

Reflections on Teaching Islamic Feminism/s

Margot Badran

I taught a course on Islamic Feminisms the Center for Contemporary Islam during the winter term 2001 upon the invitation of Professor Abdulkader Tayob, then Director of the CCI.¹ I would like to reflect upon this experience one year later.

The course on Islamic Feminisms at CCI was among the most interactive and engaged course that I had yet experienced in my teaching of this subject (which it must be said always arouses passions). The combination of regular university students, mainly in religious studies, and community activists produced a special dynamic. This composition was aided by Professor Tayob's decision to schedule the classes in the evening when members of the community would be free to attend and his efforts to get the word out. In the classroom the university students and community activists alike displayed a deep desire to probe the issues around gender in Islam that the course raised. For most attending the course these questions were of immediate and profound concern to them as Muslims and believers, and for everyone issues of gender and religion were relevant to them as citizens of multi-faith, multicultural South Africa. For me as the instructor, the subject of Islamic feminisms, as well, was not purely an academic concern (though I have spend a good deal of my academic life studying feminisms and Islam) but are of more immediate interest having lived much of my life in Egypt and having spent considerable time in other Muslim societies engaging in a daily sense with gender issues. Moreover,

for me as a feminist scholar there is a necessary connection between theory and practice or academic knowledge and everyday experience.

In teaching the course I adopted a feminist pedagogy trying to stimulate intensive scrutiny of the assigned texts while encouraging students to freely bring to bear their own experiences and inclinations or “pre-texts” to their readings and classroom debate. It was important for me as the instructor to understand where the class participants were coming from—what they brought to their readings—and I likewise wanted members of the class to hear directly from each other from where they were coming. Multiple perspectives have their own intrinsic value, indicate areas of particular relevancy and urgency, and can push us into spaces for further scrutiny. Professor Abdulkader participated in many of the classes contributing a special dynamic that enhanced the link between me, as an outsider to the university, and indeed to the society (although not a first-time visitor²), and the class participants. I have found in my experience teaching Islamic feminisms in various universities as a visiting professor that my “outside status” often frees students to be more candid yet sometimes the outsider may miss certain “insider” signals. I felt in teaching the course at CCI that in many ways I had had the best of both worlds. It was also well evident (and appreciatively acknowledged) that the ground had been prepared on issues of gender, religion, and society through previous teaching and the writings of Abdulkader Tayob, Ebrahim Moosa, and the dynamic work of the scholar-activist Farid Esack.

The content of the Islamic Feminisms course can be divided into two general areas: 1) historical and contemporary experience of women, gender, feminisms and Islam, and 2)

hermeneutic questions. Readings on experience focused on four majority Muslim societies of the Middle East: Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Yemen, and one Muslim minority society, the new and growing Canadian *umma*. This mirrored the dual-layering of Islamic feminisms: the global universalist discursive dimension and the local experiential dimension. As we examined specific historical experience at various sites I was eager for students to reflect on commonalities and differences with South African experience. Bringing to bear South African experience and asking questions from a South African perspective or grounding was also instructive to me as teacher and researcher.

Examining and engaging with feminist hermeneutics of the *Qur'an* proved provocative and lively. This was bound to happen when matters of belief and analysis intersect, as they did for most of the students. We examined the work of some of the new women exegetes. Looking at women-performed *tafsir* bringing to the fore issues of gender raises a number of questions. The question of authority becomes important; who has the right to interpret and whose interpretations will gain legitimacy and carry force?

The question of interpretive right is multi-layered. At one level it is religiously understood that every Muslim has the right to exercise *ijtihad* or individual intellectual scrutiny of religious texts, central of which is the *Qur'an*. At the same time, interpreters equipped with the requisite training and necessary tools may enact *tafsir* for the benefit of the wider community. The tension and inter-play between women engaging in individual or personal *ijtihad* and women as exegetes or *mufassirat*, as well as the tension between women and men exegetes around issues of gender plays out in Islamic feminist debates.

The passions and politics that surround women as interpreters and theologians came close to home when we looked at the pioneering exegete Amina Wadud and her seminal hermeneutical work *Qur'an and Woman*. Wadud is well-known, to South African Muslims, and especially those from Cape Town, as the first woman to speak at a Friday congregational prayer when she delivered a pre-*khutba* (sermon) talk at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in 1994, a path-breaking event that is still talked about. We also examined works of other women exegetes Riffat Hassan, Azizah al-Hibri, and Maysam al-Faruqi.

Among the questions treated by the *mufassirat* that we considered was authority in another sense: the putative authority of a husband over a wife. In traditional exegesis this is built around the term *qawwamun* as found in Qur'an 4:34 read as a husband's "authority" over his wife, and generalized to assert generic male authority over all women in all circumstances. The new exegetes understand the term *qawwamun* as conveying the notion of "providing for" and scrupulously read it in context: the specific circumstance of a wife during childbearing and rearing when the husband is called upon to give support (this constitutes a balancing, or *tawwazun*, of inputs). Such interpretation brings to the fore the force of custom, and patriarchal structures legitimized in the name of Islam. Issues raised by the feminist exegetical readings introduced as course texts most probably *raised* more questions than they *answered*. Bringing such questions to the forefront is exactly what Islamic feminism/s intends, as did the course itself.

The course examined the rise of feminisms among Muslim women from within the context of their own everyday experience and engagements with modernity, secularism, and western colonial and imperialist incursions. We looked at how Muslim women's "secular" feminism first arose in Egypt in contexts of encounters with modernity and Islamic reformism and was soon linked with "secular" nationalism (secular signifying Egyptian—territory and state—equally inclusive of Muslims and Christians, with distinct space for religion). We discussed the paradigm shift at the end of the 20th century from "secular feminism" to Islamic feminism: that is, from a feminism (secular feminism) that uses Islamic discourse along with other discourses—nationalist, humanitarian/human rights, democratic, to a feminist discourse (Islamic feminism) grounded in Islamic religious texts. We looked at the production of Islamic feminist discourse in post-Khomeini Iran and its public and explicit articulation, notably through the journal *Zanan* as analyzed and presented to anglophone readers by Ziba Mir-Hosseini and Afsaneh Najmabadeh. Why did this space open up and what are the larger implications for Islamic feminisms at other global sites? Turkish experience illuminates the way Islamic feminism may emerge out of movements of political Islam and cultural revival—even in the context of resolute state secularism. Here we looked at the work of Yesim Arat and Nilufer Gole. The different paths to Islamic feminisms and the various immediate concerns displayed at diverse sites, as the course readings showed, affirm the salience of being attentive to historicization and contextualization.

Term papers allowed students the chance to pursue questions of particular concern to them through their own research. I draw attention to one paper as especially germane to

my reflections on the dynamics among class participants, and the multiple ways we give and take of knowledge, including learning from each other. A religious studies PhD student interviewed four women classmates for his paper titled, “Islamic Feminisms in South Africa: An Interview with Four South African Muslim Women, Reflections on their Consciousness as Possible Seeds for Islamic Feminisms”. Three of these women were professionals and activists, and one was another PhD religious studies candidate, also with activist experience. Each of the women conveyed to him a strong faith commitment and sense of Muslim identity, and a pronounced gender awareness and a determination to act on the rights that are their due and are sanctioned by their religion. Talking to the women he discovered “a dynamic wave of (Islamic feminist) consciousness” that was not so much publicly broadcast as “*lived,*” as he wrote with emphasis. The women made a clear distinction between the women’s rights and gender justice the *Qur’an* ordains and repressive patriarchal practices perpetuated in the name of Islam. They conveyed how they personally lived equality through their professional and activist work (often one and the same) while through their life-example and work they consciously sought to promote more gender-just lives for others. All four women told their fellow male student that they were reluctant to identify themselves as feminists (Islamic or otherwise) as they were sensitive to the problems attached to the label and preferred to act less encumbered. They also confessed that they still had questions or were not clear enough about Islamic feminism to explicitly claim it themselves but stressed that the questions Islamic feminism/s raises were of fundamental concern to them. (In my research among Egyptian professional and intellectual women I found very similar responses from the same generation of women, who, it might be said, displayed

intellectual care and political caution.³) The women wove their remarks on being Muslim and women, through the texture of their own South African feminist experience. (The literature demonstrates that women typically come to feminism, and especially initial feminist consciousness, through their own concrete experience, not “purely” through the door of texts.) The writer acknowledged how the Muslim women classmates he interviewed gave him as a man and a non-Muslim, in a direct and immediate way, a very different picture of Islam--a more positive picture of Islam, eroding the negative stereotypes he had been exposed to about “women in Islam.”

The course on Islamic Feminisms at CCI felt to me both like a university course and Islamic feminism in action. Through readings and classroom debate new forms of awareness were raised and thinking vehemently asserted or tentatively “tried out.” There was free space for divergent views and lively rebuttal. Speaking for myself, I learned a great deal. After this intensive course I walked away exhausted and exhilarated, and with the feeling that much had been set in motion. Indeed, when I returned to Cape Town a year later to continue my research on Islamic feminism in South Africa, I discovered the debates were still robust. Only when quiet settles in shall I become concerned.

¹ I would like to thank Professor Abdulkader Tayob once again for inviting me to teach the course on Islamic feminism/s at the University of Cape Town and for generously organizing a large number of community events in Cape Town, as well as in Johannesburg and Durban, respectively through Naeem Jeenah and Fuad Hendricks whom I thank as well for their generosity. I would also like to thank the students for their lively engagement, the right amount of recalcitrance, and their wry humor (through which many “truths” are conveyed).

² In 1999 I had taught a segment on Egyptian Feminist Movements in the context of a course organized by Shireen Hassiem on African Feminist Movements at the University of Witswatersrand.

³ Margot Badran, “Gender Activism: Feminists and Islamists in Egypt,” *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective*, ed. By Valentine Moghadam (Denver: Westview Press, 1993).