

# BOOK REVIEWS

## GLOBAL ISLAMIC FEMINISMS

by Mahruq F. Khan

Jamillah Karim, *AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN: NEGOTIATING RACE, CLASS AND GENDER WITHIN THE UMMAH*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. 303p. notes. bibl. gloss. index. pap., \$23.00, ISBN 978-0814748107.

Faegheh Shirazi, *VELVET JIHAD: MUSLIM WOMEN'S QUIET RESISTANCE TO ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2009 (pap., 2011). 288p. notes. bibl. index. \$65.00, ISBN 978-0813033549; pap., \$29.95, ISBN 978-0813037301.

Margot Badran, *FEMINISM IN ISLAM: SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS CONVERGENCES*. Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2009. 358p. \$29.95, ISBN 978-1851685561.

Some secular feminists may argue that religion serves as an impediment to real social change. Sociologists of religion have observed, however, that many religious activists use their faith to promote gender equality and justice. In fact, believers can use religion in seemingly contradictory ways to foster an inclusive community. On the one hand, they can use its spiritual dimensions to help gain critical distance from the status quo and imagine alternatives to it.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars posit that those religious movements that seek to expand the purview of individual religious autonomy have the greatest potential for increasing religion's social significance in society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> In societies like the U.S., on the other hand, where social bonds between individuals are on the wane, religion can be used to form social networks and ties between individuals that may or may not have otherwise formed.<sup>3</sup>

Within Muslim communities, feminists are building an intellectual solidarity that embraces and accepts the legitimacy of a multiplicity of thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors — none more religiously authoritative than the next. Despite their divergences, these endeavors share common goals: to undermine the hegemonic

culture of silence and deference to patriarchal traditions, interpretations, and authorities; and, by doing so, to gain equal access for women to the same symbolic roles, spaces, and opportunities as for men.

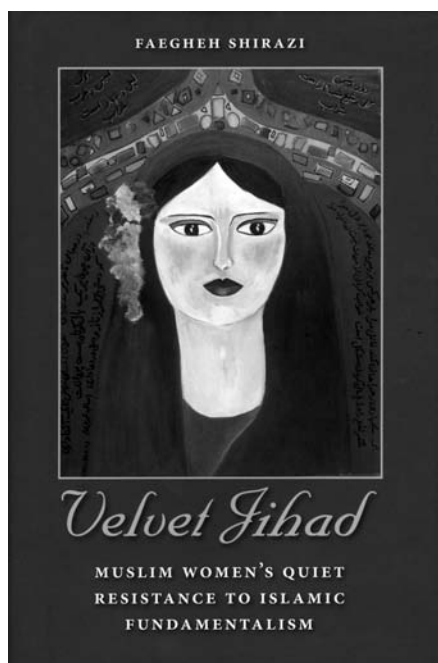
Some research on Muslim feminism in the West is already under way in the fields of religious studies and gender studies. It has been noted that Islamic feminism encompasses a broad range of issues and endeavors, including poetry, domestic violence, political participation, female circumcision, literacy, social class, the veil, appropriation of the written word, and legal equality.<sup>4</sup> It has been further pointed out that the “gender jihad” undercuts the male dominance of Islamic leadership, as women have created a female presence in the public space of the Muslim community as well as in the divine space of orthodox Islamic theology and exegesis.<sup>5</sup>

In the wider context of revivalism, Muslim women have also reconstructed their own grand narrative of Islam and the rights it has accorded to its women. They have used the theological basis of Islam to carve their own path toward freedom. Their arguments have been anchored in the teachings of

Islam — the Quranic laws and the traditions and practices of Muhammad. Muslim women have long argued that the secular pursuit of gender equality denies women their right to femininity, devalues their role as domestic providers, and makes motherhood into an unpaid burden rather than a rewarding pursuit.<sup>6</sup> The feminism they seek demands respect for women and offers them the opportunity of education, the option for independent and gainful employment in the workplace, and an honored Islamic space in the home for those who choose to become wives, mothers, and homemakers.<sup>7</sup> Feminist discourse among Muslim women also often occurs within the context of international organizations and transnational feminist networks.<sup>8</sup> Below, I will examine the coverage of Islamic feminisms and discourse within the three texts listed at the top of this essay.

Faegheh Shirazi organizes *Velvet Jihad: Muslim Women's Quiet Resistance to Islamic Fundamentalism* according to key gender-based social phenomena that Muslim women and girls face, especially in predominantly Muslim societies and to a lesser extent in non-Muslim societies: honor and virginity, fertility (and infertility), dress codes,

gender role transgression, gender preference, and the body as subject. She begins by examining how changing social factors like technology, education, and human rights discourses contribute to this “velvet jihad,” and she observes that this feminist reclamation of the gender-egalitarian roots of Islam explicitly differentiates the core teachings of the faith from patriarchal culture.



In her discussion of honor and virginity, Shirazi examines the social construction of women's bodies, how these bodies have reflected gendered interactions, and their manifestations within different realms of social and political life. Among the many strengths of this discussion are the wide range of international contexts and the examples of rape used as a weapon of war. Shirazi states in quite certain terms, “A woman's status defines the status of all the men who are related to her in determinate ways. In this respect, these men all share the consequences of what happens to her, and therefore they share the commitment to protect her chastity and virtue, since she belongs to their patrimony” (p.

30). Following this, she succinctly explains the way women are expected to preserve the honor of their families and take responsibility over their bodies vis-à-vis purity rituals. She is careful to acknowledge not only that men police women, but also that women, unfortunately, are often complicit in the honor killings of their female relatives. This social reality, Shirazi says, underscores the pervasive perception that women are the property of men (and of more powerful women) and that family disputes are often resolved through personal violence, not through the courts.

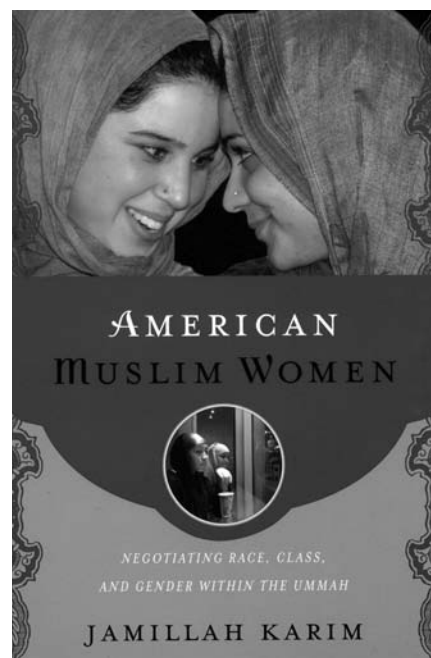
Particularly effective is Shirazi's incorporation of the internationally renowned case of Mukhtaran Mai, who spoke out after she was gang-raped in Pakistan as punishment for the alleged misdeeds of her young brother. By highlighting women who demonstrate agency, courage, and resilience in this and other contemporary examples, Shirazi successfully debunks the commonly held belief that Muslim women are helpless victims. Although many of the cultural examples she employs stem from predominantly Muslim societies, she traces some misogynistic practices to pre-Islam and to other countries where Muslims are the minority.

For readers seeking religious arguments either supporting or opposing mainstream positions on gender issues such as virginity, Shirazi incorporates interpretations of Islamic law and Quranic verses alongside her own personal commentary. In addition, she makes the legal discussion of virginity more accessible by illustrating how particular international news sources have responded to the topic within their national boundaries.

In the rest of *Velvet Jihad*, Shirazi explores the subjects of infertility, dolls as cultural expression, art, and gender preference. On each subject, her analysis of news media discussions of these social problems remains strong and critical. By showing how current

grassroots organizations are resisting restrictions against women and promoting their empowerment, and by exposing cultural paradoxes that Iran faces in response to contraception and HIV/AIDS research, she keeps the conversation timely and relevant. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, Shirazi brings attention to the recent appearance of hijab-donning dolls for young Muslim girls. For some, these dolls serve as symbols or reminders of appropriate attire and the importance of adhering to prescribed dress codes. Surprisingly, many of these hijab-donning dolls are purchased by more educated women who seek to instill particular norms and values in their daughters.

Overall, the topics explored in *Velvet Jihad* are quite accessible to a wide range of readers and provide a fascinating cross-cultural survey of the aforementioned subjects.



Whereas Shirazi spans many Muslim societies' responses to a limited set of gender-based issues, Jamillah Karim focuses more narrowly in *American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah*,

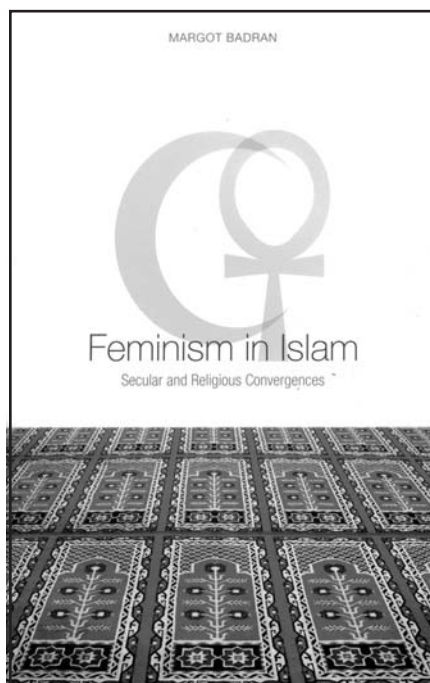
exploring the tenuous relationship between African American and South Asian–American Muslims in Chicago and Atlanta, and looking in depth at interactions between Muslim women from these two racial categories.

Karim employs the Islamic concept of *ummah*, which implies a shared religious identity within a unified community, and argues for the need to recognize the existence of the multiple *ummahs* or social networks within which Muslims reside and engage. Her focus on multiple contexts is situated within a broader discussion of the geographic distance between African American and South Asian–American Muslims, especially in hyper-segregated cities like Chicago. This physical distance leads to divergent intellectual, social, and symbolic spaces that women within these two communities often experience. Another common thread is the notion of “global flows,” referring not only to the flow of people between places but also to the flow of information and access across racial and gender lines. The intersections of race, gender, religion and class are central to Karim’s thesis.

Drawing upon ethnographic data, including rich interviews and conversations, *American Muslim Women* is interspersed with narratives and vignettes. The author clearly defines her own social location as an educated African American Muslim woman and explains the role her background played in shaping the experiences and relationships that she built before and during her research.

Karim begins with the claim that race continues to operate as the primary power construct, not just in the relationships between these women, but also in ethnic relations at large. She follows with engaging research detailing the average household income for blacks, whites, South Asians, and Latinos, reinforcing Mary Patillo-McCoy’s earlier findings that middle-class blacks

are still geographically and socially connected to poor blacks.<sup>9</sup> The shadow of anti-black and anti-immigrant racism in political discourse follows the women that Karim interviews and the ethnic boundaries that they construct between one another. Through this lens, Karim observes that many mainstream immigrant-run Muslim organizations neglect to include the pressing needs of African American Muslims.



Karim first explains the underpinnings of the disconnect between the two groups of women, but she later highlights the factors that give rise to a level of connection or familiarity for some women. She argues that some progressive women transcend their ethnic bounds in their pursuit of an idealized, racially harmonious *ummah*, or out of a humanitarian desire to bridge racial divides. In discussing these boundary transgressions, Karim emphasizes the multiple locations that Muslim women occupy and the ways in which race and religion compound the sexism they face.

Comparing the relationships between these two groups in two U.S.

cities also provides insight into the role that cities play in motivating women’s movements. Poverty rates for African Americans in Atlanta are high, but this city also has a higher number of educated African Americans than Chicago does — and more who live in the suburbs and are thus able to interact more directly with South Asian–American Muslims. Karim also posits that in Atlanta, women transform mosque space through their sheer numbers, since many more African American Muslim women in Atlanta frequent mosques than do their counterparts in Chicago.

*American Muslim Women* concludes with an emphasis on how the struggles between the two groups of Muslim women are often compounded by members of the older generation who remain wary of one another. Many African American Muslim women cite the difficulty they face in being accepted by the parents of their South Asian friends. The university setting is often where these young women (and men) meet and transcend the racial divides of their parents’ communities. Inter-ethnic marriage can result, often as an explicit act of resistance against the rigid gendered and racial expectations of their parents’ generation.

In sum, Karim’s ethnographic research is best suited for graduate students as well as non-academic audiences. It is not theory-laden and reads quite easily, but provides the rich detail that a student of ethnography and methodology would particularly appreciate.

Shifting to a more historical analysis of Islamic feminism, Margot Badran, who has been studying rise of the “feminist consciousness” in Egypt since the 1960s, compiles a series of her previously written articles in *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. Badran organizes these essays into two parts, beginning with several focused on the first hundred years of feminism in Egypt — from the

late nineteenth through the end of the twentieth century. This first half examines the interconnection between the feminisms that emerged in Egypt and nationalist ideologies, without privileging either discourse, as well as a range of issues related to women's bodies and sexuality, including female genital cutting; and discusses how Islamic and secular feminist frameworks approach the subject. The second half of the compilation goes beyond Egypt, examining Islamic feminism in other parts of the Muslim world, such as Turkey, Yemen, and Nigeria, where patriarchal laws are enacted.

Badran qualifies her discussion with the proclamation that one can indeed be Muslim and a feminist, while acknowledging the ongoing orientalist discourse that undermines that seemingly oppositional identity. She also argues that feminism among Muslim women is indigenous — *not* a byproduct of Western feminism — and that Western feminists also can trace the roots of their own feminism to religious women, even though those roots are not widely recognized.

The line between secular and religious feminism is often blurred, Badran believes, since women rarely work strictly from within either framework. She provides ample historical detail, citing numerous figures, local organizations, and dates as she traces Islamic feminism within particular moments, especially throughout twentieth-century Egypt; and she supplies much-needed nuance on the many forms of Islamic feminisms as they interact with competing agendas of the state.

The chapter on gender activism in Egypt draws upon numerous interviews with middle-class feminists in the late 1980s, following a different model from the rest of the weighty text, which reads largely as a comprehensive history, providing the theoretical, political, and religious basis of the development of Islamic feminisms in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.

*Feminism in Islam* would most benefit advanced area-studies students or scholars in their understanding of the divergent forms of Islamic feminism within particular cultural contexts.

#### Notes

1. Robert N. Bellah, "The Ritual Roots of Society and Culture," in *Handbook of Sociology of Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

2. See, in particular, Mark Chaves & Laura Stephens, "Church Attendance in the United States," in *Handbook of Sociology of Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

3. Richard Wood, "Religion, Faith-Based Community Organizing, and the Struggle for Justice," in *Handbook of Sociology of Religion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

4. Elizabeth W. Fernea, *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey* (New York: Doubleday Dell, 1998).

5. Hibba Abugideri, "Hagar: A Historical Model for Gender Jihad," in *Daughters of Abraham*, eds. Yvonne Haddad & John Esposito (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001).

6. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Zahra Rahnnavard, "Women, Islam, and Feminism," in *The Journal of Foreign Policy*, v. 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995).

7. Haleh Afshar & Mary Maynard, "Gender and Ethnicity at the Millennium: From Margin to Centre," in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, v. 23, no. 5 (2000), pp. 805–819.

8. Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., "Contemporary Feminist Scholarship and Middle East Studies," in *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Valentine Moghadam, *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*, ed. by Valentine Moghadam (London, UK: Zed Books, 1994).

9. Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

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