the Western view of Muslim women (their veiling and spatial segregation) as symbol of backwardness, “traditionalists have turned these practices into symbols of national identity and authenticity in defiance of cultural imperialism” (Tohidi 2003: 162). Traditionalists used “anti-imperialist religio-nationalist slogans” in order to mobilize Muslim men and women against westernization carried out by un-elected authoritarian westernized elite or autocratic military governments. In this situation, “demands of Muslim women have been subdued or completely sacrificed” (Tohidi 2003: 162).

In the Muslim world, women are caught in a web of contradictions and are often compelled to postpone women’s rights and give priority to the battle over nationalist goals and ethno-religious identity politics. If some choose to insist on the priority of their feminist agenda, they may reluctantly find themselves in alliance with repressive, yet secular and modernist military states (like in Turkey and Algeria) in order to prevent a more sexist and religiously conservative opposition from taking state power (Tohidi and Bayes 2001: 43).

Khaled Abou El Fadl states that “puritans promote an aggressive form of patriarchy in which they respond to feelings of political and social defeatism by engaging in symbolic displays of power that are systematically degrading to women” (Abou El Fadl 2005: 254). In his experience in studying puritans’ (i.e. traditionalists’) orientations, Abou El Fadl found that women are not degraded because of textual interpretation. Rather, there is a tendency to look at Muslim women as a source of danger and vulnerability for Islam (often expressed in describing women as the worst *fitna*) (2005: 255). Likewise, Tohidi argues that patriarchy has been attributed not only to Islamic *sharia* (Islamic law), but also to the prevalent sense of insecurity among many men as a result of economic

and political disempowerment under the impact of authoritarianism and globalization, that the “control over women within the family [became] the last bastion of assertion of masculinity and power” (Tohidi 2003:165).

The gender dimension is an important aspect of the meaning of fundamentalism. Issues such as women’s dress and sexual liberation have become the main sites of identity politics, assertion of authenticity, and setting of boundaries vis-à-vis the Western ‘Other’ as well as against intruding global forces. On the other hand, Muslim women’s membership in the Islamist movement as well as their ‘ambivalence’ toward Westernized modernization can be understood in the light of the fact that the impact of the “Western-oriented modernism on Muslim women has been uneven, complicated and contradictory” (Tohidi and Bayes 2001:40). In many Muslim societies, while the economy, political and educational institutions have been modernized and Westernized to various degrees, family laws pertinent to marriage, divorce, and child custody has remained untouched or mildly reformed. Tohidi also argues that despite the presence of women political leaders and considerable presence of women in scientific, professional and artist fields, which “testify to women’s agency and dynamism” in the Muslim world, the unequal and patriarchal nature of family laws denies women “social adulthood and autonomy” (Tohidi 2003: 164).

On the global level, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, is considered the most central and comprehensive document for the advancement of women. The Beijing Platform for Action, adopted by 1995 United Nations Fourth

World Conference on Women, is considered an “internationally accepted blueprint for achieving women’s equality, development and peace” (Tohidi and Bayes 2001: 2). Feminists believe the “universal standards” outlined in these and other documents should guide the efforts of achieving gender equality. They also believe in the transformative processes of globalization and their abilities to create a new economic and political order as well as a new gender order. They base their claims on the recent developments in education, literacy rate and communication, which have placed traditionalists in a much weaker and defensive position (Tohidi 2003: 167). Globalization has also strengthened the emergence of transnational feminist networks, such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws, that use globalized space to link women across multiple boundaries and challenge the rise of identity politics at various levels: from family rights through to the global level (Balchin 2002: 126). It is often claimed that technologies of global communication will transform the roles and lives of Muslim women and change the nature of their political participation. Mass communication and mass education facilitate the development of democracy and the development of vibrant civil societies that could push forward gender equality.

On the other hand, Asma Barlas, as a Muslim intellectual involved in “textual activism”, argues that information technology will not automatically change gender roles or generate democratic societies. She believes that global forces will be able

to transform Muslim women’s (and men’s) lives in a meaningful ways if they go together with- and better yet, if they can help bring about- a fundamental epistemic shift in how Muslim interpret and practice Islam. Such a shift would involve a willingness to read liberation from the same Scripture that Muslims use to discriminate against women (Barlas 2004:1).

This interpretive approach emphasizes the role of religion in achieving gender justice for women.

It is worth mentioning that the growing number of Muslim diaspora in the West has been playing an increasingly important role in modernizing Islam.

By waging new debates about the fundamentals of Islamic faith and practice, tackling and criticizing oppressive traditions such as honor killing, domestic violence, spousal abuse and male-biased family law through satellite TV and the spreading world of the internet, American and European Muslim diaspora are slowly but steadily carving their modernizing and democratizing mark on the Islamic world, particularly with regard to changes in gender roles, gender attitudes, women's rights, and human rights (Tohidi and Bayes 2001: 36).

The combination of modernity, democracy, equal rights and piety demonstrated by many among the Muslim diaspora presents the Islamic world with a compelling alternative to extremism (Watanabe 2000). Despite the relatively small number of Muslim Diaspora, a number of factors have made their qualitative impact greater than their numbers. For example, they are among the "freest, most educated, affluent and diverse Muslims in the world" (Watanabe 2000). The Muslim immigrants in the United States, Canada and Europe are provided with many civil rights and political freedoms that are usually unavailable to them in their countries of origins. Provocative Islamic thinkers are flourishing in the climate of Europe and North America's intellectual freedom.

Finally, the new realities in rapidly changing Muslim societies and Muslim diasporas, including women's education, roles, and expectations have created a contradiction with traditional patriarchal laws and practices. New Muslim intellectuals are challenging the traditional patterns of gender relations by highlighting the aspects of the Islamic tradition that embrace women's rights and democratic practices. They are, as Tohidi and Bayes

call them, “a theological challenge to a theological imposition” (2001:50). My goal is to map out the spectrum of opinions and the variety of strategies that Muslim women have adopted to deal with these contradictions in translocal public spaces.

The New Islamist Intellectuals and ‘Truth Seeking’ Discourses

In turn to Islam as a way of life and the solution to the ills and injustices that beset [Muslim] societies, women’s rights, status, role in private and public life, dress and behavior have all become the first battle ground to prove one’s authenticity and piety. It is therefore not surprising that in many Muslim countries today women’s groups are at the forefront in challenging traditional religious authority within governments and Islamist activists and their use of religion to subordinate women and perpetuate discriminatory laws and practices (Anwar 2005: 235-236).

The role of intellectuals is particularly important in the emerging Muslim reformist movement and its implication for women. Using Antonio Gramsci’s insights into the role of “organic intellectuals”, Meena Sharify-Funk argues that intellectuals “can either form and maintain a gender-hegemonic state or construct and sustain a counter-hegemonic movement....Organic reformist intellectuals play a key role in developing critical awareness as well as actively engaging in the formation of political and ideological consensus” (Sharify-Funk 2003:18).

The new Islamist intellectuals represent an “interstitial political identity”. They are changing the connotations of Islamic authority and authenticity in translocal spaces leading to the reimagination of the boundaries of Muslim politics. This is, as Mandaville describes it, “an Islam with a distinctly modern, or perhaps even, *postmodern* ring to it” (Mandaville 2001:176). Similarly, Oliver Roy argues that for the new intellectuals “neither the transmission of knowledge nor the place of this transmission is institutionalized” (cited in Mandaville 2001: 176). The new Islam exists in spaces where

institutionalized forms of politics cannot reach. The state has no means of controlling the new Islamist intellectuals in their social functions because they operate in transnational public space, which is autonomous vis-à-vis the state. The discourse of the new Islamist intellectuals is “anti-establishment” in nature. It seeks to question the legitimacy of the state, the institutions and even the society. Its vocabulary is “eclectic, combining ‘soundbites’ of religious knowledge into novel combinations suited for complex, translocal context” describes Mandeville (2004: 176).

New Islamist intellectuals are challenging the political and religious authorities because “[n]either the mosque, nor the state is to be trusted as a source of authentic Islam”, argues Roy (cited in Mandaville 2001:176). Muslim intellectuals are disturbing “pre-existing forms of continuity” (Foucault 2002), in which “political or religious leaders would prescribe and others were supposed to follow. Today major impetus for change in religious and political values comes from below”. This change is creating a new sense of autonomy and empowerment for both men and women (Eickelman 1999). Muslim intellectuals are deconstructing traditional percepts and practices in order to reconstruct more democratic, gendered-balanced ones (Sharify-Funk2003).

Muslim intellectuals, like Khaled Abou El Fadl, insist that it is very imperative for Muslims to take a self-critical look at their own tradition and system of beliefs. Abou El Fadl argues that “[a]s Muslims, we can no longer afford to refuse to critically engage our tradition. We have reached a critical stage in the history of our faith and we must have the will-power and courage to reclaim and reestablish Islam as a humanistic moral force in the world today” (Abou El Fadl 2005: 4).

My analysis in this chapter is based on the writings of Muslim women who fit this “new Muslim intellectuals” profile. Scholars who write on “women in Islam” participate in a common discursive place that is thoroughly transnational, demonstrating that the process of argumentation, deliberation and persuasion, which takes place in the public sphere, is an important mode of social interaction which enables Muslim women to challenge the “validity claims of norms and identity” and to agree on a “common normative framework”. Hence, Muslim women intellectuals are creating the Muslim public sphere as a domain of equality and inclusion through their “textual and contextual activism”.

A growing body of literature and scholarship concerned with defining a Qur’anic hermeneutics of sexual liberation reflects this trend of resistance, revision and reform within the Islamic tradition. Their basic claims are: Islam is a faith that offers a clear sense of social justice, empowerment and obligation by individuals to challenge those who cause the injustice. Islam, if understood and interpreted correctly, does not support the subordination of women. It is possible to read liberation from the same scripture that Muslims use to discriminate against women. This “epistemic shift” should be at the heart of social and political reform in Muslim societies (Barlas 2004; Wadud 2000). This reform is not only possible but necessary. Muslim women intellectuals, such as Azizh al-Hibri, see that since Islam was revealed to all people and for all time, therefore, its jurisprudence must be capable of responding to widely diverse needs and problems (cited in Tohidi and Bayes 2001: 49).

In order to challenge the exclusion of women and the patriarchal bias in Muslim societies, Muslim women question the textual strategies Muslims have used to read the Qur'an and offer an alternative reading that confirms that Muslim women can struggle for equality within the framework of Qur'anic teachings (Barlas 2002: xi). By illustrating the anti-patriarchal nature of the Qur'anic teachings, they establish the "continued relevance to Muslims of their Scripture for (re)theorizing women's rights" (Barlas 2001:1).

Compelled by the growing Islamist environment and/or out of spiritual conviction, many Muslim women have attempted to change and improve women's roles and rights within an Islamist framework... They seek to redefine, reinterpret and reform Islam.... This seems to be their way both of negotiating modernity and challenging the pre-modern traditional patriarchy (Tohidi and Bayes 2001: 48).

Muslim feminists challenge the male *ulama's* monopoly of authority to interpret the Qur'an or to engage in *ijtihad*. By re-opening the gate to *ijtihad* (free independent thinking), Muslim women are reinterpreting the text and laws in light of changing social and cultural contexts. This interpretation is a political process. Ericka Friedl argues that "[t]he selection of texts from among a great many that potentially give widely divergent messages, and their exegesis are unavoidably influenced, if not outrightly motivated, by the political programs and interests of those who control the formulation and dissemination of ideologies" (Friedl cited in Tohidi and Bayes 2001:49).

Hermeneutics, the strategy used by Muslim women scholar-activists, adds interpreting and reflecting as approaches to knowledge and power. Muslim women scholar-activists engaging in a transnational Muslim public discourse regarding their interpretive rights "challenge the process of knowledge: the ontological, epistemological

as well as methodological underpinnings of the traditionalist culture of interpretation” (Sharify-Funk 2003). The “new knowledge”, articulated by “the minority that resists totalization [and exclusion]” (Bhabha 1994: 162), circulate in public discussion and debates, creating new discursive communities. By affirming their Islamic identity, challenging the dominant religious discourse and claiming the public space, previously marginalized Muslim women disturb the “calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern significance” (Bhabha 1994:163). Muslim women not only contest gender relations in the dominant public sphere, but also develop alternative arenas in which they could communicate more with each other and envision alternatives, creating an oppositional “counterpublics” (a terms developed by Nancy Fraser 1992). In this context, I use the term “theology” to mean “the systematic study of discourses” seeking a “response to human need to meaning” (Kubálková 2003: 80).

Encounter between Islam and transnationalism led to a dialogue between traditionalists and reformists, in which hermeneutics and interpretation play a key role in the creation of a translocal, pluralistic, negotiated exchange sacred meaning. This emergent Muslim movement contributes to a slow but steady transformation from patriarchal to egalitarian gender relations, in which women are becoming agents and not subjects for such translocal thought and action. Mandaville argues that “the politics of authenticity which inevitably ensues from this process also serves to further fragment traditional sources of authority” (2001:176).

In the next section, I investigate the new identities and discursive fields constituted by transnationalism and the potentials toward broad social change and empowerment that

provide Muslims with a “forum to conduct politics *within* Islam” (Mandaville 2001:168) that “bypasses traditional gatekeepers and adjudicators of interpretative rights”(Jon Anderson quoted in Mandaville 2001:168). My goal is to investigate the major themes of this emergent critical reformist movement, the origins and character of new Muslim discourse, and their contextual interpretive practices and social engagement. My question is to what extent scholarship by Muslim women can be designated as a site of resistance, creating a counterpublic that challenges dominant publics?

Muslim Women and Dialogic Politics: ‘Truth-Seeking’ Between Traditionalists and Reformists

In the Islamic context, there exists a reformist, albeit new and undefined, vision of Islam competing with a more conservative vision. The two paradigmatically opposite worldviews are competing to define “the truth of the Islamic faith” (Abou El Fadl 2005: 4). Both claim to represent the true and authentic Islam. Puritans (also known as traditionalists) and reformists not only disagree on various issues, but they also each struggle to make their paradigms and worldviews the overwhelming dominant “truth about Islam”. The views of the two groups are irreconcilable, and therefore, the two views tend to clash, hence, the clash of interpretations. The two radically different discourses engage in dialogic politics in which “[p]uritans accuse the reformists of having changed and reformed Islam to the point of diluting and corrupting it. Reformists accuse the puritans of miscomprehending and misapplying Islam to the point of undermining and even defiling the religion” (Abou El Fadl 2005: 4). The layperson often finds this situation confusing.

No issue so inflames discussions between puritans and reformists as that of gender relations in Islam. Exploring the discourse of the radical or conservative approach to Muslim women (in the sense of their ideology, agenda, support, and activities) is crucial for our understanding of how the discursive landscape in Muslim societies has become so dominated by radical tendencies. It will be followed by the discussion of the reformist discourse of Muslim women and their activism that constitute a space in which pluralist and egalitarian agenda can be organized and propagated. My approach assumes that the Muslim public sphere is the medium for generating and implementing effective and sustainable responses to gender inequality that are more civil and contextual. In my view, the compelling question is which of those two clashing approaches will tend to dominate and prevail in Muslim societies?

In present day Muslim societies, the traditional interpretation of Islamic texts remains the dominant interpretation (Sharify-Funk 2003). Puritans have an impact on the religion that is widely disproportionate to their number (Abou El Fadl 2005:6). Among the points common to the traditional discourse which directly affect Muslim women, I am concerned with the following ones.

Muslim puritans have reduced the complexity and depth of the religion to one fixed, ideological worldview to determine and direct public behavior. This worldview defines Islam as an antithesis of an ideological enemy, the hegemonic West¹ (Abou El Fadl 2005; Mandaville 2004; also see chapter three). Puritans tend to compensate for loss of autonomy at the national level by asserting greater male autonomy over Muslim women (Abou El Fadl 2005: 256). Since puritans believe that the empowerment of women is

¹ For details, see Khaled Abou El Fadl (2005) *The Great Theft*.

part of a Western cultural invasion, they act as if political defeat can be compensated by a cultural victory (Abou El Fadl 2005:256). The theory and practice of traditional gender relations in Islam is seen as “a slap on the west’s face” because traditionalists believe that the West pioneered women’s right. They pursue this identity politics without paying attention to the price paid by women. The puritan tendency to view women as sources of danger and vulnerability for Islam is often expressed in terms of describing women as the worst *fitna* (Abou El Fadl 2005: 255). Most traditionalists claim that they view women as equal with men on the level of piety and they state that there is no contradiction with their attachment to separate gender roles. In other words, women are spiritually and morally equal, but they have separate roles in society (Wadud 2006). This contradiction is what Meena Sharify-Funk describes as “equal before God, unequal before men” interpretation (Sharify-Funk 2003). This rhetoric of complementarity has been (mis)used to discriminate against women whose roles are perceived as passive and pre-defined.

On top of that, puritans place a restriction on the Islamic concept of *ijtihad* (independent juristic interpretation) because they believe that the “doors of *ijtihad*” closed after the schools of thought were formed and fully institutionalized.

The Law (for traditionalists, this is not “law” but “Law”) is concretized Divine Will, and is *not* open to causal debate or pragmatic reform. [Traditionalists believe] that the practice of the earliest believers and the interpretations of early generations of jurists provides the ideal model for contemporary society (Sharify-Funk 2003).

Sharify-Funk argues that the traditionalist interpretation “tends to universalize the particular while offering no consistent methodological principle to justify the absence

of contextualization and the suppression of textual richness” (Sharify-Funk 2003). As mentioned earlier, one of the main reasons for reinforcing such an interpretation is the fear of submission to Western cultural norms. It is a countertrend that celebrates Islamic authenticity in the face of foreign ideologies (secular or feminist).

Traditionalist interpretative practices have locked Muslims into narrow, rigid and inflexible ways of defining their values and their identity. This is the core cause of the identity crisis that Muslims are experiencing today, particularly in relation to the role and status of women (Wadud 1992:63). Puritan discourse leads to the complete marginalization and exclusion of women from public life, or as Khaled Abou El Fadl describes it, it amounts for “the social death of women living in puritan societies” (2005:254). Supported by petro-dollars, puritans have flooded the market with a genre of literature that promotes their discourse on women and unfortunately, Muslims who are not experts in Islamic law are likely to believe that it represents the “truth about Islam”(Abou El Fadl 2005: 260).

Having discussed the traditional Islamic discourse, it is very important to note that the traditional attitude toward women is difficult to understand solely on the basis of the textual analysis of religious sources. The status of women and the question of gender are also politically contentious.

Women Claim Islam: The Emergence of Transnational Interpretive Identity

Faced with a transnational Islamic revival movement, more and more women are finding it necessary and beneficial to engage in transnational networking themselves and in the process to enter the dialogue about Islamic identity and culture (Sharify-Funk 2005: 250).

In response to traditional discourses, a variety of Muslim critical intellectuals and activists -both men and women- are now challenging the predominant conservative interpretive practices and are engaged in the process of reconstructing Islamic social norms. Gender represents an important ground “where the influence and efficacy of traditional authority and practice appear to weaning” in the sense that “[t]he *ulama*, an all male institution, are now facing large numbers of young Muslim women no longer prepared to have Islam dictated to them”(Mandaville 2001:142). Today, more Muslim women than ever before are to be found in the public spheres trying “to formulate their own Islam” and its underlying values (Mandaville 2001: 142).

Broadly speaking, progressive Muslims have proposed three options² for the “women question”. One option is to rely on established jurists traditions as authoritative canon and use an eclectic approach, picking and choosing from their variations. The result of this method is not only arbitrary but also fails to remove the bias against women within Muslim societies. A second option is to use the primary sources without consideration of canonical tradition. This option lacks credibility as it fails to register enough popular and specialist support and it also disrupts the integrity of Islamic tradition and continuity. The third option is to consider the tradition while providing creative interpretations that

² I relied heavily on Amina Wadud’s discussion of these options in her article “Citizenship and Faith”.

interrogate both the sources and the epistemological presumptions of traditional jurisprudence in light of current hermeneutical investigation (Wadud 2005: 179).

I chose to focus on the third option, in which Muslim women are rereading and reinterpreting the sacred text and engaging in social criticism and activism from *within* the Islamic tradition. The new, dialogical approaches to Islamic hermeneutics starts by critiquing the methods by which Muslims produce religious meaning and rereading the Qur'an for liberation in order to recover the "egalitarian voice of Islam" (Barlas 2002: 4). Dialogue becomes the norm that embodies what these women are working for; that is "a more horizontal and mutualistic gender relations" (Sharify- Funk 2005: 262).

Even though the Qur'anic hermeneutics may not by itself put an end to patriarchal, authoritarian, and undemocratic regimes and practices, it nonetheless remains crucial for various reasons. Hermeneutics and the 'women question' are closely connected. There is a "relationship between reading the sacred texts and liberation; that is between what we read the texts to be saying and how we think about and treat women" (Barlas 2002:3). Asma Barlas argues that "[i]f we wish to ensure Muslim women their rights, we not only need to contest readings of the Qur'an that justify the abuse of women, we also need to establish the legitimacy of liberatory readings" (2002: 3). Even if such readings do not succeed in achieving radical social change in Muslim societies, "it is safe to say that no meaningful change can occur in these societies that does not derive its legitimacy from the Qur'an's teachings, a lesson secular feminists are having to learn to their own detriment"(Barlas 2002: 3).

But this is not to say that gender inequality and the status of Muslim women are the result of merely of the misreading of the Qur'an. As other studies reveal, women's status in Muslim societies is a function of multiple factors such as poverty, the lack of democracy and the absence of a vibrant civil society. However, mistreatment of women has always been justified by Muslim states and clerics in the name of Islam. Moreover, socioeconomic and political factors only provide women with the supportive material context. These factors will only be able to transform Muslim women's lives in a meaningful way if they go together with a "fundamental epistemic shift in how Muslim interpret and practice Islam" (Barlas 2004: 1). To be meaningful, efforts to reform Islamic societies and structures must contend seriously with the "discursive and moral-ethical frameworks" it seeks to challenge (Barlas 2002: 25). Robert Cox supports this mutually dependent relationship between ideas and material conditions.

Under distinct circumstances, ideas and material conditions come together to form consistent patterns of action or structures which in their turn are worn out by experience and changing circumstances and replaced by other structures (Cox 1992:158).

The lack of appreciation of the mutually supportive relationship between religious ideas and socioeconomic and political conditions account for the relative failure of feminist and Western efforts to promote women's rights in the Muslim world. The weakness of the secular feminist analyses, which attribute gender inequality primarily to socioeconomic and political factors, rarely permit them to become an effective force in Muslim women's local political struggle because they fail to include the appreciation of the role of religion as a social force or the appreciation of cultural and contextual realities of the women they seek to liberate.

Democratization projects enforced from above ignored women's rights and in some countries opened up the political space for Islamist parties that showed no willingness to improve the status of Muslim women (Anwar 2005). Democratic projects that are imposed from above or by force (as Iraq in 2003) may not guarantee women's rights in the Muslim world. Strong democracy comes from below and is indigenously rooted as Benjamin Barber argues:

[I]mporting free political parties, parliaments, and presses cannot establish a democratic civil society; imposing a free market may even have the opposite effect. Democracy grows from the bottom up and cannot be imposed from the top down. Civil society has to be built from the inside out. The institutional superstructure comes last.....Democrats need to seek out indigenous democratic impulses. There is always a desire for self-government, always some expression of participation, accountability, consent, and representation, even in traditional hierarchical societies. These need to be identified, tapped, modified, and incorporated into new democratic practices with an indigenous flavor... The participatory and direct form of democracy that engages citizens in civic activity and civic judgment and goes well beyond just voting and accountability-the system I have called "strong democracy" (Barber 1992).

Pressure from *within* the Muslim world carries greater legitimacy and weight in that it directly undermines the claim that challenges to oppression of local women are 'Western-inspired' and, therefore, should be dismissed (Balchin 2002:130).

On the contrary, when using strategic bargaining or coercion, actors do not recognize each other as equals; there is no mutual respect of contextual differences; the process of change is not gradual, rationalized, and consequently change is not sustainable. Governments in the Muslim world may make some concession in order to increase their international legitimacy or to gain foreign aid. But these changes do not reflect the people's own cultural realities or local needs.

In the dialogical approach to Islamic hermeneutics, Muslim intellectuals take into account the sociological, economics, and political transformation that have occurred in Muslim societies and bring these into dialogue with tradition to reinvent the means for relating, in ways authentically Islamic, to new contexts. Even if they did not achieve their immediate objectives, they have effectively demonstrated to both local and international audiences the vitality, unity, and rootedness of women's struggle in Muslim countries and communities (Balchin 2002: 130).

Drawing on Habermas's theory, I claim that arguing, in terms of the "negotiated exchange of the sacred meaning" (Sharify-Funk 2005), may initiate reform that reflects cultural realities and local needs and is more likely to increase the influence of the materially less powerful actors (Muslim women in my case study), as they rely mainly on "the power of better argument" that resonates with the majority of Muslim women's aspiration for justice and piety. The interference of external actors does not represent an arguing process. Women's movements and feminists strategizing around the dilemma of the Muslim 'women question' have to be most delicately contextual. Muslim women scholar-activists are seeking to integrate dialogical politics and Islamic hermeneutics in order to achieve just and mutualistic gender relations.

Dialogue and arguing provide a mechanism for both learning and norms socialization in social settings. This mechanism is important to transcend what Robert Cox (1992) calls the "history of embeddedness". By this I mean the extent to which traditional discourses, supported by patriarchal readings of the texts,

“penetrated our understanding of the foundational message of the Qur’an to the degree that Muslims have largely forgotten their own heritage” (Abou El Fadl 2005: 273). It has been suggested by a number of scholars that the Medina of the Prophet Muhammad was actually an environment in which women of Arabia could flourish as never before, enjoying unprecedented freedoms and rights. It was the codification of Islam law, after the death of the Prophet that most likely put an end to this liberal climate (Mernissi 1991:11).

Therefore, it is imperative that pro-faith Muslim women scholar-activists play a critical role in initiating the process of change from within the Islamic tradition in a attempt “to legitimize and “nativize” feminist demands in their community, demands that would otherwise be cast as western imports” (Tohidi and Bayes 2001: 50). As Leila Ahmed (1992,168) argues, “ reforms pursued in a native idiom and not in terms of the appropriation of the ways of other cultures would possibly be more intelligible and persuasive to more traditional classes (and not only to modern upper and middle classes) and possibly, therefore, they may prove more durable” (cited in Tohidi and Bayes 2001: 50).

My empirical example for such “nativization” process is the various voices of reformist intellectuals and activists that contribute to the emancipation of Muslim women through an indigenous critique. This contemporary transnational movement constitutes of women who claims their Islamic identity and interpretive rights in Muslim world, Muslim women living in Muslim countries; such as Heba Raouf Ezzat and Omaima Abou-Bakr and Muslim women in non-Muslim countries; such

as Riffat Hassan, Azizh al-Hibri, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas to name a few, as well as groups, such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws and Sisters in Islam (a Muslim feminist group in Malaysia). Muslim women's voices, scholarship, and activism testify to the ongoing transformations, cultural exchange, negotiations that are taking place in localities throughout the Muslim world (Sharify-Funk 2005: 230).

The Construction of the Islamic Feminist Discourse

In this section, I outline the origins and the character of Muslim feminist discourses as well as their methodology, strategies, and style of engagement. These discourses provide an alternative broader understanding of the relationship between Islamism and gender that seeks to correct the narrow narrative of the presumed passivity of women, prevalent in Muslim cultural practices as well as Western media stereotypes.

Scholarship-Activism: The Character of the New 'Interpretive Community'

Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse expressly articulated within an Islamic paradigm and behaviours [*sic*] and activism inspired by it are enacted in Islam's name. Some of the Muslims talking about Islamic feminism were among the producers of the new discourse, or activists inspired by it. Other Muslims, as scholars, writers, journalists and public intellectuals, commented on Islamic feminism, entered debates, and wrote about while standing outside the emergent ranks of Islamic feminists (Badran 2002).

As mentioned earlier, some Muslim women intellectuals and activists articulate a pro-faith discourse on gender justice without taking an Islamic feminist identity (Badran 2002). These scholars define their approach or perspective as Qur'anic and refer to themselves as "believers", rather than feminists (Barlas 2005a: 107). Their approach

allows those who believe in God to do so while carrying out their charge as socially accountable agents (*khalifa*) on earth (Wadud 2006).

The emerging discourse on women in Islam demonstrates how Muslim women are becoming agents, not subjects, of social change. They challenge the authoritarian and patriarchal readings of Islam that are profoundly affecting the lives and future of Muslim women (Barlas 2002: 2). The intelligent scholarship documents how Muslim women activists and scholars, in their search for an adequate response to the worldviews of Islamic traditionalism, have sought to create their own transnational space for intellectual reflection on Islamic norms and identity (Sharify-Funk 2005: 250). These Muslim women activists are articulating a “Muslim feminist” critique of traditionalist tendencies to monopolize the (re)construction of Islamic culture. It draws the attention to the role of social hermeneutics in their resistance to the subordination of women by conservative, traditionalist men (Sharify-Funk 2005: 250). Their approach respects local and national identities while embracing a wider Islamic identity (Sharify-Funk 2005: 262). Their intellectual and ideational activism does not represent a return to the past, but a challenge to the present. Muslim women reinterpret the Qur’an with the new context in mind and in the light of present needs, which confirms the universality of the Qur’an (Wadud 2000). This reform movement involves “women “going back” to religious scripture to purge current practices of “deviations”, “accretions”, and “omissions” through fresh readings of scripture or *ijtihad*. Such “going back” was an operation of “going forward”” (Badran 1999:167).

These women have faith in Islam as liberating force. The Islam that “liberated women and uplifted their status by giving them rights considered revolutionary fourteen hundreds years ago: the right to own, inherit, the right to divorce, and the right to contract agreements” (Anwar 2005: 237). Applying new insights to read the Qur’an is both unavoidable and justifiable in the light of present debates and concerns. It is also legitimate because the Qur’an is *salih*, not bound by space, time, or context. These women practice the fundamental right of Muslims to freedom of jurisprudential choice and to unmediated access to the Qur’an and *hadith*. The Qur’an “instruct the believers to reflect and make best use of reason in trying to decipher the Qur’an polyvalent semiotic universe” (Barlas 2002: 18). These women are exercising their rights granted by the Qur’an to use their own reason and intellect to discover the meaning of the Qur’an.

This “scholarship-activism”, as it is referred to in the 2001 book *Windows of Faith* edited by Gisela Webb, focuses on the women-centered reinterpretation of the Qur’an because the Qur’an is the ultimate criteria available within the Islamic intellectual legacy and it is the most “authoritative reference point that enjoys an overwhelming consensus among Muslims-however variously understood-as the word of Allah, revealed to prophet Muhammad for the purpose of guidance to all humanity” (Wadud 1999: ix). For that reason, it provides the standards for checking if the status of women in actual Muslim societies could be defined as Islamic or not. Knowing that the Qur’an supports the universal values of equality, justice, and dignity for women is so empowering and liberating. It gives Muslim women the courage and the conviction to stand up and argue against those who support discrimination against them in the name of the religion. Asma

Barlas writes, “As a believer, I look to the Quran, rather than to Western texts and theories, for my understanding of concepts like sexual equality” (2002: 19).

Muslim women scholarship-activism crosses over lines of class, color, and national identity and thus appeal to many women. Some of the producers and articulators of the Islamic feminist discourse do not accept the Islamic feminist label or identity. While they do not operate on a feminist premise, they employ some of their ideas, concepts, and strategies (Fernea 1998: 421). They see their own struggle/jihad for women’s rights as different from women’s movement in the West. They identify themselves as ‘believers’, Muslims, or pro-faith and refuse to be identified as feminists (Wadud 2006 and Barlas 2002). As in Asma Barlas’s work, engagement with Western and feminist theories serves as helpful departure point. While her work draws on both Western and feminist theory, it should not be seen as a synthesis between Qur’anic and Western epistemology (Barlas 2002: 25).

From the perspective of developing a pro-faith agenda of women’s rights, Muslim women systematically address the question of the exclusion and absence of women experiences and voices in the discussion of the interpretation of the Qur’an. This interpretation reflects only “the male vision, perspective, desire or needs” argues Wadud (1999:2). However, we know that women participated actively in the creation of religious knowledge in the early days of Islam, argues Ahmed (1992: 72). Women in the Prophet’s community felt they had a right “to comment forthrightly on any topic, even the Qur’an”, and both God and the Prophet assumed their “right to speak out and readily responded to their comments” (Ahmed 1992: 72). The story of Umm Salama provides a great example.

[S]ome fourteen centuries ago, Umm Salama is said to have asked her husband, the Prophet Muhammad, why God was not addressing women directly in the Qur'an, then in the process of being revealed to him. Perhaps she was concerned at the number of Ayat [verses] addressed to men, or perhaps she did not take the Qur'anic reference to men to be inclusive of women, even though in Arabic that is often the case. In any event, that is how-says tradition- the Qur'an became the only Scripture to address women as women. As a believer, I interpret this incident to mean not that a women corrected God, but rather that, by God's Grace, Umm Salama's critique became the way for God to correct an entire community (Barlas 2002: 20).

Therefore, it is necessary to reexamine the details of the history and the process of knowledge formation in order to understand women's exclusion from interpretive communities over time (Barlas 2002: 10).

It is important to note that this gender-inclusive discourse does not question the Qur'an as the 'Divine Speech'. As Asma Barlas puts it, "I read the Qur'an as a "Believing woman", to borrow a term from the Qur'an itself. This means that I do not question its ontological status as Divine Speech" (Barlas 2002:19). Nor does this approach embrace 'moral relativism'. In fact, it is what Omaima Abou-Bakr calls "turning the tables on Islamist authorities" and Islamist men, taking them to task for their failure to adhere to Islamic principles and injunction (Abou-Bakr 2002). This discourse simultaneously critiques the "Islamic" patriarchal tradition and develops alternatives inspired by Islamic values. This project is designed to produce an Islamic discourse that problematizes gender injustice in the context of an Islamic worldview that they believe provides justice, egalitarianism and liberation from submission to anyone other than God.

This project opened the way for a new scholarship on the reading of the Qur'an (Barlas 2002 and Wadud 1999). It showed that a shared discourse of meaning is both possible and necessary for the development of moral communities. Unlike Amina Wadud,

Asma Barlas does not “valorize communities of women readers as the *sin quo non* of liberatory readings”. To her, “both men and women can produce patriarchal readings and liberatory ones as an acknowledgment of the relationship between texts and contexts of their readings” (Barlas 2002: 23). This is an important argument against biological essentialism.

This project is a synthesis between tradition and modernity. As Barlas puts it “my work is situated within these new revisions of Muslim tradition and attempts to synthesize the old with the new (Barlas 2002: 25). This project is considered traditional because it regards the Qur’an as an egalitarian text and in that they read the Qur’an in terms of its own truth claims. However, it is also modern in terms of applying new insights to read the Qur’an to address issues relevant to contemporary life such as sexual equality. Therefore, this project transcends and destroys the presumed binary between “tradition” and “modernity”. The discourse of Muslim women activists and scholars transcends another constructed binary between “East” and “West”. This discourse is not the product of East or West. It is global because “Islamic feminism is being produced at diverse sites around the world by women inside their own countries, whether they are from countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities. Islamic feminism is also growing in Muslim diaspora and convert communities in the West” (Badran 2002).

The emerging discourse and activism are multidisciplinary in nature; an encounter and intersection of intellectuals specialized in a variety of different disciplines such as Islamic studies, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, law and political science. It creates

new relations with opposing 'interpretive communities': reformist versus traditional and secular versus Islamic (Sharify-Funk 2005: 257). It shows that the 'political' in the issues of women is very much linked with the methodology and the intellectual level is linked with the grassroots level. Previously, the lack of a real intellectual environment for dialogue blocked change on the grassroots level for the empowerment of Muslim women (Ezzat 2007). Today, Muslim women discourse reflects the crossroads between scholarship and activism. This discourse is an attempt to bridge the gap between social sciences and Islamic sciences. Muslim women are combining a contemporary reading of the sacred sources with knowledge of social sciences (Ezzat 2007).

Heba Raouf Ezzat argues that reform in women's issues requires *ijtihad* on two sides: on one side, rethinking the conventional interpretation of the sacred sources and on the other side, rethinking the conventional statist notion of political identity and practice (Ezzat 2007).

Till now only attempts to reform the reading of the text have been in process, while the *Ijtihad* on the social sciences level has been almost non-existent. A simple example for that is the attempt to seek new fatwas allowing women to participate in politics by voting as well as become political representatives. Little has been done to introduce a new political theory that would revise the centrality of the state [as a] major actor, or revise the whole issue of political representation and its problems (Ezzat 2007).

In the gender-inclusive discourse, women are linking their gender and religious identities to imagine new forms and spaces of community and politics, which are non-statist, non-national and translocal. The transnational critical reformist movement in Islamic thought and practice focuses mainly on grassroots political practices which challenge "the state's totalisation [*sic*] of political normativity (i.e. the idea that politics

needs or ought to be done in a particular way)” (Mandaville 2000). By operating ‘across’ states, this movement “seeks to identify forms of transnational practice which disrupt statist delineations of inside/outside” (Mandaville 2000). Consequently, the meaning of democracy, politics, and civic engagement are redefined in order to broaden the domain of the political.

Struggling to reclaim their interpretive rights, Muslim women scholars-activists start from the premise that the Qur’an embodies the original core of Islamic ethical spirit in order to promote a faith-based reform. They reread the Qur’an’s positions on a wide variety of issues in order to argue that its teachings do not support patriarchy in theory and practice. This intellectual project challenges the dominant misperception and promotes an “ethical vision of the Quran that insistently enjoins equality and justice” (Anwar 2005:237). The “liberating spirit” of Islam plays an important role in guiding Muslim women’s “quest to be treated as fellow human beings of equal worth and dignity” (Anwar 2005: 237).

Critical Engagement with the Sacred Text: Motives and Motivation

Transnational discourses over sacred meaning emerged out of the need to “reform premodern religious epistemology through reflection on modern critical epistemologies” (Sharify-Funk 2005: 257). Instead of relying on the secular paradigm and discourses as a frame of reference, Muslim women felt inclined to develop an alternative paradigm, in which religion and social sciences are intertwined.

Before the resurgence of Islamic discourse, several generation of Muslim women intellectuals were trained in the framework provided by secular revolution, in which epistemology was separated from traditional religious ontologies. With the emergence of postmodern thought as well as new popular ideologies, more Muslim women

intellectuals have felt inclined to reclaim Islamic identities and ontologies (Sharify-Funk 2005:257).

Muslim women scholar-activists are concerned with the misreading of Islam, the abuse of Islam and the abuse of women in the name of Islam (Barlas 2002: xi) as well as the tendencies to confuse Islam and Muslims, normative Islam with historical Islam, and the “Divine discourse with its earthly realizations” (Barlas 2002: 4-5). It is the confusion of the Qur’an with its patriarchal exegesis that underwrites sexual oppression in Muslim societies and therefore needs to be contested (Barlas 2002:19). There is a widespread tendency to blame Islam for oppressing women rather than blaming Muslims for misreading the Quran (Barlas 2002: 2).

Despite women’s moral agency granted in the Qur’an, “traditional Muslim societies and Islamic law have denied women’s full agency” which “is incongruent with the achievement of a just order as sought after in the Qur’an” (Wadud 2005:187). The struggle to reclaim their interpretive rights may be related “proportionally to attempts by some Muslim states and clerics to keep Muslims from readings” (Barlas 2002: xii). The case of claiming women’s interpretive rights is also compelling due to the fact that the Qur’an has been “exclusively interpreted by men for over fourteen centuries and we have no record of women perspective on the text until the latter part of the twentieth century, which indicates a tremendous gap in our intellectual legacy, the filling of which has begun in earnest as part of progressive Islamic reform” (Wadud 2005:187).

Though Muslim women directly experience the consequences of oppressive misreading of religious texts, few have questioned the legitimacy of such reading. Many people accept the patriarchal exegesis of the Qur’an unquestionably. Thus, there is a need

to explore and document the liberatory aspect of the Qur'anic teachings in order to contest such (mis)reading (Barlas 2002: 3). It became imperative that Muslim women “contest the association, falsely constructed by misreading scripture, between the sacred and sexual oppression” (Barlas 2002: 3), because this association serves as the strongest argument for inequality and discrimination among Muslims (Barlas 2002:3).

Evidently, this discourse is cast against the background of the rise of political Islam in countries throughout the Muslim world, which has posed particular challenge to women's rights (Anwar 2005: 234). Puritans promote an aggressive form of patriarchy, unprecedented in Islamic history, in which “they respond to feelings of political and social defeatism by engaging in symbolic displays of power that are systematically degrading to women and lead to their marginalization and exclusion of public life” (Abou El Fadl 2005: 254). This recourse to knowledge that is demeaning to women, which claims to derive from religion to justify sexual oppression is what motivates such critical engagement with Qur'anic hermeneutics and renders such an engagement imperative to all projects of Muslim women's liberation (Barlas 2002: 2).

Likewise, the monopoly over knowledge and closing the door of *ijtihad* inspired Muslim women's critical engagement with the sacred text. By proclaiming that the door of *ijtihad* had been closed, historical reflection and open debate were sacrificed to the fear of abandoning historical authenticity. Muslim women scholar-activists, dissatisfied with the traditionalist discourse and mobilized by the injustice and oppression of women in Muslim societies, felt the need to challenge the Islamic agenda of the puritans and argue for their imperative right of *ijtihad*.

Over and above, a number of young, modern and educated Muslim women are no longer prepared to have “Islam dictated to them”. Many of them feel that for too long women have followed Islam blindly, never daring to ask questions, read or theorize (Mandaville 2001).

We felt powerless in the face of complaints by women who suffered in silence because Islam demands that they be obedient to their husbands because Islam grants men the rights to beat their wives and to take second wives. We felt powerless as we heard, again and again in religious classes, on the radio and the television, in interaction with religious departments and shari’a courts that men were superior to women, and has authority over them (Anwar 2005: 238).

As a result, they felt the urgent need to read the Qur’an for themselves searching for answers to the problems facing their societies in changing times and circumstances.

In addition, Islamic societies are undergoing massive transformation and dislocation under the impact of globalization. As Islam and Muslim identity become more globalized, certain Islamic practices especially against women become subject to debate. Under the impact of globalization, argues Zainah Anwar, many Muslim states are in crisis - politically, economically and socially. Many remained under the authoritarian rule and “have failed to satisfy the yearning of their populations for freedom, economic prosperity, justice, peace, and stability”. As these states and their leadership become delegitimize in the eyes of the discontented, disenfranchised and marginalized members of the society, a reactive search for an alternative governing ideology is growing (Anwar 2005: 234) . In these societies, Islamist activists have become vocal and effective opponents to the ruling elite as they successfully construct an ideology and strategy for Islamic reformation for political struggle against the oppressive state and a hegemonic Western

world. Muslim women's struggle for equality and justice must therefore be understood as taking place in societies that are undergoing change and turmoil and where Islam is increasingly shaping and redefining lives (Anwar 2005: 235).

Contextual Interpretive Practices: Hermeneutical and Political Strategies

To achieve their goals in challenging traditionalists and constructing a faith-based reform, Muslim women scholar-activists are using a variety of strategies. Some of these strategies are familiar to Western feminists, such as the research and documentation of women's conditions in Muslim societies. But Western feminism focuses mainly on socio-economic and political barriers to social change, which results in a lack of the appreciation of "social hermeneutics". Social hermeneutics is "a highly participatory endeavor. Authoritative interpreters of social texts are themselves authors of new understandings and as such write within- and indeed for- contexts of political contestation" (Sharify-Funk 2005:248, 263). Social hermeneutics allows scholars and activists to seek social change by drawing on cultural values as guidelines for action.

Meena Sharify-Funk writes

By analyzing hermeneutical methods for the analysis of textual interpretation as well as cultural analysis of the norms defining social roles for women, I found that: 1) different interpretations lead interpreters to different conclusions concerning the normative implications of foundational texts; 2) these divergent processes of interpretation and norm generation have real consequences for social practice towards Muslim women, connecting cultural and religious discourse to a politics of meaning that engages individual intellectuals, activists and society as a whole; and 3) reformist thinkers encourage Muslims to reformulate their understandings of early and medieval Islam, extract essential Islamic values, principles and goals from the root sources, and move beyond legalistic deduction towards a more integrated, systematic and reflective methodology. To act constructively in the modern world, reformists beseech Muslims to reevaluate their intellectual heritage and seek different ways of applying Islamic precepts in order to increase gender equality in all spheres of life (intellectually, socially, politically, economically, etc.) (Sharify-Funk 2003).

The methodological framework of participatory Islamic hermeneutics is based on the work of Fazlur Rahman, who was concerned with the question of how can Islam deal with a modernizing and rapidly changing world and how do Muslim scholars develop a viable Islamic humanism without becoming vulnerable to delegitimization by adherents of traditionalism.

Rahman points out that traditional Islamic models of juristic reasoning, such as *qiyas* (analogical reasoning), greatly restricted the ability of Muslim intellectuals to apply Islamic values. These models were very atomistic in their hermeneutical approach (giving priority to injunctions without context, and without an integrated philosophical sense of underlying principles), preventing comprehensive analysis of the whole text of the Qur'an and resulting in the equation of Islamic values with specific historical practices. In other words, Muslims have long lacked a well-developed "Qur'anic *Weltanschauung*" that might help them differentiate that which is essential and relevant to the demands of a situation from that which is not (Sharify-Funk 2003).

A number of reformist thinkers (both men and women) are inspired by Fazlur Rahman in using Islamic hermeneutical methodology. Muslim reformists "seek to reframe the debate on Islamic cultural norms by creating new hermeneutical methods in order to present a viable alternative to patriarchal conservative traditionalism" (Kurzman cited in Sharify-Funk 2003).

Rahman's reinterpreting hermeneutical process depends upon a "double" intellectual movement: 1) formulating an understanding of the Qur'anic *Weltanschauung* (in terms of general principles) within its historical context, and 2) reevaluation of contemporary social and moral context(s) within which Islamic values may be applied. First one must move from the concrete case treatments of the Qur'an—taking necessary and relevant social conditions of that time into account—to the general principles upon which the entire teaching converges. Second, from this general level there must be a movement back to specific legislation, taking into account the necessary and relevant social conditions now obtaining (Sharify-Funk 2003).

Despite their different techniques and approaches to hermeneutical analysis, Muslim reformists share one distinctive characteristic; they all seek the promotion and production of sustainable intellectual equality for men and women (Sharify-Funk 2003).

Reinterpretation of the Qur'an in the context of changing time and circumstances addresses the dynamics between what is universal for all times and what is particular to seventh century Arabia. It also looks at the sociohistorical context of revelation and what is the human understanding of the word of God. Such interpretive methodology develops a framework to deal with the challenge of Islam and modernity and enables more and more Muslim women activists all over the world to recognize the validity and possibility of working within the Islamic framework in order to find liberation within Islam.(Anwar 2005:237). Through the methodology of Islamic interpretation, a renewal of Islamic intellectualism is taking place that reconciles tradition with modernity. In addressing the patriarchal oppression of women and other groups, Muslim women utilize the "Quran gradualist approach" to change in both the societal and individual arenas (al-Hibri 2001).

The critical Islamic interpretation increasingly makes clear that conservative reading of the Qur'an are a function of the methods Muslims have used to read it. Muslims have not read the Qur'an as both a "complex hermeneutics totality" or as "historically situated text (Barlas 2002: 8). They have relied mainly on a verse-by-verse approach to the Qur'an. Traditional exegists "begins with the first verse of the first chapter and proceed to the second verse of the first chapter – one verse at a time- until the end of the Book. Little or no effort is made to recognize themes and to discuss the relationship of the Quran to itself", explains Amina Wadud (1999:2).

This historical analysis of religious authority and knowledge reveals how Muslims came to read inequality and patriarchy into the Qur'an in order to justify existing religious and social structures and demonstrates that the patriarchal meanings ascribed to the Qur'an are a function of "who has read it, how and in what specific contexts" (Barlas 2002). Barlas argues that the "Quran was revealed in/to an existing patriarchy and has been interpreted by adherent of patriarchies ever since" (Barlas 2002: xi). Therefore, Muslim women have a lot a stake in challenging this patriarchal exegesis.

Through deconstructing theocratic, andocentric precepts and practices and reconstructing more democratic, gender-balanced principles and practice, reformists are challenging the very process of knowledge itself: the ontological, epistemological as well as methodological underpinnings of traditionalist culture of interpretation (Sharify-Funk 2003)

Constructing this faith-based reform through an interpretive activism is a crucial effort. There will be no Islamic civil society without such an effort. It is also "foundational to legal reconstruction of a moral social order in Islam" (Wadud 2005: 183). This interpretive method can differentiate those practices which advanced Muslim society from those which resulted in stagnation.

The emergence of a new hermeneutics field in which Islamic identity and intellectuality are being rethought is further strengthened by transnationalism. Transnational interpretive processes use aspect of globalization, notably communication and information technologies and the possibility of networking rapidly across borders to facilitate and strengthen local struggles (Balchin 2002: 130).

Confined to their local context, women lack the comparisons that enrich analysis, making it difficult to unravel and challenge religious fundamentalism. Transnational

dialogue is crucial for sharing information, breaking isolation and building alliances and transnational networks. Muslim women in transnational networks are sharing information, creating exchanges, pursuing common projects and developing solidarity. They are using transnational networking to build bridges and to provide inspiration for local groups. Solidarity among activists of different backgrounds enables them to resist the manipulation of religion as a means of justifying the marginalization of women (Balchin 2002). Transnational networking and dialogue are crucial for raising public awareness in local settings and overcoming isolation. This awareness of basic rights will play a crucial role in the emancipation of Muslim women and their full participation in Muslim societies.

Transnational networks and dialogue among Muslim women have been central to cross the barrier imposed by identity politics. Women communicate through networks, compare laws in different Muslim countries, advance the issues that need to be addressed, thus breaking the barriers of different ethnicities, national identities, context and disciplines in order to work together. The horizontal, cross-border sharing of localized experiences and analyses through networks has enabled women to “disentangle the complex threads of religion, custom and law” (Balchin, 2002: 128). Thus, interpretive approach of reconciliation of Islam and women’s rights is more dynamic, appropriate and contextually relevant (Balchin 2002:127). Women’s advocacy groups, such as WLUML, recognize that

knowledge is situated and reproduced in specific places by particular people and at specific historical moment. It therefore insists on the autonomy of linked groups and individuals in terms of choosing appropriate strategies and emphasizes the rootedness of women’s struggles. At the same time, it insists that all struggles are interlinked and

thus seeks to cross boundaries and build bridges both within a particular context and between contexts (Balchin 2002: 129)

So far, we have recognized that: 1) there “has never been a single category of identity of Muslim women”, 2) there are multiple factors that “have made women’s roles and experiences significantly different from each other” (Tohidi 2003: 155), 3) the transnational encountering of their similarities and differences establishes diversity and breaks the myth of homogeneity (Sharify-Funk 2005: 254). Transnational dialogue also inspires women’s critical engagement and renders Western feminists analyses and strategies inappropriate. It also

challenge[s] hegemonic claims of absolute, context-free knowledge by putting forward an alternative approach to communal values that underscores relativity and the importance of context. Whereas the traditional approach directs all attention to the authoritative text while ignoring questions about *who* is interpreting and under what circumstances, a critical Islamic approach balances the claims of the text with consideration of the needs and existential circumstances of the Muslim society and its interpreters. It focuses on the interaction among text, interpreter, and context (Sharify- Funk 2003).

Muslim scholar-activists are not concerned with imitating the secular interpretive practices of Western feminists. Instead, these women are utilizing strategies that are related not to Western practices, but to their own traditions. Transnational dialogue and networking is providing new framework for thinking about identity. This framework and the solutions it suggests derive from within the Islamic doctrine; not imposed or enforced from outside. Women involved in local situation know the most appropriate strategies for their circumstances. Transnational dialogue then “connotes both insider/outsider perspectives all at the same time” (Sharify-Funk 2005: 260)

Conclusion

Despite a rapid expansion of research on Muslim women, analyzing traditional, political, and socio-economic barriers to their advancement, little has been written about how the dialogue among Muslim women from different contexts shapes their activism and how their efforts are increasingly linked together via transnational networks and how their activist visions influence the definition of Muslim public sphere and Muslim agency.

To provide insights into the significance of transnationalism for identity formation and activism among Muslim women, this chapter explored two set of questions- one theoretical and one practical. The theoretical questions tackled the emerging ‘discursive spaces’ in which Muslim women scholar-activists can articulate their normative claims for the reconstruction of Islamic values and percepts. The practical questions investigated the origins and character of the new Muslim critical discourse and its implications for Muslim women.

As my discussion of these two sets of questions testifies, there is a new framework for thinking about women’s right in Islam being articulated through “the negotiated exchange of sacred meaning”. Focusing on transnational interpretive processes, this new framework transcends conventional labels and binaries and do not simply transpose Western categories or posit continuity with traditional Islamism (Sharify-Funk 2005:249). This framework is embedded in the Qur’an and is not a product of Western modernity. More than ever, Muslim women are becoming agents, rather than objects, of social change. The new interpretive project based on “dialogical relations between self

and [the Muslim] Other” becomes a means of empowerment and redefinition of identity and of the role within the Muslim community (Sharify-Funk 2005: 262).

CHAPTER 5

WOMEN CLAIMING THE PUBLIC SPHERE: MUSLIM INTELLECTUALS AND TRANSNATIONAL EXCHANGE

In response to patriarchal tendencies of the Islamists, a group of Muslim women have reclaimed Qur'anic and other textual interpretation in order to recover what Leila Ahmed (1992) called "the egalitarian voice" of Islam. My goal in this chapter is to offer the reader an encounter with some of the voices of Muslim women scholar-activists, who creatively engage the Qur'an and the *sunnah* (prophetic tradition) in ways to advance gender justice.

In the previous chapter I made the case that a critical Islamic interpretation that seeks contextually appropriate answers to enable women to reach their full potential and agency is essential to Muslim women's liberation project today. The list of eminent scholars and activist who have helped shape this pro-faith discourse on gender justice includes: Asma Barlas (Pakistani), Riffat Hassan (Pakistani), Amina Wadud (African American), Aziza al- Hibri (Lebanese) and Heba Raouf Ezzat (Egyptian), to name just a few.

In the final years of the twentieth century, these women started to become part of a new interpretive community, producing compelling exegesis and analysis on gender issues. They commanded considerable respect, authority and presence in the global *ummah* (Badran 2006).

Critical Islam: Transnational Actors, Ideas and Exchanges

My main argument in this dissertation is that a combination of critical ideas, new Muslim intellectuals and transnational networking is transforming the Muslim discourse on gender justice. In the following section, I will identify the actors who developed the “new thinking” or interpretations about the role and status of Muslim women and the transnational networks through which these ideas are promoted.

Azizah al- Hibri and KARAMAH

Azizah Al- Hibri is a Professor of Islamic Law at the University of Richmond and a well-known feminist. She is the founding editor of *Hypatia: a Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, and the president and the founder of KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights. According to Al-Hibri, Muslim women are generally bewildered by the laws and judicial systems of their societies, which are supposed to be Islamic. Although the hallmark of Islam is justice, Muslim societies have been dispensing injustices to women in the name of Islam. The problem, in her opinion, “lies in misunderstanding or misapplication of the Qur’anic text resulting from cultural distortions or patriarchal bias”. Because jurists are the product of their societies and these societies continued to be highly patriarchal, therefore, Islamic literature has been saturated with patriarchal perspective on women’s rights and oppressive patriarchal jurisprudence, which became the basis of state laws. For most Muslims, “these perspective have become so entrenched that they are viewed as an “objective” reading to the Quran rather than *ijtihad* of individuals” (al-Hibri 2000: 51). She agrees with other scholar-activists who find the patriarchal interpretation

unacceptable and conflicts with *tawhid*, and hence needs to be reexamined through the process of *ijtihad*. (al-Hibri 2000:54).

[*Ijtihad* is] not just independent thinking. It's rational analysis. It's almost like philosophical analysis of the text, of the circumstances, of the overall situation to come up with the right rule for your situation, for your context.... It's at the heart of Islam and Islamic democracy.... In my view, with the closing of the door of *ijtihad*, and the rise of dictatorial centralized power, patriarchy became more and more intense in the Muslim societies, not only vis-à-vis women, but even vis-à-vis the concept of democracy in society where democracy was on the ebb (al-Hibri cited in Sharify-Funk 2003).

Clearly, such reinterpretation and *ijtihad* have profound implications for the character of Islamic societies and politics, and suggest the possibility of a much more liberal and critical Islamic discourse.

Committed to supporting the rights of Muslim women domestically and globally, Karamah has developed gender-equitable Islamic jurisprudence, based on serious research in foundational and classical religious sources for the improvement of women's rights and status (e.g. developing a marriage contract adequate to protect women's rights). Al-Hibri is in the process of completing a long-awaited book on the Islamic marriage contract in American courts.

What KARAMAH was doing was revolutionary, for they were working with Sacred texts, something that has always been the province of men. Although nothing in the Quran actually prevented women from interpreting the law, cultural practice has meant that men were in charge. Jurisprudence? Mediation? Writing marriage contracts? Never in the past was this women's business. And not only were women lawyers reading, learning, and interpreting. They were doing so in the United States, where they held positions of legal credibility in American society. This gave an advantage they might not have had in some of their societies, such as Saudi Arabia" (al-Hibri in Fernea1998: 401).

This experience and the work of Karamah are, then, shared with Muslim women jurists in various countries. To involve these jurists and other Muslim women leaders directly in legal exchange throughout the Muslim world, Karamah established an international network of Muslim women jurists allowing them to dialogue with each other on core issues affecting Muslim women.

To date, attempts to improve the legal realities of Muslim women's lives have focused largely on public education, especially within the legal and Islamic communities. Our experience reflects a dire need for improvement in laws governing everyday matters, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, domestic violence, education, political participation, and economic rights. Jurists in the network have initiated discussions of these issues within an Islamic framework, guided by the Qur'an, *hadith* and *sunnah* (the words and example of the Prophet), the Islamic legal tradition, and the concept of *ijtihad* (jurisprudential interpretation). We have traveled to and organized jurists' workshops in countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, in order to better understand the problems and discuss possible solutions. We soon plan on expanding our workshops and programs into other parts of the Muslim World, including South Africa and South East Asia (Karamah's Website).

Karamah brings together like-minded women jurists and provides them with the tools and support they need as they work together to educate and inform women and their communities globally. Other jurists in the network continue to identify and research other important issues in their communities.

One of the major programs within Karamah is the "American Muslim Women's Summit". The goal of the Summit was to identify and prioritize the urgent issues that needed to be addressed in order to improve Muslim women's lives and advance their rights at home and abroad. The Summit invited American Muslim women leaders, scholars, and activists who were at the forefront in advocating the rights of Muslim women, primarily from within an Islamic perspective. The Summit gave the

participants a collective opportunity to articulate and discuss the key issues faced by Muslim women in the United States. At the end, the participants agreed on a list of critical issues that required attention by Muslim jurists. The outcomes of this Summit were shared with Karamah's Muslim Women Jurists Network, thus connecting jurists to grassroots (Karamah's website).

Through their various activities, Karamah is empowering women, and encouraging them to play an active role in the positive development of their communities. It is helping them articulate their rights thoughtfully within their own religious and cultural contexts. Karamah provides women with valuable leadership skills as well as powerful jurisprudential knowledge, so that they become capable of negotiating much needed change within their own communities by utilizing non-confrontational and constructive methods (Karamah's website).

Asma Barlas

Asma Barlas is a professor of politics at Ithaca College, New York. She is former chair of the Department of Politics and founding director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity. Barlas is a Muslim woman who is actively involved in the emerging dialogue surrounding women in Islam. She participates and contributes to this dialogue by offering "a reading of the Quran that challenges oppressive interpretations and demonstrates the egalitarian nature of its teachings on sexual equality" (Barlas 2005a: 97). Her conviction in the necessity to theorize radical gender equality from *within* the framework of its teaching led her to write her book "*Believing women*" in Islam.

In her book, Barlas develops a believer's reading of the Qur'an that demonstrates the radically egalitarian and antipatriarchal nature of its teachings and asserts that the Qur'an affirms gender equality. She not only challenges oppressive readings of the Qur'an but also offers a reading that confirms that Muslim women can struggle for equality from within the framework of the Qur'an teachings.

Barlas argues that the reason Muslim have read the Qur'an as a patriarchal text has to do with who has read it (basically men), the context in which they have read it (basically patriarchal), and the method by which they have read it (basically one that ignores the hermeneutic principles that the Qur'an suggests for its own reading) (Barlas 2005a: 97).

She is engaged in "textual activism", using interpretive methodology or hermeneutics, as a strategy for challenging patriarchal epistemologies and institutions facilitating the reappropriation of religious texts, by reading equality in the Qur'an and opening a dialogue on the role of women in Islam. This reading of the Qur'an challenges oppressive interpretation of the Qur'an and demonstrates the egalitarian nature of its teachings and helps challenge gender discrimination. This reading allows for restructuring not only of Muslim religious knowledge but also of Muslim societies.

Her approach illustrates the liberatory potential of theology for women, which represents a fundamental epistemic shift in how Muslims interpret and practice Islam. Such a "shift would involve a willingness to read liberation from the same scripture that male authorities abuse to discriminate against women" (Barlas 2005a: 91).

I believe that Muslims must struggle to create normative horizons specific to our existence and relevant to the examination of our lives and their possibilities. As a believer, I look to Islam to provide such horizons and I content that one such horizon is a Qur'anic hermeneutics of sexual equality (Barlas 2005a: 96).

Barlas describes her book “as much a critique of sexual/textual oppression in Muslim societies as it is a concerted attempt to recover what Leila Ahmed (1992) calls the “stubbornly egalitarian” voice of Islam and to locate it as a legitimate countervoice to the authoritarian voice of Islam”(Barlas 2002: 2). It is important to note that Barlas does not offer a theory of sexual equality based on her reading of the Qur'an. However, she offers elements of a Qur'anic framework for deriving such a theory (Barlas 2005a: 100). Asma Barlas's “textual activism” has both theoretical significance and real-life consequence for Muslims women.

Zainah Anwar and Sisters in Islam

Even though the source of the law is divine, human understanding of God's message is not infallible. The knowledge produced and the legal constructs derived are both the products of human engagement with the divine text. The law can therefore be changed, criticized, refined and redefined (Anwar 2005: 244).

“Sisters in Islam” is a group for professional women and activists. It was born out of a faith in “Islam as a force for social equality” and out of deep concerns over the “injustice women suffered under the fundamentalist Islamist interpretation” of *sharia* (Anwar 2005: 234). It is a “progressive Islamic feminist group” and one of the most successful groups in challenging the patriarchy of the legal system in Malaysia. Their advocacy finds its voice in widely circulating Qur'anic arguments for gender equality through memoranda or letters to governments on law or policy. They are also

employing new technologies, with a website that allows their members to effortlessly cross geographic borders within the Muslim world, bringing together those seeking an alternative to the established interpretations of religious texts. Zainah Anwar, the Executive Director of Sisters in Islam, clearly identifies herself as an activist determined to “work from within, embracing Islam while also working to transform its practice” (Anwar 2005)

We are believers, and as such we want to find liberation, truth and justice within our faith.... We feel strongly that we have the right to claim our religion, to redefine it, to participate in it and to contribute to an understanding of how Islam is codified and implemented- in ways that take into consideration the realities and experience of women’s lives today.... We began to study the Quran and the traditions of the prophet to better understand Islam. We armed our selves with knowledge and newfound conviction to stand up and fight for women’s rights to equality, justice and freedom all within a religious framework (Anwar 2005: 234).

Sisters in Islam started with looking into the problems facing women, reading the Qur’an, consulting with progressive Islamic scholars and networking with other women’s groups engaged in the same struggle. This activism created a public space for women to stand up and argue for justice and equality for Muslim women in contentious areas such as polygamy, domestic violence and freedom.

The advocacy work of Sisters in Islam “takes two main forms: memoranda and letters to the government on law and policy reform as well as letter to the editor on current issue to educate the public and to build a constituency that would support a more enlightened interpretation of Islam on specific issues” (Anwar 2007:11). Some of the letter and memoranda are submitted jointly with other women’s groups to

demonstrate to the public that Sisters in Islam has not taken an isolated position on a particular issue, thus breaking isolation (Anwar 2007:13).

Developing alternative interpretations of the Qur'an that uphold the principles of equality and justice of the Qur'an is central to the advocacy work of Sisters in Islam. Researching alternative juristic positions in Islam "feeds into their writings and press statements on contentious issues where the conservative religious authority or Islamic movements are pushing for laws and policies that discriminate against women" (Anwar 2007:12).

In addition, Sisters in Islam "have an extensive public education program. They conduct monthly study sessions and organize public lecture series where they invite progressive Muslim scholars from overseas to speak on topical issues in Islam" (Anwar 2007:13). They embarked on a training program on women's rights in Islam that targets such opinion makers as grassroots services providers, human rights lawyers, student leaders and young professionals (Anwar 2007:13). This training is now much in demand at the international level. They have trained groups from Afghanistan, South Asia and West Africa. This grass-root activism plays an important role in educating the public about alternative positions in Islam on a particular issue as well as transform government policies.

Amina Wadud

Amina Wadud, a professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, is a well-known Muslim women reformist scholar and a core member of Sisters in Islam seeking to promote gender justice within the Islamic faith. Paramount

for her perspective is the definition of Islam as a “dynamic relationship of “engaged surrender” between Allah and the *khalifah*, or trustee on earth” (Wadud 2000: 40). The human *khalifah* is “assigned and empowered to act fully and freely as an independent agent accountable for all choices and actions” (Wadud 2005: 172). This agency is “a characteristic of every human, irrespective of race, class, age, nationality and gender”. More to the point, each woman is created as a *khalifah* with the moral responsibility to act as an agent before Allah (Wadud 2005: 172). Despite this agency asserted in the Qur’an, Wadud noticed a “complete voicelessness of women in the historical legacy of *tafsir* [interpretation]” (2000:12). The legacy of *tafsir* is “extraordinarily silent about female voice This silence has left a tremendous gap in the intellectual legacy and has come to be equated with silence of the text itself” (Wadud 2000:13). The record of Islam historical intellectual development reveals that “with the exception of *hadith* transmission and Quranic *hafiz* (memorization), women did not participate in the formation of Islam’s paradigmatic foundation” (Wadud 2006: 96). This gap cannot be closed with the mere rhetoric of equality in Islam advocated by traditional Islamists.

This particular gender concern is what triggered Wadud’s central claim, which is “the Qur’an must be continually interpreted in order to remain vital and dynamic” and in order to achieve justice for women in Islamic societies. Wadud seeks to correct these gender imbalances in her work as both scholar and activist.

An alternative interpretation of the Qur’an, one that incorporates the female voice, is explored in Wadud’s book, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a*

Woman's Perspective. Wadud, under the influence of Fazlur Rahman, took the hermeneutic methodological framework and applied it for women's rights. She argues for a holistic interpretation of the Qur'an. In particular, she challenges the tendency to exalt past interpretations of holy texts, and notes that "*tafsir* [historical and contemporary commentary] is (hu)man-made and, therefore, subject to human nuances, peculiarities, and limitations" (Wadud 2000: 11). She, then, goes a step further by advancing a dynamic rather than static concept of the divine will, stating that, "divine will is always in the process of becoming, humankind can only hope to gain direction toward that will by likewise being in process, never complete" (Wadud 2000: 11).

Wadud's work actively engage in constructing "a hierarchy of meaning where the deeper inner spirit of the faith system and the understanding of Islam vis-à-vis women's agency on earth is given priority over the utilitarian and subservient codification of her status according to the development of *Shariah* historically" (Wadud 2005:187). Her *jihad* seeks to create "substantive justifications for the implementation of legal reforms at the actual level of social praxis and policy-making that more closely reflect the egalitarian framework of Islam's sacred text" (Wadud 2005: 187).

Wadud proposes an ethical and theological basis, based on the concept of *khalifah* (defined as moral agency) for a just social order in the context of the modern Muslim nation-state, especially as relates to gender (Wadud 2005). She suggests that "[t]he patriarchal bias can be corrected toward a more inclusive and egalitarian formation of

ethical theory as a necessary prerequisite and a principle toward legal reform. Yet those addressing the issue of gender reform today are doing little or no work in the area of ethics” (Wadud 2005: 183). Wadud argues that “ [i]n order to construct alternative versions of legitimate social structure using Islamic concepts and techniques as understood and implemented by Muslims today, Muslims must rethink both our heritage and our current complexities” (Wadud 2005: 179).

Her recent book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, defined as “a struggle to establish gender justice in Muslim thought and praxis”, has continued this gender inclusive tendency while also applying it beyond theory and interpretations to more closely affirm Muslim women’s activism over the past few decades. For example, in her book, Wadud discusses women inclusiveness in public ritual leadership. On March 18, 2005, Amina Wadud led Muslim prayers (a primarily male role) in New York City as an attempt to challenge the status quo. This radical act, “targeting gender asymmetries in Islamic ritual practices” (Wadud 2006), has stirred international controversy. Some Sheikhs called her actions heresy, and death threats promoted by *fatwas* issued against her. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a leading Islamic scholar based in Qatar, commented that “[a]ll [Islamic scholars] agree that women do not lead men in (performing) religious duties”¹ (quoted in Wing 2005). On the other hand, UCLA law professor Khaled Abou El-Fadl argued that those who questioned women’s intellectual capacity to lead prayers overlook the example set by Umm Salama and

¹ See report by Meredith Wing (2005), on Amina Wadud: The Women-Led Prayer that Catalyzed Controversy, found on the website of *the Pluralism Project* at Harvard University <http://www.pluralism.org/research/profiles/display.php?profile=73972>

Aisha who enjoyed high degree of religious authority. In fact, about 30% of Islamic jurisprudence was created by these two women. However, Muslim traditionalists dismiss such evidence and cite Umm Salama and Aisha as exceptions (quoted in Wing 2005).

Amina Wadud insists that “her gender jihad is not limited to this one symbolic act and not concluded by performing it” (Wadud 2006: 247). Amina Wadud’s ‘pro-faith perspective’ as manifested in her writing and activism, contributes to a corpus of literature aiming at eradicating all practices, public and private, of injustice toward women.

Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)

The most well-known network of transnational activism for Muslim women is Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML). According to their mission statement, WLUML is “a network of women whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws, both written and unwritten, drawn from interpretations of the Quran and tied up with local traditions” ((Balchin 2002: 127 and Moghadam 2005: 148).

As an international network of information, solidarity, and support, WLUML links individual women and groups in Muslim countries and communities in order to strength their struggles and pursuit of autonomy. This cross-boundary exchange of the diversities and similarities of the lived experience of women has crystallized new ways of thinking around culture, identity and women’s right among networkers and their allies.

With a particular emphasis on the virtue of forming active transnational networks, WLUMML was formed in 1984, mainly in response to the growing crisis of fundamentalism. They may be described as antifundamentalist network of Muslim feminists and secular feminists who link with other women's networks to advance the human rights of women in the Muslim world (Moghadam 2005: 144). It was the first such feminist network to emerge. Their tasks are to create international links between women in Muslim countries, to share information on their situation, struggle and strategies through various means such as publications and exchanges and also their Alert for Action system. Since then, WLUMML has become a network of women who are active in their local and national movements. They reach out for women who worked on the ground in their countries in order to enhance their work. By 1994 women and women's organization in twenty-five countries were associated with WLUMML through various projects (Moghadam 2005: 164).

In order to achieve their goals, WLUMML undertakes a variety of activities. It collects and disseminates information on formal and customary laws in the Muslim world, as well as on women's lives struggle, and strategies. It advances shared lived experiences through exchanges, including face-to-face interaction among women in the Muslim world (Moghadam 2005: 148). Common projects are identified by women in the network and reflect their diverse concerns. One such project was called the "Koranic Interpretation by Women". This project entailed an independent reading and interpretation of the Qur'an, *Hadith* and existing Islamic laws. The ten-year

project culminated in a book and increased the awareness of the women involved of the misapplication of Islamic law in the Muslim world (Moghadam 2005: 149).

WLUML can be described as advocacy network with loose structure. The fluid, nonhierarchical organizational forms and methods are more conducive to WLUML goals of transnational advocacy, information exchange, and solidarity than the conventional bureaucratic structure. Like other transnational feminist networks, WLUML stresses information exchange, mutual support, and international solidarity toward realization of its essential goal of advancing women's right in the Muslim world. Through its projects and its documentation and dissemination of information, WLUML has expanded the creative use of scarce resources and helped individuals and groups to form contact and exchange knowledge, thereby, increasing their effectiveness (Moghadam 2005:165).

Qur'an and Gender Justice: Interpretive Possibilities

Important 'new thinking' and discourse on issues of equality, citizenship, civic engagement and civil society are being developed by Muslim women scholar-activists. This "new thinking" and discourse of Muslim women scholar-activists are significantly different from the dominant patriarchal discourse because the method they use to read the Qur'an differs substantially from how Muslims have read it historically. Muslim women are moving beyond patriarchal protection to elaborate a compelling explication of the equality of all human beings, male and female alike. In reading the Qur'an, they have found confirmation for gender equality in the many

verses addressed to both male and female believers. This reading recognizes gender difference, but at the same time goes beyond male/female duality to assert gender equality (Badran 2006). As Margot Badran argues,

There is a male/female duality in all creation, reflected in the grammatical construction of the Qur'anic language in reference to humankind and animals, which are rendered in the dual form: *insan* and *hayawan* ...Nevertheless, recognition of biological duality in no way diminishes the idea of fundamental equality of all human beings.... Neither sex is superior to the other...Neither sex is ordained to rule over the other. Patriarchy, as ideology and practice, with its stringent hierarchal ordering, fundamentally disrupts the Qur'anic ideal and practice of human equality (Badran 2006).

In explicating gender equality from the Qur'an, Muslim scholar-activists focus on the Qur'anic notions of *khelafa* and *tawhid*. The Qur'an speaks of *khelafa*, defined as agency or the trusteeship of God on earth, which is "delegated to all human beings, a divinely ordained human agency. This trusteeship or agency, logically and morally cannot be diminished, or "de-equalized" by the biological attributes of *insan* - sexual, racial, or whatever" (Badran 2006). Moreover, Muslim women connect the idea of equality of all humankind with the idea of *tawhid* - the oneness of God. *Tawhid* means that "no human being can or should act like a God.... *Ta'a*, or obedience, is due to God alone" (Badran 2006). Within the patriarchal context women owe obedience to men, who have made themselves into "virtual gods" (Badran 2006).

Qiwama or man's assumed superiority is also under attack. *Qiwama* "is traditionally viewed as the Qur'an's articulation of men's superiority". The new gender-sensitive exegetes have focused attention on the notion of male supremacy imposed on women in the name of Islam. They consider this notion to be

“fundamentally disruptive of the Qur’anic principle of human equality”. Traditional Islamic discourses claim that God has preferred men to women. They support their claim by reading and misinterpreting verses and words in the Qur’an. According to the conventional interpretation of 4:34 of the Qur’an, “the statement men are *“qawwamuna 'ala”* women has been used to justify and perpetuate male authority over and protection of women as a prerogative and duty of men”. In response, the new women exegetes offer a rereading that affirms the Qur’anic ideal of human equality. According to Amina Wadud and Azizah al-Hibri, the primary meaning of *qawwamun* is financial maintainer, not ruler. The verse is thus “charging husbands with the responsibility of maintaining women in those cases where they have a larger share in inheritance than women (in which some of them have been preferred)” (Barlas 2001:9). Traditionalists read this verse “as ordaining that the male is in charge of the woman or has authority over the woman and he is a “degree above” her. The patriarchal reading has been so firmly and pervasively held over time and place that it is seen as “Islam itself”” (Badran 2006).

This reading has promoted and entrenched the notion of male protection of women, the fundamental duty of a husband to support his wife materially and take charge of her spiritually and morally. Many women have welcomed this notion of male protection and material support as intrinsic to Islam. But “with this protection and material support have come exaggerated forms of obedience to men, to the point that it became a commonplace notion that a woman’s path to heaven lay through

obedience to her husband, thus detouring her obedience to God and rendering her *khilafa* second-class” (Badran 2006).

Along with deconstructing the notion of female dependency and male protection, Muslim exegetes elaborate the idea of mutual support/protection of males and females embodied in the notion of *awliya* enjoined upon male and female believers. The Qur’an specifically cites the two genders: “The believers, male and female, are protectors of one another” (Qur’an 9:71). The term *awliya* has much wider implications. It implies that men and women are guides or in charge of one another. There is mutuality in the relationship which should be characterized by love and mercy. This mutuality in the relationship is the basis for defining moral agency regardless of sexual differences (Barlas 2002:148). Barlas explains that “this regime of mutuality is conceivable only in the absence of hierarchies and inequality based in the idea of sexual differentiation. Yet Muslims continue to read all three (hierarchy, inequality and differentiation) into the Qur’an” (Barlas 2002:148).

Another example of gender equality is the Qur’anic concept of *taqwa* (Islamic piety). As stated in the Qur’anic verse 49:13, “We created you male and female that you may know one another. Indeed the most noble of you from Allah’s perspective is whoever (he or she) has the most *taqwa*”. Wadud points out that in the Qur’an the distinguishing value between male and female from Allah’s perspective lies in the concept of *taqwa* (god fearing or mindfulness of God).

It is...important to understand how the Qur’an focuses on woman as an individual because the Qur’an treats the individual, whether male or female, in exactly the same manner: that is, whatever the Qur’an says about the relationship between

Allah and the individual is not in gender terms.... Allah does not distinguish on the basis of wealth, nationality, sex, or historical context, but on the basis of *taqwa*. It is from this perspective then that all distinctions between woman and woman, between man and man, and between woman and man, must be analyzed. (Wadud 1992: 34, 37)

On the basis of this analysis of *taqwa*, Wadud demonstrates that in constructing gender relations, emphasis should be placed on “human dignity, equal rights before the law and before Allah, mutual responsibility and equitable relations between humans” (Wadud 1992: 63), rather than on the complementarity of men and women, which can be easily misinterpreted to mean the “traditional delineation of roles between men and women and the hierarchal, pre-ordained gender relations” (Sharify-Funk 2003).

In her article *Citizenship and Faith*, she proposes an important corollary between the idea of citizenship, in the context of a civil society of the modern nation-states, and the idea of moral agent (*Khelafa*) in the context of Islamic theology. This idea provides basis for the construction and governance of Islamic society. She argues that the benefits of civil society are not “self-evident unless they are examined against the integrity of an authentic Islamic identity” (Wadud 2005: 171).

These examples illustrate how Muslims read inequality into the Quran by “generalizing what is specific in it and by decontextualizing it” (Barlas 2002: 9). The new interpretive community of Muslim women exegetes agrees that it is not logical, then, to argue that women and men are each other’s equal in the sight of God, but unequal in the sight of men (Barlas 2002:148). This community is committed to the elaboration of alternative interpretation and of activist projects in order for women to

be able to live a gender-egalitarian Islam. Muslim women believe this egalitarianism to be at the very core of the religion. This notion was “radical at the time of revelation and still radical today” (Badran 2006).

The emergence of new intellectuals (working at the intersection of ideas and reality) and transnational networks is very important in opening up the space for alternative interpretations of Islam and in articulating a Muslim (thus, authentic) reform and ethical claims well-suited to the circumstances and problems of contemporary Muslim women. This interpretive community formed transnational networks with “like-minded intellectuals” through groups like WLUMML for transnational exchanges, information sharing, and solidarity.

According to Risse-Kappen, “ideas do not float freely”. The critical ideas of gender justice in Islam articulated through the critical engagement with the sacred text and the reinterpretation of the Qur’an have been circulating in North American and Europe. These ideas must reach and resonate with like-minded thinkers in the domestic intellectual communities in Muslim societies through transnational exchange. This argument offers significant insights into why particular ideas “carry the day” in specific policy choices while others fail. In the next section, I will test this argument in the light of the gender debate in Egypt.

Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Egypt

So why focus on Egypt? Because of Egypt's position as the cultural center of the Arab world as well as its political and religious leadership. Sunni Muslims throughout the world have looked to Al-Azhar Mosque and University for spiritual and intellectual guidance. Moreover, Egypt is the birthplace of the first Arab women's movement (Fernea 1998: 240).

Egyptian women have earned some formal aspects of emancipation such as the right to vote, the right to education, employment and the presence of women leaders in the parliament, the cabinet, and various professional fields. These changes in women's education, roles and expectation, however, have created contradiction with the persistent patriarchal tradition prevalent in the society. In Egypt today Islam has come to be embodied in a variety of practices, movement and ideas in regards to the status and the role of women. Thus, a clear example of the discourses concerning women in Islam can be observed in the current political and theological debates in Egypt. Egypt is witnessing a struggle between competing discourses: secular modernity, Islamic modernity and Islamist traditionalism (Ezzat 2001: 235).

Islamist traditionalism is advocated mainly by traditionalist *ulama* who insist on the preservation of a patriarchal gender regime. They assign women to the private domain and consider wifeness and motherhood to be the sole roles and obligations of women. "Women's rights" is seen as a secular notion and incompatible with Islam. Segregation and discrimination against women are justified on the basis of a

traditional interpretation of the sacred sources (Qur'an and *Hadith*). In reaction to the gender regimes promoted by secular Westernized modernists, Islamists in Egypt, influenced by a more advanced socioeconomic milieu, have been forced to accommodate themselves to a gender project that supports the right of women in certain fields and a mildly reformed *sharia* as the basis for family law (Tohidi 2003:169). By mobilizing women and engaging them in social and political activism, Islamists benefit from the support of many women in their struggle to seize political power. As a result, Islamists in Egypt can be described as a “neo-patriarchy that may not be as restrictive as that advocated by the Taliban, but is still quite male-supremacist” (Tohidi 2003: 170).

Secular modernity is based on Marxist, feminist and liberal considerations that view Islam as a religion with no liberating potential for women. The ban on Islamists and on Islamist activities allowed secular feminist groups to gain strength and appear as the sole actors on the scene. Heba Raouf Ezzat argues that, in order “to obtain political following, secularists sometimes used the term *ijtihad* for political purpose, to seem as though they advocated a progressive Islam, when in fact they were using *ijtihad* as a screen to mask their own fundamental secularism” (2001: 238). An example of secular feminists is Nawal Al Saadawi. Saadawi calls Arab women to study religion and interpret it “rather than seeing it through the minds of others” (Saadawi quoted in Sullivan and Kotob 1999: 112).

Islamic modernity is advocated by the modern-thinking *ulama*, new Islamic intellectuals, including Islamic feminists. This trend goes back to the late nineteenth

and early twentieth century modernist thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), an Islamic scholar and religious leader. In his writings and *fatwas* (legal opinions), “he advocated reforms to protect women’s rights in marriage, divorce, and education” (Ezzat 2001: 234). Within the Islamic framework, Muslim women intellectuals have been engaged in developing an Islamic theory of women’s liberation.

There is empirical referent affirming that ideas and efforts to develop a women’s liberation movement within an Islamic framework through the reinterpretation of the Qur’an and prophetic tradition have originated in the “domestic intellectual community”. Therefore, these critical ideas and discourse are not new to Egyptian women scholar-activists. Muslim women are developing different interpretations of Islamic sources and distinguishing between feminists who stand on secular grounds and the emerging Islamists voices- male and female- stressing the strong liberating potential Islam has for women. Outside the secular framework, we can find an increasing number of Islamist women activists who have managed to gain a voice in the discourse and criticize and challenge interpretations of Islam by men.

Among the most prominent are Zainab al-Ghazali and Ayesha Abdel Rahman. Zaynab al-Ghazali (1917-2005) is a leading Egyptian Muslim activist of the Muslim Brotherhood who also published an interpretation of the Qur’an in 1994. Ayesha Abdel Rahman (1913-1998), though not involved in any political movement, was a distinguished figure who had an impact on current Islamic thought. Ayesha Abdel Rahman had famous debates with other thinkers regarding the “modern”

interpretation of the Qur'an. Muslim jurists and scholars recognized her as a competent thinker and distinguish scholar (Ezzat 2001: 235).

A new generation of Islamist women has become outspoken and confrontational about the way they view women's role in Islam. Heba Raouf Ezzat is the principle intellectual force behind what is termed "the liberal wing of the women's movement" in the Islamist movement in Egypt (Fernea 1998: 249). Ezzat is a professor of political science at Cairo University. Her Master's thesis elaborated an innovative interpretation on the political role of women from an Islamic perspective, in which she argues and subsequently proved that according to highly valued Islamic scholarship, women were allowed to occupy the highest public functions (such as judges and heads of state) as long as they are qualified. Therefore, distinctions should not be based on gender, but on qualifications (Karam 1998: 223).

Heba Raouf Ezzat is active in the Islamic circles. She is well-tolerated and even supported by the Islamist movement. Ezzat, who have recently emerged as a key public voice of Islamist women concerned with the construction of an Islamic modernity, rejects to be classified as Islamic feminist, because she consider feminism to be a Western secular construct that is alien to the Islamic tradition that guides her endeavors (Hatem 2002: 47).

Ezzat describes her goal as that of changing the dominant paradigm 'from within'. She is committed to the Islamic women's liberation movement as an important project for reconstructing the lives and ideas of Muslim women who explicitly declared their Islamic identity (Ezzat 2001: 235).

As an Islamist intellectual, she is evoking a new discourse on women and politics which is seen as rather “liberal” inside the Islamist movement. In an interview with Elizabeth Fernea, Ezzat asserts that “we need a new women’s liberation movement- not feminism- but a new movement based on Islam” because feminists are secular who are fighting male domination and many of them regard religion as an obstacle to women’s rights (Ezzat quoted in Fernea 1998: 250-251). She said “I think that women’s liberation in our society should rely on our faith, on Islam”. Women liberation entails “a revival of Islamic thought and renewal within the whole field of Islamic jurisprudence” (Ezzat quoted in Fernea, 1998: 251). Ezzat insists that women should play a part in the interpretation and implementation of the law. Similar to Amina Wadud, Ezzat criticizes the fact that over the years, religious leadership has not been open to women. Ezzat declares herself an Islamist, “but that doesn’t mean that I accept the dominant discourse about women inside the Islamic movement” (Ezzat quoted in Fernea 1998: 251).

Ezzat’s intellectual activism focuses on the need for a new interpretation of Qur’an and *Sunnah*. She asserts that “[w]e should benefit from *fiqh* [Islamic legal theory] and the contribution of previous generations of Islamic scholars. But this doesn’t mean that we have to stick to their interpretations of Islamic sources while we ignore the sociology of knowledge” (quoted in Fernea 1998: 251). Ezzat does not accuse the whole *fiqh* of being patriarchal. She believes that “we need to differentiate what is absolute and what is relative to *sharia*. I am not aiming to deconstruct Islamic

law and thought but rather to reconstruct it. I am actually defending Islam from stagnation and bias” (Ezzat quoted El-Gawhary 1994: 26).

Regarding her methodology, Ezzat uses the orthodox Islamic methodology to interpret the Qur’an and the *sunnah*. Nonetheless, she offers unorthodox political and social views. For example, she argues that women have the right to choose and reject their mates just as they have the right, as member of the Islamic community to give and to withhold support to the political ruler (Hatem 2002: 47). On methodology, she said

In Islam the interpretation can not be completed without the a complex interaction with the *Sunnah*, a thorough understanding and critical reading of the *fiqh*, and a continuous process of *Ijtihad* and *Tajdid* to place the divine and absolute within the relative and present. The knowledge of related Islamic disciplines and methodologies is a must, along with a profound updated knowledge of the social and political contexts. Not only average Muslims are required to study carefully the Islamic sciences, but Islamic scholars are also required to know the realities of life - a strict condition of *Fatwa* and *Ijtihad* that is known to everyone (Ezzat 2007).

Unlike Wadud, who stresses the importance of the female voice in interpretation, Ezzat agrees with Asma Barlas that both men and women are able of articulating a liberatory reading of the sacred sources.

Taking the awareness about women’s problems and the unjust treatment of women in Islamic societies with different Islamic pretexts as the criteria according to which one classifies writings as “feminist” or not (sometimes regardless of the sex/gender of the author), one can find indeed that male scholars have been more outspoken and “revolutionary” than women scholars. Hence, insisting on “feminist” as description for the reading or interpretation places feminism as a frame of reference and a basically secular paradigm to be the point of reference (Ezzat 2007).

Ezzat also rejects the public/private dichotomy of Western and Islamic thought. She insists that her emphasis on the family does not reinforce the call for the return of the working women to home. She explains that “women differ according to their education, social class, age, talent and creativity. Every woman at every moment of her life should have the *freedom of choice* between different roles” (quoted in El-Gawhary 1994:27, *emphasis mine*). Breaking the dichotomy between public and private allows Muslim women to contribute to all spheres; economic, political as well as family duties. In this sense, the “private is political ... in the Islamic sense of solidarity and the importance of social infrastructure and grassroots politics” (Ezzat quoted in El-Gawhary 1994: 27).

Ezzat admits that her discourse might seem confusing on both sides. The secularists realize that she is “still standing on Islamic ground yet using a different language than the dominant Islamic one”. On the other hand, the Islamists see that her language “is Islamic but filled with new ideas and different conclusions” (Karam 1998:227). By using the traditional sources, she pays her respect to them, while simultaneously seeking their reinterpretation and innovation. Ezzat strategically places herself within the dominant Islamist trend, but actively works to promote her version of women roles and status (Karam 1998:227).

Ezzat’s ideas are gaining acceptance and support, especially among younger generation of Islamist women (Karam 1998: 244). She uses different platforms to circulate her ideas. These platforms include Cairo University (where she is a professor), and the Muslim Brotherhood-Labor Party Alliance. Ezzat also edits the

women's page in the Labor Party newspaper *Al-Sha'b* (Karam 1998:208). Ezzat is among the founders of IslamOnline.net, where she is the advisor to English Section on Islamic, political and contemporary issues. Through IslamOnline.net, Ezzat's ideas can be accessed by Muslims worldwide. Ezzat and her liberating discourse from within an Islamist paradigm is a telling example for the empowering potential that Islam can represent for many Muslim women.

This discourse on women's (re)interpretation of the Qur'an in Egypt was joined by Omaila Abou-Bakr. Abou-Bakr is a women's rights activist and scholar. She is an associate professor of English and comparative literature at Cairo University. She is also a founding member of Women and Memory Forum in Egypt- a research cell to which she has devoted her time and energy on research on gender issues. Like Amina Wadud, Abou-Bakr's research and writing focus on topics of rereading the sacred text and Islamic history from a gender-sensitive perspective.

Like other Muslim women intellectuals, Abou-Bakr's work is at the intersection of ideas and reality. She argues that "women's legal and religious rights in Islam are well-known to us all and are unquestionable. They just need to be more defined in terms of actuality" (Abou-Bakr 2002). In other words, "[t]he divergences between theoretical statements about the rights and status of women in Islam and the actual implementation or application of these rights within present-day state policies and in the legal arena need to be addressed" (Abou-Bakr 1999).

Muslim societies are called upon to take seriously the issue of the humane and equal treatment of women....a theme that is reiterated throughout the Qur'an but is never allowed by interpreters and religious scholars to be a governing principle in constructing gender relations (Abou-Bakr 2002).

In her article, *Gender Perspectives in Islamic Tradition*, Abou-Bakr discusses the validity of the gender-sensitive perspective or approach to the study of the religious texts (Abou-Bakr 1999). She refers to incidents recorded in the prophetic tradition in which women questioned the prophet on their role in the community. These incidents lead her to wonder “if God Himself and the Prophet (PBUH) gave ear to Muslim women’s queries, then why not reproduce the same situation if there is need for it at another point of our history?” (Abou-Bakr 1999).

God Almighty responded (this is the Quranic word “*istajaba*”) to the questioning by a revelation that inscribes and hence validates, women’s rights to voice concerns and questions (Abou-Bakr 1999).

The incidents recorded in the Prophet tradition demonstrate “the concern on the part of women for being included in the public affairs of the community as well as the recognition and acknowledgement of this inclusion and participation and a guarantee not to be excluded, ignored or marginalized” (Abou-Bakr 1999). The incident of Umm Salama (discussed in chapter four) underscores women’s initiative and agency in questioning and debating.

Prominent intellectuals, like Heba Raouf Ezzat, affirms that debate about gender justice within Islamic framework have originated in the “intellectual domestic community”. Moreover, the Egyptian scholar-activists are also taking their ideas into the global civil society. These intellectuals enjoy local, regional and international acceptance and support. They also have participated regularly in transnational exchanges. As mentioned earlier, Heba Raouf Ezzat *participates in the virtual and intellectual public sphere*. She circulate and promote her ideas and views through

IslamOline.net (a website that focuses on the work of intellectuals popular with young Muslims), where she published on different social issues. She also participated in a number of local, regional and international conferences. Critical to the future of Islam was the conference on “Contemporary Islamic Synthesis” that took place in Fall 2003 at the library of Alexandria in Egypt. In this conference, Muslim religious authorities, government and community leaders from Islamic communities around the world and scholars of Islam gathered to discuss and debate social justice, democracy and civil society in Islamic thought and practice. Among the participants in this conference were Asma Barlas, Zainah Anwar and Heba Raouf Ezzat. In an encounter between Zainah Anwar and Heba Raouf Ezzat, Anwar said this conference “is not a synthesis, rather there are like-minded individuals coming together” and Ezzat added that “on the one hand, the transnational is a coming together of like-minded individuals, but on the other hand, it is also a coming together of diverse personalities” (quoted in Sharify-Funk 2005: 256-257).

According to Risse-Kappen’s theory (1994), the “new thinking” requires a new generation of Muslim leaders and state-elite committed to reform in order to make policy impact. Intellectually, there is a number of reform-oriented Islamists and *ulama* who defended women’s rights. At the forefront of this movement is Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a Qatar-based Egyptian religious scholar and jurist trained at the venerable institution of Al-Azhar in Cairo. Al-Qaradawi has sought “to articulate a more cosmopolitan understanding of Islam that speaks to the unique problems of the

modern world while remaining firmly grounded in the traditions of Islamic law” (Mandaville 2005b).

Al-Qaradawi confirms that women have full rights to political participation, as well as many rights in the family. He encourages women to stand up for their rights and defend their Islam by reformulating the discourse and action of a movement rooted in Islam (Ezzat 2001).

Al-Qaradawi became a household name in the Arabic-speaking world since the 1990s through his popular al-Jazeera program "Islamic Law & Life". His approach also gained him a strong constituency outside the Arab world. Translations of his books have consistently been top sellers in Islamic bookstores around the world (Mandaville 2005b).

At Al-Azhar University as the highest center of Islamic learning in Egypt, the ideas of gender-balanced Islam are being taught and promoted as part of Islamic learning embedded in various subjects. The Dean of the Women’s College at Al-Azhar, Dr. Suad Salih, is also a Professor of Comparative *Fiqh*. Suad Salih is a highly qualified and respected scholar. She controls the boards that examine candidates for the doctorate degree and evaluates men and women’s intellectual grasp of the religious sciences, especially *fiqh*. Knowing that there is no gender impediment that keeps women from becoming *muftis*², Salih submitted a request to be appointed as *mufti*. In fact, women have historically functioned as *muftis*. The most illustrious

² *Mufti* can be defined as “dispenser of religious rulings in answer to requests”

example is that of Aisha, the wife of the Prophet. Dr. Salih was “thrust into the role of campaigning for women to be able to be officially appointed *muftis*”³.

The argument is equally valid for Muslim women in Egypt who have run the long campaign for many years using the discourse of Islamic feminism to argue that there was nothing in the religion of Islam barring women from becoming judges. This struggle finally ended in victory when a woman, Tahani al-Gebali, was appointed to the supreme constitutional court in 2003. In March 2007, the Supreme Judicial Council appointed 31 women judges who had previously worked in the Administrative Prosecution and State Courts Authorities. Egypt’s Grand Mufti Sheikh Ali Gomaa has said that the appointment of women to judicial positions does not contradict Islamic precepts. This inclusion of women is “a right owed to society as a whole”⁴.

Another instructive case reflects the rich, interpretive, and pluralist debate and demonstrates Muslim women as agents of change and the possibility that Islam presents as a framework for social change. The case is Law No.1/2000. This legislation gave women the right to initiate a divorce (*khul*). This law came to the light because of new generation of women, trained in religious law and religious philosophy and supported by Al-Azhar and religious authorities.

Creative activists turned religion into an *asset* rather than a liability, basically beating the religious traditionalists at their own game, while engaging in civil and legal collective action. This campaign could not have succeeded without its Islamic frame (Singerman 2003:4).

³ Interview with Margot Badran on Islamic Feminism found on the Website of Women Living Under the Muslim Law, May 29, 2005.

⁴ Reem Leila. “Who’s to Judge?” *Al Ahrām Weekly On-line*, (7-13 June, 2007).

In conclusion, the specific forms that Islamic women activism takes are locally grounded. The gender justice discourse and activism originated *within* the domestic intellectual community need to be supported by a new generation of Muslim leaders committed to reform as well a network of transnational exchanges with like-minded groups. The role of intellectuals in transnational spaces confirms that challenging the predominant religious discourse on women can be achieved through reinterpretation and transnational networking.

The Limits of the ‘New Thinking’ and Transnationalism: Domestic Structures as Intervening Variables

I have tried to document above the transnational reformist community of scholars and activists promoting new prescriptions for women’s liberation, such as the reinterpretation of the sacred texts and inclusiveness of the female voice and experience in *tafsir*. The transnational promoters of women’s rights in Islam must align with domestic coalitions supporting their cause in the target state in order to make an impact. However, access to the political system as well as the ability to build winning coalitions with ‘new thinkers’ in the West and with transnational networks like WLUML are determined by the domestic structures of the target state. Transnational actors need to gain access to the society to make an impact, their specific ideas has to be compatible with the beliefs and goals of domestic reformers. Transnational networks of women’s rights in Islam are active in various countries but the difference in their impact can be explained by the variation in domestic structures

of these countries. Domestic structures account for a large extent of the impact of the transnationally circulated ideas on domestic policy and discourse.

The role of these transnational networks and transnationally communicated ideas cannot be adequately understood without taking the role of domestic structures into account; that is the nature of the political institutions, state-society-relations, and the values and norms embedded in the political culture.

[Domestic structures] refer to the structure of the political system, society and the policy networks linking the two. Domestic structures encompass the organizational apparatus of political and societal institutions, their routines, the decision-making rules and procedures as incorporated in law and customs, as well as the values and norms prescribing appropriate behavior embedded in the political culture (Risse-Kappen 1994: 209).

In other words, domestic structures can help explain the constraints and the opportunities of this “new thinking” and various local responses to transnational activism. Zainah Anwar describes the domestic factors in Muslim countries as follows:

[T]he problem we face today in the Muslim world is that many Muslim governments and leaders rule in less-than exemplary ways. Many Muslim leaders have neither the moral authority nor the credibility to talk about an Islam that represent justice, peace and tolerance for they govern other people in ways that are unjust, intolerant and violent. Many Muslim countries are led by autocratic rulers and monarchs and freedom of expression, assembly and association do not exist or are very restricted. Our traditional upbringing, domestic variables acts as culture and political system do not encourage us to engage freely in debate (Anwar 2005:245).

Literature on Egypt discusses a number of features that describe its domestic structures: defective modernization, democratic deficit, the weakness of a modern middle class and the persistence of cultural and religious patriarchal constructs, the

weakness of civil society organizations- especially women's organizations. It also talks about a recent surge in identity politics and Islamic movements due to socioeconomic and cultural dislocation, polarization and alienation caused by modernization, Westernization and globalization. This type of domestic structures provides transnational ideas and networking with comparatively few access points into the political system.

The status of Muslim women in Egypt was shaped by the interplay of local customs, socioeconomics and political factors. Unjust practices against women, (mis)perceived to be Islamic, continue to exist. In order to contextualize Muslim women activism for reform in Egypt, one must understand the crucial role of the state in the process of change as well as the polarization between secularism and Islamism.

Egypt represents a state-controlled domestic structure with highly centralized top-down decision-making processes. In the course of modernization, the political regime in Egypt adopted Western political, economic, social and legal institutions and codes. However, when changes are introduced, they are the result of an autocratic decree and not achieved through an open, inclusive, democratic debate (Sullivan and Kotob 1999: 97).

According to Robert Dahl's (1971) definition of democracy, Egypt enjoys some elements of electoral democracy, but has limits on competition, participation and civil and political liberties. Egypt has a bicameral parliament, six rounds of elections, 23 political parties, and an assertive civil society. The process of modernization in Egypt has been rapid, uneven, elitist and state-centered.

Furthermore, despite the regime's official pro-democracy policies, women do not fully share equal rights with men. Family law, pertaining to family and gender relations, remained untouched or slightly reformed. The Egyptian women's situation reflects the failure of Western feminism and the "universal standards" to take hold in the society and the persistence of cultural norms and traditions. Feminism is associated with the West, which is perceived to impose its norms and values alien to the local cultural context. The tenacity of patriarchal family codes has been attributed in part to *sharia* and in part to the "ostensibly modern state-elite, having little interest in changing family law in order to use it as a tacit bargaining chip to buy loyalty from conservative clergy and to limit resentment and anti-state sentiment from classes of disempowered and traditionalist men" (Tohidi 2003:165). Even when laws were reformed, people remained devoted to traditional norms. In short, the process of reform was not accompanied by rationalization or internalization.

Muslim women have been critical of the uneven, state-centered and top-down projects of modernization. Muslim women perceive religion and religious knowledge "as a means of organizing daily [life, which] had become increasingly marginalized under modern structures of secular governance". This is usually referred to as the secularization (*'almana*) or Westernization (*taghrib*) of Egyptian society (Mahmood 2005:4).

Moreover, laws introduced to modernize the society were actually extending the authority of the state over the society. The Muslim approach to politics was always society-oriented away from the state and political authority. Civil society as an

Islamic concept existed in Egypt since the 9th century. Modern reform allowed the state to penetrate domains that for centuries had remained within the hands of the community. For example, the charitable *awqaf* (religious endowments) played an important role in societal activities. The laws of *awqaf* introduced in the Nasser era deprived the community of a source of financial independence and a source of power vis-à-vis the state (Ezzat 2001: 248). Therefore, when Egypt borrowed the concept of authority and power related to the Western concept of the state (during the process of modernization in the Nasser era), it created a situation, in which the combination of state power and Islamic legitimacy meant justified authoritarianism. This situation can be summarized by the following formula:

State power + Islamic legitimacy = justified authoritarianism

Civil society generates multiple avenues of participation for citizens, especially excluded groups such as women. The state issued several laws to tighten control over civil society. The “new” law regulating the activities of civil society organizations (Law 84 of 2002), passed by the National Assembly and ratified by President Mubarak, was intended to replace the controversial Law on Civil Associations and Institutions (Law 153 of 1999), which was overturned by Egypt's Supreme Constitutional Court in June 2000 on procedural grounds. The new version of the law contained an amendment, welcomed by a number of local human rights groups, allowing administrative courts to hear cases arising from disputes between NGOs and the authorities. But the law also contained provisions giving the government even greater powers over NGOs. The law prohibits “unauthorized activities”, including

“engaging in political or union activities, reserved for political parties and syndicates” (Article 11). It prohibits NGOs from joining a network except with the Ministry of Social Affairs’ prior permission. The Ministry of social Affairs requires NGOs to give them 60 days to approve the joining of any network (article 55)⁵.

The challenge is, then, how can gender equality be guaranteed within social structures that are facing increasing poverty, unconsolidated democracy and persistent patriarchal constructs. In other words, how can Muslim women begin discussing their rights when Muslim men and women cannot even speak freely because of the restrictions imposed by political and religious authorities?

Islamists and the state continue to compete in the cultural and political arena. So, focusing on the role of the state as the only modernizing agent ignores the extent to which Islamist practices and ideas have become normalized in the new gender identities of women and men in Egypt. It is important to note that while patriarchal Islamist groups have sought to impose conservative gender rules on women, Islamist and other Muslim women have not passively accepted them, instead they have used their Islamic mode of dress to create their own public space (Hatem 2002: 44). Women significantly “reconfigured the gendered practice of Islamic pedagogy and the social institution of mosques” (Mahmood 2005: 120). Women from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds provide lessons to each other that focus on teaching and studying of Islamic scriptures and social practices. This mosque movement represents

⁵ Mariz Tadros. “Regulating or Restraining” *Al- Ahrām Weekly On-Line*. Issue no. 116. (7-13 November, 2002).

“an unprecedented engagement with scholarly materials and theological reasoning that had to date been the purview of learned men” (Mahmood 2001:202).

This is the first time in Egyptian history that such a large number of women have mobilized to hold public meeting in mosques to teach each other Islamic doctrine, thereby altering the historically male-centered character of mosques as well as Islamic pedagogy (Mahmood 2001:203)

This movement has empowered women to enter the field of Islamic pedagogy undermining the structures of male domination. This “task of realizing piety placed these women in conflictual relations with a variety of structures of authority: some grounded in instituted standards of Islamic orthodoxy, and others in norms of liberal discourse; some in parental and male kin authority and others in state institutions” (Mahmood 2001:208). Muslim women are moving beyond passive knowledge of religion by reading the Qur’an for themselves and becoming new authorities. This movement is facilitated by “the mobility and sense of entitlement engendered by women’s greater access to education and employment outside the home” (Mahmood 2001:203). Muslim women are challenging the Islamists and the state and are claiming the mosque as a public space and an avenue for participation and activism.

This movement is very important, especially because

[p]olitics, unfortunately, has played a major role in denying the average Muslim a good religious education. This denial, in part a colonialist legacy, helped political regimes confuse the masses about what is in the Qur’an or what the Qur’an actually says. Such confusion did critical damage in areas of Islamic law relating to issues of governance and democracy. Recognizing their responsibility towards God and Muslims, jurists made repeated attempts to clarify Islamic law on these matters, as they struggled to keep political influence out of the mosque. But authoritarian rulers quashed these efforts and punished those leaders who stood in their way (al-Hibri 2000:107).

Therefore, we can argue that there is a reform taking place in Egypt since the 1990s. Heba Raouf Ezzat (2001) calls it a “silent reform”, in which the “silent” majority of women in Egypt “participates in all aspects of social and economic life and also in political informal activities, but rarely bothers to theorize or write about their stances” (Ezzat 2001:238). Their activism shows that women are educated, career-oriented, and active in the movement, while at the same time stressing the importance of the family. Their activism or “*ijtihad* was one of action rather than theory” (Ezzat 2001: 238). Islamists women have become “politically active “sisters” within the Muslim Brotherhood”. Their public presence enabled Islamists to win many votes in the elections and become a force in the parliament (Ezzat 2001: 239).

The intellectual discourse between secularists and Islamists takes place in an atmosphere of tension between *asala* (authenticity) and *mu’asara* (modernity). This polarized atmosphere between the traditional and secular discourses has hindered the reinterpretation of Islam for women’s issues (Ezzat 2001: 238). But despite this polarized atmosphere, Muslim women intellectuals created a critical ‘third space’ through a critical engagement with Islam, in which there is no epistemological contradiction between authenticity and modernity. This third space “enables the reformers to distinguish between past theological and legal doctrines (interpretations and applications) and the need for fresh formulations or re-formulations of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *tafsir* (interpretations of the Quran), in which the dynamism and diversity of contemporary Muslim life needs to be taken into consideration” (Ezzat 2001: 240).

The participation of women in mosques opened up the space to discuss new ideas in the public sphere. It is a civil society where Muslim women collected to address the concerns of their communities. This activism and community participation provide a new form of citizenship that focus on local actions rather than voting and involvement with political parties. To Borrow Jocelyn Cesari's terms, this activism has *civil* dimension rather than a *civic* one (Cesari 1997: 8). This conception of activism proved relevant in the context of Egypt, where civil society organizations are not allowed to be involved in the political sphere.

In this section, I tried to map out the dynamics of how Islam shaped and continue to shape women's societal life in Egypt. The difficulty I faced is that I have attempted to capture an ongoing dynamics. I am going to conclude this section by mentioning two drawbacks that I have observed when I participated in these mosque lessons in Egypt as well as in United States. These observations are also documented and supported by two feminist scholars: Saba Mahmood and Azza Karam.

First, as Saba Mahmood argues, the participation in these movements is critically structured by, and seeks to uphold, the limits of a discursive tradition that hold subordination to male authority. This movement is different in that its rationale cannot be

predicted on and, therefore, cannot be understood by reference to, arguments for gender equality, or resistance to male authority, alone. Neither is it possible to read these women's practices as a reinscription of traditional roles because of the significant ways in which they reconfigured the gendered practices of Islamic pedagogy and the social institution of the mosque (Mahmood 2005:15).

Second: This movement is meant as counter-attempt “to re-educate and disseminate the ‘true’ Islam subverted by the state for its own corrupt needs” (Karam 1998: 136). Azza Karam questions the democracy and freedom of speech within the ‘Islamic discussion groups’, since it is hard to question or voice an alternative meaning to God’s word in such meetings.

In Sum, despite the polarized and overpolitized debate on gender issues, women’s reading and interpretation of the Islamic sources is an ongoing process in the Islamist circles. Nevertheless, a combination of factors such as the centralized decision-making structure and the polarization between secular and religious discourses questions the ability of these innovative interpretation of the Islamic traditions to take root, gain constituencies, gain access to leadership and society and reshape Muslim policy and society.

Ideas promoted by epistemic communities and transnational networks and alliances will not be politically consequential unless two conditions are met. First, the existence of political and religious leadership determined to implement reform. Second, the existence of a political culture geared toward justice, tolerance, civic engagement and volunteerism. This culture could gradually be picked up, facilitating and accepting gender policy reform based on reinterpretation of the Qur’an and religious traditions.

In conclusion, the domestic structure approach offers significant insights regarding the conditions under which the new ideas enter the policymaking process. Any strategic prescriptions based on the “new thinking” need to be compatible with

the views embedded in the political culture. Religion is considered the most salient consideration in the shaping of women's rights and status in Muslim societies. Considering gender justice a Western concept prevents Muslim women for making their own interpretation about women's problems. Only when reform reflects meanings attached to Qur'an and prophetic tradition that gender justice could be internalized by Muslim women and men.

To make the point more clear. I will compare Egypt to the United States. In contrast to Egypt, the United States represents a comparatively society-dominated domestic structure. A number of scholars have suggested that Muslim reformist intellectuals living in the United States are in position to take a lead in the global project of producing a new tradition of progressive Islam. This analysis is connected to the social context and the relatively free intellectual climate in which they operate. A number of Muslim intellectuals and leading figures have emerged in this context. Muslim women in the United States have successfully integrated their religious beliefs and ethnic heritage with the American ways of life.

In the United States, there is "a sincere attempt to overcome many deeply rooted prejudices and harmful behavioral patterns" towards women. American Muslims who are part of these societies "have a historical opportunity to live up to the highest standards of Islam, to be the best Muslims they can be" (al-Hibri 2001:129). Muslim scholar-activists living within a democratic constitutional framework decided to make their voices heard in the public sphere to assert their rights, exposing the picture of

hegemonic power in order to achieve women emancipation. Azizah al-Hibri describes the domestic structures in American system:

We live in and are part of North American cultures that also celebrate diversity. We are free to retain from our ethnic heritage these elements that continue to be viable and useful in our new society. But we are fully bound by our religious beliefs. We cannot be selective among them. We are entitled, however, to interpret Divine Will in ways that are best suited for our own jurisdiction and era. Of course, such interpretations do not apply to the *thawabit* of Islam, i.e. to matters that are fixed, clear, and fundamental, such as the unicity of God.... The fact that our governments espouse democratic principles and do not stifle our freedom of expression facilitates our efforts. North American Muslims are free to engage vigorously in the time-honored tradition of *ijtihad* in order to authentically define their own jurisprudence. Unlike their brothers and sisters abroad, they do not have to be concerned about either political censorship or retribution.... In the United States and Canada, many of our Muslim women are capable professionals whose mere existence presents a counterexample to these patriarchal assumptions (Al-Hibri 2000:108-109).

Muslims in the United States are provided with civil rights and political freedom, which are usually unavailable to them in their countries of origin. Provocative Islamic thinkers are flourishing in this climate of intellectual freedom. North American women scholar-activists are in a different position than their Middle Eastern “sisters”. They live in a democracy and have certain guaranteed constitutional rights. They are balancing their Muslim identity with their responsibility as citizens of that democracy.

Prospects for Gender Justice: Practical Reform

According to Risse-Kappen (1994), ideas alone, in my case study it is the Qur’an’s primacy as a tool for transformation in thought and action, are unlikely to determine transformation of specific policies. Rather, these basic assumptions (about the role and status of women in Islam) open up an intellectual space for changes in

principled and causal beliefs- values and knowledge. Consequently, the “new knowledge” about justice for women within Islamic framework needs to be operationalized into specific policies. As mentioned earlier, Muslim women work at the intersection of ideas and reality. Amina Wadud is among Muslim scholars who stress the relationship between theory and practice. She argues that a mere theoretical strategy of alternative interpretation of the Qur’an for gender justice is not enough. It needs to be complemented with strategic activism.

Despite my book, *Qur’an and Women*, and its revolutionary contribution at the time of its formulation, the ideas of alternative interpretation of the Qur’an from a female-inclusive perspective is by itself insufficient to bring about all gender reform necessary for the multiple dimensions of Muslim men and women’s lives. This points to the need for a more radical synthesis of strategies and struggles toward the end of gender equality (Wadud 2006:188).

Ideas provide clarity about goals and ends. This clarity affects policies. Muslim women scholar-activists stress not only the significance of the reinterpretation of the Qur’an, but also the relationship between interpretation and action. Muslim women “struggle to knit together intellectual discourse, strategic activism and holistic spirituality” (Wadud 2006: 2). As believers, “*we cannot rewrite the Quran*” (Wadud 2006:204 *emphasis hers*), but “we can rewrite the law, the *shariah* through *fiqh*” (Wadud 2006: 205). Muslim scholars-activists have drawn ideas from reflecting upon the Qur’an, “yet it requires a political structure to ensure that [these ideas are] justly and comprehensively activated” (Wadud 2006:53). Wadud’s active interaction with Sisters in Islam reflects the crossroad between theory and practice.

Likewise, Heba Raouf Ezzat (2005) expresses her concern that the work of moderate intellectuals does not come from the perspective of political science. Reformist “ideas have to be considerably more developed before they can become prescriptive in a useful way”.

I am not a thinker but a political scientist. I know that if people want to talk seriously about democracy, they have to draw the maps, outline the matrices of relations, specify the spheres of freedom and of the authority of the state (Ezzat interviewed by Bechler 2005b).

It is important to note that the implementation of gender reform depends, not only on an alternative interpretations of the Qur’an, but also on time, place, level of knowledge, resources and circumstances of history and culture. The reform process is neither simple nor straightforward (Wadud 2006: 97).

Stages of Reform and Activism: The first stage in reform is ideas and theory about alternative interpretation of the Qur’an that significantly affect women movements of Islamic reform. Justice and Women’s full agency within Islamic framework affect how the social and political order is established and maintained. Ideas and theory help develop goals and agenda (second stage). Strategies are processes with actual steps to attain these goals (third stage). The fourth stage is to determine obstacles to be avoided or removed. The final stage is an evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures taken in achieving reform. Muslim intellectuals help develop an *agenda* for women’s liberation and activism that accommodate diversity and difference without undermining the legal and ethical framework grounded in the Qur’an upon which women rights can be upheld. Scholars work as consultant and experts on women issues in Islam. For example, through her “textual activism”, Amina Wadud helps

create spaces for making meaningful, authoritative, and appropriate knowledgeable assistance across geographical borders.

Simultaneously, activists are searching for strategies to transfer or translate the “new knowledge” they gained into a civil struggle in the broader political context. Theories and ideas about faith-based gender justice were put to the test of actual practices in the work of women grassroots and networks.

Grassroots activism: The first step in grassroots’ activism is to recognize that when women are isolated in their local context they have no access to information. Even when many Muslim women in other countries have made some gains they are being hindered in their progress by patriarchal forces in the name of Islam and/or by an authoritarian structure of governance. On the one hand, transnational networking strengthens local struggles by providing support at the international level. On the other hand, local initiatives strengthen the transnational movement in a mutually supportive process.

Some of the primary goals of women networks like WLUML are to: increase public awareness and concern about human rights abuses committed against women, to facilitate the direct participation of women in international debates concerning their rights, and to encourage women from all cultures to work together to define and achieve common goals (Moghadam 2005: 146).

The central activity of the network, however, may be identified as its solidarity and support work. Besides Alert for Action, the activities of the network entails documenting and disseminating information in the form of dossiers, which describe

the situation of Muslim women and legal codes in various countries and report on the activities of Muslim women organizations. It also provides updates on the status of women in various Muslim countries. The Dossier is an occasional journal in English and French intended “as a networking tool with the aim of providing information about the lives, struggles, and strategies of women in various Muslim communities and countries” (Moghadam 2005: 150). Women meet face-to-face in order to agree upon a plan for action and collective projects on topics related to women in the Muslim world (Helie Lucas in Moghadam 2005: 163).

Another example of grassroots activism is Karamah. Karamah plans to organize a broad-based international conference for the global Muslim women community. In this conference, Muslim women hope to launch grassroots and policy level campaigns to present the conclusions and recommendations of their *ijtihad* and of their serious scholarship in the area of Muslim women’s rights. This approach will open new doors in the development of Muslim women’s rights domestically and globally (Karamah’s website). Azizah al-Hibri, the founder of Karamah, calls for the establishment of an International Muslim Women’s Human Rights Commission entitled to review human rights violation in Muslim countries and takes effective steps for their cessation (Karamah’s website).

In sum, intellectual reform is integral to actual social reform. The work of the reformist scholars is the practical scholarly sources and guide for the work of Muslim women involved in grassroots’ activism in various countries.

Conclusion

While some literature on women in Islam often further obscure the root causes and solutions needed to empower women, Muslim women scholar-activists engage in a meaningful collaboration between specialists in various fields for the retrieval, investigation, criticism and reinterpretation of classical Islamic text, methodologies and cultural traditions in order to address the problems Muslim women face (Webb 2000: xiii). The focus on locating women's agency within Islamic framework plays a crucial role in "complicating and expanding debates about gender in Muslim societies beyond the simplistic registers of submission and patriarchy" (Mahmood 2005:6)

Muslim women intellectuals are disentangling religion, culture and gender by demonstrating that the apparently natural connections between them are in fact constructed and contingent. Their scholarship presents a challenge to the established patriarchy in its interpretation and use of the Qur'an and prophetic tradition. Each of these scholar-activists brings a unique contribution to the discourse related to the rethinking and recontextualization of Islamic sources, whose (mis)interpretation have led to the exclusion of women from the public sphere in Muslim communities.

This growing trend among women scholars and activists in the past two decades invites us to rethink the presumed passivity of Muslim women under Islamic tradition. Muslim women scholar-activists open up new possibility for changing the expectations connected with Muslim women's roles and rights. They open the space for the recognition of Muslim women as intellectuals, which represents a continuation to the precedent examples set up by Aisha and Umm Salama.

CHAPTER 6

RECOVERING WOMEN'S VOICE: THE COMMUNICATIVE EMPOWERMENT OF MUSLIM WOMEN

In previous chapter, I argued for the need for a critical model of public sphere and public discourse that can enable us to imagine Muslim politics for the collective empowerment of women. I also discussed some of the traditional discourses that speak of and for Muslim women, the discursive mechanism by which Muslim women have been silenced or used in the service of a variety of projects (nationalist or religious) not of their own making as a starting point in understanding how to empower Muslim women in the communicative sphere. I also identified ways in which Muslim women have challenged their marginalization in the discursive sphere, namely, the gender-sensitive interpretation of the sacred texts as well as their grassroots activism and networking. The process of engaging with the sacred text and *tafsir* aims at recovering the 'egalitarian voice' of Islam. The liberatory hermeneutics appears to be essential to the project of Muslim women's liberation today (Barlas 2002).

In her book *Women, Islamism and the State*, Azza Karam raises a very important concern, which is in spite of the fact that Heba Raouf Ezzat's ideas are gaining much acceptance and support, especially among the younger generation of Islamist women, what remains to be seen is the extent to which Ezzat's arguments will be popular among the male Islamists once the implications of her discourse are realized.

In the long run, such a discourse as developed by Ra'uf [*sic*] will challenge the male Islamists' views on rationality and goodness being exclusively male characteristics. By arguing against the fine line between public and private, Ra'uf is paving the way for two things. First, the logical extension of her argument is that public space for women's activism is interchangeable with the extended family.... Secondly, Ra'uf's argument legitimizes women's occupation of such public roles as are currently refuted by the most moderate of Islamists: leadership of the whole Islamic community and the judiciary- both 'rational, male roles (Karam 1998: 245).

This is a very valid concern. However, in my opinion, the way to address this concern is to raise people's consciousness and get them to think about the different options and alternative meanings. In searching for the appropriate approach to this dilemma, I have turned to the work of Jürgen Habermas and his notion of the “discursive public sphere” and the role of the intellectual in social space in the hope that it could offer a framework for constructing a civil pluralist approach for Muslim women to challenge the validity of claims of the traditionalist patriarchal discourse and to reclaim and reconstruct the Muslim public sphere.

According to Habermas, the “public sphere” consists of social spaces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power. The principles of the public sphere involve an open discussion of all issues of general concern in which *discursive argumentation* is employed to ascertain general interests and the public good. The public sphere thus presupposes freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making.

Based on Habermas's theory, Risse-Kappen developed his theory of discursive argumentation as a mode of interaction, in which actors engage in truth-seeking

arguing with the aim of reaching mutual understanding based on reasoned consensus (Risse-Kappen 2000:2). Discursive argumentation enables actors to mutually challenge and explore the validity claims of norms and identity (i.e. the constitutive rather than regulative role of norms and identity). When norms are *contested*, people argue in order to answer to the question “how do we adjudicate which norms apply?” (Risse-Kappen 2000:2).

In translocal spaces, religious knowledge becomes objectified, i.e. becomes subject to debate within the public sphere (Mandaville 2001:156). This transformation in the status of religious knowledge caused and is caused by the fragmentation of traditional religious authority. It also led to the emergence of new breed of Muslim women intellectuals challenging and reinterpreting the ethical claims of Islam that construct patriarchal structures and systems.

Muslim women intellectuals argue that any reading of the Qur’an must recognize the relationship between “divine ontology and divine discourse; i.e., between (conceptualizations of) God and (interpretation of) God’s speech” (Barlas 2003: 3). They also identify objectionable epistemic claims in the dominant Islamic discourse that “confuse the Qur’an with specific [male] *readings* of it” (Barlas 2002: 4).

Jürgen Habermas (1981) distinguished between different types of validity claims that can be explored and challenged in the argumentative discourse:

First: the validity claims concerning the truth of assertions made. Is the interpretation of the Qur’an that read patriarchy and gender imbalances into the text substantially correct in terms of reflecting the Divine Will? Or can we develop an

alternative reading of the Qur'an that supports women's agency granted to them by Allah within an authentic Islamic framework? Is the door of *ijtihad* closed? Or does the Qur'an need to be continually interpreted in order to attain the lived state of Islam?

Second: the validity claims focusing on justifying or criticizing the moral rightness of the norms underlying arguments. How morally correct is the claim that allows male interpreters to monopolize religious knowledge? How do the violations of Muslim women's agency and the silencing of their voices undermine a holistic understanding of the Qur'an? Is it morally correct to contest a reading of the sacred texts that serves as the strongest argument for abuse and degradation of women? To what extent is the status of women in Muslim culture accurately portraits the intention of Islam for women in the society? Is the discourse on the reinterpretation of the Qur'an and gender justice justifiable in the current context of Western hegemony? How do we face the new challenges as *ummah* if we do not engage in *ijtihad* and produce new knowledge and new understandings of Islam in the face of the new circumstances?

Third: the validity claim concerning the truthfulness and authenticity of the speaker. How authentic is the patriarchal exegesis? Is the male-dominated interpretation of the Qur'an representative of women experiences and perspective? How authentic is the female-inclusive interpretation of the Qur'an? Here, the authenticity of male and female exegetes is being challenged.

It is important to note that truth-seeking arguing is goal-oriented. It aims at reaching a mutual understanding based on reasoned consensus. It is different from

“rhetorical action”, in which “actors use arguments in a strategic mode in order to justify their identities and preferences” (Risse-Kappen 2000:8). In their discursive argumentation, Muslim women scholar-activists have rejected the rhetoric of: a) *Cultural relativism* used to justify violation of the rights of women in Muslim societies. b) *Complementarianism* or the rhetoric of equality employed in the traditional Islamist discourse. Complementarity has unequal power dimension, in which “[e]ach person, male and female, plays significant, yet gender-specific roles...It rhetorically and actually constructs an unequal relationships... by evaluating each players on separate and unequal standards, leaving power and privilege to men and male roles”(Wadud 2006: 27-28). Therefore, the actual gender gap cannot be closed with the mere rhetoric of equality in Islam.

Arguing in the Transnational Public Sphere

I suggest that focusing on the transnational communicative empowerment of Muslim women living in various locale is a recent but crucial strategy in its ability to give voice to the marginalized in the discursive space. Norms cannot be exported (Barber 1992) and ideas “do not float freely” (Risse-Kappen 1994). They are argued in an open dialogue, in which everyone can participate freely. What guides the participants in the discursive argumentation is a commitment to be moved by “the force of the better argument” (Linklater 1998:92). This force of the better argument requires expanding the boundaries of the discursive communities (Linklater 1998:90). I have described a number of efforts by which Muslim women create new ideas and new knowledge that began to circulate in public discussions and debates, thus,

expanding the boundaries of the discursive community to include the voice of women as “subaltern counterpublics”. From this new knowledge, Muslim women derive their strategies to construct a position that resists exclusion in the dominant religious discourse and claim the “public sphere”, in which they could be self-critical in examining and rethinking Muslim norms and practices. Muslim women intellectuals “deconstruct the discourses that have served to construct norms that exclude them as women” (Cooke 2001: 80).

Through “truth seeking” arguing, Muslim women scholar-activists are developing a common knowledge concerning two issues. The first issue relates to the definition of the situation. According to Muslim reformists, the problem facing Muslim women is not Islam but specific readings of Islam and the misinterpretation of the sacred text that reads patriarchy into the Qur’an. The second issue pertains to the underlying normative framework and principles that should guide their efforts to find a cooperative solution. Muslim women have been developing a pro-faith framework for gender justice; thus, bringing new reading and discourse to the gender debate.

Therefore, truth-seeking arguing provides Muslim women with a mode of interaction to explore and challenge the validity of the patriarchal discourse and its claims regarding the role and status of Muslim women. This arguing process takes place in the public sphere, in which Muslim women equally participate, creating new authentic authority. Through the process of “truth seeking arguing”, Muslim women are reinterpreting the basic assumptions about the role and status of women in Islam

(realm of theoretical discourse) and norms and rules of behavior that fulfill their agency and guide their actions (realm of practical discourse).

Muslim women scholars-activists are not motivated by interests (seizing political power) or power relations (the empowerment of women over men as in the feminist theory), but by faith, that is the collective principles and beliefs and common identity as well as their faith in the transformative power of Islam. They are seeking optimal solution for a commonly perceived problem; that is the tension between the normative ideals and the lived realities of Islam, especially with respect to women's rights. Therefore, arguing is goal-oriented, but the goal here is not to maximize their own preferences and interests (as suggested by the rational choice theory), but to seek reasoned consensus concerning women's rights in Islam without compromising the core Islamic principles.

The following conditions (Risse-Kappen 2000) are conducive to truth-seeking communicative action among Muslim women:

- 1- The existence of a common lifeworld. Islam functions as common discursive field- a 'lifeworld'- "through which meaning and discourse can be organized" (Mandaville 2001:55). Islam provides a repertoire of collective understanding to which Muslim intellectuals can refer when making truth claims. Muslim scholar-activists search Islamic history and scripture for positive language, models and agenda. Concurrently, the communicative action and its practices reproduce the common lifeworld. With transnational discourses rearticulating particular set of ethical claims, Muslims "are disembedded from the national context and resettled in

interstitial spaces, in which the ‘religious’ rather than the ‘national’ becomes the focus of political identity”. Relating transnationally led some Muslims to begin “reimagining the *umma*” as a renewed form of political community (Mandaville 2001:186).

2- Ideas about the situation and preferences are not fixed, but subject to discursive challenge. It must be understood that despite Muslim consensus over the authority of the Qur’an, the human efforts in interpreting it had always led to differing opinions. It is precisely because of this wealth of diversity that Islam has survived and flourished in different cultures and societies. This fact should open the doors for Muslims to re-engage in the process of *ijtihad*.

3- Actors have the ability to empathize one another. Muslim women scholar-activists, unlike secular feminists, have the ability to understand the deep-rooted commitment of pious Muslim women when arguing or challenging validity claims. Any attempt to bring about social change without full understanding of

the deep-rooted commitment by most Muslim women to spiritual and cultural authenticity, could halt or even reverse this process at great cost to women particularly and Muslim societies as a whole (al-Hibri 2001:101).

4- Lack of knowledge about the situation among actors. According to H lie-Lucas Muslim women scholar-activists “realized that many local customs and traditions practiced in the name of Islam in one part of the world were in fact unheard of in others. It also became evident that not only the varied and contradictory interpretations of the Koran [*sic*] monopolized by men but they are also the only ones who have so far defined the status of Muslim women” (quoted in Moghadam 2005: 153). This realization led to the initiation of the project on Qur’anic interpretation by

women. It allowed Muslim women to see how differently the same verses of the Qur'an have been interpreted by various Islamic scholars in different contexts (Moghadam 2005:153).

5- Dense informal, network- like interactions. I have documented in previous chapter the transnational grassroots advocacy groups that seek to transform women's status as well as the Muslim public sphere. Muslim women are sharing their experiences by forming transnational support networks which, in turn, are developing into transnational activism and transnational alliances. Though transnationalism is not new to the Islamic experience, the public engagement of Muslim women in transnational networking represents an apparent discontinuity with the Muslim past. In recent decades, Muslim women's activism has become increasingly transnational. From transnational engagement, dialogue, and communication emerge a language of familiarity and trust. Transnationalism becomes not only a means of empowerment but also a way to a redefinition of self-identity and of roles within Muslim community.

6- All interested parties have equal access to the discourse. Muslim women have equal access to discourse and equal rights concerning making an argument or challenging claims. This was previously unavailable to them, since they were the subject of the discourse dominated by male-authored interpretation of the Qur'an and religious tradition. Access to the discourse is available to women from diverse professional and academic background and diverse perspectives on Islam. They share the commitment to the centrality of women in the debate of democracy. The inclusiveness of the female voice brought new ideas and views to the discourse as

well as diverse perspectives on the challenges and opportunities, the contradictions and complexities facing Muslim women in the twenty-first century.

7- The relationships of power, force and coercion are absent in the arguing process. The interference of external forces does not represent an arguing process. Strategic bargaining or coercion through sanctions, for example, is not decisive in changing gender relations in Muslim societies. The United States neoconservative agenda that calls for a process of 'enforced democratization' does not represent an arguing process. Coercive change, or regime change, last for only as long as the source of the coercion continues to exist. Muslim women feel ambivalent if not resentful toward attempting to exercise hegemony over the Muslim world by forcing upon it, whether through the introduction of international legal instruments or otherwise, a certain model of gender relationships suitable primarily for some other country, belief system, or culture, to the extent that many have joined the neopatriarchal Islamist movements as a reaction to this imposition. In the arguing process, Muslim women rely mainly on the power of their arguments.

8- It is important to note that structural conditions in international relations play an important role in allowing for the discursive and argumentative process. As I have mentioned elsewhere, globalization and translocality are providing Muslims with a greater capacity to communicate and relate internationally. It also urges them to rethink Islam in the face of globality and articulate an alternative normativity capable of addressing the circumstances and problems of contemporary life (Mandaville 2001: 185). In spite of the absence of international institutions that enable Muslims to

communicate transnationally, “we can speak today about the existence of something like a global infrastructure for the maintenance, reproduction and dissemination of Islam. This ‘regime’ possesses no central authority and there is very little coordination between its various constitutive elements” (Mandaville 2001:145). Globalization, translocality and communication technology are providing Muslims with greater capacity to communicate, interact and bridge distances between them¹. These transnational interactions opened up new spaces of religious contestations where traditional sources of authority could be challenged by the wider public.

In response to Jürgen Habermas’s call for the reclaiming of the “public sphere”, Muslim women are creating what Nancy Fraser has referred to as “subaltern counterpublics”; that is “the parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (Fraser 1993: 13). Iris Young argues that civil society enables the emergence of public sphere in which differentiated social sectors express their experiences and formulate their opinions (Young 2000: 155). Such vision tend to emphasize the importance of bringing people together in a reconstructed public sphere that will allow people to engage more or less in determining its agenda and participating in its deliberation. It is in this context that differences are acknowledged and negotiated rather than ignored or eradicated. In this sense, one can argue that there is a possibility of a meaningful democratic political

¹ For a detailed analysis of the impact of information and communication technologies on the Muslim world, see the rigorous analysis of Peter Mandaville (2001) *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the umma*.

engagement in Muslim societies. In the newly formulated public sphere, Muslim women are reshaping their political and social engagement and activism.

The Power of the Better Argument:

So, if Islam allows for multiple articulations and interpretations, why only certain understanding of Islam have been foregrounded in our consciousness while others have been virtually ignored? (Barlas 2003: 15). In other words, why particular ideas “carry the day” in specific discourse or policy choices while others fail (Risse-Kappen 1994). Misogynistic interpretations of Islam rely on “the tendency of public discourse to make some forms of experience readily available to consciousness while ignoring or suppressing others” (Lears cited in Barlas 2003). Habermas argues that “communicative daily practices are embedded in a sea of cultural taking for grantedness, i.e. consensual certainties...As soon as... the certainties enter the conditions of criticizable knowledge, they may become subject of dissent. Only when this dissent is persistent enough to provoke a discursive treatment of the disputed issue, does this become an instance of....a reasoned consensus” (quoted in Risse-Kappen 2000:17).

Since Muslim women as agents of change do not command many material resources, they rely mainly on the power of “the better argument”. Muslim women use their “new knowledge” and intellectual skills to enhance their ability to respond constructively to adversaries. Successful arguing means that “the better argument” carries the day (Risse- Kappen 2000: 9). The Qur’an (39:18) praises “those who listen to the Word and follow the best (meaning) in it”. According to the Qur’an injunction

“to read it for its best meanings”, Muslim women seek to confirm “that some meanings, thus some readings, are better than others” (Barlas 2003: 2). Moreover, the potent combination of modernity, equal rights, and piety demonstrated by these Muslim women presents other Muslim women with a compelling alternative way of life that is both modern and authentic.

The success of the new reformist discourse should be measured in terms of being able to raise public awareness that alternative visions for a more just gender relations can be created within Islamic framework, i.e. based on the Qur’an, the *hadith*, and traditional juristic sources. These ideas and arguments may, then, resonate with the Muslim audience because they satisfy their need for both piety and justice and are compatible with their cultural framework. As a result, “the doors of change is thrust wide open and opposition melts away” (al-Hibri 2000:55). This recommended course of action is based on the fact that “religious people will always strive to follow Divine Will” (al-Hibri 2000: 55). Hence, arguing for “the best meaning” becomes causally consequential for social change.

Muslim women scholar-activists have a lot to contribute, but it is a slow and gradual process because ideas take time to hold. Also, this frame of reference rooted in the Qur’an is yet to be institutionalized in the Muslim world. I have argued that faith is the guiding principle of the new intellectual discourse that makes a distinction between relative and absolute, immanent and transcendent, sacred and profane.

Finally, two suggestions are worth mentioning: Muslim scholar-activists need to encourage and capitalize on current populist spirit of Islam and Muslims. Also,

Muslims need to be open to differences and open to change based on the Qur'an injunction:

“We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most virtuous of you” (Qur'an 49:13).

The dialogic engagement and social learning, based on Habermas's theory, require that the agents of the discourse are “prepared question their own truth claims, respect the claims of others and anticipate that all points of departure will be modified in the course of dialogue” guided by the power of the better argument (Linklater 1998:92).

From the aforementioned discussion, we can discern three phases in the process of arguing for “the better meaning” as a strategy in mobilizing Muslim public opinion against the violation of women's rights in Muslim societies maintained by political or traditional religious discourses.

The first phase: traditional Islamists deny the validity and the authenticity of gender-sensitive reading of the Qur'an and refuse to engage in a serious dialogue with the critical reformist discourse, which they accuse of betrayal and blame for being a part of a Western conspiracy. At the same time, the traditionalist discourse engages in rhetoric of equality, complementarity and cultural relativism as well as anti-Western, anti-imperialist discourse.

Second phase: women start assuming the right to define for themselves the “parameters of their own identity”. Transitional networks and coalitions link women and women's groups across Muslim communities, increasing their knowledge about both their common and diverse situations, and strengthening their struggle by

providing information, solidarity, and support. Transnational networks, like WLUML, aim at breaking the isolation and assisting Muslim women in analyzing and reformulating their identity (Shaheed 1995: 96). Their approach is to challenge the established patriarchy in its (mis)interpretation of the Qur'an and prove that it have moved away from the essentially egalitarian thrust of the Qur'an and the model of participation of women in the public sphere set during the early Islamic period (Webb 2000: xiii).

Third phase: in conjunction with the continuing domestic and transnational pressure, we can observe a striking development toward an open dialogue. After accepting the validity of the claim about the tension between Qur'anic ideals and the lived realities of Islam, Muslims start arguing (engaging in a public discourse) over specific meanings and ethical claims. This mode of interaction incrementally takes over to become the dominant form of interaction with the Muslim 'other' toward a contemporary Islamic syntheses or reasoned consensus (*ijma'*).

The Path of Communicative Ijma' (consensus): Obstacles and Possibilities

The arbiter of this discursive argumentation and the judge of its outcome should be the Muslim publics, who are exposed to several and contradictory ideas. The *ummah* (the community of the believers) should judge the validity of the claim in the light of its coherence, rationality and the commitment of its author to the core Islamic ideals (An-Na'im 1995:53-54). The road to consensus or *ijma'* is full of obstacles, contradictions and roadblocks that Muslim women have to work through.

Rethinking traditional understanding of Islam is not going to be easy because of the dominant power relations in Islam. Islam as a discursive space is not devoid of hegemony. There are those forces seeking to control religious knowledge and monopolize the discursive arena and denounce any Muslims who deviate from their vision. The “custodians of traditional Islam” and their totalizing discourse claim the authority to represent ‘true’ Islam and classify alternative discourse as ‘deviant’ or ‘westernized’ (Mandaville 2001:179-180). Such a discourse establishes clear boundaries of what can be legitimately argued and what arguments can be legitimately made. Muslim women intellectuals refused to be caught within these boundaries and challenged the legitimacy of these boundaries from *within* and with a Muslim (thus, authentic) voice. The dominant discourse claims that jurists of the past have perfected the understanding of Islam and the doors of *ijtihad* should, therefore, be closed. This discourse inhibits critical thinking and renewal (*tajdid*). As a result, “[t]he freedom of every generation to evolve its own consensus(*ijma*) is thus rendered nominal given that arena in which interpretive choices can be made has been circumscribed” (Barlas 2003:2).

The fact that Muslim identity is at stake in this theoretical and practical discourse, presents another challenge for Muslim women scholar-activists that not even the shield of the term “Islamic” feminism’ can protect them from. The validity claims being challenged have been “internalized as having religious sanction” (Shaheed 1995: 83). Adding the gender dimension, which is one of the main site of identity politics and an important aspect of the meaning of fundamentalism, makes the task of

challenging traditional claims more difficult. Gender subordination is “an effect of power secured through repeated performance of norms” (Judith Butler cited in Mahmood 2001:211). Challenging traditional claims and norms raises the fear of losing one’s identity. To critique traditional claims is to betray and weaken the Islamic identity. In many Muslim societies today, anyone who offers alternative views faces condemnation as an apostate and as violating certain norms of behavior by those who choose to deny or negate the complexity and diversity of Islamic heritage. By justifying that their *ijtihad* is *within* an indigenous and Islamic frame of reference Muslim scholar-activists are undermining accusation of cultural betrayal. They are “claiming their right to be strong women within their tradition”, regardless the accusations of being westernized (Cooke 2001:60).

Another challenge that comes with rethinking Islamic knowledge is that lay Muslims may experience a sense of instability, leading them to yearn to a firm, stabilizing factors. This may take the form of the quest for authenticity, in the sense of reinforcing traditional values and conservative social norms that provide secure grounding in this shifting world.

Regarding authenticity, communication can be very useful and necessary for developing trust in the authenticity of the discourse, especially face-to-face communication through networking. Trust in the intentions, commitment and knowledge of the new Muslim intellectuals increases the persuasiveness of their arguments and makes communication efficacious. Azizah al-Hibri, describes her

experience in communicating her arguments and views on Islamic law as it relates to women based on the Qur'an, *hadith* and traditional juristic sources:

The audiences in the various Muslim countries were very interested in my perspective. Once they recognized my serious spiritual commitment and jurisprudential knowledge of the topic, they wanted further information about women's rights in Islam.... Many questions were asked (politely) to test my knowledge of Islam and Arabic, as well as to uncover my intentions... Once this test was passed, communication channels became wide open (al-Hibri 2001: 103).

To establish the authenticity of the discourse, emphasis is placed on methodology that is "more respectful of the Qur'an ethical concerns and interpretive philosophy" (Barlas 2003:3). Simultaneously, Islamic authenticity and legitimacy are maintained in such a way as to respond to our need and aspirations in today's world (Wadud 2005:179).

Scholars maintain that certain interpretation is more probable than another based on reading the text. How do we adjudicate which interpretation is valid? Is *ijma* (reasoned consensus) attainable? Even if, Asma Barlas argues, "we cannot agree on which interpretation, we should be able to agree on the fact that certain interpretations are not contextually legitimate...At least we should be able to agree that whatever diminishes and denies full humanity for women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine" (Barlas 2002: 19). Muslims may reconsider the conclusions they have drawn from the Qur'an if "sound textual argument can be proposed" (Wadud 2000: 16).

The fact that much of the discourse on reinterpreting the Qur'an originated in the Western academies could militate against its acquiring widespread legitimacy in the eyes of the public. The traditional Islamic discourse is constructed around a set of

claims that are non or anti-Western. The West and the Western academy “are suspects in the eyes of many Muslims” (Barlas 2003: 14). This is mainly because of the contradictory politics that the United States chose to pursue in the Middle East².

A number of scholars suggest that Muslim intellectuals reformers living in North America and Canada are in position to lead the global project of Islamic reform (Ramadan 2005; al-Hibri 2001; and Mandaville 2001) and question “the ability of these innovative interpretations of Islamic traditions to take root and gain constituencies outside the Western contexts in which they were initially elaborated” (Mandaville 2003a:1).

Given our level of social consciousness and development, we have no excuse to continue abiding by standards more suitable to those of *Jahiliyyah* or other highly patriarchal cultures. Furthermore, we have a duty towards the rest of the Muslim *ummah* (community) to lead by example (al-Hibri 2001:129).

In my opinion, this contrast between “Western Muslims” and “Eastern Muslims” invokes a sense of geographical superiority, indicative “of North/South geo-political and economic disparities” (Zine 2006:11). We cannot say that innovative ideas come exclusively from one region, as Tariq Ramadan, Azizah al-Hibri and other scholars suggest. In chapter five, I have documented the rise of similar innovative ideas and prominent intellectuals in Egypt. By the same token, Arabs also should not think of themselves as the true innovators and representatives of “true Islam”. Jasmine Zine correctly argues that “[a]s we claim this space of privilege to speak with (not *for*) our Muslim sisters in the South we must nonetheless remain cognizant of allowing our

² U.S. policy-makers talk about the importance of democracy and human rights in the Muslim world, while at the same time allying themselves with conservative and autocratic rulers.

privilege to co-opt their voices” (Zine 2006:11). In order to generate an Islamic synthesis and a true universality, we need to challenge this reductive association of reformist Islam with either the East or the West and show mutual recognition of all Muslims as partners in this global project. This is important for a true Islamic universalism that allows Muslims to cultivate mutual regard, reconciliation and dialogue based on the respect for diversity. The Qur’an taught us that: “It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but its righteousness to believe in God” (Qur’an 2:177). Discourse on Muslim women should be grounded in the Qur’an and the *sunnah*. It is neither “Western” nor “Eastern”. It is a universal discourse. This argument is exquisitely conveyed in Surat Al Nur: “God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there was a niche and within it a lamp...lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the East nor the West” (Qur’an 24:35).

Muslim Women and the Securitizing Religious Discourse

The rise of the ‘new breed’ of Muslim women intellectuals and their contemporary discourse on gender relations within the Muslim communities provide an illustration of ways in which Muslims are *rethinking Islam*. As a result of this discourse, preferences are re-defined, new identities are created and the hegemonic discourse is contested. It is important to understand how the hegemonic Islamic discourse and agenda regarding Muslim women are produced and enforced. The theory of securitization (the Copenhagen School) explores the processes by which something (a referent object) is deemed threatened and security actions taken in its

defense (Laustsen and Wæver 2003: 184). We need to understand the logic of securitization, why and how it is done and what it does in the discourse on Muslim women. For the traditional Islamic discourse, the Islamic faith is not only threatened by a secular religious discourse, but also by a reformist Islamic discourse. My claim is that an alternative, gender-sensitive interpretation of the Qur'an is possible and - even welcomed- when Islam is no longer part of securitizing discourses.

Discourse on gender issues are produced by actors (states or Islamists), who pose Islam as existentially threatened and therefore claim the right to use extraordinary measures to defend it. They claim that "women's rights" is a Western concept and the West is using it as a tool to impose its hegemony and values on Islam and Muslims.

The securitizing discourse contains the following claims: the secular West is blamed for the crisis in social values and in important institutions like the family and religion. The traditional Islamic discourse is obsessed with Muslim women's *fitna* and seductive threats as the main corruption in Muslim society. In a 1992 seminar held in Cairo at the International Institute of Islamic Thought, Heba Raouf Ezzat was "criticizing men in Muslim societies for not daring to face up to current political authorities, while writing endlessly on women's *fitna* and seductive dangers as the only corruption to fight against" (Abou-Bakr 2001).

When Muslim identity is threatened, Muslim women are closely guarded. For example, Al-Qaradawi warns Muslim women that the 'destroyers' of Islam could use them to undermine the inherited values and customs in the name of development and modernization (Karam 1998: 193).

It is a Muslim woman's duty to be aware of these conspiracies, and to prevent herself from being used as tools for destruction in the hands of the inimical powers to Islam, and to return to what the women of the *umma* were doing during its (umma's) best centuries: the well-behaved girl, the decent wife, the good mother and the generous person who works for the betterment of her religion and *umma* (Al- Qaradawi cited in Karam 1998: 193).

It is important to note that these threats could be real or perceived. Security is “neither objective (threats in themselves), nor subjective (a matter of perception), but intersubjective and political” (Laustsen and Wæver 2003: 150). What makes these threats real and this securitization attractive to Muslim women are the stereotypical views of Muslim women as passive and victims of their misogynist religion, circulating in the western media as well as the policies U.S. chooses to pursue in the Muslim world. As a reaction to West depiction of Muslim women (esp. veiling) as a sign of backwardness and oppression, Islamists have turned these practices in symbols of Islamic identity and authenticity in defiance of Western cultural imperialism. Modernization carried out by Westernized autocratic governments also helped patriarchal traditionalists to mobilize men and women in their struggle for authenticity that came to rival development and modernization.

Therefore, in this clash between the West and Islam; authenticity and modernity, demands for women's rights are usually subdued or completely sacrificed as a reaction to perceived erosion of religious traditions and a marginalization of religion by secular modernity.

The traditional discourse is also being challenged by a reformist discourse. As mentioned before, in the clash between the two discourses and interpretations,

traditionalists accuse reformers of having changed and reformed Islam to the point of diluting and corrupting it and reformers accuse traditionalists of miscomprehending and misapplying Islam to the point undermining and even defiling the religion. The two views tend to clash and compete in their struggle to make their views the overwhelming dominant discourse on Islam. They both claim to represent the ‘true’ Islam (Abou-El Fadl 2005, see chapter four).

With regard to Muslim women, the patriarchal presumptions that premodern Islamic jurisprudence made with respect to women affect their civic and personal liberties (Wadud 2005: 178). The *ulama*, all male institution and the custodians of the Islamic tradition are being challenged by women equipped with intellectual tools to ask questions and criticize practices that are called “Islamic”.

Muslim women advocating critical approach toward gender issues have been accused of cultural betrayal and of being involved in Western conspiracy. Zainah Anwar describes her experience as a Muslim scholar-activist:

In our struggle for women’s rights and creating the space to speak out in public on Islam, ...[w]e have been attacked and condemned by conservative Islamist scholars and Islamist activists and movements – a common experience for women’s groups and progressive scholars in other Muslim countries as well (Anwar 2005:242).

Anwar also describes three forms that the attack and condemnation usually take. First, they undermine their rights and legitimacy to speak on Islam by questioning their credentials because these women are not traditionally educated in religious schools and institutions such as al Azhar. Puritans consider them Western –educated feminists who are trying to impose Western values on Islam and the *ummah*. Second, they are

accused of having deviated from their faith. Puritans equate questioning the traditional interpretation and views on women with questioning the word of God. Third, Puritans contend that it is dangerous to offer alternative opinion and interpretation of the religion as this could confuse the *ummah* and lead to disunity (Anwar 2005: 243). In addition to the questionable Islamic authority, some of the Muslim women scholars-activists cannot speak Arabic or not wearing the veil.

The claims of prominent Muslim feminists that Islam is a patriarchal and even misogynistic religion further complicate the discourse³. They have obfuscated the critical line. On occasions, secular feminists sometimes use the term *ijtihad* for political purpose, to seem as though they advocate a progressive Islam, when in fact they are using *ijtihad* as a screen to mask their secularism.

In conclusion, in the face of external threats, women are more closely guarded not only from perceived and real external threat but also from internal flexibility and change. Changes in the role and status of women seem to occur with the context of stable Muslim identity (Haddad 1998). In securitizing religious discourse, the religious core is often violated. Dominant Islamic discourse argues that there is one feasible option and only one interpretation of the role and status of women in contemporary Muslim societies. In the securitization context, religion is impoverished (Laustsen and Wæver 2003:167). Securitization also has antidemocratic effect by inhibiting debate and reform.

The securitization process is a ‘speech act’ or an arguing process. The success of the securitizing move depends on the audience in their decision to accept or reject it,

³ See chapter two for details of these claims

which in turn depends on the power of the better argument. In the light of the current context, any discourse on women's rights has to be within an indigenous and Islamic frame of reference in order to be accepted as valid and to undermine accusation of cultural betrayal.

Discursive Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

Muslim discursive hegemony claims the authority to represent the 'true' Islam and negates other alternative voices and classifies them as deviants or Westernized. It is a power struggle over ideas and values –“war of position” in Gramscian terms. In previous chapter, I presented the competing discourses on the status of women in Islam, traditional and reformist. In this section, I am interested in the conditions under which discourses are more or less likely to gain, retain, or lose their status as hegemonic and how the objectification of Islam under conditions of translocality and globalization provided new Islamic intellectuals with an environment to develop counter-hegemonic discourses. Hegemonic discourses and their claims achieve or lose their status as hegemonic as a result of a struggle over *discursive* formations. I will extend Gramsci's arguments on hegemonic relations to gender resistance in Islam.

In *The Modern Prince*, Gramsci explains some factors and conditions under which beliefs gain, retain, or lose hegemonic status. I will explain and extend Gramsci's theory to “Muslim hegemony” in order to develop a theory⁴ for the

⁴ In developing this theory, I rely heavily on: Antonio Gramsci 1957 “The Modern Prince” in *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, ed. Louis Marks .New York: International Publishers.

deconstruction of the patriarchal discourse and the reconstruction of new gender-balanced one.

This theory has three elements. The first element is the effect of what Gramsci called “incurable contradictions” and what I call the discrepancy between Qur’anic ideals and lived realities of Islam. Like Gramsci, I emphasize the difficulty of sustaining beliefs which too explicitly and systematically contradict “the Qur’anic ideals”. This may be thought of as a hypothesis about the impossibility of “absolute distortion” in the achievement and maintenance of the hegemonic status for particular beliefs. In order to expose this distortion, Muslim women intellectuals raise the public awareness of the tension between the normative ideals and the patriarchal interpretations and practices.

Second: Gramsci suggests that counter-hegemonic ideas, (i.e. offering an alternative liberatory reading and interpretation), will be a necessary component in the overthrow of an existing hegemonic conception. According to Gramsci, it is reasonable to expect that change in the status of hegemonic beliefs will be linked to the availability and mobilization of new ways of thinking, and not only to the accumulation of evidence of distortion.

Third: political and intellectual leadership acts as the transmission channels carrying ideas with hegemonic potential forward into the public and political arena, challenging the established hegemonic discourse. This kind of role is practiced by Muslim intellectuals involved in research and activism in order to correct abuse, injustice and subordination of women. To avoid failure, Gramsci argues, the inventors

and promoters of hegemonic projects need to understand the decisive importance of “reclotting political questions in cultural forms”. So, to avoid being dismissed, new ideas must be grounded in the Qur’an and Islamic tradition. To cast discourse and change as Islamic is to render it legitimate, authentic and thus acceptable and durable.

By extending Gramsci’s theory to Muslim hegemonic relations, I can suggest a *partial* theory for the deconstruction of patriarchal discourse and the reconstruction of a gender-balanced one based on a combination of three elements:

- A severe contradiction between Qur’anic ideals and the lived realities of Islam.
- To ensure Muslim women their rights, Muslim intellectuals not only need to contest readings of the Qur’an that justify the abuse of women, but they also need to establish the “legitimacy of liberatory readings” (Barlas 2002: 3).
- Dedicated political and religious leaders committed to the promotion of gender justice.

Muslim women scholar-activists look at women’s issues from *within* the Islamic perspective. Muslim women are “speaking for themselves” through their writing and their creative, lively, and critical debate currently taking place in the academy and in Muslim communities, raising issues of pluralism, democracy, gender, and modernity. They represent the formation of interdisciplinary network of Muslim women involved in scholarship and grassroots activism on issues of hermeneutics, theology, and women’s rights. As a result, the influence and efficacy of patriarchal authority and traditional practices seem to be declining.

To achieve that end we need to develop a clear agenda of our strategic goals and a definite program of action that prioritizes these goals. Such programs must take

into account the differing needs and wishes of Muslim women in each country. It must demand the proper and equitable implementation of Islamic laws. It must also stress the Qur'anic foundation for our demands and, simultaneously, actively encourage Muslim to re-engage in the process of *ijtihad*" (al-Hibri 2000: 55).

Conclusion

As a result of new discursive spaces and forms, Muslims are experiencing a "paradigm shift" occurring *within* the Muslim *ummah* at various locales that began to surface two decades ago in old Muslim societies and in newer communities in Europe and North. In the transnational space for intellectual reflections on Islamic norms and identity, women opened new forms of civic and religious leadership and forged new links. Women became agents, not subjects, of social change. Throughout the Muslim world, women are becoming more visible, making their voices heard and insisting upon greater participation in the public sphere.

The transnational Muslim public sphere is the outcome of intensified dialogue of like-minded activists and networks of local and global support for religious, cultural and policy transformation. Muslim scholar-activists, though locally based, operate with a transnational orientation that links together "nodal points" in places such as New York, Virginia, Malaysia, Egypt and other locales around the world. They leverage the collective social power of women in various settings articulating an alternative vision of Muslim identity and Muslim position that seek

to challenge the tradition and the history of patriarchal knowledge in Islam from *within* and with a Muslim voice (Mandaville 2003b).

This form of global advocacy of a normative agenda related to the role of women in Islam helps create and shape the transnational Muslim public sphere and provides a broader interpretation of the relationship between Islam and gender. Muslim women's debates and critiques as well as their interacting voices constitute a dramatic widening of the *Muslim transnational public sphere*, in which formerly disenfranchised voices (e.g. women) are empowered to articulate alternative interpretations of Islamic authenticity (Mandaville 2001: 4).

The reformist discourse opens up new possibilities, previously inconceivable, for women's independence and activism. The increased participation of women in these activities indicates a movement toward a critical mass "building a variegated movement of gender empowerment and reform" (Wadud 2006: 3). The outcome of such a movement includes "consciousness-raising, increased levels of education, promotion and protection of rights of girls and women, movement to protect and eradicate violence against women, affirmations of women's bodily integrity, policy reform, political empowerment and representation, religious authority, and personal spiritual wholeness" (Wadud 2006: 3).

Communicative action and dialogic engagement empower Muslim women in different parts of the Muslim *ummah*. Muslim women overcome their isolation and achieve a sense of belonging to the wider *ummah*, based on Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined community", in which people become aware of

themselves as part of a social collective based on *discursive* formation (Anderson 1991).

Encounters and debates with the “Muslim Other” play a central role in defining Islam’s political agenda. Muslims are asking new questions. They contribute to the discourse on the renewal of Muslim theories on religion, politics and community (Mandaville 2001: 132).

As argued by Asma Barlas (2005a), any practical solutions to problems and injustices faced by women must have sound theological grounding in the Qur’an. Islamic thought is open to revision and reconstruction; however, that reconstruction must reflect indigenous and authentic approach rooted in the Qur’an.

CONCLUSION:

BEYOND JIHAD AND MCWORLD: MUSLIM WOMEN SCHOLAR-ACTIVISTS AND ‘GLOBALIZATION FROM BELOW’

Benjamin Barber (1992) counterposes “jihad” and “McWorld” to connote the reaction of tribal, religious and national groups – various forms of particularism and identity politics- to the hegemony of capitalism and Western norms. These two trends are represented in the ideological and political tug of war between fundamentalist movements in Muslim societies and globalizing forces and the political, economic and cultural encroachment of the West. The two trends of globalization and localization “have one thing in common: neither offers much hope to citizens looking for practical ways to govern themselves democratically...Neither McWorld nor Jihad is remotely democratic in impulse....Neither needs democracy; neither promotes democracy” (Barber 1992). In order to secure the future of democracy, Barber proposes a system of “strong democracy”, that is a “participatory and direct form of democracy that engages citizens in civic activity and civic judgment and goes well beyond just voting and accountability”. He asserts that “Democracy grows from the bottom up and cannot be imposed from the top down. Civil society has to be built from the inside out” (Barber 1992).

Engaging in ‘Multiple Critique’: Muslim Women’s Response to Globalism and Islamism

Muslim women have been caught between these two opposing and oppressive discursive spaces: imperialism and religious extremism that script the way their identity is defined and narrated, limit their agency, autonomy and freedom as well as repress their struggle against injustice and complicate their endeavors for critical and political engagement. Muslim women’s rights have suffered as “collateral damage” in this political and ideological battleground (Zine 2006: 1).

In response, Muslim women scholar-activists took on the challenge to correct this narrow representation of their identity and struggle by engaging in two-front battle. Muslim women address and contest simultaneously the patriarchal and imperialist domination (Zine 2006: 2). Miriam Cooke (2001) refers to women’s response to the political and discursive influence of globalism and Islamism as engaging in a space of ‘multiple critique’ seeking justice and citizenship for Muslim women. It is a “double commitment: on the one hand, to a faith position, and on the other hand, to women’s rights both inside the home and outside”. This double commitment leads to the emergence of a new, complex self-positioning that confirms “belonging in a religious community while allowing for activism on behalf of and with other women” (Cooke 2001: 59-60). This self-positioning will then inform the speech, actions and writings, or the way of life adopted by Muslim women intellectuals occupying the space between identities that appears to be “mutually exclusive” and trying to demonstrate their “continuity”. They are engaging in a provocative and oppositional act of

political insubordination, because they refuse the boundaries others (traditionalists or secularists) try to impose on them (Cooke 2001: 60). In their gender *jihad*, Muslim women rejected the reductionist approaches of merely accepting traditional constructions of law and interpretations of texts as final and absolute as well as the unconditional embrace of modern secular discourses on human rights as universal and absolute.

By engaging in local-global critique, Muslim women are imagining a ‘third space’ that moves beyond this duality. In order to face these challenges as *ummah*, Muslim women scholar-activists are embarking on the path of epistemological reform by (re)opening the doors of *ijtihad* and producing new knowledge and new understandings of Islam in the face of the new circumstances.

This concluding chapter proceeds in three steps. First; I summarize the findings of the study in the light of the propositions developed in the first chapter. Second; I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of my analysis as well as some policy recommendations. Third; I relate the argument made in this research to broader debates in the field of international relations.

Lost in Interpretation: Recovering the Egalitarian Voice of Islam

It is this aspiration that has encouraged me to join my voice to those other Muslims who want to interpret Islam “in the light of moral humanistic commitment (Khaled Abou El Fadl) as well as those of non Muslims” (Buck-Mores) who want to ensure that Islamic discourses are not “excluded from the global discussion because [their] premises are non-western” (Barlas 2005a: 108).

In my portrait of Muslim women liberatory discourse and activism, I have examined the nature of internal discourses, debate, and contestation occurring *within*

Islam, in which Muslim women intellectuals are playing a key role in the reinterpretation and reform of the religion. Muslim women are “committed to questioning Islamic epistemology *as an expansion of their faith position and not a rejection of it*” (Cooke 2001:61 *emphasis hers*). They challenge the image of women as voiceless passive victims.

As ‘believing women’, to use Asma Barlas’s terminology, their critical engagement with the Qur’an is based on a conviction that Muslim women struggle for equality should come from *within* the framework of the Qur’an’s teachings. They are committed to the renewal and reform of religious dogmas and the recovering of the egalitarian voice of Islam. Muslim women scholar-activists take advantage of transnationalism to empower themselves to approach their local work with greater confidence and creativity. It is a form of transnational grassroots politics.

The efforts of these scholars-activists ensure that the struggle for a civic-pluralist politics will remain a central stream in Muslim civilization for years to come. Whether this civic-pluralists stream in contemporary Muslim political culture will spread and become the model for a broader pluralistic reformation of Muslim politics will depend upon several domestic and international factors, such as the domestic interpretive communities, the domestic structures, the role of religious and political leadership as well as the ability to build transnational alliances and networks with like-minded activists.

The critical faith-based project for liberating Muslim women is an example of non-homogenizing ‘globalization from below’ (Falk 2003: 202). This approach offers

an alternative for the 'globalization from above' through homogenization, in which a universalizing Western culture negates any sense of local differences (Mandaville 2001:32). The diversely situated Muslim women struggle for liberation outside the Western narratives of progress and modernity, they are creating a space based on the Islamic texts as foundation for continued debate, interpretation, re-interpretation and contestation. The reformist discourse proves that these texts are not static but *salih* (sound) for all times and places.

My case study offers an example of pluralization and contestation of forms and meanings of Muslim politics. It a debate between two groups: those who believe in the compatibility of Islam and civic pluralism and those who insist that Islamic values and institutions are antithetical to democracy. It also relinquishes the preconceived notion of Western-style feminism as the only goal for all women and secular, Western-style democracy as the only viable political structure for all societies. The pro-faith reform project is an attempt to "legitimize" or "nativize" gender justice demands in the Muslim communities (Tohidi and Bayes 2001:50). It is considered to be "more intelligible and persuasive and therefore durable" because it is pursued in "native idiom" (Ahmed 1992:168; Tohidi and Bayes 2001:50).

These tensions and transformations have a great impact on the widening of the Muslim public sphere, which includes a "critical mass" of educated, enlightened, and strong Muslim women in various locales around the world. By entering into the public sphere, Muslim women scholar-activists reclaimed and reshaped the concepts of democracy, politics and activism. They demonstrate that Muslim debates on

democratic and civil Islam are relevant to the debates about strong democracy and the reform of democracy in the Western world. Unfortunately, these debates were never compared or networked (Ezzat and Abdalla 2004:50). Muslim women created an emergent, transnational public space that projects civil pluralistic attitude in challenging Muslim identity politics (Sharif-Funk 2005: 261).

It is important to note that this process of social change is gradual. It is “a slow revolution, one that is working quietly ...at the grassroots of Muslim society” (Mandaville 2001: 185). It is an alternative to neo-colonial imposed or enforced change. Social change “requires much more than the quick fix of the transfer of institutions. Like technology transfer, institution transfer rests on foolish assumptions about a uniform world of the kind that once fired the imagination of colonial administrators” (Barber 1992).

One crucial finding of my analysis points to the importance of achieving “deeper pluralism” through a thick engagement of the views of other religious traditions for a true universal normative structure of world politics. It also points out to the need for recasting the meaning of democratic practice and civil society to encompass the positive and emancipatory contribution of religion. Margot Badran argues that “people worldwide come to the concepts of gender equality and social justice through different routes, through different text-religious or secular” (Badran cited in Barlas 2004:23).

Religious Knowledge, Social Agency and the Politics of Hermeneutics:

Critical to the work of Muslim women scholar-activists is the role of spirituality and religious knowledge in strengthening and empowering the self and the collective to resist marginalization (i.e. social agency). Religious knowledge becomes “the foundation for social transformation, revolution and collective struggle”. In my case study, Muslim women scholar-activists “evoke spiritual knowledge to transform society and challenge oppressive systems and structures” (Die cited in Zine 2006:18-19).

Amina Wadud’s gender *jihad* “juxtaposes spirituality as an essential qualification for just actions and public policy reforms” (Wadud 2006:13). Muslim women are reclaiming the “hermeneutic space of the public discourse” (Zine 2006:19) as a means to rethink gender, politics and community. They use the politics of hermeneutics to create a liberatory reading of religious texts that build a discursive basis for arguing for more equitable structures and practices. In her *jihad* against gender prejudices, Amina Wadud is simultaneously critical of conservative or traditional Islam as well as of progressive Muslims and feminists (multiple critique). Her civil intellectual *jihad* (struggle) and activism of Muslim women provide an example of “spiritual activism”, in which she “augments the abstract epistemology of reform discourse into creating a meaningful alternative in governing Islamic affairs worldwide” (Wadud 2006:13). The outcome of her definition of Islam as “engaged surrender” is full agency and citizenship for Muslim women.

Key Findings

1. A combination of critical ideas and transnational activities is transforming Muslim public discourse on gender.
2. This discourse is “one of the most powerful internal impulses for social critique and change in Muslim societies” (Barlas 2005a: 91).
3. Debates in the international public sphere are more likely to invoke identity-related issues. It also develops new understanding of Muslim women identity and new sense of local particularism and empowerment.
4. A combination of religious doctrine, social structures, and power relations determines gender relations, attitudes, and practices in Muslim societies.
5. The success of reformist discourse is contingent upon a combination of internal and external factors. The outcome of this discourse is very crucial for the future of Islam and Muslim women have much at stake in the outcome of this interpretive disputation.
6. The public discourse on Muslim women has “civilizing” effects and implications for the character of Islamic societies and politics toward more liberal and critical Islamic discourse. It constitutes “a dramatic widening of the Muslim public sphere that offers a discursive space in which Muslims can articulate their normative claims (i.e. ‘Islam’) from a multiplicity of subject positions” (Mandaville 2001:186). In this space, “differences are negotiated rather than eradicated” (Mandaville 2001:181). This public space allows less privilege actors (women) to access the discourse armed with the power of the

better argument. Coalition-building across women's groups is especially important in building democracy and civil society and in challenging both authoritarianism of the state and the powerful influence of fundamentalism.

7. The discourse and debate entail adaptation and the continual renewal of religious understandings within a framework of civility. But the challenge is not only to recognize these debates, but also to place these debates in their context, to understand the obstacles and challenges, false starts, accommodations and decisive shifts that emerged in Muslim political discourse and practice (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:164).
8. Muslim women who claim authoritative and authentic knowledge should be able to use their intellectual skills to convince a skeptical public audience (Muslim men and women). This task should not be so hard as long as the sanctity of the primary source (the Qur'an) is maintained and that the alternative Qur'anic exegesis is rooted in the Islamic tradition untainted by either culture or gender discrimination.
9. Unlike other approaches to gender and social change, arguing in the international public sphere based on the "new knowledge" could be the foundation of the most far-reaching and meaningful social change in the Muslim world as well as a useful mechanism for norms internalization in Islamic social settings. In contrast, in order to promote women's rights, Western governments used strategic bargaining or coercion, and in turn governments in the Muslim world responded either by making some

concession in order to increase their international legitimacy or rejecting women's right as Western concept. In both situations, change was not gradual; norms were seen as imposed and alien to the local culture and hence rejected or not applied.

10. I have presented a model of mutually supportive understanding of religion and conceptualizations of civil society, taken to be "the space where people and transnational entities debate and negotiate the rules of their relationship and pursue accountability for those rules, in furtherance of their respective concerns" (An- Na'im 2002: 70). Muslim women engage in the process of dialogue and internal discourse within different constituencies in order to promote consensus about the normative content of their solidarity and cooperation. It is a public negotiation over the rules that morally bind the community together.
11. This global Islamic 'public sphere' represents a "critical mass" of Muslim intellectuals, clergy and laypersons and "constitutes a dramatic widening of Muslim public sphere" (Mandaville 2001:186). It is a transnational Muslim global civil society in the making.
12. My analysis challenges both the assumption of civil society defined by Western conception of secularism as well as the assumptions that claim that civil society is a Western concept and cannot take root in Muslim communities.

13. An informed discussion on the role of religion and the interplay between religion and politics in the Muslim context requires the elaboration of new interpretive categories and analytical frameworks.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

In this section, I would like to make the following arguments and policy recommendations on how Muslim women scholarship-activism generates:

- I. A civil, pluralist Islamic approach to gender relations
- II. A response to the challenge of Islamic fundamentalism (and terrorism)

I. A Civil, Pluralist Islamic Approach to Gender Relations.

1. We need to look at religion, not as static, but as performing a valuable function as a motivator for change and transformations.
2. There is in fact an existing, critical, reformist vision of Islam competing with a more conservative one. The outcome of this confrontation is crucial for the future of Islam and global governance. This critical reflection has become imperative due to the circumstances of contemporary life, in which Muslims “can no longer afford to refuse to critically engage our tradition” (Abou El Fadl 2005: 4-5).
3. The role of women, who constitute half of the *ummah*, must be acknowledged and included in the process of dialogue, policymaking and lawmaking based on the idea of women’s full agency as the underlying idea for gender reform and grassroots activism. Muslim women intellectuals, whose voices has been traditionally excluded from the process of interpreting and defining Islam, began

to see themselves as interpreters- a role that was previously reserved to men. Muslim women intellectuals are drawing on their transnational political, religious, and gender identities in order to speak effectively to, with, and against several audiences.

4. There should be no contradiction between tradition and modernity. Muslim women scholars developed an alternative interpretation of Islamic tradition in order to affirm its compatibility with modernity, civil pluralism and justice. In fact, the examination of tradition might shed the light on the rich history of women activism and resistance to subordination in order to affect social and political change in Muslim societies.
5. One of the reasons for why Western feminism and Western initiatives did not take hold in Muslim countries is the differential in power relations between developed and developing countries, which inhibits sustainable consensus building around issue of religion and global civil society, which, in turns, affects the agenda, strategies and outcome of global civil society and affects the process of transnational alliance formation. Take the issue of funding, for example, there is a severe resource limitation on developing countries to fund studies of their own local problems. Whatever funding they are able to secure from foreign donor agencies and foundations has to be limited to the priorities and agendas of those sources. Western funding sources thus strongly influence decisions about research agenda (An-Na'im 2002: 58), which most the time does not represent the real issues and problems facing these societies. For example, while Western feminists

have been focusing on such issues as the veil and the perceived gender discrimination in the laws of inheritance, Muslim women did not regard these issues as important. They were more interested in re-examining family law and in the proper application of all Islamic laws. In short, Muslim women want a more just understanding of and adherence to Islamic principles (al-Hibri 2001: 102). Western feminists do not understand the piety and spiritual commitment of Muslim women they claim to liberate.

6. In this public sphere of Muslim women activism, meanings of democracy, politics, and civic engagement are redefined. Activities undertaken by Muslim women to challenge oppressive structures and broaden the domain of the public sphere cannot be ignored or dismissed because their premises are not Western. Such activism is the building block in creating a more inclusive democratic practice in Muslim societies.
7. Religion plays an important role in the political culture of Muslim societies, where religious expressions are inseparable from the expression of cultural, political and social values. Therefore, it is very important that any prescription for democracy, civil society or gender justice must engage religious traditions. The new thinking about participation, engagement and activism confirms that secularism is not an essential prerequisite of democracy, civil society or modernization. In fact, “[c]ertain options are closed down for Muslims at the global level when Marxists and other secular theorists refuse to acknowledge the value of internal critique of Islam, and to recognize the power of Islam, one would

need to engage it on its own terms, without trying to secularize or privatize it in the manner of Western religions” (Barlas 2005a: 104-105). Instead of trying to secularize Islam to conform to a particular Western understanding of politics and society, Muslim intellectuals should campaign for an “Islamic secularism”, which does not mean “that Islam is subject to secular restructuring, but that through Islam, we can arrive at a form of secularism which suits us. We can decide where the power of the state should be minimal, where the power of the people should be maximised [*sic*], where law enters, and where morality rather than law decides” (Ezzat in Bechler 2005b). Critical to Ezzat’s conception of Islamic secularism is its ability to provide “an opportunity to force Islamists to be concerned with human rights, democracy and social justice, rather than keeping them preoccupied with the overarching imperative of defending *sharia*” as well as the opportunity to “empower people in civil society” (Ezzat in Bechler 2005b). For many Muslims, the Qur’an is *the* Magna Carta of human rights and through Islamic secularism; we can derive systems of human rights, democracy and social justice¹.

8. The process of democratization, civil society and consolidation of human/women’s rights are intertwined with reformation in Islam. Gender has become a blind spot for democratization in the Islamic world. Foreign pressure on governments and ruling elite in Muslim societies does not guarantee an internalized and sustainable social change. There is a need for a deeper awareness of the complexity of the “women question” in the Muslim context and a better

¹ See Riffat Hassan (2000) for an overview of the fundamental human rights grounded in the Qur’an.

appreciation of women's agency in the modernization and development of the Islamic world, employing religious knowledge as a basis for a transformative movement that challenges oppressive structures and conditions in their societies.

II. A Challenge to Islamic Fundamentalism and International Terrorism

The suggested approach might provide a response to the threat of international terrorism, which needs more than military might. The Muslim society tends to become more conservative when it perceives itself under attack. Islamic fundamentalists mobilize disadvantaged groups against those perceived threats. Therefore, the externally imposed social, economic and political changes fuel the impetus for radical religious insurgencies. Circumstances of injustice and disempowerment fuel extremism. According to the securitization theory, the externally imposed values and norms open the doors to radical groups in opposition to cultural imperialism to claim existential threat to Muslim norms and values. To counteract the Western discourse and politics, they implement harsh measures that have negative implications internally, by inhibiting debate and reform and externally, by stimulating conflicts, clash, and terrorism.

Addressing the legitimate concerns and underlying grievances of Muslim communities by engaging theology can challenge the authenticity and validity of fundamentalist claims. A creative, open *ijtihad* and a "holistic and contextualized readings of our scripture" (Barlas 2003:9) develop a new theory and practice of Islam that provide an alternative to the "misogynistic and violent interpretation of Islam" (Barlas 2003: 15). In the case of women's rights, Muslim women challenge the patriarchal interpretation by providing an alternative Islamic, authentic reading of the Qur'an to

address their concerns of gender injustices. Muslim women also engage in transnational networks that contribute to social and political restructuring of their societies from within. This approach can also contribute to the end of the clash of civilizations and the conflicts associated with it, similar to role played by the ‘new thinking’ and transnational coalitions in changing the Soviet foreign policy, thus bringing an end of the Cold War².

If scholar and policymakers remain dismissive of faith-based reforms, it reinforces patriarchal, fundamentalist readings of the Qur’an as the only authoritative voice. This movement should be seen as a quieter alternative to the more militant forms of Islamic activism. Muslim reformist intellectuals are not only proving that religious fundamentalism and terrorism are unacceptable expression of religious beliefs but also establishing common grounds and mutual understanding between Islam and the West without undermining core Islamic values.

Traditional Islamic thought has divided the world into two parts: *Dar al-Islam* or the Domain of Islam, and *Dar al-Harb* or Domain of war. Radical Islamists often employ this division during times of conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslim. In redefining the relations between Islam and the West, Muslim intellectuals have rejected the radicalized and polarized Islam/West binary that fosters and legitimates clash/ jihadist views and actions. They are also rethinking *dar al-Islam* and *dar al Harb* division of the world. The reformist Muslim discourses, especially by Muslims in the West, emphasize active participation and freedom in Western communities. As a result these binaries are

² For the role of epistemic communities and transnational coalitions in explaining the end of the Cold War, see Thomas Risse- Kappen 1994.

undergoing serious transformations. The West has been promoted to *dar al 'ahd* (abode of treaties)³, in which peaceful and positive relations must prevail (Abo-Kazleh 2006:6).

At a recent conference⁴ in Egypt, a group of Muslim intellectuals came together to discuss Islamic approaches to coexistence and peace⁵. Among the papers presented in this conference was Asma Barlas's paper: *Reviving Islamic Universalism: East/s. West/s, and Coexistence*. In this paper, Barlas (2003) explores the methodological aspects of coexistence and suggests that "traditional method of knowledge creation is incapable of generating synthesis" (2). She advocates the need to develop new interpretive methods for reading the Qur'an that would enable Muslims to "look past the sword verses" (9) and challenge the "violent interpretation of the Islam" (15). Through "a creative and open *ijtihad*", "we can create a theory that can inspire the best possible praxis" (16). She also insists that "one way to enhance mutual understanding is to reject the Islam/West binary since it legitimizes the idea of radical difference which then lends credence to the apocryphal view that Islam and the West are fated to clash with one another"(15).

I suggest that the United States has a lot at stake in the outcome of this creative theoretical and political endeavor working for creating a more just and humane global system. This "intellectually critical and socially accountable power" of Islamism is extending the discursive field of political resistance to Islamic fundamentalism and "is revealing the possibilities latent in the West to renew itself by engaging Islam on its own terms. Islamism becomes a critical criterion against which the West too can measure its

³ For the analysis of Traditionalist and Pacifist theories of IR in Islam, see Abo-Kazleh 2006.

⁴ Conference on Contemporary Islamic Synthesis, Alexandria, Egypt, October 4-5, 2003.

⁵ For details, see Abdul Aziz, Abu-Nimer and Sharify-Funk (eds) 2006

own practices and, in doing so, engage in a constructive self-critique” (Buck-Morss 2003:42).

Nevertheless, the possibilities of an effective “Islamic” response to the challenge of Islamic fundamentalism are contingent on a combination of internal and external conditions. At the micro level, these factors include the ability to forge strategic transnational alliances, the ability to mobilize ‘believers’ in a moral and spiritual challenge to extremism and violence through an “understanding and practice of religion that are more inclusive, civil and voluntary” (An-Na’im 2002:59), and the ability to address the legitimate concerns and aspirations of Muslim communities of authenticity, progress and freedom through peaceful means rather than violence. These possibilities need “to be actively thought by all sides [including the United States], instead of passively waiting for religious persons and communities to success or fail the test of inclusion” (An-Na’im 2002:59). In this regard, the ability of Muslim intellectuals to restructure Muslim religious thought and practice will depend to a significant degree on the policies that the United States chooses to pursue in the Muslim world (Barlas 2003:15). Also, in the discursive arena of the war on terror, the radicalized discourses of the West versus Islam and the stereotyped representation of Islam and Muslims that produce Muslims as terrorists and Muslim women as voiceless victim of their misogynistic religion have rendered the dynamic of the interacting Muslim voices invisible or obscured. This environment is not conducive to the smooth transition toward civil Islam.

At the macro level, transformations of Western attitudes towards Muslim world; i.e. changing policies and adjusting media stereotyping, enhance the possibilities of not only ending the clash of civilizations and winning the war on terror, but also denying the fundamentalists their discursive and political power and creating a just and humane global system. As long as the U.S. hegemonic discourse remains unchanged, the global arena will not be conducive to equality, democracy, or peaceful coexistence.

The process of construction and deconstruction of identities and discourses is dynamic, complex and volatile; therefore, it should be handled with care. Too close handling on the part of the United States could undermine the ability of the Muslim reformists to speak with credible voice to the Muslim audience (Mandaville 2003b). It is true that the promoters and adherents of reformist ideas in Islam are minority. But the United States policies in the Muslim world need to be “proactive in recognizing that sometimes one of the minority trends of today can potentially be the majority trend in the future” (Mandaville 2003b).

Beyond Political Imagination: Rethinking Religion, Politics, and Community

A central motif running through my dissertation is an attempt to address and move beyond the limited political imagination of positivist, mainstream international relations. This limited imagination was the result of the exclusion of religious and spiritual dimensions as well as the failure to imagine “any political form which does not conform with the requirements of political science *qua* state science” (Mandaville 2001:25). This limitation has become apparent in analyses of the Muslim world that mostly lead to

Manichaeism simplicity: “Islam and Muslims have become the foils of modernity, freedom and the civilized world” (Zine 2006: 2). Recognition of the debates and contestations within Muslim thinking and practice promises a better understanding. Such an understanding “promises to undermine unreflective presumptions that Muslim relations with others are chiefly hostile and that Muslim governance is almost inevitably arbitrary and authoritarian” (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:164).

My role as a student of international politics is to think through the implication of contemporary Muslim politics as a means of enriching our understanding of the possibilities these discursive forms and spaces make apparent in world politics today. In order to offer a better understanding of Muslim politics, I have drawn eclectically from a variety of areas that need to “communicate” more in order to develop an integrated framework of analysis. My analysis is a modest contribution that aims at developing an appropriate framework for understanding Muslim politics and Islamic contention.

International Relations Theory and Religion

In their book *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile*, Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos address “a striking theoretical void in IR theory” that resulted from the rejection of religion as a concept of any theoretical use (2003:2) and as social force on its own terms, on a par with secular forces (Kubálkova 2003). They call for the analysis of the concept of politics through an exploration of religious traditions as one of the theoretical directions to address this void.

My exploration of Muslim women scholarship-activism was an attempt to do exactly that. It sheds the light on how the engagement of religion might lead to creative

theoretical and political endeavors. Contrary to the view that “politics with reference to religion became the ultimate threat to order, security and civility” (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 2), Muslim women’s dialogue and debate entail adaptation and the continual renewal of religious understandings within a framework of civility. Engagement with religious traditions is not simply a back-looking strategy, but a forward-looking one. Muslim women engage with religious texts and traditions searching for models and language to enable them to challenge the dominant religious discourse and to “articulate a Muslim (thus ‘authentic’) normativity well-suited for the circumstances and problems of contemporary life” (Mandaville 2001:185).

We need to look at the global resurgence of religion, not as a “clash of civilizations”, but as peoples and societies’ aspiration and search for authenticity, to the extent that this aspiration for authenticity began to rival modernity. This is apparent in Egypt’s atmosphere of tension between *asala* (authenticity) and *mu’asara* (modernity), which shapes the discourse on Muslim women’s rights. A reconstruction of Western and Islamic social theory can result in a creative theoretical and political endeavors for “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt 2000) and “multiple *asala*” (authenticity)(Mandaville 2001:183). The notion of multiple modernities allows different societies and different cultures to “come to the concepts of gender equality and social justice through different routes, through different text-religious or secular” (Badran in Barlas 2004:23). The multiplicity of *asala* has been already institutionalized in Islam in the notion of *ikhtilaf*, which refers the “equally authentic plurality of opinions”, seen as “a sign of divine favor” according to a *hadith* attributed to Prophet Muhammad “*ikhtilaf al-umma rahma*” (difference of

opinion in the community is a blessing) (Mandaville 2001:183). With the erosion of the Western totalizing discourse of political modernity as well as the erosion of Islamic hegemonic discourse, Muslim intellectuals juxtapose modernity and authenticity as well as Islam and democracy, previously conceived as mutually exclusive and incompatible.

The fundamental obstacle to attaining multiple modernities and multiple *asala* lay in the polarized binaries that position Islam versus democracy and theology versus secularism. These binaries block critical engagement and reinforce the political and discursive influence of Islamic traditionalism.

The oppositional framing of Islam and democracy, supposedly mean to edge Muslim toward democracy, ensures that democracy is never presented as being compatible with Islam. Telling Muslims that the cost of joining the universal community is to abandon any sense of themselves as a specifically Muslim *umma* (community, faithfulness) can only evoke in them suspicion of this community, not veneration for it (Barlas 2005a:103).

International Relations Theory: rethinking community and politics

The state-centric nature of mainstream international relations theory fails to take account of alternative forms of community and politics. Consequently, the emergence of alternative spaces and forms of Muslim politics has been overlooked because it does not conform to a predetermined notion of the ‘political’. My approach and analysis endorse the “critical” turn in international relations theory in searching for wider conceptual frameworks for thinking about contemporary Muslim politics and world politics in general.

In my attempt to understand how Muslim women in various locales communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about the nature of gender relations in Islam, I

focused on the concept “politics” as the “negotiation of meaning within and between social contexts” (Mandaville 2001: 39) as well as on the “dialogic nature of the community”; that is the internal debates and competing discourses within the Muslim *ummah*.

Iris Young defines civil society as a kind of activity identified with the “associational life world”. She argues that, contrary to much commonly held belief, to be “political” is not necessarily to engage in the formal electoral/political system, that is, to engage with the state. “Political” is “to struggle, together with others, to influence what will be on the agenda of the community” (Young in Ackelberg 2005:75). According to this definition, by debating and contesting the ethical claims about women in Islam, Muslim women determine the normative content of their agenda for the struggle for gender justice. They also ensure that gender justice is a central theme on the agenda of the Muslim community. This is an important aspect of creating a democratic Muslim public sphere or civil society.

In the end, my research has been an attempt at refiguring the scope of international political theory so that it becomes more capable of recognizing and accounting for non-traditional aspects of Muslim politics and the new political spaces and identities it constructs. The various parts of my dissertation build on each other in a cumulative analysis.

The Need for Future Research

This research is an introductory investigation into the major themes of an emergent reformist movement in Islam. Future research is needed to further trace and analyze the increasing growth of this emerging critical Islam and its dialectal relationship with

conservative voices. Who will win the debate on gender relations in Islam is a very crucial question for the future of Islam and Muslim women have much at stake in the outcome of this ideological and interpretive disputation. There is also a need for future research to explore the relationship between religious knowledge and social agency.

There is a need for future research to study the impact of the new knowledge and ideas on local communities throughout the Muslim world. I am interested in looking at the differential impact of the new thinking and ideas on gender relations in Islam as well as the domestic structures in three countries: Egypt, Malaysia, and Iran. There a need for a research that addresses the following question: to what extent are Muslim women scholar-activists open and accessible to the larger Muslim audience?

Conclusion:

The Muslim “Women Question” Revisited

Let me conclude by revisiting the Muslim “women question” in the light of the key arguments and claims I have made in my analysis. For the issues of democracy, tolerance and global governance, the Muslim “women question” has been key aspect of the Western critique of Islam. Both scholarly literature and public policy debates propagate a limited narrative about Muslim women as backward, traditional, veiled, secluded, voiceless, and oppressed, who need liberating through imperialist intervention. The media also played the role of the primary disseminator of this image.

My point is not to suggest that there is no injustice toward women in Muslim societies, but that the reductive character of the framing of issue needs to be questioned. In addressing the Muslim “women question”, scholars have been asking entirely the

wrong questions. Also, when attempting to explain the situation, they explain it in reference to something called 'Islam'. There is a belief that within Islam, there were certain innate features that not only legitimized injustices toward women, but which quite actively encouraged them. These views actually further obscure the root causes and distort potential solutions. Moreover, the discourse on undifferentiated mass of Muslim women ignores the actual "diversity of Muslim societies and the differing realities of Muslim women within them" (Shaheed 1995: 79). As Balchin points out, these assumptions "deny us agency, obscure and silence our struggles, conflate religion with custom, prevent an effective analysis of the local and global structures of oppression, and hinder the building of effective local and global alliances" (Balchin 2002: 130).

Only when we transcend this thin-based critique and widen the arc of analysis to incorporate religious perspectives and discursive forms and spaces of politics, we can discover creative theoretical and political endeavors currently taking place in the Muslim world. My analysis showed that Muslim women activism is alive but in different forms than expected in the West. The role Muslim women played in articulating and implementing new concepts and paradigms in domestic and international politics challenges the fixity of Western social theory that remains unwilling to move beyond the "Westphalian order".

GLOSSARY

Asala: Authenticity

Awqaf: Religious endowment

Dar al-‘ahd: Land of covenant

Dar al-harb: Land of war

Dar-al-Islam: Land of Islam

Fatwa: Legal opinion or decree issued by a recognized Muslim scholar.

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence.

Hadith: Reported saying of the Prophet Muhammad, based on the authority of a chain of reliable transmitters.

Ijma: consensus.

Ijtihad: independent reasoning or judgment.

Ikhtilaf: difference of opinions as regards to *fiqh*.

Jahiliya: Pre or non-Islamic ignorance.

Jihad: Religious struggle.

Mufti: Jurisconsult, issuer of *fatwa*.

Shari‘a: Religious law of Islam.

Shura: Consultation.

Sunna or *sunnah*: Orthodox traditions of the Prophet.

Sura: Chapter in the Qur’an.

Tafsir: Qur’anic exegesis.

Tajdid: Religious reform and renewal.

Tawhid: Unity of God.

Ulama: Muslim men of learning.

Umma: The world Muslim community.

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