

**WOMEN, ISLAM AND FEMINISM IN POSTCOLONIAL
MALAYSIA AND SINGAPORE**

BY

NADIAH BTE RIDZUAN

B. Soc Sci (Hons.) National University of Singapore

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Abstract

This paper calls into question the ability of postcolonial feminisms, Islamic feminism in particular, in capturing the diversity of Muslim women's voices. It argues that postcolonial feminism narrowly defines women's empowerment as 'emancipation' and 'equality' despite being critical of the Eurocentric understandings of these terms as used by Western feminists. Feminists thus have a tendency to assume that women would be predisposed to see these ideals as favourable in comparison to those which uphold a patriarchal structure. However, as women's assertiveness in Islamic movements that espouse gender-differentiated roles demonstrate, reality is more complex. Thus, postcolonial feminism is unable to make sense of Muslim women's self-understandings of empowerment that have little to do with the ideals of 'emancipation' and 'equality'.

As I will show from examples from the Malaysian and Singaporean contexts, Islamic feminists are at a loss in terms of fully appreciating Muslim women's identifications with the conservative principles espoused from a more conservative Islamic framework and their involvement in such movements. As a result, women's voices are framed out of the hegemonic framework that pits feminist universal values against state cultural essentialism in the discourse of Islam and gender. Thus, I propose that the boundaries of the feminist paradigm need to be redefined, so as to make the feminist theoretical framework more inclusive and more in tuned to 'difference'. This thesis aims to clear the conceptual space in order for the feminist theoretical framework to be more receptive towards alternative forms of empowerment that are based on women's own self-definition and understanding.

1. Introduction: Rethinking Postcolonial Feminism

How do we begin to make sense of Muslim women's overt identification with a religion which seemingly spawns patriarchal oppression? How should we understand the struggles and motivations of Muslim women within Islam and also in their interactions with the larger society in a modern secular world? Through a critical analysis of the experiences of Muslim women in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore, this paper seeks to lay bare the limitations of postcolonial feminisms, in particular Islamic feminist discourses, in capturing the diversity and nuances of these 'Third World' women's voices. Postcolonial or 'Third World' feminisms are committed to the concept of 'difference' which entails questioning essentialized notions of 'women' as a coherent discursive category in the effort to decolonize the feminist paradigm that has thus far privileged the experiences of Western women in terms of analysing women's conditions.¹ Yet, when confronted with the issue of women's identification with and involvement within Islamic movements that espouse gender-differentiated roles, postcolonial feminists are presented with a conundrum.

Feminism as a theoretical framework faces limitations in terms of explaining Muslim women's compliance and even active engagement with a religion which keeps them seemingly trapped within a patriarchal structure. The reason as I shall demonstrate in this paper, is that feminists including postcolonial Islamic feminists, construe women's empowerment as mainly 'emancipation' and 'equality'. Despite being critical of the Eurocentric understandings of these terms within other strands of feminism such as liberal feminism, postcolonial feminists continue to retain the same vocabulary and ideals. The problem, I argue, arises when a woman understands her own empowerment to mean something other than 'emancipation' and 'equality'. Her self-definitions are thus framed outside of the feminist discourse because the feminist theoretical framework mainly perceives

¹ Sue Morgan, "Introduction: Writing Feminist History: Theoretical Debates and Critical Practices", 2006. p26

women's empowerment according to these ideals. In spite of their attention to 'difference', postcolonial feminists' attachment to these terms has turned out to be a hindrance to their making sense of Muslim women's struggles and experiences.

In order to demonstrate this, I briefly present here a case which will be expanded further in chapter 2. In Malaysia, the report of a Malay Muslim woman who had received a caning sentence for being caught drinking an alcoholic beverage took the media by storm in 2009.² The main contention was that the unprecedented punishment for a religious transgression was being meted out by a secular state. The most vocal Islamic feminist group in Malaysia, Sisters in Islam (SIS), had condemned the caning sentence as a "violation of human rights" and a step back in terms of achieving "gender equality".³ Couched in these terms, SIS worked within a feminist framework that prioritizes the ideal of 'equality' and the 'rights' of a woman to be free from the encroachments on her interests by a patriarchal system. However, in her interviews, the woman involved had agreed to receive her punishment and described how she felt more "calm" and "not afraid" of the punishment "after reading the Quran".⁴ Later, when the woman's sentence was reduced, she remained steadfast in preferring the initial caning sentence. Clearly, her approach to the situation differs from that of the Islamic feminists.

In the media statement issued by SIS, they had asserted that whipping as a form of corporal punishment should not be condoned even if the woman had agreed to it based on the "principle of free choice".⁵ The Islamic feminists had interpreted the women's actions as

² Al-Jazeera. 23 Aug 2009. "Malaysia caning sparks debate" <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-pacific/2009/08/200982373312488496.html>

³ Hamidah Marican, 17 Feb 2010. "Malaysia: Sisters in Islam Condemns caning of 3 Muslim women under Shariah Law" *Women Living Under Muslim Law* <http://www.wluml.org/node/5989>; Sisters in Islam "Stop the Whipping. Stop the Whipping of Kartika." Media Statement. <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/news.php?item.224.27>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sisters in Islam "Stop the Whipping. Stop the Whipping of Kartika." Media Statement. (as accessed on 13/04/2012) <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/news.php?item.224.27>

compliance to a patriarchal system. However, further exploration into the case will show that she had merely admitted her mistake in committing a religious transgression. Her admission did not extend to an approval of the state's form of 'justice'. On the surface, it may seem that by not appealing to the notions of 'equality' or 'rights', she remained trapped within the patriarchal system. However, as I would later demonstrate in the next chapter, the woman's decision to obey the so-called religious ruling had placed her on the same moral platform as the state in order for her to be able, later on, to question the state's efficacy in implementing religious punishments. She would later go on to state that the caning she had agreed to was in effect, a miscarriage of justice by the state as a result of its misreading of Islamic Law.⁶

What the brief presentation of the case study here aims to show, is that the Islamic feminists in this case were limited in terms of understanding the woman's actions. What they failed to perceive was that her compliance to the state's ruling was more than merely an exercise of free choice. Rather, her compliance can be construed as an attempt to navigate and manoeuvre her way to find her own space within a patriarchal system. She defined her own course to empowerment not by appealing to feminist ideals. Rather, through her acceptance of a religious dictate, she had managed to place herself on a moral standing that would allow her to hold the state accountable for its interpretation of religious texts.

This brief example attempts to highlight the disjuncture between Islamic feminists' understanding of the situation and how a Muslim woman's understands her own experiences and struggles. As I will illustrate in the subsequent chapter, this disjuncture arises because the feminists' interpretation of empowerment is largely confined to ideas that women have to be equal with man and free from patriarchal systems. Islamic feminists like SIS were thus unable to perceive that a woman can be empowered even as she complies with the decisions

⁶ Chong, Debra. April 10 2010. "Kartika says she would rather be caned" *the Malaysian Insider*. <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/Kartika-says-she-would-rather-be-caned/>

made by a patriarchal system. Therefore, the boundaries of the feminist paradigm need to be redefined for it to be more inclusive to alternative approaches in thinking about women outside of the Western world. This paper explores the limitations of postcolonial feminisms, Islamic feminism in particular, and also attempts to offer an alternative approach to thinking about the struggles and experiences of ‘Third World’ women which includes Muslim women.

It must be made clear at this point that it is not the objective of this paper to make any definitive arguments about Muslim women’s engagement with their religion per se. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to clear the conceptual space, which has been long dominated by Western-centric precepts, for thinking about the experiences and struggles of the ‘Third World’ or postcolonial woman as subject. In order to do so, there is a need to re-think some of the values and ideals inherent within the feminist paradigm. This does not mean that feminist ideals of ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’ should be done away with. On the contrary, this thesis aims to demonstrate that there is a need to redefine the boundaries of the feminist paradigm in order for it to be more inclusive and receptive towards ideals and goals that have little to do with ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’. In order to better understand the experiences and struggles of the ‘Third World’ woman, the idea that a woman can be empowered without actually being emancipated from a patriarchal domain and without actually achieving full equality with men, must be conceivable to postcolonial feminists.

This project admits that feminists throughout the decades have conceptualised both the ideals mentioned above, especially the notion of equality, in different ways. Liberal feminists, like Susan Moller Okin, have conceptualised equality as the equal rights of both men and women to education, to job opportunities and to be equal under the law.⁷ Islamic feminists, such as Amina Wadud, on the other hand, have found that it better suited their purpose to

⁷ Susan Moller Okin, “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” in J. Cohen, M. Howard and Martha C. Nussbaum (eds.) *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999)

conceptualise equality in less tangible forms by placing emphasis not only on the earthly social functions of men and women but also their spiritual equality before God.⁸ One might therefore counter my argument that the term ‘equality’ restrains an understanding of the postcolonial woman subject by positing that the term has a transformative quality which allows feminists to conceptualise the term to suit their own purposes. However, the counter-argument above misses the mark.

As this paper is concerned mainly with clearing the conceptual space in the discourse on postcolonial women, it is all the more important that there is also a re-examination of the vocabulary used. As my discussion in Chapter 3 will demonstrate, by retaining and transforming these notions and ideals in terms of meaning, postcolonial feminists are unable to capture women’s voices that do not attend to these notions. In doing so, despite transforming the meaning, feminists are restricted to understanding women’s experiences in terms of their striving for one form of ‘equality’ or another. Therefore, this thesis will not attempt to define or conceptualise the terms ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’ because there is no need to. Neither will it discredit these terms. In fact, these ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’ are still very much relevant and useful when assessing the conditions of women in particular circumstances or social conditions. This project instead argues, that postcolonial feminists need to look beyond these ideals when assessing women’s experiences in particular situations in order to be able to truly listen to and understand the experiences and struggles of women that have little to do with ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’.

What does it mean to conceive of a feminism that is not related to the ideals of ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’? The alternative I propose is a feminism which is able to perceive that women’s empowerment is tied to a woman’s ability to determine and articulate

⁸ Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)

her own goals and aspirations within her own religious and socio-cultural context. This can be done by carving her own space within a male-dominated society and by using the very tools of oppression in her quest for justice against the oppressor. It may also mean a sort of strategic application of the doctrines or cultural mores to her own benefit. More importantly, empowerment is not merely about using indigenous tools to arrive at goals or ideals that were predetermined for them. It is about their ability to articulate these end-goals for themselves and for their articulation to be truly heard. This would compel postcolonial feminism to take on a more deliberative stance rather than a prescriptive one in order to carve a discursive space for 'Third World' women to articulate their views.

As analyses of some of the works which attempt to study women in Islamic revivalist movements will show, postcolonial feminists are often blind-sided by the preoccupation to perceive in Muslim women the desire for 'emancipation' and 'equality' whenever they do something that is conceivably empowering. However, women's participation in Islamic movements neither liberates women from a male-dominated system, nor does it grant them equal stature with men within the system, at least not in terms of a legal or socio-political standpoint. Thus the most immediate and common reaction to Muslim women's outward expression of their faith is to dismiss it as false consciousness.

However, to make this assumption would be to deny the Muslim woman any form of agency, relegating her to a position of passive receiver. It also ignores the obvious contradiction in the fact that even as Muslim women have begun to don the 'garbs of oppression' or take on positions 'subordinate' to men, they are more visible now than ever before as they increase their participation in the public sphere. Given that Muslim women are contributing more actively to the socio-political and economic life of the modern state, they have been more exposed to various avenues for physical and intellectual emancipation from patriarchal

structures. This suggests that a dismissal of Muslim women's support for Islamic movements as false consciousness is inadequate in understanding Muslim women's struggles. It also results in the failure to see that the actions of these women are indeed empowering in the sense that these women define their own self-worth and are able to carve out their own space within a patriarchal structure.

Re-examining the Literature: Women's Involvement in Conservative Islamic Movements

I will discuss here a few works of Islamic feminist literature which illustrates that the perception of women's empowerment largely as 'emancipation' and 'equality' hinders feminists' efforts to understand the experiences of Muslim women. This results in a deficient understanding of the motivations and aspirations of Muslim women who engage in Islamic movements. Instead of viewing their religious engagements as attempts to empower themselves and prove their self-worth in accordance with their belief-systems, the analyses tend to undermine the potential of these women's actions as being "not feminist enough" to improve their own status in society vis-à-vis men. In fact, in some of the analyses, the authors assert that these are examples of Muslim women's inability to articulate their own interests and thus the recommendation for them to look to the West for inspiration. The weaknesses of the analyses in some these works provides some justification as to why there is a need to re-examine the vocabulary and underlying principles and ideals that define Feminism as theory and practice.

In *Unveiling the Fundamentalist Woman*, Nilufer Narli examines Malay Muslim female university students in Malaysia at a time when the *dakwah*⁹ movement, in which women formed a substantial number of the supporters, was at its height. The purpose of Narli's study

⁹ The word *dakwah* denotes preaching of Islam or calling people to the religion. Those who engage in *dakwah* activities can be regarded as the equivalent of the Christian missionary.

is to find if women's participation "inject[ed] a feminist consciousness" into the Islamic movement.¹⁰ Narli posits that higher education, in the modern sense, is "essential for enabling women to conceive egalitarian ideas" concerning gender whereas "Islamic re-socialization reinforces gender-differentiated values and orientations"¹¹. She hypothesizes that university education and the *dakwah* movements are two socializing agents that could influence Malay Muslim female students to discard or reinforce gender-differentiated values.¹²

The underlying rationale of her analysis is that "socialization agents exert influence on individuals only if this influence is perceived by the individuals to be meaningful"¹³. This of course depends on pre-university factors such as socio-economic background and early socialization experiences through familial or communal interaction.¹⁴ What Narli's study found was that most of the female students in the university who were brought up by less educated mothers, were highly exposed to Islamic teachings and who came from the rural areas were more receptive of the *dakwah* movements and its gender-differentiated ideology.¹⁵ She found this to be the case despite the intervening social variable of a university education, which would otherwise have made them more receptive to egalitarian ideas concerning the role of the sexes. Thus, Narli concludes that Malay Muslim women who are involved in the Islamic movement do not seem to have the potential to bring a radical feminist perspective to demand equality with men, for they lapse back into a concern for the gender roles within the Islamic framework.¹⁶

¹⁰ Narli, Nilufer, *Unveiling the Fundamentalist Women: Case Study of University Students in Malaya*. Istanbul, (Turkey: The Isis Press, 1991)

¹¹ Op. Cit., p12

¹² Ibid., p15

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p14

¹⁵ Ibid., p173

¹⁶ Ibid., p175

However, Narli's study still does not answer the question as to *why* highly educated Malay Muslim women adamantly choose to identify with gender-differentiated norms. As evident from Narli's study, women choose to go with the option that is more meaningful to their lives. Narli chooses to explain the choice her respondents made as the effect of early socialization prior to university education that has held them back from embracing a more 'progressive' stance towards gender roles. Yet, despite having more doors open to them with the privilege of a university education it still does not explain why the Malay female students choose not to abandon the *dakwah* movement and subsequently adopt a more egalitarian mindset.

Narli's study shows above all, that there in fact is nothing intrinsic to women that should predispose them to favour the ideals as espoused in feminism and to adopt a more secular or liberal outlook. The respondents to her study claimed that they found little meaning in terms such as "emancipation" and "equality" of the sexes in all spheres; often, they had very ambivalent and contradictory reactions to these concepts.¹⁷ What Narli's study failed to ask or to perceive was the ways in which this Islamic movement did empower women in terms of their involvement or identification with it. Most of the questions asked in the study centered on feminist ideals of "emancipation" and "equality" of men and women in all spheres and if the women believed that these could be accommodated in an Islamic framework. The questions posed to the respondents mostly revolve around these ideals that are intrinsic to the feminist framework but do not fit with how the respondents saw themselves and their roles in the movements leading her to conclude that there are no subversive or progressive potentials

¹⁷ Ibid., p101. A large proportion of the students (32.9%), when asked if they perceived any relationship between the Islamic movement and the progress and emancipation of women, found that they did not conceive of any relationship between the two. Another 27.3% found that it contradicted Islamic precepts while 11.3.0% found a positive relationship between the two because they thought there is a concept of emancipation and women's equality with men within Islamic ideology.

among women in such movements. Narli's study shows exactly the problem that exists when one insists on looking at women's struggles through a feminist perspective.

Hence, the preoccupation with discovering in women's struggles or women's movements a set of ideals that match up to the emancipatory goals of the feminist movement impedes the development of understanding the motivations and goals of women on their own terms. In a discussion of *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, Haideh Moghissi concedes that feminist ideals, goals and strategies should be formulated according to differing social, cultural and political contexts.¹⁸ This may include women advocating for women's rights by drawing concepts from an Islamic framework. However, Moghissi insists that unless the women's movements take on a notion of gender equality as "indifference to difference", it is incompatible with feminism. She argues that notions of 'gender equality' as implied in the Qur'an, which makes men and women equal in the eyes of God but ascribes their rights and obligations in this world differently, are incompatible with the notion of feminism and its emancipatory ideals.¹⁹ Moghissi's argument reflects the difficulty of perceiving women's struggles and motivations through the lenses of feminism. The idea of gender justice through gender equality is so intrinsic to the feminist paradigm that it is difficult for feminists to perceive that women can be empowered without identifying with these ideals.

In fact, scholars like Wazir Jehan Karim, in her work on *Sexuality and Domination*, claim explicitly that women from cultures which do not provide any avenues for women's emancipation should achieve gender and social equality by borrowing ideas from the West.²⁰ Karim asserts that leaving women to their own devices to find indigenous feminism is contradictory, because people want changes which can improve the state of their society

¹⁸ Haideh Moghissi, *Islamism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The limits of Postmodern analysis* (USA: Zed Books, 1999) p96

¹⁹ Ibid., p140

²⁰ Wazir Jehan Karim, *Sexuality and Domination*. (Penang, Malaysia: Women's Development Research Centre (KANITA) and Academy of Social Sciences (AKASS) 2002)

which they are unable to articulate on their own and hence need to look to European and American experiences.²¹ The people best equipped to articulate their goals and interests and find ways to empower women are the feminists and the activists.²² Karim makes two big assumptions here. First, is that women are unable to articulate their interests on their own terms. Second, is that borrowing feminist terms and concepts with Western historical antecedents are more advantageous to indigenous movements in devising their strategies and expressing their interests and goals.

My contention with Karim's argument is that it risks driving the non-Western woman further in the shadow of her Western counterparts. Contrary to what Karim suggests, Muslim women do have articulable interests of their own should there be a conceptual space cleared for them to be heard. In fact, it is Karim's own suggestion for them to draw from hegemonic discourses born from Western experiences that leaves Muslim women's self-defined interest and aspirations unarticulated. The problem that Narli, Moghissi and Karim have in common in their analysis of women and Islamic movements is the implicit assumption that women should be predisposed to resist any forms of Islamic cultural imposition as patriarchy, and subsequently should adopt a feminist pose that pursues the larger, long term goals of emancipation from patriarchal structures to enjoy equality with men in all spheres. What is holding them back is merely their inability to conceive of or articulate their aspirations for such ideals due to the context in which they are socialized.

Feminism's prescriptive tendency results in the Malay Muslim woman's self-definitions and aspirations being framed out of the debate concerning women in Islam, *a priori*. Hence, like the respondents of Narli's study, the subject as woman is conveniently categorized as the 'fundamentalist woman', who has no conceivable interest of her own, as a Malay Muslim and

²¹ Ibid., pvii

²² Ibid., pvii

as a woman. By virtue of her piety, she is perceived as a mere subordinate in a male-dominated movement. The implication is that if her goals do not fit with the feminist ideals of emancipation and equality then her goals have little to do with her empowerment as a woman. Indeed, the feminist paradigm seems to conflate women's empowerment with emancipation and equality. As the subsequent chapters will show, this is not necessarily the case when we advance a study on the Malay Muslim women's identification with the values espoused by the Islamic revivalist movements.

To an extent, the argument made in this paper follows in some ways Saba Mahmood's study of mosque movements in Egypt. Mahmood questions the liberatory impetus within the feminist paradigm and turns the gaze back on the supposed feminist 'liberator' instead of the feminist subject.²³ She questions the binary model of subordination and subversion and alerts us to the fact that there are dimensions of human actions that do not map onto the logic of repression and resistance.²⁴ In her work, Mahmood reconfigures the conceptualizations of 'freedom' and 'agency' in terms of the experiences of pious female participants of the mosque movements.²⁵ However, instead of re-conceptualizing the concepts of freedom and equality, this thesis instead questions the need and the efficacy of understanding women's struggles and motivations in terms of these feminist ideals. Re-conceptualization of these terms, I argue, will only continue to limit the vocabulary of understanding women's struggles to the very terms it wishes to de-construct. Instead, there is a need to expand feminist discourse in order to appreciate women's struggles that need not have anything to do with the ideals of 'emancipation' or 'equality'.

²³ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005)

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p14-15

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Overview of Chapters

A large part of my argument on the limitations of postcolonial feminism and the problems which are manifest when these limitations are contextualized in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore will be covered in the next chapter. Chapter 2 will do a more in depth analysis of the case studies of Muslim women's experiences in the two states. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how postcolonial feminism in the form of Islamic feminism is inadequate in capturing the nuanced and diverse voices of Muslim women's experiences due to the fact, that it is unable to extricate the notions of 'emancipation' and equality' from its analyses and approach. The case studies presented in this section will cover a range of issues from the caning of women for religious transgression, the effects of juridical proceedings on women and to the donning of the Muslim *hijab* or covering as a religious symbol. In most of these cases, the challenge to the state's conservative stance would come from Islamic feminist groups often on the grounds that the treatment of women is contrary to 'gender equality' as espoused in Islam.

Due to this, Islamic feminists namely SIS, which is the largest and most vocal Islamic feminist advocacy group in the region, often face allegations by Muslim conservatives of being harbingers of unwelcomed 'Westernisation'. In this context, no group has attracted as much media attention and controversy as SIS, which aims to reclaim Islam from the clutches of the male-dominated *ulama* (Islamic scholars) to attain a more egalitarian interpretation of Islamic sources. SIS's stand on all of these issues make them a convenient fodder for bashing by conservative Islamic groups, who accuse them of threatening the cultural sanctity of the Malay Muslim community by promoting 'Western norms and conduct'. There remains a persistent battle between the Islamic feminists and the conservatives on whose interpretation is closer to the 'truth'. While conservatives claim that SIS's efforts are premised on the desire

to emulate Western lifestyles, SIS counters by pointing out the male bias in the *ulama*'s Quran'ic interpretations. This, I argue, culminates into the perpetuation of a hegemonic framework of East-West binary that frame the Muslim women's voices outside of the debate.

However, upon close examination of these cases, one finds elements that will contradict the presuppositions that are inherent within the postcolonial feminist discourses. A careful analysis of the case of three young Muslim women who were caned for the crime of premarital sexual relations and another who was similarly convicted for the crime of consuming an alcoholic beverage, demonstrated that their articulations of their experiences went far beyond the presuppositions of postcolonial feminists. The interviews revealed a complex multi-layered understanding of their experiences that went beyond expressions of regret for their religious transgression or any condemnation of a patriarchal state.

Similarly, a study done on a women's mosque movement in the city and juridical court proceedings in rural Malaysia, proved that women were not simply on the receiving end of the machinations of a patriarchal system. In fact, these women actively carved their own space within the system by drawing from the same religious doctrines that men used to uphold their position in society. Frequently, the tables were turned when the women invoked these doctrines to their advantage. Were they gunning for equality with men? The answer is no. In fact, they thoroughly complied with Islamic gender-differentiated roles. Their goal was to ensure that these roles were well adhered to. From this standpoint, Islamic feminist groups like SIS have also managed to alienate many parties including women's groups that do not aspire to the same goals. SIS's stand on women who subscribe to the gender-differentiated roles espoused within a more conservative Islamic framework had shown a lack of nuance in understanding Muslim women's struggles.

Most of the case studies presented in this thesis are drawn from Malaysia. However, I also put forth the case of Malay Muslim women in Singapore which presents a different and unique scenario. Like that of her counterparts in Malaysia, the voices and opinions of Muslim women with regards issues concerning women in Islam, are silenced. However, this silence is the result of a restrictive state control over any discourse concerning the ‘sensitive’ issues of race and religion. Unlike in Malaysia, Malay Muslims are the minority in Singapore. Nevertheless, they are a potent minority. For a state that prizes racial and religious harmony as a social good, there is little space for any civil society to form without coming under the ambit and scrutiny of the state. Therefore, despite the contributions by Malay Muslim women in the public sphere, one finds that this particular group is silent on most issues that directly pertain to them.

The global Islamic revivalism of the 1970s similarly heightened the consciousness of the Malay Muslim minority in Singapore (as it did in Malaysia) as part of a larger global Muslim *ummah*. Stricter observances of Islamic dress codes and dietary requirements of the Singaporean Muslim that continued even after the revivalist movements have died out, symbolize greater religious consciousness in observing Islamic tenets. Because they are seen by the state as portraying an overt religious identity, women become the public face of Islam. There is an obvious lack of representation for Muslim women and the discourse on gender in Islam is only articulated within the discourse of Malay Muslim’s ability to integrate into the larger Singapore society, However, this also means that there are more discursive spaces for Singaporean Muslim women (as compared to her Malaysian counterparts) to articulate a discourse of gender roles in Islam because their discourse is not circumscribed within a hegemonic East-West binary. The experiences of Muslim women, as a study conducted on *hijab*-wearing young women showed, are not articulated from any kind of feminist

framework. Instead, these women had focused on their own religious empowerment by being able to adhere to what they believed are religious dictates.

Chapter 3 will thus move on to deal directly with the limitations of Islamic feminism itself. I argue that Islamic feminists place too much emphasis on the process of analysis rather than a re-examination of the goals or the underlying principles that guide the theory. Even as postcolonial feminists are critical of the overt Eurocentrism in mainstream feminist theories, they are much less critical of the ideals born out of the very context which they spurn. Even though Islamic feminists' laudable efforts at challenging male-biased interpretations through Quran'ic exegesis compel them to engage in critical scrutiny of the texts, there is considerably less effort to apply the same level of critical scrutiny to the ideals of 'equality' and 'emancipation' as espoused by mainstream Western feminism. Instead, Islamic feminists find themselves looking through Islamic texts for interpretations that would validate the principles and ideals embedded in the feminist paradigm. Therefore, this chapter will also demonstrate how Islamic feminists are confined to challenging Western feminisms only in terms of analyses and strategy but not in terms of ideals or principles. Here, I will draw parallels between different strands of feminisms, to show that the same thread of underlying principle of emancipation and equality, tie these feminisms together.

Admittedly, there are many strands of feminism and feminists continuously assert that women's movements should retain their own indigenous qualities. However, I maintain that there are certain precepts underlining feminist movements which make them distinguishable from other forms of theory or praxis. The ideals of 'emancipation' and 'equality' form the strings that bind the different strands of feminisms together under the aegis of the feminist paradigm. I do not claim that feminism in itself is reducible to 'equality' between men and women and 'emancipation' of women from patriarchal structures. Rather, I mean to show

that because women's empowerment, which every form of feminism aspires to, is narrowly defined as 'equality' and 'emancipation', the feminist theoretical framework is circumscribed by these ideals.

Karen Offen, a historian of feminism, argues that

The concept of feminism... encompasses both a system of ideas and a movement for sociopolitical change based on critical analysis of male privilege and women's subordination within any given society. It addresses imbalances of power between the sexes that disadvantage women.²⁶

While this definition seems broad enough to encompass feminism in any form, there are much deeper implications. Offen notes that feminism is "necessarily at odds with male domination in culture and society" in whatever time or location and therefore is concerned with women's emancipation and equality with men.²⁷ Therefore, I contend that feminism is not just "primarily concerned with process" of analysis as Offen asserts, but it is equally concerned, if not more so, with what is achieved at the end of the process.²⁸ Feminism does not merely serve as a theoretical framework. Ultimately, it is a prescriptive project that aims for the betterment of women's condition through empowering women. The problem is that the prescription is not entirely culture-neutral. Instead, it relies on value-laden concepts born within a context of hegemonic Western scholarship.

This I argue, perpetuates the problem of Eurocentrism within feminist theory and praxis in spite of postcolonial feminists' critique of the Eurocentric foundations of liberal feminism. By drawing on the arguments of postcolonial theorists, I will go on to discuss the reasons *why*

²⁶ Karen Offen, "Editor's Introduction" in Karen Offen (ed.) *Globalizing Feminisms 1789-1945*. (New York: Routledge, 2010) p15

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

such Eurocentric precepts remain integral to the feminist paradigm despite feminism's embrace of diversity in terms of analyses and strategies. The hegemony of Western scholarship dictates that Europe or the West (which today includes America), remain the authorial referents of any discourses concerning the West's 'Other'. My main contention in this section is that the proverbial 'West', remains the authorial referent for any kind of social scientific endeavor. Therefore, I argue that as long as postcolonial feminist scholarship continue to be unquestioning with regard to the underlying principles that guide its praxis, capturing the 'difference' in 'Third World' women's experiences will remain an uphill task. Here, I draw on the works of Edward Said and Dipesh Chakrabaty among others, to illustrate how the production of knowledge especially with reference to the social sciences had its beginnings in the West. The purpose here is not to defy any hope that 'Third World' or non-Western scholarship can ever hold its own. Instead, it serves as a cautionary reminder that as 'Third World' scholars have been handed down the scholarly tools of their colonial masters, there is always a need to reflect and question the efficacy of these tools as they are applied in a specific cultural context outside of the West. Otherwise, even as indigenous women's movements manage their own strategic paths, their successes are inevitably measured according to the yardsticks already set within the feminist paradigm.

Chapter 4 will examine the limitations of postcolonial feminisms in capturing the experiences and voices of the 'Third World' woman. Following from the previous analysis of feminist scholarship as being part of a hegemonic Western scholarship, this chapter will attempt to elucidate the effects of having women's self-definitions framed out of the discourse such that they can only appropriate from a ready-made feminist vocabulary that they may not identify with. As chapter 2 would have demonstrated with the example of Muslim women's experiences in Malaysia, they are trapped between the hegemonic Eurocentric feminist discourse and the state's cultural-essentialist discourse and are left with no recourse but to use

the vocabulary and goals of one or the other of these. They are thus unable to represent themselves on their own terms.

What results is that the voice-consciousness of the 'Third World' woman is lost, as she is unable to articulate her interest or to represent herself by appropriating from the hegemonic discourses. As such, there is a need to locate the voices of these women who have been relegated to the position of the subaltern. In order to do so, a discursive space must be carved out within the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism that allows for the articulation of women's aspirations and ideals and that does not appropriate from the ready-made feminist vocabulary. An alternative feminist approach which takes away focus from the ideals of 'emancipation' and 'equality' is needed to give a voice back to the subaltern woman by clearing the conceptual space for her to articulate her ideals, motivations and aspirations through her own self-understanding and on her own terms.

Therefore, Chapter 4 also offers a resolution to the issues with the theoretical framework of feminism that had been laid out in the previous two chapters by presenting an alternative approach to postcolonial feminism. This chapter is concerned with the potential of social criticism in redefining the boundaries of feminism. The purpose of this chapter is to develop a feminist paradigm that is more inclusive. In the approach to understanding 'Third World' women subjects, it is important to understand their self-definitions. Therefore, feminists as social activists need to specify and break the rigidities within the feminist paradigm in order to expand the framework of feminism. Instead of adopting a prescriptive approach that attempts to remedy women's situation vis-à-vis male dominance, I argue here that a deliberative approach is more crucial to understanding women's struggles as it incorporates the views of women from multiple vantage points which would then lead feminists to question their own long held presuppositions.

The final concluding chapter of this thesis recapitulates the arguments in the previous chapters and draws the links between the preceding arguments. It also reiterates the point that while postcolonial feminism as a theoretical framework is somewhat lacking in terms of truly being able to capture difference, it is unwise to dismiss feminism altogether as a viable framework for understanding ‘Third World’ women’s experiences. Instead, it is more important to redefine the boundaries of feminism in order to carve a discursive space for the articulation of self-definitions and self-determined aspirations that are not tied to Eurocentric precepts which dominate feminist scholarship.

2. Discourse on Women in Islam in Postcolonial Singapore and Malaysia:

Contesting the Hegemonic Discursive Framework

A postcolonial feminist critique that aims to attend to differences between women and within categories of women must consider the following questions: How do postcolonial feminist theories help us to understand the struggles and motivations of groups of women in specific cultural locations? What are the limitations of the feminist paradigm when applied to a particular cultural context? By examining two Southeast Asian states where Islam is central to individual lives and state politics, I will discuss the limitations of postcolonial feminism for articulating nuanced claims about the condition of Muslim women. I argue that it is inadequate to perceive Muslim women's struggles in postcolonial Malaysia and Singapore through the lenses of the existing feminist paradigm. To do so would be to confine the understanding of women's struggles only to those which aim for the feminist ideals of 'emancipation' and 'equality'. Simply focusing on these ideals may obscure the possibility that women's struggles may have little to do with achieving freedom from patriarchal structures or attaining gender equality in all spheres and yet, still manifest a form of women's empowerment.

In countries where Islam is a pivotal social and political force, Islamic feminism takes centre stage in the discourse on the role and status of women. Islamic feminists to a large extent, adopt a postcolonial perspective in the sense that they pay attention to 'difference' among women and are committed to decolonising the feminist paradigm which has thus far privileged Western women's experiences in terms of analysing women's conditions.²⁹ Islamic feminists, in the words of Margot Badran, privilege a "new discourse or interpretation of Islam and gender grounded in *ijtihad* or independent intellectual investigation of the

²⁹ Sue Morgan, "Introduction: Writing Feminist History: Theoretical Debates and Critical Practices" in *The Feminist History Reader*. 2006

Qur'an and other religious texts".³⁰ To that end, Islamic feminism recognises the diversity of women's experiences and also the need for an analytical process that would speak to the concerns and interests of Muslim women. However, as I will argue in this chapter, Islamic feminism is not doing enough in terms of decolonising the feminist paradigm. The reason is that even though Islamic feminists employ indigenous means such as exegetical readings of religious texts, they remain unquestioning with regard to the principles and ideals of 'emancipation' and 'equality' that underlie feminist theory. Hence, it fails to comprehend Muslim women's experiences that have little to do with these principles or ideals.

Such is the case in Malaysia where the state's conservative stance towards Muslim women prompts a strong response from feminists concerned with the injustices committed against women in the name of Islam. Given the importance of Islam in the socio-political landscape, groups that hope to advance the feminist cause cannot help but articulate their discourse within an Islamic framework that appeals to the Qur'an and the *hadith*³¹. Strategically, Islamic feminists adopt textual exegesis of religious texts as a means to undermine male dominance which they claim are grounded on male-biased interpretations of the texts. However, they also espouse a feminist discourse replete with notions of 'freedom' and 'equality'. In that respect, Islamic feminists share the same vocabulary as Western feminists even though the two differ in terms of strategy. They espouse 'emancipation' and 'equality' as the normative prescription for women's disadvantaged situation vis-à-vis men. Hence, Islamic feminists are often faced with allegations by Muslim conservatives of being agents of 'Westernization' who try to suit Islam according to a foreign standard. The use of such vocabulary in feminist discourse thus becomes convenient fodder for conservatives to dismiss their claims as attempts at 'Westernization'.

³⁰ , Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and religious convergences.* (UK: OneWorld Oxford, 2009) p3

³¹ *Hadith* refers to the prophetic tradition which includes the Prophet Muhammad's words and actions that serve as a guide for Muslims on issues which has no explicit references in the Qur'an. It is the second highest authority for Muslims after the Qur'an itself.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how the subject of Malay Muslim women is entangled within a hegemonic discursive framework that pits conservative Islamic values, as articulated by the state and Islamic conservatives, against an Islamic feminist discourse which derives its principles from a larger transcendental feminist paradigm. These contending paradigms of cultural relativism pitted against a transcendental universalism become predominant in the way the relationship between Islam and gender is understood. However, the two paradigms are not completely in opposition but are instead mutually reinforcing. Over time, these discourses become hegemonic precisely because they reinforce each other in such a way that one discourse generates the other. The allure of freedom and equality invoked in the feminist paradigm becomes a little more vacuous if it is not articulated in opposition to restrictive patriarchy within 'Islam'. On the other hand, the state's discourse on Islam as a patriarchal system meant to provide security and respect for women is less meaningful without conjuring images of moral decadence in the West. Therefore the mutually reinforcing discourses of Islamic feminists and Islamic conservatives actually perpetuate this hegemonic framework. As a result, the ordinary Muslim women's voices are framed out of this hegemonic binary framework

In the next section to follow, I will present and go in depth into the case studies of Muslim women in Malaysia which covers a variety of situations. I present high profile cases of Muslim women sentenced to caning for religious transgressions in Malaysia, a case study of a local court proceeding in a district in Malaysia and also offer glimpses into the everyday lives of Muslim women in which religion is manifested in the roles that they play and their physical appearances. In each of these accounts, one is able to locate the disparate, though not quite distinctive voices of Muslim women. I say that although their voices can be located, they are not easily distinguished as counter-hegemonic because their voices are easily

coopted and subsumed into the state's conservative discourse on Islam as endorsement of its stance towards women.

The problem is that Islamic feminism does not offer an alternative recourse that is more inclusive and receptive toward articulations and self-definitions of empowerment which do not have to do with ideals of emancipation and equality. Moreover, in doing so, they would be deemed by the conservatives as 'un-Islamic' and 'Western' and their actual motivations would still be framed out of the hegemonic discursive framework altogether. This particular dilemma is shown in the case studies presented in this section. The cases are derived mostly from the experiences of Malay Muslim women in Malaysia, but the discussion will be interspersed with accounts from the experiences of their counterparts in Singapore. The experiences of Singaporean Muslim women will show that they have more discursive space to articulate their struggles as compared to those in Malaysia. I will argue that this is largely because of, and not in spite of, the absence of a prevalent Islamic feminist discourse in Singaporean context.

Contextualizing Postcolonial Feminism within Malaysia and Singapore

Before embarking on a discussion of the case studies per se, it is imperative to explain why Malaysia and Singapore would provide interesting contexts to explore the issues of feminism. While most academic texts concerning the discourse on Islam and gender center on the experiences of women in the Middle-East and to a lesser degree South Asia, much less attention has been paid to the developments in East and Southeast Asia and how the discourse affects Muslim women in these regions. As a result, many expositions on women in Islam tend to treat the experiences of the Arab Muslim woman as definitive. Whenever Southeast Asia and Islam are discussed in the same vein, there is a great tendency for thinking of Islam

outside of the Middle East as “nominal Islam” spliced with syncretic practices.³² The prevalence of *adat* (tradition and custom) also makes it easier to attribute women’s empowerment to *adat* while conveniently ignoring Islam’s role.³³

Despite these characterizations, Islam is central to politics in both Singapore and Malaysia, constituting a potent socio-political and cultural force. The two states faced particular intensification of Islam’s presence within their Malay Muslim communities after the Islamic revivalist movements of 1970s swept the globe. This increase in religiosity, and the tendency in the region towards Islamic norms and precepts years after the height of the Islamic resurgence movement, provides a good basis to critically examine how a transformation in the way Islam is internalized has affected the lives of Malay Muslim women. Therefore, this project aims to trace the effects of these movements, long after they have reached their peak. In fact, the effects run so deep that the values espoused by the revivalist movement have become an integral part of how Muslims conceptualize their religion and manifest it in their daily lives. Hence, despite the prevalence of *adat* in the Malay Muslim world, one cannot be content with attributing empowerment of women in this region simply to local customs and traditions. The ever-heightening presence of Islam in the lifestyles of Malay Muslim in the region, bodes the question of how Muslim women empower themselves through Islam, within a socio-political system that is male-dominated.

Despite Islam’s centrality, the two states also have to negotiate Islam within a larger socio-political framework of multiculturalism. One of their major and lasting concerns is managing intercultural diversity while retaining legitimacy. Thus, Islam as a predominant religion and

³² Susan Blackburn et al, *Indonesian Islam in a New Era: how women negotiate their Muslim identities*. (Monash University Press, 2008)

³³ Wazir Jehan Karim, *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam*. (San Francisco, USA: Westview Press, 1992) p5. Karim asserts that consensus runs through the region that women’s power and autonomy is derived from *adat* rather than Islam.

pivotal political force finds its place within a complex articulation of the “Asian Way”. For both the Malaysian and Singapore states, the articulation of an ‘authentic’ Islam is part of a larger complex discourse of ‘Asian’ values, which emphasize the importance of maintaining the social order by prioritizing harmony, consensus, community and family.³⁴ As part of the state’s discourse on ‘authentic’ Eastern culture, the discourse on women and Islam tends to emphasize the domestic role of the woman as part of the natural social order and central to the preservation of the traditional family unit.³⁵ Islam is seen as a legitimate Eastern bulwark against the encroachments of the ‘morally bankrupt’ West and whatever is associated with it. In sum, this discourse paints ‘Eastern values’ as superior to that of the ‘Western liberal values’, in line with the nation-building rhetoric of ‘cultural preservation’.

The postcolonial state, Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz argue,

In its varied tasks of building a national identity, meeting challenges from community-based interest groups, and representing itself as a modern nation, is continuously engaged in defining the composition and form of political society. This making and patrolling of the body politic is an ongoing struggle that often entails the inscription of state power on women’s... bodies.³⁶

The image of Malay Muslim women and their private and public roles have come to symbolize both social relations and values and any transgressions are deemed deviant and undesirable.³⁷ In this event, the state had to have control over the discursive construction of Malay Muslim womanhood. Any deviation from state’s ideal construction would be deemed as destructive to the national values.

³⁴ Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad and Tan Beng Hui. *Feminism and the Women’s movement in Malaysia: An Unsung (R)evolution*. (New York: Routledge, 2006) p140

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Aihwa Ong and Michael Peletz, “Introduction” in Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (Eds.) *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1995) p6

³⁷ Ibid.

This is where perceiving women's struggles and motivations as feminist become very problematic. By subscribing to the goals of 'emancipation' and 'equality' as feminism currently espouses them, Muslim women are more conveniently dismissed as the bearers of Western 'moral decadence'. More often than not, they are perceived as threatening the demise of culture and tradition and heralding 'Westernization'. Even if Malay Muslim women engage in the discourse armed with Islamic textual references, the articulation of their feminist goals becomes useful fodder for those who wish to pin them down as imposing Western cultural imperialism. Therefore, the hegemony of these opposing discourses in the debate on gender and religion has the effect of rendering the subject of the discourse – the Malay Muslim woman – voiceless. No matter which side she takes the woman is still trapped within a discourse of hegemonic binaries. She is left without the means to articulate her goals except by appropriating a discourse either of Islamic conservatism or Eurocentric feminism. As a result, the views of Malay Muslim women who may not wholly identify with either of these two discourses remain unvoiced.

The rise of Islamic feminism seems to offer Muslim women a new possible stance, one that neither supports the conservative patriarchal dictates of men who interpret religion, nor panders to Western feminist stereotypes of the cultural Other. However, although Islamic feminism arms itself with Islamic textual exegesis in the effort to challenge male dominance in interpreting Islamic laws, the objectives and goals of Islamic feminism in fact conforms to ideals already set within the feminist paradigm.

Case Studies: Malaysia and Singapore

The headline of a leading newspaper in Singapore reads “‘We Deserved It’ – Say 3 Women caned in Malaysia”.³⁸ The crime committed by these Muslim women was engaging in premarital sexual relations. In a Muslim majority state such as Malaysia, such transgressions against religion are never treated lightly. However, religious misconduct has never warranted punishment from the state. The report states that the men involved also received the same punishment, but the main focus of the article was mainly on the women. This article appeared not long after a Malaysian Muslim woman, Kartika Dewi Shukarno, was caught and convicted in 2009 for drinking an alcoholic beverage in public.³⁹ While caning is prescribed as a form of punishment in Islamic Law for unmarried parties engaging in premarital relations outside of marriage, corporal punishment for consuming alcohol is not stipulated in Islamic Law.⁴⁰

The voices of the four women, who had been sentenced for caning, were completely framed out of the larger discourse. However, these women did speak. They were indeed interviewed by the media on their thoughts about the sentences that were meted out. The three women who were caned expressed deep regrets over their actions citing religious reasons.⁴¹ One of the young women sentenced to caning due to her premarital affair said in an interview for the newspaper that she “deeply regret(ed) her actions as (she) should have married before having

³⁸ The Straits Times. 20 Feb 2010. “‘We Deserved It’ – Say 3 women caned in Malaysia”

³⁹ Al-Jazeera, 18 Feb 2010. “Malaysia canes women for Adultery” <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia-acific/2010/02/201021844619366612.html>.

⁴⁰ Abdullah Yusuf Ali (translator), *The Holy Qur'an*. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust. 2007 p419. The 24th Surah in the Quran (An-Nur) confirms that flogging for the sin of premarital sexual relations is instituted under Islamic Law. However, there are very strict conditions under which a person can be convicted for this crime. Neither the Quran nor the Hafith prescribes caning for the sin of drinking, under Islamic Law.

⁴¹ The Straits Times. 20 Feb 2010. “‘We Deserved It’ – Say 3 women caned in Malaysia”

sex.”⁴² Another had said that “after undergoing the punishment”, she had left it “to GOD to forgive” her sins. The last girl was quoted as saying:

“I truly am sorry for committing the sin and I have repented. I feel that it is my responsibility to remind my fellow Muslim brothers and sisters not to commit sin and that is why I’m sharing my experiences.”⁴³

Clearly, the punishment had a great effect on these young women, and the impact was greater on them than on the young men who were involved and purportedly received the same punishment, since media and popular attention was focused primarily on the women who were caned. A careful reading of the interview statements showed that the young women had mentioned nothing about whether they felt the punishment meted out by the state was just. What they had admitted to was committing a sin and their subsequent remorse. However, none of them had commented on whether they felt it was fair or just for the state to single them out for the unprecedented corporal punishment. Nonetheless, their statements were interpreted by state officials as an endorsement to of the state’s action. The Home Minister was quoted as saying that the punishment which was “carried out perfectly”, had “caused pain within their souls”.⁴⁴ An experience of personal transformation was thus turned into a vindication of the state’s conservative stance.

SIS, being the main advocacy group for women’s interests, wasted no time in condemning the episode as an “outright violation of human rights” and “gender equality” which constitutes further discrimination against Muslim women.⁴⁵ However, SIS’ condemnation of the canings had only met with resistance from Islamic conservatives. In fact, the Malaysian Assembly of Mosque Youth had told SIS that despite their respect for SIS’ opinions, the

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Hamidah Marican. 17 Feb 2010. “Malaysia: Sisters in Islam Condemns caning of 3 Muslim women under Shariah Law” *Women Living Under Muslim Law*. <http://www.wluml.org/node/5989>

group had wanted SIS to “interpret the issues on their own platform” and in addition, had questioned SIS’ right to use Islam in their name claiming that this created confusion and misled people into thinking they were a Muslim organisation.⁴⁶ SIS had even been queried by the police for questioning Kartika’s sentencing after 14 non-governmental organisations urged authorities to punish those who questioned the ruling.⁴⁷

This is clearly an example whereby Islamic feminists armed with a vocabulary of rights, equality and justice, are deemed lacking in Muslim credentials to speak about Muslim matters on the same platform as the Islamic religious groups. SIS as an Islamic feminist group is still seen as a harbinger of ‘Westernization’ given that SIS’ mission is to promote “gender equality, justice, freedom and dignity”⁴⁸. SIS, on the other hand, maintains that the state’s conservative stance is based on a gender-biased interpretation of Islam and declares it a step back for gender equality in the nation. Despite its use of Islamic texts to justify its arguments, Islamic feminist groups like SIS are not considered by Islamic conservative groups as occupying the same religious and moral platform. As such, it becomes difficult for SIS and even Muslim women in general to engage in the debate from a feminist perspective. This is because the terms and vocabulary used by feminists are perceived as “Western”.

The case for Kartika, however, was a little more complex. In an interview, Kartika, like the other three women whose sentences were actually meted out, had voiced regret over her actions.⁴⁹ In an interview, Kartika had mentioned that she was “sad and stressed” for having “tarnished her family's name” but “after spending time reading the Quran” she had felt “calm” and “not afraid of being caned.” When her sentence had apparently been reduced to performing several hours of community service, Kartika had voiced that she would rather

⁴⁶ AsiaOne. 23 Mar 2010. “Malaysian women’s group sued over name”

<http://news.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Malaysia/Story/A1Story20100323-206334.html>

⁴⁷ Sisters in Islam, “Cops query SIS over Kartika issue”

<http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/comment.php?comment.news.231>

⁴⁸ Sisters in Islam, “Mission and objectives” <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/page.php?36>

⁴⁹ Debra Chong, April 10 2010. “Kartika says she would rather be caned” *the Malaysian Insider*.

have gone through with the caning sentence.⁵⁰ The reason given by Kartika was that she wanted to “respect the law”.⁵¹ It would seem on one level a tacit agreement with the state’s decision. However, on another level, when queried further as to why she would rather go through with the punishment, Kartika was also quoted as saying the following words:

“Yes. Because they already sentenced me. If they couldn’t make it (*mete out the sentence*), they should have asked their legal advisers...I don’t want Islam to be fitnahed (*misconstrued*)... For those who study law, this thing (*the punishment for drinking*) is not in the enactment”⁵²

Unlike the three young women after her, Kartika had voiced her opinion of the state’s conservative stance. Certain indignation towards the state for their obvious miscarriage of religious justice could be read in Kartika’s words despite the expression of regret for her actions. As I had argued earlier in the introduction, it might have seemed on the surface that by not appealing to the notions of ‘equality’ or ‘rights’, Kartika had remained trapped within the patriarchal system. However, Kartika’s decision to comply with the so-called religious ruling had placed her on the same moral platform as the state in order for her to be able to question the state’s efficacy in implementing religious punishments. Her words implied that the state had almost performed a miscarriage of justice as a result of its misreading of Islamic Law. In fact, this time, Kartika had placed herself on a moral high ground vis-à-vis the state, as she was the one who had, by her open compliance to their earlier sentence, tried to ‘save’ Islamic Law from being misconstrued by others. Her later statements had prevented the state from interpreting her voice and her compliance as endorsing state conservative actions.

⁵⁰ Debra Chong, April 10 2010. “Kartika says she would rather be caned” *the Malaysian Insider*.

⁵¹ The Australian, 25 Aug 2009. “Malaysia stays a hand on caning of woman, Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarno. (As accessed on 20/04/2012) <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/malaysia-stays-hand-on-caning-of-woman-kartika-sari-dewi-shukarno/story-e6frg6so-1225765786094>

⁵² Op. Cit.

It must be noted that neither Kartika, nor the three girls, appealed to a sense of gender justice or to their rights within the system. They had all accepted the sentence meted out by a patriarchal state eager to prove its Islamic credentials. Instead, when she had the opportunity, Kartika's words appealed to Islamic religious doctrine which the state had claimed sanctioned her punishment, this time turning the tables around by insinuating that it was indeed a miscarriage of duty on the part of state for not ascertaining Islamic law before passing out her sentence. It is these very nuances in the articulation of the ordinary Muslim women that is often missed out by postcolonial (Islamic) feminists. Their focus on notions of gender equality in this case hampers their ability to perceive such moments that empower women to determine their own interests and self-understanding even within a context that does not seem to favour them.

In SIS' media statement on this particular case, they had compared Kartika's decision "to the decisions made by Hindu widows in the past."⁵³ This was a reference to the practice of sati which "meant that widows were burnt on the pyres of their deceased husbands." SIS had argued that just because Kartika had agreed to the sentence, like the "widow (who) chose to immolate herself", it did not mean there should be no interference and that this sentence should be condoned, even on the principle of free choice.⁵⁴ SIS had appealed to international human rights standards to appeal against the sentencing calling the punishment degrading in terms of international standards.⁵⁵ This can be interpreted as SIS' attempt to emancipate the woman from having to go through a decision meted out by a patriarchal state.

However, by appealing to an international standard, it had only confirmed SIS' standing as "Westernisers" in the eyes of the conservative state and Islamic groups as was evident from their assertions in the case of the three young women, that SIS did not speak from the same

⁵³ Sisters in Islam, "Stop the Whipping. Stop the Whipping of Kartika." Media Statement.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

religious or moral platform as their Islamic credentials were doubted. SIS' comparison of to the Hindu *sati* who seemingly 'needed to be rescued', marked a weakness in the Islamic feminists' analysis of the Muslim woman's struggle and experience. Despite the feminists' best intentions, they had failed to discern that Kartika's actions which secured her a place on the same religious and moral platform as the conservative state was indeed an empowering act. If Kartika had initially appealed to the state based on international standards or gender equality, she would have been less able to hold the state accountable for its mishandling of the matter, based on religious doctrine. In this instance, the state was not able to refute her claims, and indeed, they did not.

Nevertheless, even without the presence of the Islamic feminists, these unprecedented moves of meting out punishment for religious or moral misconducts created uproar amongst the international and domestic communities citing violations of human rights and casted doubts on the secular nature of the Malaysian state.⁵⁶ The end of the report on the caning of the three women even slyly hinted at the political motivations of the incumbent government to outbid the opposition Islamist party which had earlier advocated the setting up of an Islamic judicial institution.⁵⁷ The article had also mentioned that the state had carried out these sentences at a time when the "tide of Islamisation" was on the rise.⁵⁸

Before going into an analysis of another case study of local court proceedings, it is important to understand the historical and socio-political context of Malaysia in order to provide a background to the male-dominated nature of the local Islamic courts. It will also provide a historical background that would explain the reason even for the high-profile caning sentences, which had strategically occurred at a time when Islamisation was on the rise. The state's tendency to do so could be traced back to the Islamic revivalist movements in the

⁵⁶ Sisters in Islam, "Mission and objectives" <http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/page.php?36>.

⁵⁷ The Straits Times. 20 Feb 2010. " 'We Deserved It' – Say 3 women caned in Malaysia"

⁵⁸ Ibid.

1970s. In the face of an increasingly religious-conscious electorate, the ruling UMNO had little choice but to boost its Islamic credentials by outbidding its main opposition, the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), in terms of Islamic credentials. PAS was, at the time of the Islamic revivalism, a party that unequivocally called for the establishment of an ‘ideal Islamic state’ with the Qur’an and Sunnah (prophetic tradition) as the constitution and strict application of the Shari’ah laws which includes *hudud* (criminal law), although it has gradually, over the years moved towards a political middle ground.⁵⁹ However, at the height of the revivalist movements, UMNO’s game of Islamic ‘one-upmanship’ with PAS moved the discourse on Islam and political Islam towards greater conservatism.⁶⁰

The state had then begun its own Islamization programme, taking on a more holistic approach, initiating further steps to entrench Islam in the socio-political and even economic landscape. Malaysia’s former premier Mahathir Mohamad undertook many of these endeavours which include increasing Islamic programmes in the mass media, revamping the legal system to align it with an Islamic legal system, building mosques, and developing Islamic banks and financial institutions.⁶¹ The change that had the greatest impact on the lives of women is most probably the revision of the legal system to make it more in line with an Islamic legal system. The resulting expansion of the Shari’ah legal system has led to several areas of conflict and overlap with civil law and the Federal Constitution.⁶² Inevitably, juridical decisions made with regards to Muslim family law have the most direct effect on women. As Islamic feminists have pointed out, Islamic jurisprudence is traditionally male-dominated.

⁵⁹ Norani Othman, Zainah Anwar, and Zaitun Mohamed Kasim. 2005. “Malaysia: Islamization, Muslim politics and state authoritarianism” in Norani Othman (ed.) *Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic Extremism*. Malaysia: Sisters in Islam, p81-82

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Hussin Mutalib, *Islam in Southeast Asia*, (. Singapore: ISEAS Publications, 2008) p27

⁶² Othman et al, “Malaysia: Islamization, Muslim politics and state authoritarianism” p91

Hence, many male-biased interpretations and implementations of Islamic laws such as those concerning polygamy and divorce have severely disadvantaged women.⁶³ As Islamic feminist activists have discovered, Muslim women who are divorced, abandoned, abused, or neglected by their husbands often fail to find justice and redress through the Shari'ah legal system.⁶⁴ This disturbing situation of some Muslim women is the reason for the founding of SIS, one of the most vocal and controversial feminist research and advocacy groups in Malaysia, made up of Malay Muslim women professionals. SIS engages in a hermeneutical reading of the Qur'an to rediscover the socio-historical contexts in which specific verses were revealed in order to find the gender justice within Islam that has been obscured by the existing male-biased interpretations.⁶⁵

However, in Michael Peletz' study, these courts which in many respects symbolize men's legal privileges, were the very places where counter hegemonic discourses on masculinity and gender were produced.⁶⁶ Such is the case with the Malay Muslim women in Peletz's study in Rembau, Malaysia who turned to the Islamic courts in order to hold their husbands accountable for their actions. I will venture here to introduce one of the case studies in Peletz' work in order to demonstrate that these women are resourceful and knew how to utilize the courts to their advantage.

One of Peletz' interviewee, who was seeking for back payment in terms of child support from her errant ex-husband, had gone to the courts.⁶⁷ Despite her "dubious morality" for having "a checkered marital history" and the ex-husband's apparently better standing in the community, being a person of means who had gone on the pilgrimage to Mecca, the courts

⁶³ Othman et al, "Malaysia: Islamization, Muslim politics and state authoritarianism" 2005, p91.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Zainah Anwar, "What Islam, Whose Islam?: Sisters in Islam and the Struggle for Women's Rights" in Robert Hefner (ed.) *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001) p229

⁶⁶ Michael G Peletz, *Islamic Modern: Religious Courts and Cultural Politics in Malaysia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. p185

⁶⁷ Ibid. p132

had sided with the woman and tried to expedite her case.⁶⁸ Upon receiving the summons, the lady's ex-husband had gone straight to her and not to the courts in order to offer a small sum as peace-offering and a promise to return her the back payments in due time if she would drop her case against him.⁶⁹ The lady had rejected his offer preferring to stick to the courts which had greater enforcement power, as a way of ensuring that he no longer defaults on child support.

Peletz suggested that most of these counterhegemonic discourses are heard within courts because these are places where Muslim men are also often held accountable for matters concerning their duties, or responsibilities, not their rights.⁷⁰ Thus, women are often able to empower themselves by defining the goals that they wanted to achieve within the patriarchal system that they live in. The lady in question did not petition the court merely on the basis of her rights or her children's rights. Rather, the mention of child support itself had brought the focus on her husband's duties. Nonetheless, Peletz still concedes that men had strategies of resistance that ensured that they could at least "buy time" for themselves and continue to make minimal contributions to the maintenance of their wives and children.⁷¹ However, I argue that even though Muslim women are working within the bounds of the patriarchal system, they are able to attain a moral high ground in terms of their appeal to the religious understanding of rights and duties. The men may renege on their agreement to maintain their families, but that does not make them less accountable or guilty in the eyes of the Islamic law and the religious courts.

This of course does not mean that women could, in practise, find redress for their issues all of the time. There were still many areas in which women were unable to achieve justice. This is

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 184

⁷¹ Ibid, 190

evident from the activist works of SIS. Thus far, SIS has championed many women's causes and also achieved a considerable number of successes in acquiring justice for Muslim women especially on issues concerning marriage. An example is the pressure that SIS had put on the government to recognize that domestic abuse should fall under criminal law as the Shari'ah court deals mostly with family law, resulting in the Domestic Violence Act being gazetted and implemented to include Muslim women.⁷² SIS is also known for making a tough case for the review of procedures that make it easy for men to practice polygamy. They argue that the ease with which men acquire multiple wives regardless of their capabilities to act justly, contravenes the message of Islam which allows polygamy only under very strict conditions.⁷³

However, despite SIS's laudable efforts, the group expounds a larger goal that Muslim women in Malaysia may not identify with. Zainah Anwar, a founder-member of SIS, and one of its most vocal spokespersons, claims that SIS's stand on women in Islam occupies a "precarious middle ground" by advocating a critical re-examination of exegetical and jurisprudential texts as well as a reinterpretation of Islam's foundational texts and tradition.⁷⁴

The Islamic feminists aim to open the door to *ijtihad* in order to develop or sustain an emancipatory or egalitarian thrust in the interpretation of Shari'ah laws.⁷⁵ According to Islamic feminists, the oppressor is not Islam but men who have misinterpreted the texts according to their own whims and gender-bias, which go against the true spirit of Islam.⁷⁶

The struggle for Muslim "women's rights, equal treatment and eradication of discrimination" has to be fought on two broad fronts, that is against "secular patriarchy" and against "contemporary Muslim patriarchy".⁷⁷ In a nutshell, SIS's feminist perspective intends for

⁷² Op.Cit., p236

⁷³ Sisters in Islam, "Polygamy Procedures Welcomed", *New Straits Times (Malaysia)* May 8 2003

⁷⁴ Anwar, "What Islam, Whose Islam?", 2001, p231.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p230-231

⁷⁶ Claire Miller, "A faith unmasked" *The Age*, April 12, 2003.

⁷⁷ Othman et al, "Malaysia: Islamization, Muslim politics and state authoritarianism", 2005, p96

women to break free of the patriarchal norms that have set the tone for Islamic practices thus far and to achieve gender equality with men be it in the public or the private sphere.

As a result, much criticism has been levelled at SIS for “trying to interpret Islam according to Western norms”.⁷⁸ Zainah Anwar herself admits that SIS is under all kinds of attacks by conservative men who are especially displeased that SIS is flouting the conventions of Islam in Malaysia by challenging the position of the *ulamas* as the authority on Islamic knowledge.⁷⁹ The irony is that despite working entirely within an Islamic framework based on a re-interpretation of religious texts, they are seen as “anti-Islam, anti-God and anti-Quran”.⁸⁰ As mentioned earlier, SIS has even been brought to court by a religious group, the Malaysian Assembly of Youths (although unsuccessfully) to contest the use of the word ‘Islam’ in their name. This group contends that SIS is more interested in advancing secular feminist ideals of gender equality rather than Muslim women’s interests.⁸¹ Therefore despite their Islamic strategies, the feminist ideals espoused by groups like SIS are not lost on the larger population. This is especially the case with the “broad middle band of Muslim women who do not see gender equality as a must-have” and who want to “retain the traditional division of rights” by having these rights truly reflect Islamic ideals.⁸²

Although SIS adopts an Islamic strategy, many other Muslim women’s groups in Malaysia who do not identify themselves as feminists, have shown much discomfort in allying themselves with SIS. Groups like PAS Dewan Muslimat and Helwa ABIM (the women’s wing of the respective Islamic groups) are more inclined to stand together with SIS on issues which have not been specified in the religious texts and thus are open to various

⁷⁸ Carolyn Hong, “Muslim Sisters fight for their rights” *The Straits Times (Singapore)*, April 4 2006

⁷⁹ Sofiani Subki, “Sisters for justice” *New Straits Times (Malaysia)* April 11 2003

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ “Group seeks order against Sisters in Islam” *New Straits Times (Malaysia)* March 23 2010

⁸² Carolyn Hong, “Muslim Sisters fight for their rights” *The Straits Times (Singapore)* April 4 2006

interpretations such as the punishment for rape.⁸³ However, SIS receives little support from these groups on issues such as shunning polygamy altogether, challenging the male witness requirement under *hudud* laws or the ‘victimization’ of women due to the Islamic dress code. In fact these Muslim women’s groups opposed SIS’s 2003 campaign to abandon polygamy in Malaysia, citing the reason that polygamy can still be beneficial in some circumstances such as a childless marriage.⁸⁴

What should we make of these Muslim women’s groups that not only work within an Islamic framework but also concede to religious practices that uphold a patriarchal system? Should these women be dismissed as being submissive victims of false consciousness? Clearly, this is Islamic feminists’ opinion of women, who share the view espoused by the state and Islamic groups with regards to gender-differentiated roles and who adhere to the Islamic dress code which includes the *hijab*.⁸⁵ According to Islamic feminists, the discrimination of Muslim women through the mechanisms of *hijab* and gender segregation is reinforced in contemporary society because they coincide with the desire to claim cultural authenticity.⁸⁶ They view all issues ranging from the primacy of women’s domestic role, to veiling, to polygamy as forms of social control that attempt to keep women subordinated to men in the name of ‘preserving culture’. For example, SIS’s critical scrutiny of verses relating to the Islamic dress code, led them to liken the wearing of *hijab* to “idol-worship” simply because SIS’s own reinterpretation of the texts finds ‘no evidence’ about head-covering.⁸⁷ Hence, the conclusion is that the *hijab* is only customary. When worn today, it only symbolizes men’s control over women; a woman who conforms to such male interpretations, instead of “God’s

⁸³ Cecilia Ng et al, *Feminism and the Women’s movement in Malaysia*, 2006, p101

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Othman et al, “Malaysia: Islamization, Muslim politics and state authoritarianism”, 2005, p89

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Sisters in Islam. “Women’s Dress Code in Islam”

http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/index.php?Itemid=298&id=584&option=com_content&task=view

true intent” to accord women the freedom to interpret their own way of modest dressing, is akin to committing “idol-worship”.⁸⁸

Before further discussion, let me provide a brief history of the *hijab*-wearing Malay Muslim woman who only began to appear after the Islamic revivalism of 1970s Malaysia. Islamic revivalism in Malaysia took the form of *dakwah* (missionary) movements, of which the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM) led by Anwar Ibrahim (later the deputy premier to Mahathir Mohamad), was at the forefront.⁸⁹ These movements, which flourished on university campuses, embarked on a project to Islamize society by promoting Islam as a comprehensive way of life. Muslim feminists have observed much to their consternation that,

The targets for this project of ‘Islamization’ are first and foremost women – women’s rights and status in the family and society – and women’s bodies. The control of women, their social roles, movements and sexuality form the core of the Islamic fundamentalist’s view of gender roles and relations in the ‘pristine Islamic society and state’ which they seek to establish.⁹⁰

The resulting changes brought about by the Islamic resurgence movements are most apparent in women’s dress code which began to portray a more ‘Islamic’ image. What started as movements within the campuses slowly spilled out to the public and more Malay Muslim women began donning the *tudung*⁹¹ or hijab and wore loose-fitting dresses similar to those worn by Arab women. This was also accompanied by greater public concern over morality resulting in increased gender segregation.⁹²

However, the changes were not limited to women’s dress code. The popular discourse spawned by the ‘Islamization’ process with regards to Muslim women is that the primary role

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Othman et al., “Malaysia: Islamization, Muslim politics and state authoritarianism” 2005, p80

⁹⁰ Ibid., p86

⁹¹ *Tudung* is a Malay term for headscarf which is a type of *hijab* (veil) worn that covers the head from the hair to the chest area but leaves the face unveiled.

⁹² Othman et al., “Malaysia: Islamization, Muslim politics and state authoritarianism” 2005, p80

and responsibility of the women is towards her family. In this conservative discourse, the ‘ideal Muslim’ woman is reduced to her “nurturing, reproductive and socially supportive” roles.⁹³ Although UMNO’s state policies take on a less extreme form of conservatism than Islamist parties like PAS, its discursive construction of Muslim women is deeply culturally essentialist. Aihwa Ong argues that the state’s ‘official Islam’ panders to an ideal image of gender relations in Islam which is linked to a discourse of “family development” promoting the image of a successful Malay Muslim family in which men are in charge of women’s needs and livelihood.⁹⁴ It advocates that women whose husbands can afford the household maintenance should refrain from seeking employment and instead focus on their domestic roles as wife and mother.⁹⁵ The discourse is articulated over and over again in print and broadcast in order to promote the ideal of a ‘culturally authentic’ Muslim woman.

This strict practice of Islam in women’s lives is thus linked to the way in which the state views women’s roles and status vis-à-vis men. This perhaps creates the biggest consternation for Islamic feminists who then insist that any actions of women that shows conformity to what are apparently conservative Islamic values must necessarily be an act of passive compliance with male dominance. As such, this has led Islamic feminist groups like SIS to argue severely against the practise of *hijab* amongst Muslim women seeing it as an outward symbol of male-dominant interpretation of the Qur’an.⁹⁶ However, Islamic feminists fail to fully appreciate the possibility that women’s conformity to these norms may in fact empower women by putting them on an equal ‘spiritual footing’ with men. Of course, Muslim

⁹³ Norani Othman, “Introduction: Muslim Women and the Challenge of Political Islam and Islamic Extremism” in Norani Othman (ed.) *Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic Extremism* (Malaysia: Sisters in Islam, 2005)p2

⁹⁴ Aihwa Ong, “State versus Islam: Malay Families, Women’s Bodies, and the Body Politic in Malaysia” in Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (Eds.) *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2005) p182-183

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Sisters in Islam. “Women’s Dress Code in Islam”

women's outward expression of their faith has to come from their own self-understandings of religious dictates.

Here, I bring the discussion over to a few case studies from Singapore which history and legacy of Islamic revivalism in the 1970s, is not unlike that of Malaysia. Despite the Singapore government's efforts at emphasizing a multicultural national trajectory, Singaporean Malay Muslims are not insulated from global events. Just as the Islamic revivalism of the 1970s had spawned the *dakwah* movements in Malaysia, Singaporean Malay Muslims too, felt the rippling effects of the phenomenon that had taken over the neighbouring states of Malaysia and Indonesia. Even though there was no specific group that led the *dakwah* movement in Singapore, Singaporean Malays had very close familial and socio-historical ties with the neighbouring countries such that trends were easily transmitted across borders. Suzaina Kadir notes that the Islamic revivalism which pushed for a "comprehensive conceptualization of Islam as a way of life" resulted in increasingly public manifestations of a stricter Muslim identity.⁹⁷ The most visible change, of course, is the prevalence of women donning the headscarves and stricter dietary requirements for Muslims across the board.⁹⁸

A series of interviews was conducted in Singapore and reflected in a 2010 work by Nasir, Pereira and Turner to understand the linkages between the body, piety and social distancing. Most of the well-educated respondents who ranged from teachers, librarians, social workers and researchers, gave answers which reflect sincere beliefs that according to their own interpretations and understanding, the *hijab* is a religious obligation that dictates one's

⁹⁷ Suzaina Kadir, "When Gender is Not a Priority: Muslim Women in Singapore and the Challenges of Religious Fundamentalism" in Norani Othman (ed.) *Muslim Women and the Challenge of Islamic Extremism*. (Malaysia: Sisters in Islam, 2005) p113

⁹⁸ Ibid.

behaviour after one decides to don the covering.⁹⁹ One of the respondents, a social worker, was quoted as saying the following:

“Yes, it (hijab) is an obligation. But we must understand why it is an obligation. If we wear (the hijab) purely as an obligation, then it defeats the purpose. When I wear, I know what it means: I must be modest and chaste...”¹⁰⁰

Another respondent said the following:

“As a Muslim, I believe it (hijab) is an obligation. But then I also believe that one has to be ready, one has to be motivated by the right reasons to be wearing the scarf...”¹⁰¹

A non-*hijab*-wearing respondent replied that she was not “mentally prepared” to start wearing the tudung as one has to have “proper conduct, portray the right image” when one starts wearing the tudung.¹⁰² They believed that it was important for a woman to be ready and *understand* why she wears the *hijab* not because she is being told to.¹⁰³ In fact, their answers reflected that the *hijab* was a way in which they drew up the ‘rules of engagement’ with others, both men and women.¹⁰⁴ One respondent stated that her Islamic dressing signified that she was a “chaste and modest” woman and thus it automatically transmits to her friends, both male and female of any religion, that she would be uncomfortable doing certain activities.¹⁰⁵ Hence, in no ambiguous terms she was able to set the tone in her interpersonal relationships. These young women were able to carve for themselves a space within the patriarchal state. Their engagement with Islam through the donning of the hijab has empowered them to also set the rules of interactions within their socio-cultural context.

⁹⁹ Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, Alexius A. Pereira and Bryan S. Turner. *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, politics and policies*. (New York: Routledge, 2010), p88-92

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 89

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 91

¹⁰³ Ibid, p88-92

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p94

The wearing of the hijab is thus inseparable from an Islamic education and a self-understanding that emerges from gathering knowledge about Islam. Mutalib notes that increasing religiosity in Singapore had also brought about increasing assertiveness in Malay Muslims demanding their rights to practice their religion in daily conduct and interactions.¹⁰⁶ Muslims across the board have become more religiously conscious as evident from the vibrancy of religious programmes in the mosques, Islamic religious schools (*madrasahs*) and Islamic organizations. Of note is also the increasing active involvement of Muslim women in such programmes and activities held in mosques all over the island. The level of activism is growing so much so that some of the mosques in Singapore have established women's units within their organisational structures.¹⁰⁷ This is also the case for Malaysia where a deep interest in their status and roles in Islam have spurred women to involve themselves and be more publicly visible in terms of their activities in mosques.

At this point in the discussion, I turn to the work of Sylvia Frisk, whose study on women's mosque movement in Malaysia illuminates some feminist misconceptions of the way women understand their roles and status in Islam. Frisk's study of women who are actively involved in the Islamization process showed that they conceived of themselves as pious subjects and as transmitters of religious knowledge not only to their children but also to their husbands.¹⁰⁸ These middle-class housewives and workers garbed in traditional loose clothing and colourful headscarves may seem on the surface to conform to the submissive image of the Muslim women who prioritize their domestic responsibilities. However, these regular attendees of religious classes held at mosques were not contented to receive Islamic 'instructions' from their husbands. In fact, more often, they were the ones to dish out

¹⁰⁶ Mutalib, *Islam in Southeast Asia*, 2008, 54

¹⁰⁷ MUIS (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) 9 Dec 2009. "Women's Activism in the Mosque" (as accessed on 14/04/2012) <http://www.muis.gov.sg/cms/view.aspx?id=291&terms=muslimah%20masjid>

¹⁰⁸ Sylvia Frisk, *Submitting to God: Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009) p5

criticisms (based on the scriptures) of their husband's failure to live up to what they sincerely believe is the husband's role as the head of the household.¹⁰⁹

However, the paradox is that the women's critique of men serve not as a challenge to male authority but are instead aimed at "buttressing male authority".¹¹⁰ Women expected men to be the leaders, and they expected them to be good at it.¹¹¹ According to Frisk,

Women's religious practices as produced within an orthodox model of Islam do not necessarily or in any simplistic fashion challenge, oppose or resist, at least not as these terms are usually understood within a Western, feminist discourse.¹¹²

Indeed, my own argument agrees with Frisk's conclusion above. Frisk's analysis finds the weakness of feminism in the way that it privileges a conceptualization of agency as resistance instead of a more creative and productive concept of agency.¹¹³

I wish, however, to extend Frisk's argument. I suggest that feminists privilege a conceptualization of agency as resistance precisely due to the way in which feminists are constantly aspiring towards the ideals of 'emancipation' and 'egalitarianism' or gender equality, which require some form of resistance against the status quo. These ideals, I argue, restrict the feminist discourse to appreciate only strategies and conceptualizations that are geared towards achieving these ideals. Women's realities, however, are much more complicated than that. Frisk's study is by no means definitive of the sentiments and experiences of Muslim women who subscribe to state conservative interpretations of Islam. Nonetheless, the study presents possibilities that the discourse of Islamic feminism may have failed to consider due to the misconceptions fostered by certain central notions in the feminist paradigm. Hence, instead of generating more awareness of the diversity in women's

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p161-179

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p14

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., p15

¹¹³ Ibid., 189

struggles, the feminist paradigm in fact narrows the understanding of women's struggles to conform to a certain form of feminist universalism.

Across the border from Malaysia, in Singapore the postcolonial discourse on women in Islam is mainly characterized by its lack or absence. The subject of women in Islam is always articulated within the discourse of the role of Muslims in Singapore's national development. Kadir argues that Malay Muslim Singaporean women face both a "gendered state and a stifling discourse with regards to Islam and the community".¹¹⁴ Muslim women in Singapore generally lack a representative body that specifically articulates its interests. The Young Muslim Women's Association (PPIS) is the only organization that deals exclusively with Muslim women. However, its focus is on welfare matters and it is not an advocacy group like SIS. Malay Muslim women's interests come under the general purview of the interests of all Muslims and hence, are regularly articulated by all-encompassing religious bodies like the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore or Majlis Islam Singapura (MUIS).

While this may on the surface seem to be a severe limitation in terms of Muslim women's representation, the situation also permits a greater discursive space for Malay Muslim women in Singapore to articulate their differences. These are prospects that may not be available to Muslim women in Malaysia given that the discourse on women in Islam is already dominated by a hegemonic framework that places a woman either in the Islamic conservative camp or in the Islamic feminist camp, while women's self-understandings are marginalized. Indeed, the very lack of representation also potentially presents Singaporean Malay Muslim women with a larger intellectual space to develop self-understandings that are not hijacked by conservative Muslim or Islamic feminist discourse.

¹¹⁴ Kadir, "When Gender is Not a Priority", 2005 124

This is because the subject of women in Islam has not taken centre stage nor has it been co-opted by the state or any feminist groups. In fact, this absence of a conservative public discourse of Islam is also strengthens the argument that Muslim women in Singapore are not conforming to public pressures or male dominance even as their actions are based on an understanding of Islam which is not as 'progressive' as feminists would have advocated. This is very apparent in the answers given for the interviews done by Nasir, Pereira and Turner, which have very little to do with any overtly feminist aspirations such as emancipation or equality.

The next chapter will attempt to get to the heart of Islamic feminism. I argue that Islamic feminists place too much emphasis on the analytical process rather than a re-examination of the goals or the underlying principles of feminist theoretical framework. This lack of critical examination of the feminist ideals limits the analysis, by Islamic feminists, of Muslim women, even as they use Islamic texts and engage in textual exegesis to advocate in Muslim women's interests. I will draw parallels between liberal feminist, socialist feminists and Islamic feminist scholars, to show that all these strands of feminism are still guided very much by the notions of emancipation and equality. I will then go on to discuss why these notions are considered 'Eurocentric' and show that although feminist scholarship has the potential to, it has been largely unable to move away from its Western beginnings.

3. The Limits of Postcolonial Feminists' Challenge to Western Feminisms

According to Sue Morgan, a burgeoning non-Western feminist literature has, over the past few decades, exposed the “ethnocentric and imperialist proclivities of feminist history as well as the inadequacy of western epistemological frameworks” as grounds for the study of women outside the ‘West’.¹¹⁵ A feminist framework that analyses inequities between men and women is, thus, no longer adequate. There is in fact a greater need to recognize inequities *between* groups of women and *within* groups of women. Gender is only one aspect of the Third world feminist subject’s experience of oppression because women’s struggles are also inextricably linked to their cultural communities’ experience with imperialism.¹¹⁶ Therefore, postcolonial or “Third World” feminists are not concerned purely with male domination and female subjugation. Rather, they attempt to confront the theoretical limitations of “Western” feminism that long comprised mainstream scholarship in the field. The question is, how successful have “Third World” or postcolonial feminists been in terms of overcoming the limitations faced by “Western” feminisms in terms of recognising ‘difference’.

In this chapter I will discuss the limitations of postcolonial feminist scholarship, paying particular attention to Islamic feminism. As I have attempted to show using the case studies in the previous chapter, Islamic feminists are unable to fathom forms of women’s empowerment that are not premised on ‘emancipation’ or ‘equality’. I will argue in this chapter that the limitations of Islamic feminism is symptomatic of “Third World” feminists’ preoccupation with transforming the analytical process rather than advancing a critique of the foundations and principles that underlie feminist analysis. By analytical process, I am talking about the way feminists think about women’s struggles and experiences and the tools that

¹¹⁵ Sue Morgan, “Introduction: Writing Feminist History: Theoretical Debates and Critical Practices” 2006, p26

¹¹⁶ Ibid; Chandra Talpade Mohanty *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. UK: Duke University Press, p16-42; Amos, Valerie and Pratibha Parmar. 2006. “Challenging Imperial Feminism” in Sue Morgan (ed.) *The Feminist History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004) p285-287

they use to conceptualise women's conditions. In the case of Islamic feminists, Qur'anic exegesis and an understanding of Islamic doctrines form part of the analytical process by which they think about the issues faced by Muslim women. Hence, even though postcolonial or 'Third World' feminisms, Islamic feminism included, are critical of the Eurocentric understanding of 'Western' feminisms, they are not deeply critical enough.

It would be useful to note here my use of the terms 'Third World' and 'Western' feminisms do not imply that the two can be categorized neatly into coherent monolithic blocs, or that their proponents can be reduced to a physical or geographical identification. Categories such as these are quite fluid and constantly borrow ideas and terms from each other. Nevertheless, the categories 'Third World' and 'Western' serve as useful discursive references. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty states, these categories draw attention to how the articulations of feminist interest in the United States and Europe (the collective 'West') are set up as the analytic reference in feminist theories, which result in the discursive construction of an uncomplicated 'Third World' woman who is differentiated only by her 'non-Western' condition.¹¹⁷ In this thesis, I take 'postcolonial' or 'Third World' feminism as a discursive category unified by its critique of the ethnocentric universality of 'Western' feminist discourse. However, have 'Third World' feminists truly managed to discard the Western-centric proclivities found in mainstream Western feminisms?

In this chapter, I examine more closely some of the Islamic feminist literature that comes from a postcolonial perspective. I will draw parallels between the works of these Islamic feminists and the works of western liberal and radical feminists to show that the same ideals of 'equality' and 'emancipation' lie at the core of the different strands of feminism. Despite having come a long way in accommodating diversity, the ideals of 'emancipation and 'equality' remain constant in feminist theoretical framework. Because empowerment is

¹¹⁷ Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 2004 , p18

mainly construed as women's emancipation from patriarchal structures and the achievement of gender equality within feminist theory, these become the common denominators that distinguish and form the baseline for feminist praxis. 'Third world' feminisms' challenge to Western feminisms is therefore largely confined to their articulation of the heterogeneity of non-Western women's conditions and the development of alternative strategies to ameliorate these conditions. However, I will show that Third world feminists are still guided by the same principles and articulate their ideals using the same vocabulary as 'Western' mainstream feminisms. Subsequently, I will attempt to illustrate how this is problematic in the sense that by retaining the same vocabulary, 'Third World' feminisms may instead perpetuate the very same Eurocentric understandings of the underlying principles of feminism that they wish to critique.

Islamic Feminism

This section concerns itself with the question: To what extent is Islamic feminism counterhegemonic? How far does it actually capture the difference and diversity of Muslim women's voices? These questions can only be answered when we understand what Islamic feminism stands for and what are its challenges and limitations. Hence, in this section, I will discuss the conflicting arguments of some women scholars with regard to Islamic feminism's prospects in providing Muslim women with an effective discursive framework. The works of these women scholars will illustrate that Islamic feminism is more concerned with transforming its analytical process rather than expanding the feminist theoretical framework to accommodate ideals and principles that are borne from the self-definitions and understanding of Muslim women. I will also go on to make comparisons between liberal feminist discourse and Islamic feminist discourse which will illustrate the pitfalls of focusing purely on the analytical process and failing to critique the principles upon which the analysis is based.

Islamic feminism is a comparatively recent phenomenon which has been met with both scholarly hype and criticism. It is commonly perceived as an avenue for Muslim women to dissolve the hardened perceptions of Islam as a religion that spawns a woman-unfriendly culture. Feminist scholars like Margot Badran find that Islamic feminism fills the “in-between-space”, a middle ground between secular feminism and masculinist Islam.¹¹⁸ It potentially closes gaps and reveals common concerns and goals “starting with the basic affirmation of gender equality and social justice”.¹¹⁹ Badran asserts that by engaging the issue of faith, Islamic feminists open up a public space to rethink religion and expose false readings of sacred texts.¹²⁰

Islamic feminism, according to Badran, extolls the idea of gender equality as part of Quranic injunctions.¹²¹ It argues that the patriarchal model of the family does not conform to the principles found in religious texts. Islamic feminists thus argue for a more egalitarian model of family and society given that there is no separation of the private and public in Islam.¹²² Islamic feminists also insist for more gender equality in the religious sphere, demanding more egalitarianism in public religious rituals.¹²³ In a way, Margot Badran considers Islamic feminism as more radical than secular feminisms which have historically accepted equality in the public sphere and the notion of complementarity in the private sphere.¹²⁴ Similarly, according to Moghadam, Islamic feminist theologians seek to evaluate Islamic sources, criticize the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic sources, and stress the equality of men and

¹¹⁸ Margot Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and religious convergences* (UK: OneWorld Oxford, 2009) p236

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p246

¹²⁰ Ibid., p233-4

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., p4

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p250

women in the Qur'an.¹²⁵ In order to do so, Islamic feminists have gone back to religious texts to seek new interpretations that promote the equality and egalitarianism they strive for.

*Ijtihad*¹²⁶ has thus become the greatest methodological tool of Islamic feminists attempting a re-reading of the Quran. The ability to give a hermeneutical reading of the texts allows one to overturn the gender-biased readings that have been used to endorse patriarchal systems. According to Badran,

In the final decades of the twentieth century, highly-educated Muslim women, armed with the advanced educations, including doctoral degrees, are applying a combination of historical, linguistic, hermeneutic, literary critical, deconstructive, semiotic, historicist, and feminist methodologies in their rereading of sacred texts, pushing *ijtihad* to new limits as they explore their religion with fresh eyes.¹²⁷

Prominent Muslim women scholars like Amina Wadud and Riffat Hassan have been at the forefront of the gender *ijtihad* programme reinterpreting texts in order to undermine male-biased readings that often result in the denigration of Muslim women, especially in states that claim to uphold Shariah law.

Riffat Hassan and Amina Wadud call for reforms within Islam that look to notions of equality between men and women in order to reclaim women's rights within Islam. Hassan wishes to challenge the notion that she deems most Muslims take for the truth, that is: women are unequal to men.¹²⁸ Hassan tries to challenge interpretations which allow religion to be used as the instrument of oppression by advancing new scriptural analysis that challenge the basic

¹²⁵ Valentine Moghadam, "Islamic Feminism and its Discontents: Towards a Resolution of the debate" *Signs* 27, no.4 (Summer), 2002: 1159

¹²⁶ *Ijtihad* is a struggle to strive for a goal with all of one's ability and efforts which is in this case is to deduce, through a process of reasoning, Shari'ah laws based on the sources of Qur'an and Hadith. In order to make a decision based on *ijtihad*, one has to be well educated on all aspects of Islamic religion and is considered an expert on religious matters.

¹²⁷ Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 2009, p233

¹²⁸ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith and Kathleen M. Moore, *Muslim Women in America: the Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006)

fundamentalist assumptions that women are inferior to men.¹²⁹ On the issue of the rights of women within Muslim communities, Hassan explains that Islam has indeed liberated women, from being viewed as “chattels or inferior creatures”.¹³⁰ Nonetheless, Hassan finds it a “tragedy” that women in the context of marriage cannot claim equality with their husbands.¹³¹ In this context, Hassan was not very explicit about what she meant by equality. If she had meant spiritual equality, then many would find her statement agreeable. However, if she had meant equality in every sense of the word, including responsibilities and duties, then Hassan’s analysis would be severely limited in terms of understanding Muslim women’s compliance with their husbands within the marital context. This is especially so when one thinks back upon the case studies of women in Frisk’s mosque movement who acknowledged the functionally unequal yet complementary roles played by the husband and wife who accepts the husband as the leader of the household.

Wadud too, in a more nuanced analysis, aims for the recovery of “sexual equality” within Islam through new exegetical readings of the Qur’an.¹³² In *Qur’an and Women*, Wadud argues that ‘equal’ or equality’ in the Qur’an means that women and men have “the same rights and obligations on an ethico-religious level” and they have “equally significant responsibilities in the social-functional level”.¹³³ She argues further that gender equality on the ethico-religious level is more significant than the social-functional level because of the different values that various social systems have attributed to men and women’s roles at the social-functional level.¹³⁴ On a theoretical level, I agree with Wadud’s perception of how the notion of ‘equality’ can be translated to an Islamic context. In fact, referring back to my case

¹²⁹ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith and Kathleen M. Moore, *Muslim Women in America: the Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p156

¹³⁰ Hassan, Riffat. “Are Human Rights Compatible with Islam? The issue of rights of women in Muslim Communities”. *The Religious Consultation*. (as accessed on 20/05/2012)
<http://www.religiousconsultation.org/hassan2.htm>

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Op.Cit, p157

¹³³ Amina Wadud, *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, 1999. p102

¹³⁴ Ibid.

studies in chapter 2, the actions of Kartika and the women from Frisk's mosque movements somehow proves that these women realised their ethico-religious equality with men in the sense, that when they make their case by appealing to religious texts, they are speaking as men's spiritual equals.

However, my argument that empowerment for these women has little to do with 'equality' or 'emancipation', still stands. The reason is that these women are not asking to be freed from their male-dominated socio-cultural context. On the contrary, they accept their roles within this context. In fact, these women go beyond the notion of equality to hold men accountable in their roles as leaders of the Muslim community. They did not use their ethico-religious, or spiritual equality to demand more equality in the socio-political or cultural spheres in terms of, for example, demanding a right to be instated as leaders of men and women in the religious community. Instead, they assert their spiritual equality with men by taking measures to ensure that the men are good leaders and maintainers of the family and the community, in line with their own self-understandings of the social-functional roles that Islam has ordained for men and women. Hence, women's empowerment can go beyond 'equality' and 'emancipation'. Islamic feminists' insistence on occupying themselves with these notions may blind them to the other ways in which women are empowering themselves.

Both Wadud and Barlas reject pandering to secular demands that Islam transform itself to conform totally to the ideals of the majority culture (read: Western societies). Yet, the two scholars find themselves looking through the religious texts and revising traditional readings to find in them the same terms and vocabulary used by Western, in particular, liberal feminists. Wadud's challenge for an individual exegetical reading of the scriptures was answered by another feminist, Asma Barlas. Barlas found in her re-interpretation that the

Qur'an does not endorse inequality and that it in fact supports the "liberation" of women.¹³⁵ It is reasonable to say that Barlas' readings of "liberation" is largely based on the precepts of Western notions of liberty, because there is virtually no explicit mention of the "concept of (individual) freedom" anywhere in the Qur'an, nor implicit suggestions of it in the prophetic traditions, based on the concept of the human being as the servant or slave of God (*abd'Allah*).¹³⁶ One may argue that the concept of Islam being to submit to the will of God, may be interpreted as freedom from the man-made dictates. However, Muslims are still confined to strict ritualistic procedures and theology in terms of practising the faith which precludes the notion of 'freedom' as it is understood in the liberal paradigm. Such a finding must be largely based on an individual's own scrutiny of the texts, with a conscious effort to find notions of 'liberation' exogenous to the text itself. In fact, Wadud is most forward about the role of human beings as the "makers of textual meaning," who can interpret religious texts with egalitarianism in mind.¹³⁷

However, it is rather unsettling that texts should be interpreted only in line with whatever preconceived values and standards the reader holds to. Just as Islamic feminists interpret the texts with 'freedom' and 'egalitarianism' in mind, many extreme conservatives interpret texts with the preconceived belief in male superiority. In this way, both are only looking at the texts simply to justify their own viewpoints. Such discourse often comes to a deadlock as there is almost nothing to compel other Muslim scholars to abandon their own ideals for those espoused by feminists. This causes particular problems for Islamic feminist activists, who are often accused by conservatives of being agents of 'Western moral decadence'. Their

¹³⁵ Haddad et al., *Muslim Women in America: the Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p157

¹³⁶ Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Political Thought*, (Edinburgh, 1968) p 96

¹³⁷ Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's reform in Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2006) p204

efforts are often further misconstrued as a challenge to the divine law, and their ability to engage in *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) are openly discredited.

These issues have led Moghadam to assert that although she is sympathetic to the discursive strategy of these Islamic feminists, the focus on the “correct” reading of the Islamic texts is highly problematic.¹³⁸ So long as Islamic feminists remain focused on theological arguments rather than socioeconomic and political questions, Moghadam argues, and so long as their point of reference is the Qur'an rather than universal standards, their impact will be limited at best.¹³⁹ Moghadam's concern stems from the probability that feminists will be engaged in a drawn out tug-of-war with Islamic male scholars over the right to interpret the texts. At worst, this method might reinforce the legitimacy of patriarchal systems by sidelining any secular alternatives.¹⁴⁰ This concern will only be allayed, she argues, by combining the Islamic framework with basic human rights set according to universal standards.¹⁴¹

As evident from her argument, although Moghadam concedes that feminism is not and should not be confined to one strict set of ideology, she is reluctant to see Islamic feminism as an effective discourse in and of itself. While Moghadam allows for turning to Islamic texts as a means, she insists that the women's movements subscribe to a universal standard in defining their objectives. Similarly, Moghissi is wary that Islamic feminism might be imposed on Muslim women as the only culturally legitimate strain of feminism.¹⁴² She concludes that the feminist project to articulate difference might instead regress into cultural essentialism.¹⁴³ Instead of affirming the plurality of experiences of Muslim women, the drive to preserve and hear out the culturally ‘authentic’ might instead create sympathy by softening the way

¹³⁸ Moghadam, “Islamic Feminism and its Discontents”, 2002:1158

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Haideh Moghissi, *Islamism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The limits of Postmodern analysis* (USA: Zed Books, 1999) p135

¹⁴³ Ibid.

Islamic fundamentalism is viewed. It is clear in Moghissi's argument that she views the Islamic legal system as incompatible with feminist ideals. According to Moghissi, if a feminist claims that the essence of Shari'ah is a legitimate framework for achieving feminist goals,

then we are compelled to redefine both feminism and the Shariah, since Shariah distinguishes between the rights of human beings on the basis of sex (and religion)... Women cannot enjoy equality before the law and in law. The Shariah is not compatible with the principle of equality of human beings... Which is to say, Islam is reconcilable with feminism only when Islamic or Muslim identity is reduced to a matter of mere spiritual and cultural affiliation because any meaningful change in the treatment of women in Islamic societies has to start by the recognition of women as autonomous full citizens, which includes legal equality for women in family law and other civil legislation.¹⁴⁴

Indeed, I agree with Moghissi's assertion, that the Islamic legal system as it is run by self-professed Islamic states today would be incompatible with feminism defined as the pursuit of gender equality. The two would be incompatible precisely because of the way each framework is conceptualized. For Moghadam, the Islamic framework cannot offer much because the reality in Islamic societies is that the Islamic discourse is largely dominated by male scholars. For Moghissi, the principles of an 'authentic' Islamic framework are themselves incommensurate with the feminist ideals of gender equality. Hence, Islam is still seen as culturally lacking the crucial qualities in comparison to 'universal' standards.

In accounts of Islamic feminism such as Moghadam's and Moghissi's, the Islamic framework is often confounded with its masculine manifestation. Moghissi's account of an 'authentic' Islam can be construed as genuinely women-unfriendly as she argues that only by doing away with the political and legal face of Islam, can one bend the faith to be accommodating

¹⁴⁴ Moghissi, *Islamism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, 1999. p141-142

towards the interest of women. Indeed, it is the case that when understood holistically, the Islamic framework cannot advance the role and status of women, foremost in terms of achieving gender equality with men as feminists aspire to. This is where Moghissi's analysis falters. Due to her preoccupation with gender equality, Moghissi is dismissive towards the opinion advanced by some Sunni Muslim scholars who insist that complementarity and mutuality, and not gender equality, is emphasized in order to achieve social justice in Islam.

At this point in the discussion, I briefly explain the approach taken by the majority of Muslim scholars towards gender relations in Islam which is often regarded by Islamic feminists as 'conservative' or 'not progressive enough' in advancing women's interests. Within this approach, the term 'equality', as it is understood according to the feminist framework, is only recommended in certain spheres. In Islam, the notion of equality and justice need not always go hand-in-hand; the primacy of complementarity in most spheres except the spiritual, exceeds the value of equality in achieving the ideal of social justice. An explanation of this approach here foregrounds the analysis in the next chapter, which gives an account of Muslim women's subscription to traditional readings of Islamic texts as espoused by the Islamic revival movements or *dakwah* groups. The objective is to demonstrate that there are approaches to understand gender relations in Islam adopted by women which can also be empowering, aside from the approach taken by Islamic feminists that privilege 'emancipation' and 'equality'.

Unlike Islamic feminists, women scholars like Fatima Naseef approach gender relations in Islam not exclusively in terms of the relationship between men and women. Rather, the relationship between men and women is always mediated by both their obligations towards God.¹⁴⁵ The concept of *fitrah* or natural dispositions is particularly important here. It asserts

¹⁴⁵ Fatima Umar Naseef, *Women in Islam: A discourse on rights and obligation* (New Delhi, India: Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1999) p57-59

that men and women have innate differences which help them to fulfil equally important roles in life without affecting their spiritual equality or human dignity.¹⁴⁶ These different but ‘equally important’ roles are decided based on the rights and obligations that men and women have towards each other. By fulfilling these roles, men and women also fulfil their duties towards God by acting in accordance with their *fitrah*.¹⁴⁷ For example, the most controversial oft-quoted verse in the Qur’an with regards to men’s position over women reads,

“(Husbands) are the protectors and maintainers of their (wives), because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband’s) absence what Allah would have them guard.”¹⁴⁸

This verse is read not as a claim of men’s authority over women, but as an affirmation that God has decreed the material and spiritual maintenance of a household as the sole obligation of men in line with their *fitrah*. Read in terms of men’s relationship with God, there is less to rejoice for men because a heavy burden is placed on their shoulders, as fulfilling this is part of their obligation towards God. As much as this verse is unsettling because it implies that men have certain special rights over women, it also means that men are held accountable in many more ways. Women’s obedience in the text is not demanded as a right of the husband, but as an obligation towards her creator. As I will illustrate in the next chapter, the example of the Malay Muslim women’s role in ensuring men’s accountability proves how women create for themselves opportunities for self-empowerment through this framework of rights and obligations.

The above is an approach adopted by the majority of scholars (many among whom are women scholars) who follow in the tradition of the four schools of classical Islamic

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p57

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Abdullah Yusuf Ali (translator), *The Holy Qur’an*, Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2007, p92

jurisprudence.¹⁴⁹ However, this approach has of late become synonymous with ‘conservative’, ‘backward’ and ‘patriarchal’ interpretations of religious texts which are oppressive towards women. This is due in large part to the application of juristic decisions by male scholars working within a pre-existing context where female subordination to male dominance is the norm. Because this approach insists that innate differences between women and men should translate into different societal roles, it is most abused in “Islamic states” to restrict women even from the rights that are clearly due to them (as can be found in religious texts and agreed upon by a majority of Muslim scholars), such as education and the rights to seek employment.

It is beyond the scope and intention of this project to justify or promote any particular approach to understanding gender relations in Islam. Rather, the objective here has been to present a different approach to understanding gender in Islam, and to glean from this approach an understanding of women’s empowerment which may have very little to do with ‘emancipation’ or ‘equality’. With the advent of Islamic feminism, there is a propensity to exclude other opinions of gender relations in Islam which do not concur with its approach as potentially women-empowering. Some Islamic feminist scholars and activists have even dismissed the actions of certain groups of women as being completely compliant with conservative interpretations that bolster male dominance. Hence, because Islamic feminists are more focused on the way they use religious texts to advance their ideals, they pay less attention to critiquing these ideals, and in the process fail to capture the diversity of Muslim women’s voices.

¹⁴⁹ The four schools of religious jurisprudence or *madhabs* that I refer to here, are the *Shafi’i*, *Hanbali*, *Maliki* and *Hanafi* schools of thought in Sunni Islam which are concerned with *fiqh* or the extraction and interpretation of Islamic law from its two most important sources, the Quran and Hadith. Their efforts are informed by *usul-Fiqh* or a comprehensive set of exegetical methodology which forms the fundamentals of Islamic law. The four schools have their differences mainly in areas of execution of rites and other minor practices but not in matters of theology.

Rethinking Empowerment in Feminism

Despite its critiques of the Western feminism's analytical framework, why is there seemingly an unquestioning acceptance of feminist principles and ideals by 'Third World' feminists? To understand why this is the case, we must consider the question: "what is feminism?" What is it that identifies a discourse as 'feminist'? The historian of feminism, Karen Offen, offers a "historically informed definition" of 'feminism' in which despite its accommodation of diversity, the "final analysis rests on a single 'bottom line', a common denominator – which boils down to challenging masculine domination."¹⁵⁰ Offen insists that not all women's movements can be considered 'feminist' because

Feminism is *specifically concerned* with women's *emancipation* – the struggle for *equality and rights*, especially the rights of citizenship, or for women's legal, educational, economic, and socio-political equality (engaged both by women and men). Feminism is ultimately about ending women's subordination, which... confronts existing male-designed institutions, ideas and practices, as well as well-defended patriarchal family structures.¹⁵¹

Offen traces the significance and utility of these concepts beginning in 15th century France and recurring throughout the next three centuries in what could be considered early Western feminist literature.¹⁵² Until today, these notions of 'emancipation' and 'equal rights' are inextricable from the course of feminist history and are still integral to the feminist paradigm. The primacy of these concepts is grounded in feminism's concern over the subjugation of women in male-dominated societies and the belief that so long as masculinist hierarchies exist, women are severely disadvantaged.

¹⁵⁰ Karen Offen, "Editor's Introduction" in Karen Offen (ed.) *Globalizing Feminisms 1789-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2010) pxxx

¹⁵¹ Ibid. (emphasis mine)

¹⁵² Ibid. According to Offen, the concept of sexual equality can be found in the writings of the Venetian-born poet, Christine de Pizzan, who challenged misogyny and the gender stereotypes of her time. But the term 'feminism' itself originated in France, when it was first claimed by advocates of women's rights in 1882 (see pxxx).

Liberal feminists such as Susan Moller Okin, who wrote a paper entitled “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?”, identify cultural groups (read non-Western societies) which “endorse and facilitate the control of men over women” as the locus of female oppression.¹⁵³ Okin’s main argument against the concept of multiculturalism is based on the claim that defence of “cultural practices” in communities where there are clear disparities of power between the sexes would likely have a negative impact on the lives of women and girls.¹⁵⁴ Slipping from accounts of veiling, to polygamy, and then to honour killings, all semblances of custom and tradition are deemed as women-oppressive practices that “look to the past – to ancient texts and traditions” for guidelines on how to live in the contemporary world.¹⁵⁵ In other words, most if not all cultural practices discriminate against women by controlling their freedom and making it difficult for them to achieve equality with men in all spheres.¹⁵⁶ She suggests that the women might be better off were these cultures “to become extinct” and its members be integrated into the ‘less sexist’ surrounding culture or that the culture itself reinforce the “equality of women... to the degree to which this value is upheld in the majority culture”.¹⁵⁷ Gender differences within cultural groups are seen as the greatest impediment to feminism’s unquestionable ideal of women’s ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’.

Okin’s paper certainly did not go unanswered. Feminist scholar Azizah Al-Hibri responded to Okin’s argument, attempting to defend the teachings of Islam itself as undoubtedly ‘progressive’. However, in doing so, she had placed most Muslim communities in a stagnant and even regressive light because these communities subscribed to jurisprudence of past centuries and civilizations in which “the laws have not changed with the change of time and

¹⁵³ Susan Moller Okin, “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” in J. Cohen, M. Howard and Martha C. Nussbaum (eds.) *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999)

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p21-22

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p22

place”.¹⁵⁸ Al-Hibri’s defence of the individual rights both of men and women in exercising *ijtihad* (jurisprudential interpretation) without referring to central authority, is meant to resound with ‘equal rights’ of both genders in religion. By claiming that no one had exclusive access to the truth, Al-Hibri subtly makes a hint at the freedom which all Muslim women has to carry out *ijtihad*.¹⁵⁹ Al-Hibri’s noble intention is to defend Islam, by showing that Islam has in more ways than one already matched up to the ideals of freedom and gender ‘equality’ that had been posited by Okin. Despite a commendable attempt to justify Islamic culture within the confines of a dominant framework, Al-Hibri’s justifications echo a similarly narrowed definition of women’s empowerment as ‘emancipation’ and gender ‘equality’.

This narrowed definition of empowerment is not exclusive to liberal and Islamic feminism. They also characterize other strands of feminist discourses. Self-identified socialist feminists like Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor have also argued for the importance of (freedom from) ‘patriarchy’ as a “theory of women’s oppression”.¹⁶⁰ According to them, if the mechanisms by which women’s subordination are reproduced also reproduce the family structure, then these mechanisms need to be dismantled and reconstructed to eliminate women’s subordination.¹⁶¹ Other feminist scholars like Judith Bennett also argue for the centrality of patriarchy to feminist history, which she insists could explain the pervasiveness and persistence of women’s oppression without having to ignore differences of class, race, and culture.¹⁶² Bennett asserts that a study of how patriarchy has endured will also highlight women’s collusion in their own oppression as women have been both (often simultaneously)

¹⁵⁸ Al-Hibri, “Is Western Patriarchal Feminism Good for Third World/ Minority Women?”, in J. Cohen, M. Howard and Martha C. Nussbaum (eds.) *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p43

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, Sally Alexander and Barbara Taylor, “The Trouble with ‘Patriarchy’” in Sue Morgan (ed.) *The Feminist History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006) p57

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Judith M. Bennett, “Feminism and History” in Sue Morgan (ed.) *The Feminist History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006) p66-67

victims and agents of male-dominated social structures.¹⁶³ Unlike most analyses of culture which portray women primarily as the victims of patriarchy, Bennett's argument attends to the nuances in terms of women's role in their particular cultural communities.

The various strands of feminisms above are predicated upon the implicit assumption that a feminist agenda must be aimed at breaking down the social structures of male dominance. Women should find themselves better off once they are somehow 'freed' of patriarchal structures. This definitional assumption becomes extremely problematic when analysing the case of women's overwhelming acceptance and support for movements that are seemingly inimical to their interests, such as the Islamic revivalist movements which I explore in this thesis. This is because feminist theoretical frameworks do not leave any space for the possibility that women might chart their own path and set their own terms even *within* these so-called patriarchal structures. Women may not be 'free' nor will they necessarily achieve 'equality' with men in either the private or public arena, but they can in their own ways become more empowered within their cultural systems as I had attempted to demonstrate in Chapter 2.

Making the Connection: 'Emancipation', 'Equality' and Euro-centrism

Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out that the preoccupation with breaking down and being free of patriarchal structures stems from a discursive construction of the 'Third World' woman as a singular, monolithic subject.¹⁶⁴ This image is produced by drawing a broad brush stroke over the conditions of 'women' as a coherent categorical entity in opposition to 'men'. According to Mohanty,

this focus on the position of women where women are seen as a coherent group in *all* contexts regardless of class or ethnicity, structures the world in binary, dichotomous terms, where

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 2004, p17

women are always seen in opposition to men, patriarchy is always necessarily male dominance, and the religious, legal, economic and familial systems are implicitly assumed to be constructed by men.¹⁶⁵

This form of analysis is prominently found in the work of liberal feminists like Okin, discussed above. What follows from this generalized notion of women's subordination is that 'Third World' women are always victims of their cultural locations. Any differences within this category that pertains to class or race, which are equally important in determining women's material realities, are simply glossed over.

Therefore, unless there is an effort made to think beyond 'emancipation' and 'equality', to expand feminist theoretical framework to be more inclusive, the focus on breaking down patriarchal structures might well perpetuate the Eurocentrism in feminist scholarship. Consider Okin's statement that "while virtually all of the world's cultures have distinctly patriarchal pasts – mostly... Western liberal cultures – have departed far further from them than others."¹⁶⁶ This creates a form of hierarchy of conditions in which the West world has reached the desired peak of human civilisation to which all other societies must aspire. Presumably, the West through the passage of time, has managed to overcome the pitfalls of 'culture' by granting women "many of the same freedoms and opportunities as men."¹⁶⁷ The Western liberal feminists set up their own authorial subject as the reference whose norms and standards would be used to encode others. Mohanty argues that this consequently results in the image of the average Third world woman as,

Lead(ing) an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.) This... is in contrast to the (implicit) self-

¹⁶⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", *boundary 2*, Vol. 12 No. 3 (Spring – Autumn), 1984: 350

¹⁶⁶ Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?", 1999, p16

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own choices¹⁶⁸

In sum, ‘Third World’ women are simply defined as ‘what Western women are not’. The assumption is thus reinforced that the ‘Third World’ has not evolved to the extent that the West has.¹⁶⁹

In order to re-think feminism as a theoretical framework, feminist discursive constructions must always be considered in the context of a global hegemony of Western scholarship which refers to the production, publication, distribution and consumption of ideas.¹⁷⁰ The roots of this global asymmetry of power in knowledge production can be traced back to a colonial history in which the ‘West’ became the geographical marker of ideological formation. This is the phenomenon of Orientalism, which Edward Said likens to a corporate institution that is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient”.¹⁷¹ According to Said, “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”¹⁷² This is carried forward even in other forms of scholarship such as feminist scholarship.

I turn to examine the ideological underpinnings which explain why the ideals of ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’ remain integral to feminism despite its embrace of diversity in terms of analysis and strategy. In order to do so, I draw on the ideas of several postcolonial theorists to elucidate the complexities of knowledge production in the context of hegemonic Western scholarship. Situated within the broader context of knowledge production in social science, it is difficult even for postcolonial feminisms dedicated to the project of recognizing

¹⁶⁸ Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 2004, p40

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p21

¹⁷¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) p3

¹⁷² Ibid., p3

differences, to deviate from using the Eurocentric yardstick of the feminist paradigm in order to assess women's struggles in postcolonial societies.

Homi Bhabha stresses the disempowering effect of the West's imaging and articulation of the Other in similar terms to Said. Critiquing 'Western' critical theory as essentially Eurocentric and dominant, Bhabha argues that

(t)he Other *loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse.* However impeccably the content of an 'other' culture may be known, however anti-ethnocentrically it is represented, it is its location as the closure of grand theories, the demand that in analytic terms, it be always the *good object of knowledge, the docile body of difference,* that reproduces a relation of dominance and is the most serious indictment of the institutional powers of critical theory.¹⁷³

Casting the 'West' as the authoritative figure that is able to articulate the Other has a very powerful silencing effect over the subjects in the discourse, thus perpetuating Western hegemony.

What is more disturbing is that the hegemony of Western scholarship not only allows it to articulate a dominant discourse that constructs a universal image of the 'Other'. It is also able to situate its non-Western subject in a specific position on the historical timeline. Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies this as a problem inherent in historicism where Europe is considered the centre and the starting point of historical developments.¹⁷⁴ The making of Europe as the originating point of 'global' phenomena such as modernity and capitalism which then "spread abroad" constructs a "first in Europe, then elsewhere" structure of global historical time.¹⁷⁵ It spawns a linear idea of progress with Europe as a point of origin which then allows 'Europe'

¹⁷³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (Routledge, 1994) p46 (emphasis mine)

¹⁷⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000) p7

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

to dictate the criteria of development. Political modernity, which characterizes the West's present or "now," is used as a measuring rod of social progress opposed to the colonized subjects who still occupy the "waiting room" of history.¹⁷⁶

Drawing from Chakrabarty's argument, the problems of historicism are also evident in feminist theories which present women situated in cultural locations outside of the discursive 'West', as yet to evolve into the "present" modern Western woman. 'Third World' women are considered "not yet" evolved from the point of view of women's history, lacking the intellectual sophistication of their Western and therefore, modern counterparts. Western mainstream feminism has the tendency to, as Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar put it, "portray (non-White, non-Western women) as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism."¹⁷⁷ This is because Western women have reached or are close to the 'desired destination', at least in terms of political consciousness and intellectual development, to which all women are supposedly headed. Yet, this 'desired destination' characterised by a condition of 'liberty' and 'equality' is no more than a construct of feminist trajectory just as 'modernity' is a crucial discursive construct in the metanarrative of linear historical development.

However, Amos and Parmar also insist that they "reject a feminism which uses Western social and economic systems to judge and make pronouncements about how Third World women can become *emancipated*."¹⁷⁸ It is obvious from this statement that 'Third world' feminists have always been critical of Western-centric means and strategies but tend to take for granted the ideals or the 'desired destination'. These postcolonial feminists' analyses show how the Eurocentric precepts are so entrenched within the feminist paradigm. Even

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., p9-10

¹⁷⁷ Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, "Challenging Imperial Feminism" in Sue Morgan (ed.) *The Feminist History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006) p287

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. (emphasis mine)

though strategically, ‘Third World’ feminists shun the overt cultural superiority in Western and liberal feminisms, they are less critical of the idea that ‘Third World’ women’s successes are based on the criteria set in white, Western contexts.

Therefore, there is an imperative to expand the theoretical framework of feminism by being more inclusive and receptive towards not only different strategies of feminisms but also towards different principles and ideals that are based on the self-understanding of ‘Third World’ women. The answer is not simply to do away with notions such as ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’ but to expand the feminist paradigm. Otherwise, ‘Third World’ feminists would always find themselves measuring the progress of women’s empowerment according to Western yardstick.

One might counter-argue that even though postcolonial feminists continue to adopt these terms, they have transformed its meanings to suit the indigenous contexts, much like Amina Wadud’s interpretation of ‘equality’ according to Qur’anic exegesis. As shown earlier, Wadud had adopted the term on two levels to mean ‘ethico-religious’ equality and ‘social-functional’ equality to explain the conditions of women in Islamic context. However, I contend that even though these notions or ideals are not stagnant but transformative according to contexts, they still limit women’s vocabulary in expressing and articulating their experiences. For example, as explained in Chapter 2, none of the women who were interviewed cited reasons of equality or emancipation for donning the *hijab*, not even in terms of the way Wadud understands ‘equality’. The reason is because these terms had nothing to do with their actions. Instead, as mentioned earlier, their decisions were based on a self-understanding of what their religion dictates. I demonstrated in Chapter 2 how some of these women were empowered by their decisions as they were able to set the terms of interaction with others due to the donning of *hijab* because the women and others believed that they had a certain image or code of conduct to live up to as a *hijab*-wearer.

To this end, I have attempted to illustrate that the failure to see the need to expand the feminist theoretical framework stems from the emphasis placed by 'Third World' feminists on reforming the analytical process in order to confront the limitations of 'Western' feminisms. However, they had not gone further to critique the principles that underlie the theoretical framework. As a result, instead of moving away from the Eurocentric proclivities of Western feminism, postcolonial or 'Third World' feminists have played a hand in perpetuating it. In the next chapter, I trace the effects of having women's voices framed out of the discursive framework by drawing from Gayatri Spivak's theory of the subaltern. In the next chapter, I will also argue for a deliberative approach to feminism as the most suitable in terms of locating women's voices and as a way of expanding the boundaries of the feminist theoretical framework.

4. Redefining the Boundaries of Postcolonial Feminism

In the previous two chapters, I have attempted to show that postcolonial or 'Third World' feminists maintain a narrowed definition of women's empowerment. The examples of Islamic feminists' analysis of Muslim women's struggles and experiences in Chapter 2, showed that they were unable to make sense of women's empowerment that had little to do with notions of 'emancipation' and 'equality'. This, I explained in Chapter 3, is symptomatic of 'Third World' or postcolonial feminists' weakness in terms of advancing a more rigorous critique of the feminist paradigm. As evident in the example of Islamic feminism, there was a larger focus in terms of transforming the analytical process which deviated from Western feminisms by approaching women's struggles from an Islamic standpoint. As a result of that, Muslim women who did not appropriate from the feminist discourse because they do not identify with its underlying principles had their voices framed out of the discourse. In this way, many voices which could be potentially counter-hegemonic are never heard. They are instead relegated to the amorphous category of subaltern.

Therefore, in this chapter, I attempt to develop a discursive strategy that would compel postcolonial feminists to clear the conceptual space within the feminist theoretical framework that would allow alternative forms of women's empowerment to develop and be heard. I argue that empowerment should be perceived as the ability of the woman to determine, for herself, her ideals and aspirations. These ideals and aspirations should not be pre-determined or prescribed, least of all, by a feminist theoretical framework. The measure of a woman's success will then be determined on her own terms and not measured against a prevailing yardstick. In order to expand the boundaries of feminism to include these voices, feminists, in particular postcolonial feminists need to adopt a more deliberative rather than a prescriptive approach in terms of praxis. In the long run, what feminism would have adopted in terms of praxis will then inform feminist theory, resulting in more receptive and inclusive theoretical framework that takes into account the disparate voices of women.

It is certainly not the aim of this project to discredit the concepts of 'equality' and 'emancipation' as irrelevant to understanding and ameliorating women's conditions in postcolonial societies. Indeed, there is no denying that there are societies where rampant injustices abound as a result of entrenched male dominance and in which women are completely stripped of any means of empowerment, for example, the case of women in Afghanistan under the Taliban. In such cases, emancipation from such patriarchal structures is indeed called for. However, it is unfair to compare the effects on women's lives of radical extremist movements like the Taliban, with Islamic movements that espouse milder versions of conservative Islam like that of the *dakwah* movements in Malaysia. Yet, this is the case with many secular progressive and liberal scholars, feminists included, who feel a deep sense of discomfort when confronted with any socially conservative movements that keep women in a subordinate position to men.¹⁷⁹ There is a tendency to draw with broad brush strokes the

¹⁷⁹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 2005, p37

effects of such Islamic movements on women's lives and women's understanding of their involvement in these movements. Feminist theorists and activists, therefore, need to take into account women's self-understanding in order to distort previously held assumptions about 'women' as a discursive category and to truly pay attention to difference.

The question now is how do we begin to locate and to pay attention to women's self-definitions? How can feminism be expanded to capture greater diversity of women's voices? I will begin by outlining the difficulties of such an endeavour. Much has been said in the field of subaltern studies of the complexities in recognizing voices that have been framed out of hegemonic discourses. Proponents of the politics of difference, especially postcolonial feminists, need to be reflective of how the feminist paradigm itself may contribute, paradoxical as it is, to the perpetuation of a hegemonic framework. This self-awareness is the first step towards locating the silent voices of women. Following this, there are some discursive strategies that will compel feminists to stretch the borders of feminism in order to break the rigidities within the paradigm. This also means that postcolonial or 'Third World' feminisms, unlike mainstream Western feminisms, need to take less of a prescriptive position and adopt a more deliberative approach to understanding women's struggles in specific cultural locations.

Locating the Silent Voices of Women

Charles Taylor argues that "within any given culture, the languages of social science are developed out of and nourished by the languages of self-definition which have grown with it".¹⁸⁰ What this suggests is that given the hegemony of Western scholarship in the field of social science, which includes feminist theories, the presuppositions of the desirability of gender 'equality', 'emancipation' and 'progress', are born out of the context of European and

¹⁸⁰ Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2*. (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p131

American culture and self-definitions. Given the Western historical and cultural baggage of the feminist vocabulary, Islamic feminists, are denied engaging in the discourse on their own terms by specifying goals that do not subscribe to a Western-centric universalism. Within the feminist paradigm there is an assumption that there are some universal, difference-blind principles when in fact, such principles may be “particularism masquerading as the universal”.¹⁸¹ The implication of this is that the subjects’ self-definition and self-understanding are being framed out of the debate on the issue of women in Islam.

The lost voice-consciousness of Muslim women as a result of having their self-definitions unarticulated and framed out of the cultural debate *a priori*, relegates the subject, as woman and Muslim, to the realm of the subaltern. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay titled “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, refers to the subaltern as the “general non-specialist, non-academic population across the class spectrum for whom the episteme operates its silent programming function”.¹⁸² Their history and condition is articulated by others, namely intellectuals who do not necessarily share or represent their interests for the subaltern remain the disparate amorphous entity whose “identity is its difference”.¹⁸³

The subaltern, according to Spivak are not merely the oppressed who if given the chance, “*can speak and know their conditions*”.¹⁸⁴ The subaltern as woman remains voiceless in the shadow when she can neither articulate from the male-centric discourse of conservative Islam nor can she articulate her condition by appropriating from the feminist vocabulary. Muslim women who form part of the general non-specialist, non-academic population, essentially differentiated from their intellectual sisters, like Anwar and Wadud, who speak from within a feminist framework, have no recourse to articulate their voice consciousness. As long as

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p44

¹⁸² Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988) p283

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Islamic feminist discourse continues to appropriate terms from the feminist paradigm to justify Islam as promoting ‘freedom’ and ‘equality’ and point to patriarchal norms as the cause of their subjugation, Muslim women will continue to be cast as essentially oppressed. As long as they continue to be represented by Islamic feminists who adopt a rigid prescriptive approach, they are robbed of their agency of self-definition. Spivak also confronts the possibility that even if the “non-representing intellectual making space for her to speak is achieved” the subject of ‘female subjugation’ will not be able to articulate a ‘text of female subjugation’.¹⁸⁵

However, Ania Loomba argues that Spivak’s theoretical assessment of the prospects of the silenced subaltern is unnecessarily pessimistic. Because the subject of Spivak’s essay, the immolated widow, the *sati*, is essentially voiceless after her death, this absence of the *sati*’s voice becomes representative of the difficulty of recovering the subject positions in general.¹⁸⁶ Loomba cautions that Spivak’s essay is not only a critique of, but is also an echo of the writings of Indian nationalists, British colonialists and British feminists of the nineteenth century that essentially portrays the female Indian subject as victimised and helpless.¹⁸⁷ To Loomba, Spivak’s analysis taken to the extreme might only mean a dead end for postcolonial feminists. However, Loomba insists that the *sati*’s experience is “not limited to the pain of death” but the event, when deconstructed, tells of the woman’s “social and ideological interactions” and “pressures and configurations” that connect her individual person to her community.¹⁸⁸ The event of widow immolation is a culmination of a woman’s whole life story, not merely her conscious thoughts at the time of death. Therefore, Loomba

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p288

¹⁸⁶ Ania Loomba, “Dead Women Tell No Tales: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and Post-colonial Writings on Widow Immolation in India” in Sue Morgan (ed.) *The Feminist History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006) p314

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p318

argues that instead of being pre-occupied with the lost voice-consciousness of the *sati*, it is more prudent to look at the ‘almost-*sati*’, the widow who lived to tell the tale.¹⁸⁹

Both the contestations over *sati* and the Muslim woman in *hijab* make extensive use the gendered imagery in which women, their behaviour, dress codes and bodies, become eulogised as bearers of authentic culture or tradition.¹⁹⁰ Unlike the *sati*, the Muslim woman in *hijab* is not completely a silenced subject. Her silence is not constituted by her absence (death) or her absolute oppression. Instead, as in the case of the Muslim woman in Malaysia and Singapore, her silence is constituted chiefly of her inability to articulate a discourse that would be *heard* and recognized by the culturally essentialist state or the Islamic feminist. To be heard is to be given a space within the mainstream public discourse of women in Islam. However, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, the voices of difference articulated by the Muslim women of Frisk’s study or the respondents of Nasir, Pereira and Turner’s remain only on the fringes in academic study, not in mainstream, dominant public discourse. These studies show that the silenced voices not only belong to the uneducated underclass of the society but also educated, working women whose voices are framed out of the hegemonic discourses.

Instead, public debate such as those covered in print media in Malaysia is pervaded by the mutually reinforcing discourses of male Islamic conservatives and their opposition in the form of Islamic feminism. Examples of rising fundamentalist opinions and strict Islamic observances are constantly featured as being at “loggerheads” with feminism.¹⁹¹ The pervasiveness of these hegemonic discourses of binaries infuses public debate with the assumption that women who practice strict Islamic observances (however that is defined) are

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p319

¹⁹⁰ Morgan, “Introduction: Writing Feminist History”, 2006, p33

¹⁹¹ Seth Mydans, “Kuala Lumpur: Blame Men, Not Allah, Islamic Feminists Say” *The New York Times* Oct 10 1996

incapable of putting up a challenge to male biased practices where they see fit. For example, in explaining the assertiveness of women in Islamic movements, Cecilia Ng et al attributed the support and leadership positions filled by educated women in Islamic movements to a “gap between theory and practice, between discourse and reality.”¹⁹² However, I disagree that this is the case. As Frisks’s study has shown, by taking up assertive roles within the patriarchal system, women are in a way reminding men that they are men’s spiritual equal even though they concede that men and women have different roles. This allows women an equal footing with men by using men’s own weapon of subjugation against them. More interestingly, the women do not see their actions as incompatible with Islamic teachings or as a gap between discourse and reality. I find from Frisk’s study that their assertiveness in upholding what they believe is the Islamic message, is in fact seen as a necessary virtue. The subaltern in the case of these postcolonial states is filled by a wide spectrum of people who are defined by their difference from the Islamic conservatives, on the one hand, and the Islamic feminists who maintain dominance over the discourse on Islam and gender, on the other.

Stretching the Borders of Islamic Feminism

Is this a dead end then for the postcolonial feminists’ project of political difference? As Spivak had argued, will the perpetuation of the hegemonic framework result in the erasure of the subaltern woman’s experiences by her inability to articulate a discourse that can be *heard*? As much as theory informs praxis, social activism is just as crucial in redefining the contours of theoretical analysis. Postcolonial feminism can no longer be contented to inherit the boundaries set by mainstream feminism in determining what is considered ‘feminist’. As ‘Third World’ feminism itself seeks to pose a challenge to Western feminism, it needs to be able to expand the feminist paradigm by interrogating the rigid boundaries that have held

¹⁹² Cecilia Ng et al, *Feminism and the Women’s movement in Malaysia*, 2006, p86

feminist theories together for so long. To do so would be to make feminist theories no less revolutionary or radical, but in fact, more inclusive with greater counterhegemonic potential. The postcolonial feminist can, in her capacity as a social critic, redefine feminism's boundaries by creating space to make feminism more inclusive.

In order to do so, it is crucial for Islamic feminists as social activists to adopt a more deliberative rather than a prescriptive approach. In this respect, I share Brooke Ackerly's optimism that 'Third World' feminisms as actual activism are capable of expanding the range of familiar perspectives and understandings making the process of deliberation more inclusive and better informed.¹⁹³ The deliberative approach encourages the "silent to speak for themselves" and represent the silent when they do not.¹⁹⁴ However, this approach does not come without its own set of problems. There are many issues with representing silent voices. This includes misrepresentation or worse, a representation that conforms to a hegemonic perspective of women as passive victims of male dominance. Nevertheless, in engaging multiple critics, feminist social criticism aggressively challenges the norms, values and practices that allow some to be excluded.¹⁹⁵ More importantly, an effective deliberative approach would also prompt self-reflection on the part of the social activists that requires feminists to question their own long-held beliefs and assumptions about women.

Ackerly notes the importance of the contributions of multiple critics in the deliberative process which includes the insider, the outsider and the multi-sited critics.¹⁹⁶ More important are the critics' ability to promote inclusiveness by speaking among themselves, gathering outside information, promoting deliberation and an awareness of whose views are excluded and included in internal deliberation. She cites the success of groups like Women Living

¹⁹³ Brooke Ackerly, *Political Theory and Feminist Social Activism* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

p67

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p152-7

Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) in informing women of the differences between the Islamic law and Islamic law as it is practiced by Muslims in different societies.¹⁹⁷ In doing so, they also reclaim the rights of women to reinterpret religious texts. In this sense, WLUML is not that different from SIS of Malaysia, as both aspire to reclaim women's rights within an Islamic framework. These organizations are indeed effective in calling for changes to the lives of Muslim women who have been unfairly treated under laws that are biased towards men.

However, I want to extend Ackerly's argument further, in that feminists and social activists who engage in deliberative processes must be extremely conscious of whose views they include and whose views are excluded. It is not enough to deliberate only on issues that serve to reconfirm the assumptions that are already held by feminists about the nature of male dominance and female subjugation. Deliberative approaches that engage in discussions with women who suffer from domestic abuse, ill-treatment in a polygamous marriage or male-biased divorce procedures are absolutely necessary for Islamic feminists to develop strategies that fight injustices. They lend insider perspectives to various women-related issues. Nonetheless, such deliberative interactions are also inadequate.

Islamic feminists need to engage women involved in conservative Islamic movements or who subscribe to gender-differentiated roles as well. These women are neither directly involved in situations that require immediate redress like domestic abuse, nor are they complete outsiders to women's issues. This makes their views all the more crucial. As Loomba has argued, the act that made the woman a worthy subject of discourse (immolation for the *sati* and *hijab* for the Muslim woman), has to be understood as a culmination of her "social and ideological interactions" and "pressures and configurations" that connect her individual person to her

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p162

community.¹⁹⁸ To bring these into focus in deliberative processes is to shed light on the multiple perspective of how women understand and internalize the social construction of gender in their culture or society.

In doing so, the Islamic feminist will have less tendency to view these women merely as submissive subjects or victims of false consciousness. By engaging women who are involved in conservative movements, such as those who are active in the women's wing of Islamic organizations like PAS, it is easier to view them as active agents—who are just as opposed to forms of female oppression by male dominance, but who may have different conceptions of what it means to be 'oppressed' and what it means to 'oppose'. By including a wider range of perspectives on how women conceive of gender relations and their role in the social structure, there is greater opportunity for feminists to question assumptions that they have long held about the relationship between challenging male domination and achieving 'emancipation' from patriarchal structures. In the process, there is the possibility that new vocabularies would emerge that would transcend the rigid boundaries fossilized by centuries of feminist theoretical endeavours which had bounded the disparate and unique women's discourses under the aegis of feminist solidarity.

Therefore, in the attempt to redefine the boundaries of feminism, the deliberative approach is the best first step towards realizing truly counterhegemonic discourse that transcends the bounds of Western-centric conceptions. However, to take the steps toward a deliberative approach requires an exercise of humility for all the parties involved, including a willingness to question their own long-held beliefs and presuppositions. This will achieve greater inclusiveness in the deliberative processes which will gain feminists more allies in the effort to challenge male domination. As shown in terms of the assertiveness of women who subscribe to gender-differentiated roles, they bring to the fore more 'innovative' strategies,

¹⁹⁸ Loomba, "Dead Women Tell No Tales", 2006, p318

which include the subversion of conservative norms from within the patriarchal structure itself that would not trap postcolonial feminisms in a hegemonic discourse of East-West binary. Feminism will still be at the forefront in championing women's empowerment in general by not restricting the conception of empowerment to the dictates of seemingly universal values.

5. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to study in depth the limitations of the postcolonial feminist paradigm in order to show how the ‘Third World’ feminisms are still confined to the same vocabulary and underlying principles that are integral to the feminist paradigm itself. In a sense, this paper is a critique of postcolonial feminisms’ failure to go deeper in terms of critiquing the foundational principles of the feminist theoretical framework. I argued that as long as the empowerment of women is defined narrowly according to the ideals of ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’, they act as rigid boundaries that form the contours of the feminist theoretical framework. Thus, any discourse on women or women’s movement that identifies itself as a feminist movement necessarily subscribe to these ideals in solidarity, or rather conformity, with the larger feminist network. Feminists’ attachment to these principles and ideals become problematic when women have other self-definitions and means of empowerment that have little to do with the notions of ‘emancipation’ and ‘equality’.

The presupposition embedded within the feminist framework is that women should be predisposed to reject conservative or traditional values that subject them to male dominance in any sphere. The assumption also entails that women will choose to be emancipated from patriarchal structures and pursue gender equality. By being restricted to these ‘ideals’ that form the fundamentals of feminist discourse, women are not able to effectively articulate women’s conditions that do not subscribe to these ideals from a feminist perspective. Hence, their self-definitions and self-understandings remain outside of the discursive framework.

This is clearly seen in the case of SIS in Malaysia, where Islamic feminists’ explanation for women who subscribe to values and norms espoused by the more conservative Islamic movements is that these women are, for some reason, submissive to male dominance. However, while this may be the case for some women, surely, women’s participation in

Islamic movements cannot all be generalized as such. In fact, as in depth studies by some academics have shown, women within patriarchal systems do advance challenges to male dominance but for purposes that have little to do with ‘emancipation’ or ‘equality’.

What exacerbates the problem is that given the context of a paternalistic state which espouses a culturally essentialist construction of Malay-Muslim womanhood, and which subscribes to gender-bias conservative interpretation of religion, responses of Islamic feminists are seen as efforts to ‘Westernize’ society by these conservative elements. Therefore, a discourse that pits feminist universality against state cultural essentialism forms the hegemonic framework that governs the discourse of women in Islam. The voices of the Muslim women who neither subscribe to feminist ideals nor pander completely to state version of Islamic conservatism are silenced by being framed out of the hegemonic framework.

Therefore, this thesis ends with a proposal that feminists, especially postcolonial feminists, adopt a more deliberative rather than a prescriptive approach to understanding women’s struggles. A more deliberative approach that includes multiple critics is more conducive to the goal of redefining the boundaries of feminism in order to make it more inclusive. A more inclusive process would possibly generate a more inclusive theoretical framework that transcends Eurocentric precepts by challenging long-held assumptions about women. It also creates opportunities for the development of a new feminist vocabulary that does not confine feminist analysis to Eurocentric universalisms.

The argument that the feminist paradigm should be expanded rests on the belief that while it is prudent to admit the limitations of feminism it is just as impetuous to completely disregard feminism as a viable framework for understanding women’s agency. This is because despite its Eurocentric tendencies, feminism as theory is well developed in terms of discursive strategies and it has a well-established vocabulary of resistance towards male oppression. As

a theoretical framework, feminism has the potential to be truly counter-hegemonic in the sense that it not only advances a critique on gender but also a critique of imperialism. In terms of praxis, feminism provides women with a well-connected network of support. In this sense, feminism has the potential to be truly inclusive and pervasive in pushing for the betterment of women's conditions. Therefore, the aim is not to abandon the feminist framework altogether but to make it more inclusive by expanding its scope. Further expanding the scope of feminism, in turn, involves identifying rigidities in the structure of the feminist paradigm so as to stretch its boundaries. Only when its perimeters are stretched to accommodate not only differing strategies and interests but also ideals, can women's struggles and motivations be perceived through feminist lenses without necessarily acquiring or privileging Western-centric universalisms that do not speak to the differences between women.

The reason that feminism will always remain a viable framework in terms of advancing women's causes and ameliorating women's conditions is that it also provides a framework of solidarity for women that transcend class, ethnic, cultural or geographical boundaries. However, in spite of the optimistic view of feminisms' prospects, this project is also cautions against mistaking solidarity for restrictive conformity. In trying to build a more comprehensive manifesto for women the world over, feminists must always be wary not to mistake uniformity for solidarity in trying to prescribe a standard goal of feminism at the expense of truly paying attention to difference.

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