Muslim Feminists and Transnational Networking in Asia: Upholding the Origin and Diaspora

Nausheen Ishaque[1*] Abdul Rahman Eid A. Alblowi[2]

1.   Department of English Language and Literature, Lahore Leads University, Lahore, Pakistan

2.   King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program, Ministry of Higher Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

* E-mail of corresponding author: noorbilli@hotmail.com

Abstract

Globalization, with both its banes and boons, poses certain threats to the episteme of the religions across the globe. Islam is no exception in this connection especially when it comes to its practices and popular discourses on gender. The Muslim feminists, at a global level, should tend to secure a transcultural and diasporic identity while also maintaining their territorialized affiliations with their respective virtual centers. The ideal can be materialized through the notion of transnational networking while exploiting the modern means of communication. The authors, in this paper, tends to articulate that in face of the starkly exploding spirit of postmodernist simulacra characterizing the present-day world order, the Muslim feminists in Asia are supposed to uphold both their origin and diaspora on the parallel if they intend to sustain their essential identity as Muslims while also enjoying the citizenship of a world order which has become most globalized, challenging and kaleidoscopic today.

Keywords: globalization, transnational networking, simulacra, diaspora, Islam, feminism, Other

1. Introduction

Globalization, in terms of its potential, has been studied and analyzed in a number of ways. Generally believed to be a concept abstract in nature, globalization alludes to a host of sociological phenomena demonstrating a multitude of meanings. Characterized and conditioned primarily by the explosion of technology and communication, it appears to be sliding towards the evolution of capitalist tendencies in production supplemented by the subjugation of the peripheral states to the industrial and capitalist hubs (Mahdi, 2003). Many take globalization as internationalism (Hirst & Thompson, 1996) while others consider it transnationalism (Strong, 1995) and still there are many who take it akin to the privatization of economies through the agency of international financial agencies and multinational co-operations (Barnet & Cavanagh, 1994). With the advent of globalization, there evolved a host of phenomena which had been either non-existent or passive previously. This entails the promotion and manufacturing of global services, products, values and phenomena through international, transnational and non-government organizations (Mehdi, 2003). Harvey (1989) and McGrem (1992) are of the view that globalization is bound to confront resistance at the hands of localization and particularism. Regional ethnicity, nationalism and religion have been the best nominees in this connection which are actively operating against the all-encompassing phenomenon of globalization, especially when it comes to the promotion and dissemination of universal values, beliefs and processes across the globe. The situation has become even more intricate after the emergence of postmodernist pre-occupations of simulacra and hyper-reality which simply explode all the so-called hierarchies and break open the established centers and slogans of authority and influence in whatever form these exist. The popularly held codification of the non-West as 'Other' or Object and West as the 'Self' or Subject seems to be losing its validity since the status of West as a point of reference has already been challenged. (6) Globalization alone appears to be no more than a mere void if it does not conform to the appropriation called for by the unavoidable processes of localization. Miriam Cooke (1995) in *Women Claim Islam* asserts emphatically that,

  Localization channels the global energy, directs it to the appropriate destination, and customizes it to the formats of the indigenous structures. In a dialectical process of give and take, content and form of globalization shape each other to the local needs and demands. At the same time, the local demands and structures modify themselves to global processes and institutions appropriate to their growth and expansion.

The 'woman question', as Riham Ashraf Bahi (2008) uses the term, has been one of the issues central to the western critique of Islam today. Samuel Huntington's controversial work *Clash of Civilizations* is by now one of the seminal

points of reference on the issue. Both the 9/11 scenario and the *Clash of Civilizations* stance have been instrumental in establishing Islam and Muslims on the global silver screen as anti-liberal and anti-democratic. There has been an unleashed budding of innumerable issues as the situation is problematized with reference to Islam in varying spheres like economics, internationalism, politics, law, etc. Gender too, certainly carries a place of defined significance among all these. The author, in this paper, tends to look at the cross-border and cross-cultural dialogue and coalition among Muslim women across the world and especially Asia. The author strongly believes that Muslim feminists and scholar activists must reap the benefits of transnational networking, while still showing allegiance to the provincial schemata they are part of, in order to empower their race. The endeavor will certainly profit their situation while enabling them operate within the just and permissible scope granted to women by Islam.

2. Review of the Related Literature

There has not been considerably sufficient effort on how communication and feminist dialectics from varying contexts can politically and socially shape up their activism. Mostly, when it comes to the issue of women and Islam, there is literature studying the 'pre-dominantly structuralist account of social change that focuses on analyzing traditional, economic, neo-colonial, and revivalist barriers to women's advancement as well as on localized impact of global economic factors.' (Bahi, 2008) Mariam Cooke in *Women Claim Islam* (2001) expresses a strong consciousness on the part of women about their new global position when they feel like 'relocating their words from a local to a global context', while 'they are negotiating new transnational realities that cut across local and familial identifications.' With their roots embedded locally in their respective origins, they have managed to speak out transnationally thus taking up both the subject and speaking position for the females of the Muslim community or *Ummah*. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (1998) in *In Search of Islamic Feminism* tends to look at the situation of both feminism as a notion and women as subjects or objects in a scenario which is most globalizes and kaleidoscopic. In course of her journey across the Islamic world, especially the Middle Eastern and Arab countries, she comes to conclude that women are emerging as prominent activists and are determined to be heard in the public sphere. Meena Sharify Funk (2005) talks about the role women have got to play in a transnational public scenario which upholds a pluralistic and civil attitude towards the identity politics on the part of Muslims. Women believe themselves as 'cocreators' of this emerging sphere especially when they approach their local work with an enhanced creativity and confidence despite their being belonging to diverse cultural and geographical contexts.

3. Islam and Transnational Activism

Ummah has been serving both as an idea and ideal as far as all the history, present and future of Islam is concerned. *Ummah* can actually be taken as a discursive entity which achieves its life and blood from the interacting voices of Muslim intellectuals, clergy and laity around the world. Peter Mandaville (2001) in his most persuading work *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Ummah* focuses the liberal movement among Muslims where Muslim men and women are free to practice their innate right of *Ijtihad*.

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.

Such activities among Muslims give birth to a pluralist tendency towards religious sources. It acts as a gateway to a revised reading, understanding and interpretation of the sacred textual sources. This carries within it a spirit quite akin to the postmodernist agenda where doors are virtually closed any totalizing or authoritative narratives. With these transnational pluralist practices, new horizons are opened up for Muslim men and women all over the world which lets them speak their minds out while remaining in their respective capacities.

The post 9/11 scenario displays a situation which is no less than an irony in itself. The toppling down of World Trade Centre is actually symptomatic of the collapse of the so-called 'liberalist' agenda on the part of the West. The war

against terrorism with the famous proverbial statement by George W. Bush stating 'You are either with us or against us' acts as a gateway to the watertight compartmentalization of the entire human race into two colliding groups. The entire situation has ironically enough imparted a greater consciousness to the Muslims of their being 'Muslim' than they ever had until now. Previously, it was only the identity, but now it is also their survival they are thinking in terms of today. We thereof see a renewed awareness among Muslims who are today inclined to revitalize Islam and its injusnctions through a re-reading of the Quranic hermeneutics.

And obviously when it comes to the issue of gender, a reformist vision of the religion extends an altogether new interpretation of the Holy Scripture. Today, it is possible to see the women liberated and exercising their will, something which exactly draws its strength from the same scripture which has been used to discriminate against them until now. The Muslim women, at a global level, are today seeking an interpretation of Islam which is essentially critical and egalitarian in its spirit. They are fully conscious of their potential and capacity as actors both in the public and private spheres of life and thus look for contextually favorable and justified ways to pronounce this potential globally. Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Azzizah-al-Hibri, Zainah Anwar and many other spirited females like these are active enough to transform and re-shape the popular Muslim discourse on gender justice and placement. These, in unison with many others are fully aware of the fact that women are subject to oppression at both societal and domestic level. Nevertheless, these are the social norms and behaviors which bewilder them the most since it is the social spirit which determines and models the pattern of their lives at the most private levels too.

With these concerns and the very bent of mind, these women in coalition with several organizations and networks across the globe, are establishing vibrant transnational networks. These networks are today busy in establishing translocal and international links among women in Muslim countries where they find an opportunity to share information and facts about their respective situations. They shape up their strife through varying means like publications, workshops and seminars, media productions, etc. WLUML (Women Living Under Muslim Laws) and COSAW (Committee on South Asian Women) are two such organizations. Formed in 1984, WLUML has ever since acted as a network of women who want to be listened to at both local and national level. By 1994, WLUML has managed to engage women from 25 different countries while enabling them become a part of the 'woman' project through various endeavors. (Shaheed, 1994)

4. Muslim Women's Activism in Asia

In the late 20th and early 21st century, there has been a conspicuous transformation marked by a certain level of consciousness on the part of Muslim women in Asia. A number of prominent Muslim have stood up to speak for their fellows through several public platforms which let these women speak with influence. Their aim had been to promote and integrate women's rights into all spheres of public life. Precisely by the end of 20th century, the rejuvenation and re-interpretation of Islam in combination with feminist and democratic ideals has developed a certain mind-set among the Asian Muslim women. Their efforts are bound to navigate the altering and shifting alliances at local, national and international scales. This owes to their dream of establishing a solid basis for knowledge and skill, something instrumental in adding to their political influence and social say.

It is however worth-noticing at this point that the efforts of the Muslim female activists in Asia can be broadly categorized into two groups:

i)   Muslim Feminist Struggle
ii)   Islamic Feminist Activism

The aim, at this point,is not to discuss the individual episteme and ideology of the two camps since these both remarkably differ from each other in spirit and activity. What is more important is to seek a point of convergence for both the sides since they both belong to a social set up which draws its ideological sustenance primarily from Islam.

The feminist approaches to Islam and gender, which evolved recently, call for the diverse movements and networks for the vindication of their purpose.

Pakistan: Women Workers Centre, All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA), UKs Research, Resource and Publication Centre on Women and Media, Kahsaff, Aurat Foundation

Afghanistan: Afghan Women's Education Centre (AWEC), Afghan Women Skills Development Centre, Acid

Survivors Foundation

Bangladesh: Adhunika, Ain o Salish Kendro, Dhaka American Women's Club, Grameen Bank, Women for Women, Nari Shonghoti

Malaysia: Sisters in Islam**,** All Women's Action Society (AWAM)**,** Joint Action Group (JAG)

Indonesia: Aisyiyah **,** Rahima**,** Nahdlatul Ulama**,**   Persis

5.   Transnational Networking and the Politics of Muslim/ Islamic Identity

The Muslim women, all over the world, are today getting conscious about their identity. In their pursuit of seeking sufficient space for themselves in both public and private spheres of life, they all care for and tend to determine the status they actually enjoy while staying in varying capacities. Miriam Cooke in *Women Claim Islam* (2001) expands on the issue with emphasis,

   Women are now asking how new technologies and the cultures and values they entail will be adapted to a well-understood notion the Quran and Sunnah as eternal. How can one be modern, global and yet observant? What role will Islam play in shaping ethical, modern citizens who are able to survive in, as well as to critique, a rapidly transforming world? Will Islamically inspired responses to globalization help or harm human? How will horizontal networking transform human relationships that have traditionally been based on vertical hierarchies?

The allegedly militant spirit of Islam (as pronounced by the West) is one of the most robust responses to the changes brought about by the bombast of globalization and technology. The previously so-called authoritative and totalitarian realities over-shadowing the world in the name of super power now seem to be most vulnerable at least ideologically. Simulacra and Hyper Reality are the recently developed postmodernist challenges which are good enough to interrogate the authenticity of anything which proclaims transcendence. The situation undoubtedly heralds new challenges especially to the very existence, survival and identity of Muslims as *Ummah*. But on the other hand, it is equally open to new changes and establishment of new and even more enhanced spaces. Both Muslim and Islamic feminists, as believers in the revealed faith brought by Muhammad (peace be upon him) are seeking identities of resistance to a number of forces. Islamic feminists, for instance, are striving to find a suitable way amidst the changes pertaining to survival while remaining critical to modernity. They aspire to uphold viable resources of sustaining dignity, morality and unity. Networking across the oceans through technological means this provides them with a means to see their dreams come true.

Religion, as a matter of fact, is a means of determining and establishing identity. Previously, it was believed to be operative only in terms of the indigenous identity of nations in general. Scholars like French historian Fernand Braudel are of the view that before the emergence of nationalism in 19th century, 'peoples felt truly united only by the bonds of religious belief, in other words by civilization'. (Braudel, 1995) Culture and civilization were believed to be akin to religion. Religion had been influential so much so that even civic rights were determined by it. The case of Iran and Pakistan are glaring examples in this connection where the two states are believed to have their ideological foundations in the name of religion, something which even explains and justifies their very establishment in the first place.   This is, however, only one side of the picture. As discussed earlier, the world underwent an entirely changed order after 9/11. It is no longer the same place where national and indigenous identities would suffice. The war against terrorism is actually a sugar-coated nomenclature imparted to a modern Crusade or an international terrorist stunt inflicted upon the Muslims. (Chomsky, 2002) The reason being the custody of oil resources reserved with Muslim countries by the so-called super power or even the ethically challengeable pronouncement of 'Islamic Fundamentalism' jeopardizing the world peace, one must care more for the consequences. Besides a sweeping mass destruction through wars or Drone attacks, the Muslims are being robbed of their essential identity as Muslims and moreover as citizens of a globalized contemporary world order. The ironical uprising and increased consciousness of their being 'Muslim' is the most natural backlash on the people inhabiting the Muslim world. This all culminates in a situation which is almost charismatic since Muslims today have acquired a renewed sense of the *Ummah* they are a part of. This collective consciousness transcends geographical boundaries and historical differences (if there are any) among Muslims across the globe. They are more into cross-communication with their spirits uplifted and ready to pronounce their firmness in whatever stance they uphold against this 'civilized tyranny' by the West. So the very idea of Muslim *Ummah* is now a matter of a transnational

and trans-border establishment and identity since all the Muslims, at a global level, are either ready or preparing to converge at Islam which stands as a symbolic capital to them.

6. Positioning the Muslim Self: Islamic Origin and Contemporary Diaspora

According to Miriam Cooke (2001), the Muslim women across the globe should rely upon the two stories of origin and diaspora if they intend to position themselves transnationally as women of courage and righteousness who are committed to gain social justice for themselves. Being a part of the global community in general, they can situate themselves transnationally while staying connected to their past and place of origin. Muslims enjoy an edge of a particular type over other people since they have in reserve their symbolic capital, something unavailable to the present-day nations around the world. Muslims surely have easy access to the pure origins of their Islamic genealogy and origin in a number of sources. Miriam Cooke pin points these resources while bringing into lime light the connections these help drawing between Muslims and their illuminated Islamic origins,

These connections are created by two of the five pillars, or basic tenets, of Islam: the *hajj,* or pilgrimage, which each Muslim is expected to undertake at least once in a lifetime; and by *salat*, or the five daily prayers in Arabic, the language of the Quran. Ritual travel to a site in Arabian Peninsula and daily use of its language, as well as of a compass to orient the faithful to Mecca from wherever they might be in the world, compel a transnational consciousness that links Muslims in their specific places with the symbolic heart of their religion. (Cooke, 2001)

It goes without saying that foreign domination in the name of wars or colonization had a tendency to contaminate these resources, yet the Muslims must be alert and on their guard not letting others trample their history through any kind of adulteration.

Muslim women today may find themselves split politically and geographically as citizens of different countries spread across the globe. The need is nevertheless to invoke and retain the symbolic and spiritual links with their coreligionists through a trans-local vision of being members and companions at a broader communal platform called *Ummah* besides exploiting today's means of communication as Cooke suggests that,

At home in the broader zones that have assured them actual and cultural survival, they are comparable with today's migrants and refugees. They have not *become* migrants moving constantly across and within national borders. Rather it is their geographically flexible identity, which oscillates between diaspora and origins that characterizes Muslim identity. (Cooke, 2001)

The idea of pan-Islamism can thus be exploited at this particular point in temporal when Muslim synchronic individuation is in desperate need of their diachronic unity. With special reference to the situation of women in terms of their cross-border networking, Cooke quotes Dr. Fatima Umar Naseef who strongly expresses her belief in an interview in the change brought about by globalization and information revolution to the lives of Muslim and especially Arab women. This is something which encompasses all the local, national and international simultaneously, and challenges the stereotypical ideas about liberty and isolation upheld be the West until now,

Women here have always been networked, always able to be in touch with whomever they wanted, even when alone at home,…Anyhow, you have the same phenomenon in the U.S. today. I have heard that millions of Americans are now working out of their own homes, whether by choice or by necessity. They are not together but they are also not isolated. Like women here, they are even more connected than ever before. They have actually chosen physical isolation so as to be able to enhance virtual community. (Cooke, 2001)

Transnational networking is surely galvanizing Muslim women globally. While staying faithful to their culture and origin, they are relocating their perspectives from local to global. This is giving birth to novel transnational realities which easily transcend the familial, racial and local identities. It also addresses the pluralities that characterize the individual order of the women's lives living in a particular state. Among Muslim states, it has been observed that laws are formulated on either of the two basis: civil and religious. (Shaheed, 1994) A Muslim woman, being citizen of one states, is bound to differ her sister in Islam especially when it comes to legal and cultural context of life. Transnational networking, if managed sensibly, can help deal with differences very effectively. As for the migrant Muslims, they too essentially get entwined into the problems proposed by the ideological hermeneutics (belonging to all spheres of all) and the realities of the new place simultaneously. Leila Ahmed is of the view that Islam, in today's kaleidoscopic order of renewal of thought, is a site of profit for women. The authorities who previously strived to separate men's Islam from that of women are today seeking ways to bridge this gap. Today, Islamic discourse being

a site of resistance and a space establishing the redefined identity of Muslims, is giving out a unified Islamic ethos. (Shaheed, 1994)

Conclusion

Foregrounding the theoretical paradigms of the Muslim *Ummatic* discourse at a massive scale, the transnational feminist networking among Muslim women in Asia should be reinforced with an end to enable them pursue their due space while keeping in view both their common and diverse situations. This will strengthen their struggles by establishing means and channels required to speak their stance out globally from within and outside the Muslim world. Such networks are certainly a platform providing these intellectually and socially active women rethink and redefine their identity especially after a situation which is bound to topple down the image of Islam and its observes. The ideal definitely calls for a joint effort on the part of both Islamist and progressive feminists who, by facilitating contact and interaction among them across different countries can positively generative a flow of information. The multiplicity of women's realities within the Muslim order should not be taken as something intimidating. It should rather be taken as a positive inspirational fact which can actually be appropriated to diversify the image of Muslims and Islam which has always been received as a monolithic and authoritarian code of faith by the West.

References

Ahmed, Leila. (1992)."Women and gender in Islam". Yale University Press

London.Bahi, Riham Ashraf. (2008). "Networking for power and change: Muslim women activism and the transformation of Muslim public sphere", *PhD Thesis*, Northeastern University:Boston, Massachusetts.

Braudel, Fernana. (1966)." The mediterranean and the mediterranean world in the age of Philip II". University of California Pres: Berkley and Los Angeles.

Cooke, Miriam. (2001). "Women claim Islam*"*. Routledge: New York and London.

Fernea, Elizabeth Warnock. (1998). " In search of Islamic feminism". Anchor Books: New York.

Jeremy, Brecher, T, Costello. (1994). **"**Global village or global pillage: economic reconstruction from the bottom up". South End Press: Mass, Boston.

Mahdi, Ali Akbar. (2003). "Iranian women: between Islamization and globalization": *Iran encountering globalization: problems and prospects*. Routledge/ Curzon: London and New York.

Paul Hirst, G. F. Thompson**.** (1996) **"**Globalization in question". Cambridge: Polity Press and John Zysman. "The myth of a 'global economy'":enduring national foundations and emerging regional realities**.***"* *New Political Economy*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1996.

Richard J. Barnet, J, Cavanagh. (1994). "Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order". Simon and Schuster: New York.

Shaheed, Farida. "Controlled or autonomous: identity and the experience of the network, women living under Muslim laws": *Chicago Journals*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1994.

Biographical Notes

Nausheen Ishaque did her Master of Philosophy (M.Phil) in English Literature from GC University, Lahore, Pakistan. Her teaching career at university level spreads over a period of over four years. Currently, she is serving at Department of English Language and Literature at Lahore Leads University, Lahore as an Assistant Professor. She is also a PhD research candidate at Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Her areas of interest and specialization include feminism and postcolonialism.

Abdul Rahman Eid A. Alblowi earned his Master of Islamic Law from Islamic University, Madinah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. At present, he enjoys doctoral fellowship from Minsitry of Higher Education, KSA and is a research candidate at Ahmed Ibrahim Kulliyah of Laws, International Islamic University, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His areas of focus comprise Shariah and Corporate Law.

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:
http://www.iiste.org

CALL FOR PAPERS

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. There's no deadline for submission. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** http://www.iiste.org/Journals/

The IISTE editorial team promises to the review and publish all the qualified submissions in a **fast** manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request from readers and authors.

IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digtial Library , NewJour, Google Scholar