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Negotiating Feminist Identities in Islam: Questions and Conversations for an
International Feminisms Project Introduction

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*"Over the last two decades, the question that has occupied many feminist theorists has
been: 'how should issues of historical and cultural specificity inform both the analytics
and politics of any feminist project?' While the question has led to serious attempts at
integrating issues of sexual, racial, class, and national difference, questions regarding
religious difference have remained relatively unexplored. The vexing relationship
between feminism and religion is perhaps most manifest in discussions of Islam [due in
part to] the challenges that contemporary Islamist movements pose to secular-liberal
politics of which feminism has been an integral (if critical) part." (Saba Mahmood,
2005: 1)*

Mahmood's scholarship (from which the above quote was selected) finds itself in
growing and increasingly divided company. For feminist theorists asking themselves
questions such as the ones raised above, there is an impetus to inaugurate new languages
and politics of cross-cultural cooperation among activists for women's rights. Indeed,
feminist discourses have enabled new elocutions of counter-patriarchal resistance
characterized by recognition of difference and the multiplicity of women's experience.
However, while the scholarship on feminist politics cognizant of and sensitive to
racial,[1] class, or national difference has enjoyed considerable attention in recent years
(Minh-Hah, 1987; Mohanty, 1987, 1991, 2000; Lionnet, 1989; Sinha, Guy, Woollacott,
1999), as Mahmood asserts, if ever there were uneasy bed-mates it is religious belief and
feminist criticism. How to navigate the contentious and more often than not antagonistic
spaces where feminism and religion tend to meet is an area requiring much close and
nimble study.

In this paper, I embark on a limited estimation of the debate surrounding the
'Islamic feminism' movement, which has grown in popularity in the Middle East and
other places where women confess Islamic belief and feminist consciousness/activism.
My aim is to consider what sorts of questions this debate may open for the international
feminisms project, to map some of the intersections across plains of difference where

situated knowledges and identities may bring "secular" and religiously-motivated feminisms together. The focus of the following pages is the struggles and contributions of women from Islamic states to the 'international feminisms' project – a term I am using somewhat anachronistically. In studying the history of feminisms east of the Mediterranean I found a wealth of literature on the debatable impact of 'Western' feminism in the region and how indigenous' Middle Eastern feminisms could be said to be.[2] This debate, I suggest, is of limited value. More relevant is the question of how feminisms on either side of the Mediterranean came to affect each other. Moreover, the interplay of Orientalism with patriarchies across borders – both real and imagined – has a significant history, the effects of which have since remained and continue to impact the lives of women in all parts of the world today. For this reason, "feminism without borders" is relevant to the debate surrounding Islamic and secular feminisms in the Middle East, and vice versa. I conclude with thoughts meant to provoke questions on (hybridity of) identity, imagined community, and notions of 'solidarity across borders' by interrogating regnant Westerncentric conceptions of ethical-political being. Such (re)evaluations, I suggest, offer radically transformative possibilities to an international feminisms project not lumbered by universalist or totalizing discourses – though not necessarily privileging difference over commonality, nonetheless cognizant of the hybridity of the histories and social/political spaces in which women locate their gender activism.

A framework for 'International feminisms'

When Chandra Talpade Mohanty returned to her seminal thesis in "Under Western Eyes" (Mohanty, 1987) almost twenty years later, she clarified her original intent, which had been misinterpreted since "Under Western Eyes" first appeared.[3] In her re-evaluation, she states plainly her aversion to the subsequent "postmodernist appropriation" of her work, and cultural relativist approaches to international studies (and studies of international feminisms in particular), as well as the commonly construed notion that "Under Western Eyes" was a call for Western feminists to cease and desist from cross-cultural studies. Rather, she had written with optimism for a new era of sensitivity, of decolonizing scholarship, and commonality across difference "within a framework of

solidarity and shared values" (Mohanty, 2003: 224). Mohanty's framework for an international feminist project is grounded in the notion that "in knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining" (Mohanty, 226). She is referring here to the current state of 'Third-First World' feminisms, and other forms of resistance to oppression, but her statement is relevant to the history of that relationship, as evidenced by the Egyptian case.

A feminism by any other name…

In a study of Egyptian women and women's activism, Nadje Al-Ali engages in an extensive discussion of the term 'feminism' and what it means to women who care about women's rights in Egypt.[4] She conversed with many young women, as well as veterans and more prominent activists, to discover 'where their feminism comes from' and what that word signifies for them. She discovers a linguistic tension which reflects unsettled dichotomies and old colonial wounds. In fact, she writes, the English version of the word invokes "antagonism and anxiety" (Al-Ali, 3). In Arabic, the term *al-haraka al-nissa'iyya* (the women's movement) is somewhat less off-putting than *al-hakara al-nassa'wiyya* (the feminist movement).

Margot Badran (2005) stresses the importance of distinguishing between identities, analytical modes, and descriptive/categorical modes. She uses Miriam Cooke's "speaking positions" to get past problems with identity. According to Cooke, "[i]f identity is the recognition of sameness with some difference from others, then we have many identities. To retain a sense of wholeness, we usually assert only one of many possible identities, the one that gives authority at the moment of its assertion. This speaking position is not an identity, but rather an ascribed or chosen identification" (Cooke, 2001: 54). Although the 'feminist' identification has acquired negative associations for Egyptian women – successfully, since 'women activists' themselves admonish it – this has not stopped women from engaging in the activity. For this reason, Badran applies the term to women who "act like feminists," who "assert themselves and

their rights as women" (Badran, 2005: 13). Moreover, they are *gender-conscious* and are *active* in demanding these rights.

An Historical Perspective

This study, like Al-Ali's is concerned with identities and their outcomes, but an investigation of the significance of identities would be lost without some understanding of the historical contexts from which they emerge. I find value in Mohanty's observation that "narratives of historical experience are crucial to political thinking not because they present an unmediated version of the 'truth' but because they can destabilize received truths and locate debate in the complexities and contradictions of historical life" (244). Thus, the focus of the following pages is not a 'recovery of history' *per se* but a critical examination of the received narrative and relocation of the "narratives of marginalized peoples in terms of relationality rather than separation" (ibid., 244-45).

By and large, the two Islamic countries which have received the most feminist historical scholarly attention are Iran and Egypt, though in terms of women's movements over the last century, the latter has been the subject of the most extensive research. For this reason and others, it is the chosen case-study of this paper. As mentioned, 'feminism' is regarded with reproach by most Egyptian women who, in Al-Ali's experience, are feminists in all but the name. This is the direct result of particular events and distortions in Egypt's colonial past.

From consciousness to action: women and writing in turn of the century Egypt

Gender-conscious literature calling for reformation in the patriarchal Egyptian system has a considerable tradition that is only now being recovered and acknowledged. This retrieval of women's history has important implications for the debate over 'authenticity,' not least because it uncovers complexity that is so frequently glossed over, most often for political reasons. As one young woman told Al-Ali: "Our struggle dates back much longer than Huda Sha'rawi [early twentieth-century Egyptian feminist commonly associated with the dawn of Egyptian feminism]. I would not frame it in a particular time, not Western or non-Western... Framing [our struggle] into a kind of

dichotomy is harmful... We need to break through this" (Al-Ali, 81). Indeed, as Cooke suggests, the various webs entwining identity with blood, language, history, and religion are contingent and constructed, and deserve discussion not limited to binaries "Western or non-Western" (Cooke, 2001:53).

Because history and the study of it has worked notoriously hard to erase the voices of women, traces of women's resistance in the Middle East prior to the turn of the century is not easy to come by.[5]   As language would have it, we get a better sense of women's (and men's) gender consciousness through the writings of Egyptian feminists around the turn of the century, when the advent of print journalism in Egypt gave women a new outlet to preach their message, albeit less available to them than to the men of their generation. It should be noted, as well, that for the most part upper-class, educated women were granted access to these resources, though grappling with class-struggle did not escape their intellectual ambit. Seclusion, polygamy, discriminatory divorce laws, and the right to education were among the more salient topics to draw women to the pen; however, as Baron points out "an examination of the positions and aspirations of women writers in the early years of the women's press shows that the phrase 'the rights of woman' had many meanings and that the views of female intellectuals also covered a wide range" (Baron, 1994: 104).

Mai Ziyada, one of the first Arab women to eulogize her colleagues, wrote biographies of Bahithad al-Badiya (1920), Aisha al-Taimuriya (1924), and a speech about Warda al-Yaziji that was published in 1924 in the mainstream weekly *Al-Muqtataf*. Such studies can be seen to constitute the foundations of a tradition of Arab women writers, and illustrate the significance of the correspondence between them. Ziyada credits Aisha al-Taimuriya as being the first, among both men and women, to advocate 'equality' between the sexes. Taimuriya, one of the earliest women to publish her writings, communicated her negotiation with her patriarchal environment through prose, but was also known to have corresponded with other women intellectuals in harem through poetry, notably Syrian poet Warda al-Yaziji (Badran and Cooke, 125).[6]

In 1891, Zainab Fawwaz wrote a response to the newspaper *Lubnan* entitled 'Fair and Equal Treatment' urging the recognition of women's abilities, their equal treatment, and the rejection of essentialism (Badran and Cooke, 220). She argued that, contrary to the belief that the entrance of women into the public sphere would 'disrupt the laws of nature,' "this transformation would not occur through employing women in men's occupations or men in women's occupations." History, she argued, had proven her point, illustrated by "the likes of Cleopatra, Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, Elizabeth, and others who have come before us." (ibid., 224). Such passages reveal an understanding of the hybridity of the feminist heritage; meanwhile still others indicate an eye to the future of the women's movement: "In any case, the persistence of woman in demanding advancement until she obtains her rights is not to be considered a crime. Rather, posterity will glorify her and she will be remembered with words of gratitude for opening the doors of success to her sisters." (ibid., 226)[7]

The following year, Hind Nawfal launched *Al-Fatah*, a women's publication, out of Cairo. *Al-Fatah* professed "no goal in political matters, no aim in religious controversies" but a mission "to defend the rights of the deprived and draw attention to the obligations due."[8] In 1909, she asked her readers to consider "how many women were noted for their intelligence and perfection, whose learning was not dependent on that of men. How many courageous women were like Joan of Arc, philosophers like Hypatia and poets like al-Khansa?" *Al-Fatah* was among the first in an extensive collection of women's publications to appear around this time, all of which mainly circulated out of Cairo and Alexandria (Badran and Cooke, xxi).

Autobiography and personal experiences were the dominant fodder for most polemical and political writings. In Egypt, a community of influential women, including Huda Sha'rawi, Nabawiya Musa, Bahithad al-Badiyya (or "Seeker in the desert," the pen-name of Malak Hifni Nassef), Mai Zayyida, and later Doria Shafik, to name but a handful, launched impressive activist campaigns, held lectures on gender equity and women's rights (often attended by European women), and were published in both their own organizations' monthlies and in national newspapers. Their writings lay bare their very different personal, and always painful,[9] experiences in Egypt's patriarchal society

of the day, and at what point these experiences became political. Huda Sha'rawi's description of her first brushes with patriarchy in Egyptian society is one that resonates throughout feminists' accounts of their own 'awakenings.' She describes resentment towards her brother as they were both growing up, and the differential treatment he enjoyed as the only boy. She also expresses resentment towards her own female sex, which she found confined her to her skin in a disquieting way (Sha'rawi, 1879-1947, transl. Badran, 1987: 40-41).[10]

The first Egyptian women to explicitly call themselves feminists were the founders of the Egyptian Feminist Union, lead by Sha'rawi, though these women typically used the French *feministe*. Bahithat al-Badiyya was the first to use the Arabic *nisaiyat* in both her writings and her public addresses (Badran and Cooke, xviii).   Her speeches and essays which appeared in *Al-Jarida* were published in 1910 under the title *'Al-Nasaiyat'* (Feminist Pieces). When Bahithad al-Badiyya succumbed at only 32 years of age to influenza in 1918, Huda Shaarawi delivered her eulogy – which was to be her first feminist speech.[11]

The years before and after Egyptian independence in 1919 saw an auspicious upsurge in feminist public expression and critique and the emergence of an entire(ly) female literary culture. Doria Shafik described the historic significance of these decades: "We are witnessing a great turning point that constitutes the crisis traversed by the woman of today: a passage from one moment to another of her history, a substitution of a new reality for another reality" (Nelson, 31). The one moment that is recalled again and again as the pinnacle of the Egyptian feminist movement is Sha'rawi's public removal of her veil upon returning from the International Women's Conference in Rome in 1923. Her writings, moreover, are consistently referred to and hold an elevated status in the scholarship of Egyptian feminism, most prominently *Harem Years: The memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist* (1945). Sha'rawi's memoirs recount a complex assortment of influences, including her close friend and esteemed mentor, Mme. Richard-Rushdi, a French ex-patriot and herself a practicing Muslim (Sha'rawi, 81).[12] Nevertheless, she is also a target of feminists and anti-feminists alike, who claim she is merely a product of

a wealthy Westernized upbringing, that she and her followers foisted an 'alien' discourse upon the women and the nation of Egypt.

'Colonial Feminism'

Margot Badran responds to efforts to discredit Middle Eastern secular feminisms – namely, by de-legitimizing them as clones of 'Western feminism' (whatever that is) and colonialist intrusion into Islamic 'authentic' culture (whatever that is) – by stressing both the "home-grown" nature of Middle Eastern feminisms as well as the fluidity of feminisms, the ways in which "feminisms speak to each other in agreement or disagreement." This reality is too often overlooked by feminist scholars, whatever their social or geographical location.[13]

Unfortunately, this conversation between feminisms was not always congenial or constructive. For the first part of the twentieth century, Middle Eastern women's voices were subsumed under nationalist and anti-imperialist battles. Meanwhile, their bodies were the centre around which these conflicts revolved, always returning to the contest over the 'subjugation of women', often ignoring what women were actually saying and negating whatever efforts they were making to elaborate and realize the terms of their own justice.

I am here primarily informed here by Leila Ahmed's critical evaluation of Egyptian feminist history. Though her study is of Middle Eastern women's narratives in all their diversity, she narrows her focus on the last century to the Egyptian experience. As mentioned, the turn of the century witnessed monumental changes in the ethical-political lives of Egyptian women, as more were striving for higher education and entering public discourse in unprecedented ways. This was also a time of deep nationalism and antagonism toward the British colonial presence. The British in Egypt were resolved to maintain their grip on the Suez, and resorted to subversive tactics – besides wholesale cruelty – to entrench their power.

It was at this time that Lord Cromer, the British High Representative in Egypt, magnanimously took it upon himself to champion the cause of Egyptian women.

Meanwhile, back home he was co-founder and sometime president of The Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage (Ahmed, 153). He wrote extensively on the "barbarism" with which Islam treated its women, the evils of the veil, and what this displayed about the backwardness of the religion as a whole. "The degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten into the whole system of Islam" (cited in Ahmed,152).[14]

The language of Victorian-age feminists was surreptitiously wrested from them and used to justify the colonial project and 'civilizing mission.' Ahmed calls this 'Colonial Feminism' (Ahmed, 151), and worries that it has never been fully eradicated. "Even as the Victorian male establishment devised theories to contest the claims of feminism [in Europe]," she writes, "it captured the language of feminism and redirected it, in the service of colonialism, toward Other men and the cultures of Other men" (ibid., 151). According to Moghissi, "[t]he Muslim woman was to be exploited by Muslim man but protected from enslavement by the Western man; she was to be liberated from her own ignorance and her culture's cruelty" (Moghissi,16). This tactic represented the marriage of patriarchy with Orientalism and racism.

This manipulation was not only directed from Europe east, but worked in both directions. As Moghissi explains, the condemnation of Islam was combined with a curious fascination if not disturbing obsession with the East and the symbols of its otherness – the harem, the veil, polygamy, etc. – which "helped obscure and legitimize sexual and cultural repression of women of Europe, their non-person status and the sexual double standard" (Moghissi, 16). Thus Colonial Feminism – perhaps better named Colonial appropriation of feminism – turned feminism on its head to suppress European feminists while it masqueraded as an advocate for Muslim women's rights.

The effect of this history has been the marginalization of feminisms in Egyptian public consciousness. To this day, feminism retains the suspicious smell of colonialism. As a result, writes Al-Ali, women have internalized patriarchal interpretation of feminism, as "men-hating, aggressive, possibly lesbian (though most likely to be obsessed with sex), *and certainly Westernized*," (Al-Ali, 4; emphasis added) – aside from

the latter, a caricature strikingly similar to the Western construct of a 'fire-breathing' feminist.

Beyond the 'Westernized' feminist

This stigma on Egyptian feminism corresponds with what Mohanty has observed as 'Third World' internalization of Western patriarchal assumptions: "Perhaps it is no longer simply an issue of Western eyes, but rather how the West is inside and continually reconfigures globally, racially, and in terms of gender" (Mohanty, 236). Because of limitations imposed by such methods as 'Western-baiting', Middle Eastern women, whether they 'act like feminists' or not, are subject to imposed and reductivist definitions of their identities. This stigma is compounded by the fact that feminism is thought to detract from 'greater' issues of nationalism and globalized capitalism. In the past, the women's movement in Egypt was often viewed as a threat to anti-colonization; today feminists are seen as threats to the counter-capitalist struggle.

This process works in much the same way that Colonial Feminism did: it dismisses the agency of Egyptian women, this time by calling Egyptian feminism a mere imitation of the 'genuine article'. It assumes that Egyptian women either have never been exposed to oppression or have never acted against it – both of which are false. As one of Al-Ali's younger informants put it, with a hint of resentment: "As if rebellion, freedom, dignity, and awareness are privileges that Arab women cannot have, and if they do, then they are imitating the West... I am daily oppressed by class relations as well as by patriarchy. I do not need an American woman to tell me this" (Al-Ali, p 49).

To move past this, Al-Ali suggests that what needs to be dismantled is the notion of a monolithic West and the homogenous category of Westernizers (Al-Ali, 32). This is likely to help, but such an effort would be well-complemented, and thus fortified, by a reaffirmation of the indigenous nature of Egyptian feminism. 'Western-baiting' would cease to have any grounding were the history of Egyptian feminisms truly appreciated for what it is. From reading the articles and speeches of early Egyptian female intellectuals – both Islamic and secular – one can detect an awareness, if not preoccupation, with the

need to avert such tactics by continuously emphasizing women's histories in Islamic cultures. Indeed, many Egyptian feminist writing between the turn of the century and into the 1950's worked to historicize their foremothers' contributions to the Islamic tradition, including the leadership, spirituality, and material power of ancestral women, and to enlighten the general public in this regard. "By locating golden ages for women in the past, they hoped to show that the idea of the rights of woman was part of their own history and therefore make it more accessible" (Baron, 1994: 106).[15] At the same time, an equally conscious effort was made to write the histories of the 'daughters of the East' and their 'Western sisters' in many ways as *one history*; often juxtaposing the relatively advanced status of women in Islamic and Arab societies at various moments in history compared with elsewhere, including European and South-East Asian civilizations. Central to the Egyptian women's movement was a hermeneutics of recuperation in the mythological and exegital literature of early Islam. In this way, they wrote to recontextualize their experiences within a radically transgressive anti-patriarchal, counter-Orientalist discourse.[16] Ahmed suggests that the shift from Jahiliya to Islam may not have been as radically liberatory to women as many Arab-Islamic intellectuals insisted (Ahmed, 42-44). I would suggest, however, that this is in many ways immaterial: for one, there is no clear indication whether or not this had anything to do specifically with the rise of Islam or other global or local developments; and second, what's more important is that Egyptian feminist intellectuals were able to reclaim and restore a history that had been so long used to repress them. The point, again, is not to arrive at some ultimate 'truth' at the proverbial core of these histories, but to demonstrate that many truths are possible, that certain narratives have been marginalized and other privileged, resulting in political-institutional injustice.

None of the arguments made here that Egyptian feminism is indigenous are meant to suggest that it developed in a vacuum. While this is frequently acknowledged in the Egyptian literature, the same must be said of European feminisms. As Badran observes, "Middle Eastern feminisms affect the world outside and exhibit connectivity with feminisms elsewhere. The West is not the patrimonial home of feminisms from which all feminisms derive and against which they must be measured. Indeed, Middle Eastern

feminisms generated a critique of Western 'imperial feminism'" (Badran, 10). Her use of the word 'outside' is perhaps not helpful (and her use of the word 'patrimonial' may be very deliberate), but her point is well taken: feminism is anything but a Western invention.

On the heritage of Egyptian feminisms, Al-Ali writes:

> "[t]he debate over 'foremothers' versus 'forefathers' [in reference to Qasim Amin]... and the cultural background of 'the parents'... could be resolved by replacing 'a single parent' with a 'bi-cultural couple' – thereby allowing for the possibility that the women's movement was born to a combination of ideas, values, and traditions. A different way of thinking about the intellectual origin of the women's movement, and consequently any kind of political struggle or contestation, would allow for a cultural encounter that is not merely confrontational and exclusive, but creative and incorporating" (Al-Ali, 59).

It is important that more writers and activists who claim an investment in the 'international feminisms' project make this realization. Badran's statement sits comfortably with Al-Ali's notion of the 'bi-cultural' parentage of many Middle Eastern feminisms, and should be coupled with an awareness on the part of Western feminists of the effects that Eastern feminisms have had in Western history. This mode of thought also corresponds with the type that Mohanty advocates for.

A closer look at 'Islamic feminism'

Islamism may be considered a 'modern' movement in the sense that the era of Egyptian 'modernization' predates, and in many ways prescribes it. From another perspective, secular feminism and its Islamic version may be understood as historically cohabitant and in many ways mutually sustaining discourses. As early as 1908, for instance, Fatima Rashid called for fellow activists to look to the time of the Prophet and the discourses on women prevalent at that time; Rashid founded the group Jam'iyyat Tarquiyat al-Mar'a to urge women to return to religion for liberation, and especially to don the veil to "guard the symbol of our grandmothers" (Baron, 1994: 113).

Islamic feminists and secular feminists are generally in agreement about the importance of 'rights'; how to go about claiming those rights, however, and the foundational arguments used, is where they differ. At the turn of the century, for instance, many Muslim women writers generally preferred "the slow reform of Malik Hifni Nasef ('Bahithad al-Badiyya') to the secularism of Qasim Amin"; while modernists focused on expansion of the education system and reform of marriage and divorce laws, Islamists aligned themselves with the enforcement of Islamic laws, "encouraging women to know their rights, not to modify them" (Baron, 1994: 112). Baron notes, however, that the line between the two often blurred, and that "modernists and Islamist positions often differed more in emphasis than in substance" (ibid., 111). They also tend to disagree on the role of women in the social order, though, from what I've gathered, this discrepancy exists as much among Islamic and secular feminists as between them.

Historians differ in their respective topologies of these movements. For my purposes, I found Beth Baron's the most useful. She identifies three rather than two branches of the women's movement at the turn of the century: the first is the secularist strategy, which "restricts religion to private life and emphasizes religiously neutral subjects such as education and domesticity"; the second involved working within the religious (Islamic) framework and "slowly assimilating acceptance modern influences and reforming Islamic law through innovative interpretation"; and the third strategy "challenged secularists, modernists, and conservatives alike [to] work for an Islamic revival that purged foreign influences and religious accretion" (Baron, 1994: 121).

Islamic feminism was only widely recognized (outside the Muslim world) as an emerging discourse during the 1990's (Badran, 2005: 6, Moghissi, 2002: 127), particularly during the first American invasion of Iraq and the Gulf War. About twenty years earlier, Edward Said's *Orientalism* drew scholarly attention to a Western fantasy of the 'Islamic world' that had fortified a barrier along an imaginary border. The 1990's saw a 're-Orienting' trend on both sides of this border. In the West, images of veiled women once again took centre-stage. Reminiscent of British Colonial Feminism in Egypt, Westerners were again imbued with a need to 'rescue' Islamic women from oppression, coupled with a self-congratulatory attitude of superiority that somehow

"softened the shame of the West as a violent, clumsy bully" (Moghissi, 2002: 41). It is no coincidence that Islamic feminism emerged at this moment of fierce identity politics.[17]

Muslim women found themselves once again at the intersection of opposing and essentializing discourses. The rift between the secular and the religious grew deeper as the former was retrenched 'imperialist' and 'intrusive' and the latter 'backwards' and 'barbaric.' At no point did the need for women to dismantle patriarchy go away. Rather, that struggle reorganized itself. It had reached a point of needing to find a new language, to adjust to new political realities, so that its message could still be heard. The answer to this need came in the form of Islamic feminism – a label, it should be added, many of these women reject, conscious of the associations of 'feminism,' and opposed to them.

But the history of Islamic feminism has roots that run deeper than the Gulf War or the intifadah. There is no telling how long Muslim women have been calling for equity from the pages of the Quran, but it may be argued that the modern manifestation of Islamic feminism is more closely tied to the secular feminist movement than the more recent wave of Islamicization. Consider one prominent leader of this growing movement: Zeinab al-Ghazali was a young student of Huda Sha'rawi when she broke from the EFU and formed her own organization. At eighteen, she came to the conclusion that Islam provided everything – including freedom, and economic, legal, political, and public and private rights – and founded the Muslim Women's Association (MWA). The stated goal of the MWA is "to acquaint the Muslim woman with her religion so she would be convinced by means of study that the women's liberation movement is a deviant innovation that occurred because of the backwardness of Muslims.... [T]hey must remove this backwardness from their shoulders and rise up as their religion commands" (Ahmed,198).

In an interview with al-Ghazali, Leila Ahmed asked her about the place of women in Islam. Al-Ghazali asserted that a woman's place is in her home (though that rule does not apply to herself, given her particular mission), but that no woman should be restricted

from public life "if she then has free time." Ahmed is concerned that al-Ghazali's Islam is not pursued for spiritual fulfillment, but for the sake of, as al-Ghazali put it, "power, glory, and a properly regulated society... to give control of the whole world to Islam" (Ahmed, 198). Al-Ghazali, and many like her, discount feminism as imperialism and secular feminists as blind followers of Western standards. Al-Ali is quick to point out the dichotomous thrust of such rhetoric and the construction of a homogenous Western other that Rauf and al-Ghazali's brand of Islam creates itself against. Indeed, it does little more than replicate the universalist claims of colonialism.

On matters of converging identities Haideh Moghissi asks, "if Islam and feminism are compatible, which one has to operate within the framework of the other?" She is critical of the notion of 'Islamic feminism' both as an identity and an ideology. " How could a religion," she demands, "which is based on gender hierarchy be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women's equality?" (Moghissi, 126). Moghissi is concerned not only about Islamic feminism in itself, but the contradictions she finds in it, and the discourse that is evolving around it, particularly in postmodernist circles. She writes:

> "... as an alternative to the more passive image, a new notion of Muslim women is constructed which is as essentializing and as irrelevant to the realities of the overwhelming majority of women in these [Islamic] countries as it was in typical Orientalist writings... Muslim women, therefore, represent an indigenous non-Westoxicated model of liberated women to all women in these societies.... My concern is that in the name of validating women's 'self-perception' and hearing 'women's voices,' only the voices of particular groups of women are heard and that then these voices are broadcast as the unanimous expression of 'women in Islamic societies'" (ibid,: 41-42).

In other words, simply because some women are articulating their empowerment in Islamic terms does not mean that all women in Islamic societies have the same opportunities. In fact, their opportunities are diminished when the experiences of Islamic feminists are mistaken as representing all Muslim women.

Miriam Cooke responds to Moghissi in her own study of the Islamist feminist movement. According to Cooke, Moghissi's argument fails by confounding "Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, as though the two were the same. This slippage leads her to assert that there is a general pressure today to affirm Islam, regardless of whether or not one believes in it, so as to gain credibility." She goes on to suggest instead that Islamic feminists "are refusing the boundaries others try to draw around them so as to better police them. They are claiming that Islam is not necessarily more traditional or authentic than any other identification, nor is it any more violent or patriarchal than any other religion." Most importantly, especially for the purposes at hand, these women are "learning how to take advantage of the transnationalism of Islam to empower themselves as women and as Muslims. From their *multiple situations*, they are critiquing the global, local, and domestic institutions they consider damaging to them as women, as Muslims, and as citizens of their countries and of the world, while remaining wary of outsiders' desires to co-opt their struggle" (Cooke, 61; emphasis added).

Another student of Sha'rawi's, Doria Shafik, has been considered by some the 'secular' counterpart to Al-Ghazali, the progenitor of the more Western-facing branch of the women's movement. However, from Baron's tripartite topography rather than other scholars' dualistic analysis, Shafik is in many ways an 'Islamic feminist.' If she is 'Westernized' because she studied at the Sorbonne, she is 'Islamic' within the second group Baron identifies (reformist, pushing for 'innovative interpretation'), not least for having devoted her doctoral thesis to reconciling the 'woman question' with Islamic teachings (Nelson, 74). Moreover, like the women intellectuals before her, Shafik's mission encompassed the bridging of gaps not only between Islam and modernism, but between her cultural and intellectual footings in both France and Egypt (ibid., 74). It becomes more evident, then, that 'Islamic feminism' is an identification situated within a multiplicity of norms and contexts, none of which may be called *the* Islamic feminism.

 Towards a framework for International Feminisms

When thinking about the Islamic feminist subject-position, what is most striking in the 'final' (at least in terms of this project) analysis is the broad range of particular

experiences this identity is meant to encompass. One challenge I anticipate with future engagements with this topic is traversing notions of identity that generalize without totalizing and particularize without isolating. In other words – that is, C. T. Mohanty's – "How we think of the local in/of the global and vice versa without falling into colonizing or cultural relativist platitudes about difference is crucial in this intellectual and political landscape" (2001, 229).

I would not dismiss the merit of Moghissi's warnings about the limits of cultural relativism (or what she understands as, and terms, 'postmodernism'). Indeed, it presents another totalizing discourse, as paternalistic as previous trends in universalist Western scholarship, for its tendency to forfeit and recoil in the name of 'cultural' or 'traditional' preservation, knowing all the while that global power-structures are such that it remains within the province of one side of the West/Other binary (such as it exists) to assimilate or preserve the other at its discretion. Nothing is different within this relation of power in terms of direction, only technique. It is within such a discourse that the language of 'backwardness' of certain cultures is at its most salient and limiting.

I break with Moghissi, however, in assuming that to identify the limits of this line of criticism automatically eliminates the possibility of thinking of Islamic feminists as anything other than mere pawns, participants in 'patriarchal bargaining,' or even complicit in sustaining patriarchal norms. Rather, relativism (now perhaps better called 'value-pluralism') needn't declare de facto loyalty to the 'rights' of so-called 'traditional' cultures/groups to go unchanged and unchanging (as if to revere some idyllic notion of such cultures' would-be 'natural' course), even at the expense of those who self-identify within such cultures and are engaging in radically transgressive, transformative ethical-political activity.

Cultural relativism, moreover, reflects another kind of hegemonic projection – that is, it ignores all kinds of very complex social and cultural locations in which women negotiate their identities, and identify with other/Other women. There is no denying the importance of asserting and acknowledging difference and particularity. I suggest,

however, that that project would be only half-complete without also acknowledging intertwining histories and the plurality and regular instability of identities.

From my own experience, this is precisely what many Islamic feminists are working to do. In this study, the history of the early Egyptian feminists was taken up in part to demonstrate this, as well as the effort on the part of many intellectuals, both 'secular' and 'Islamic,' to revive women's histories in Islam and re-imagine the heterogeneity of women's voices. Today, this project is still of vital importance to 'interpreting women' in terms of their spiritual and intellectual engagement with Islamic texts in an attempt to salvage them from hegemonic patriarchal readings. In various parts of the world where Islam is practiced, many women who identify themselves as 'Islamic feminists' are creating subversive spaces that both reject Orientalist scripting and 'traditional' (or, as it often turns out, not so traditional) cultural patriarchal norms.[18] This project involves an on-going hermeneutics of recuperation and retrieval to reassign the value of Islamic women's histories, the Quranic feminine, and the signification of the veil.

A Herstory of Hybridity

"Plurality [is] thus a political ideal as much as it [is] a methodological slogan. But... a nagging question [remains]: How do we negotiate between my history and yours? How would it be possible for us to recover our commonality, not the humanist myth of our shared human attributes which are meant to distinguish us all from animals, but more significantly, the imbrication of our various pasts and presents, the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values, material resources? It is necessary to assert our dense particularities, our lived and imagined differences. But could we afford to leave unexamined the question of how our differences are intertwined and indeed hierarchically organized? Could we, in other words, really afford to have entirely different histories, to see ourselves as living – as having lived – in entirely homogenous and discrete spaces?" (Satya Mohanty1989, 13)[19]

Satya Mohanty's sentiment in many ways elucidates much of what I tried to accomplish in the first part of this study. I undertook an historical investigation in order

to reveal a conscious project within feminist writings in turn-of-the-century Egypt to historicize the feminine in Islamic history as well as the multiplicity[20] of the feminist heritage in Egypt. This marked a reclamation of both particularity *and* hybridity of experience within Middle Eastern women's histories, and thus a recognition of "the imbrication of our various pasts and presents, the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values, [and] material resources." A reevaluation of these histories brings us closer to what Al-Ali calls a "different way of thinking about the intellectual origin of the women's movement, and consequently any kind of political struggle or contestation [which] would allow for a cultural encounter that is not merely confrontational and exclusive, but creative and incorporating" (59).

As I have showed, the languages and politics of Victorian European as well as American feminisms intersected with Middle Eastern feminisms on more than one occasion during even their earliest political/public phases. The significance of these conversations should not be underestimated, and deserve to be more vigorously explored and theorized. As Baron notes, the founders of the Egyptian women's movement were "active agents, sifting and weighing various ideas, absorbing some and reacting against others, and shaping their own agenda" (1994:7). She goes on to explain further that they represented

> "an ethnically and religiously diverse group, reflecting wide currents of Egyptian and Arab society, and their journals presented a wide range of views. They were no doubt aware of the Western colonial discourse, or more properly discourses, on gender but were not completely swayed by them. These wrestled with ideas in a critical fashion and grappled like other intellectuals of their day with problems of culture, identity, and change," (ibid., 7-8)

 ADVANCE \u 6   Such reevaluations of identity[21] as I have been discussing open numerous possible avenues for thinking about an ethics and politics within which one could conceptualize a framework for an international feminisms project not saddled by cultural relativism or hegemonic projection. Where dichotomies and difference can be imagined, they can be reimagined.

Mauritanian literary critic Francoise Lionnet devised an experimental theoretical model for reading these multiplicities within and slippages of identities – a concept called "metissage" introduced into cultural poetics by Martinican writer Eduoard Glissant.[22] Lionnet argues that *metissage*, the braiding together of cultural forms, can open up a space where histories that have been occluded can find expression and where essentialism can be replaced by diversity and movement. She writes:

> "Within the conceptual apparatuses that have governed our labelling of ourselves and others, a space is thus opening where multiplicity and diversity are affirmed.... a sheltering site, one that can nurture our differences without encouraging us to withdraw into new dead ends, without enclosing us within facile oppositional practices or sterile denunciations and disavowals. For it is only by imagining *nonheirarchical modes of relation among cultures* that we can address the crucial issues of indeterminacy and solidarity... We can be united against hegemonic power only by refusing to engage that power on its own terms, since to do so would mean becoming ourselves a term within that system of power. We have to articulate new visions for ourselves, new concepts that allow us to think *otherwise*, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very condition of possibility of thought, of 'clarity,' in all of Western philosophy. *Metissage* is such a concept and a practice: it is the site of *undecidability and indeterminacy*, where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages"(Lionnet, 1989; emphasis added).[23]

I had earlier called this reformulation 'bi-parentage,' borrowed from Nadje Al-Ali. *Metissage* serves a similar purpose; it stands on the shaky ground *between* and *across*. "Lionnet's vision of a new liberatory cultural politics collapses the facile opposition between theory and practice, refuses reduction to a cog in the reigning machineries of power, and insists upon multiplicity as a radically new ground for thought. Rather than merely calling for the inversion of hegemonic power relations, her cultural politics of *metissage* demand a reformulation of the terms of debate and relation, a dispersion of power and identity into multiple locations simultaneously" (The Bible and Culture Collective, 244).

Finally, Moghissi asserts that Islamic feminism has no "coherent, self-identified, and/or easily identifiable" ideology or movement. I would suggest that this is, in fact, precisely the point.   The disagreement between users of the message board, at least, is demonstrative of this. Amina, as well, though she was unfamiliar with the term made an effort to articulate something that was her "*version* of Islamic feminism," suggesting that there may be as many versions of this feminism as there are women who practice it.

In Cooke's words:

"Islamic feminism is not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning. Actions, behaviours, pieces of writing that bridge religious and gender issues in order to create conditions in which justice and freedom may prevail do not translate into a seamless identity. Indeed, Islamic feminism works in ways that may be emblematic of postcolonial women's jockeying for space and power through the construction and manipulation of apparently incompatible, contradictory identities and positions. The term "Islamic feminist" invites us to consider what it means to have a difficult double commitment: on the one hand, to a faith position, and on the other hand, to women's rights both inside the home and outside. The label Islamic feminist brings together two epithets whose juxtaposition describes the emergence of a new, complex self-positioning that celebrates multiple belongings. To call oneself an Islamic feminist is not to describe a fixed identity but *to create a new, contingent subject position*" (Cooke, 2001: 59-60; emphasis Cooke's).

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[1]   Prominent within the discourse of race-sensitive feminisms is Womanism, a term first coined by Alice Walker to describe the Black feminist concept, arguably a branch of women's activism and writing with a longer tradition and richer development than so-called 'White' or European feminisms. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman (1990).

[2]   I use the term "Middle East" in its commonly accepted definition to include Israel and other non-Muslim societies in the area east of the Mediterranean. I acknowledge, however, that "Middle East" is not a term coined by people of the region, and is necessarily a Western construct. (Until someone of academic stature comes up with a better name, I will be left with few other alternatives.) Not all people living in the Middle East are Arab; in fact, the area called the Middle East is a vibrantly heterogeneous region. Thus, I refer to people as Middle Eastern rather than Arab unless I am speaking specifically of Arabs. When I refer to Middle Eastern people in Islamic societies, I mean just that.

[3]   Mohanty, C.T., Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing theory, practicing solidarity, Duke University Press: London (2003).

[4]   Al-Ali, N., Secularism, Gender, and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (2000).

[5]   Moghissi, for instance, dates her account of visible gender consciousness in the Middle East to Tahereh Qurrat-ol 'Ayne, a fervent Babi and learned theologian in Iran in the mid-1800s (Moghissi, 128). Other scholars, as will be examined, have traced this history as far back as 700 AD. However, an investigation worthy of this topic is beyond the scope of this essay.

[6]   Taimuriya writes with a quivering yet resolute hand, aware of her shaky steps into the realm of male discourse so long hostile to women, but freeing herself of this hesitance nonetheless, sure of the significance of her trans/ingression. Her longing to write, to write herself into the masculine discourse that had pushed her out, echoes the aspirations of the tormented female protagonist in Charlotte Perkin Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper': "In my yearnings, I used to entreat pieces of paper and the small reeds of used pens. I secluded myself, withdrawing from the people around me. I imitated the writers with my own writing, so that I could delight in hearing that screech." (Badran and Cooke, 126). Prosaic correspondence between al-Yazijiand Taimuriya were later published by Zainab Fawwaz in *Scattered Pearls.*

[7]   In 1928, Doria Shafik would describe her feeling of connection to past women and their struggles while standing before her mother's tombstone before leaving to earn her doctorate at the Sorbonne, Paris: "For the first time I did not cry. I felt the strange sensation of being the continuation of my mother's life. She was not dead, but living forever within me. This strange sensation of being on the threshold of realizing a great dream, unacknowledged but vaguely felt by generations of oppressed women, a secret buried deep within their hearts, which little by little, as within my own, would become a day of liberation" (Nelson, 30).

[8]

        From "Dawn of the Arabic Women's Press," by Hind Nawfal, translated by Beth Baron, in *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab feminist writing*, Badran, M., and

Cooke, M., eds., Virago Press: London (1990), pp 217-219. In the seventh issue of Al-Fatah, Nawfal's father announced her engagement. A few issues later her wedding was depicted and the magazine ceased publication thereafter.

[9]   As Bahithat al-Badiyya wrote in *Bad Deeds of Men* (1909), "It seems that we have not received anything more than men receive except pain. This reverses the Quranic verse that says, 'One man's share shall equal two women's shares.'"

[10]   Her recollection mirrors that of Nawal Saadawi, the foremost contemporary Egyptian feminist writer – indeed, a formidable figure of international acclaim – who depicts her 'feminist awakening': "I became a feminist when I was a child. Starting to feel the discrimination between myself and my brother, and how he was treated, how he was more privileged than I." (From Saadawi, N., "Reflections of a Feminist" in *Opening the Gates: A century of Arab Feminist Writing*, Badran and Cooke, eds., Virago Press: London (1990): p 397.) When she asked why the system was so unfair, she was told that "this was what God had said." Her first reaction to this was hostility to God and a sense that he was very unjust. Irshad Manji describes feeling a similar sense of disjunction when she began asking questions at her Madressa (Islamic school) and was shut down with a brief "Allah says so" (Manji, 2003:13-14).

[11]   In 1928, Doria Shafik won a national contest for a speech she wrote commemorating the death of Qasim Amin and was invited by Sha'rawi to deliver the speech before the Egyptian Feminist Union, an event which marked Shafik's first feminist public address (Nelson, 28).

[12]   Mme. Richard-Rushdi died in 1908, the same year as Mustafa Kamil and Qasim Amin, whom Sha'rawi referred to as the 'Defender of Women.' She eulogizes the three of them, mourning Egypt's loss of "three valiant strugglers in the service of her cause" (Sha'rawi, 82).

[13]   See Badran, M., "Between Secular and Islamic feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 1.1 (Winter 2005), 10-11.

[14]   It is worth noting that upon publication of these statements, Cromer was refuted "from a number of directions," most conspicuously Egyptian women's rights advocates and organizations; "Muslim women also denounced the fantasies that Western travelers had concocted about them" (Baron, 1994: 119).

[15]   Baron suggests that this tactic may have been adopted for reasons other than accessibility: "The posture of these Islamists, moreover, proved attractive to many and reflected a certain understanding of the limited options, for the British occupation of Egypt had narrowed the range of possible responses by Egyptian Muslims to the woman question. The issue of women's roles in society had henceforth become inseparable from the struggle for national independence and rhetoric about imperialism, even when the occupation itself had receded. Women writers understood that harsh criticism of their

heritage would have caused negative reaction to their cause and led to charges of treachery. The 'issue of cultural betrayal' steered them toward indigenous solutions, which to some observers seemed like no solution at all. Ironically, the accommodation of modernists with Islam seemed more politic, a means to an end, than that of the Islamists, whose end was a return to Islam" (Baron, 1994: 115).

[16]   See for instance, Marilyn Booth, "The Egyptian Lives of Jeanne D'Arc," in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, Abu-Lughod (ed.), Princeton University Press: Princeton (1998): 171-211.

[17]   See also Cooke, M., "Crusade! I mean democracy! You know: women!" *The Middle East Women's Studies Review* (Fall-Winter 2002), p 14-17, on the renewed use of this tactic by the second Bush Administration.

[18]   Cooke, for instance, gives us the example of the film *A Door to the Sky*, directed by Moroccan film-maker Farida Benlyazid, hailed as "an alternative both to the Western imaginary and to an Islamic fundamentalist representation of Muslim women. Whereas contemporary documentaries show all-female gatherings as a space for resistance to patriarchy and fundamentalism, *A Door to the Sky* uses all-female spaces to point to a liberatory project based on unearthing women's history in Islam, a history that includes women's spirituality, prophesy, poetry, and intellectual creativity as well as revolt, material power, and social and political leadership" (Cooke, 2001: 59, citing Shohat and Stam, 1994).

[19]   Cited in Mohanty, C.T., 2001, p 262 n. 3.

[20]   A term I prefer to 'duality,' as some writers have interpreted, for its lack of a dichotomous modality.

[21]These reevaluations, moreover, defy what Trinh Minh-hah describes as regnant reactionary version she criticizes: "Identity, thus understood, supposes that a clear dividing line can be made between I and not-I, he and she [West and not-West -SG]; between depth and surface, or vertical and horizontal identity; between us here and them over there... The search for an identity is, therefore, usually a search for what is lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted or Westernized." ("Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference," 1988: 71).

[22]   I would be remiss not to point out the serendipitous fact that 'glissant' is French for 'slippage'/ 'slippery.'

[23]   Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (1989): p 5-6.