The Path of Most Resistance:

Social factors affecting gender identity among young Muslim women

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"[There are] a wide range of responses to Islamic feminism, ranging from the assertion that feminism is indigenous to Islam to the position that Islam and feminism are mutually irreconcilable entities. The latter position is one shared by various critics of Islam who allege that Islam is uniquely oppressive to women, secular feminists who view feminism as fundamentally incompatible with women's liberation, and Muslim conservatives who renounce feminism as a foreign ideology at odds with Islamic morality."- Feminist Edges of the Qur'an, pg 39

"As Muslim women, we actually ask you not to wear hijab in the name of interfaith solidarity." That was the title of a Washington Post article by Asra Nomani and Hala Arafa published late in December. Seemingly overnight, after years of relative dormancy over the topic, the Muslim interwebs were aflame with a revived hijab debate. While it is overexposed as an "issue" in the Muslim community, the manner in which the hijab is usually debated strongly aligns with broader gender discourses in Islam. The views are often polarized, presenting a dichotomy of liberation and oppression, with one perspective intolerant of the other. Similarly, Islam's teachings on gender are often either lauded as "feminist" or disparaged as "patriarchal." The reality is that, just like the value ascribed to a piece of fabric wide enough to cloak one's hair, Islamic prescriptions on gender are open to a melee of interpretations.

For this paper I conducted interviews of three college aged, middle class, first generation American, Muslim women on the interplay between Islam and gender roles. Through these interviews I deduced that Islam does not ubiquitously define gender for Muslim women; rather Muslim women project their socialized understandings of gender onto Islam- and there is enough latitude within the tradition to accommodate this variety of understandings. Therefore, I contend that there is not a hard and fast relationship between Islam and gender roles. Islam is a 1400 year old religion with a vast exegetical legacy that includes interpretations that are feminist, patriarchal, and that occupy every nebulous grey area between those extremes. Rather than providing evidence for any of those singular claims, I will argue that an individual's interpretation of gender roles in Islam is contingent upon a multitude of external social factors. The purpose of this paper was to investigate the factors that affected understandings of gender among three diverse Muslim women who occupy a similar social space.

This paper is divided into four sections- an introduction to the interview subjects, and an analysis of three social realities identified as integral to their understandings of gender roles. Part 1 will describe the role of imperialist narratives- specifically the reality of western feminists and American media attempting to "liberate" Muslim women. Part 2 will describe the effects of culture and religion becoming intertwined on these first generation Muslims. And part 3 will discuss the growing movement to challenge androcentric interpretations of gender in Islam.

The Interviewees, An Introduction

> *"I think men and women strive for the same qualities, but because of the society that we live in, those qualities manifest in different ways. Both aspire to be strong, but for a man, strength may mean showing vulnerability when he's expected to be stoic. For a woman it may mean speaking up, advocating for herself in spaces that are typically male dominated."- Waraqa (all names changed)*

Tasneem is a first generation Palestinian-American. Her father is a construction worker and her mother a Sunday school teacher. In the 7 years I've known her she hasn't disobeyed her parents, she's fastidious in all her prayers, and she was just accepted into medical school.

Mavish is a first generation Pakistani-American, the youngest of 3 daughters. Her mother interrupted her education and married young, finishing her degrees decades later and impressing upon her children that a successful career was as paramount as a successful family. "My parents raised me to be both the perfect daughter *and* son."

Waraqa is also a first generation Pakistani- American, with a relatively non-traditional family. She is a leader in her MSA, a riotous social justice activist in her community, on working on a thesis about expanding sex education in Islamic schools.

All three of these women are practicing Muslims whose understandings of religion and gender span across the spectrum from "conservative" to "liberal." They all identify as feminists, with different understandings of what that word connotes. The thing they have in common is that they occupy the same social milieu- they live in a society in which they must constantly defend

their capabilities to their non-Muslim communities, and continue to demand their freedoms from their Muslim communities, all while negotiating their roles as interlopers between two cultures. This reality has instilled in them a heightened sense of self awareness and an imperative to understand their rights within the religion. "If anything because I'm a Muslim woman I have to be more educated about these things. I have to know the facts, to be on the offensive. If I don't write my own narrative, someone else will write it for me."(Waraqa)

Part 1- When white women try to save brown women from brown men; Gender identity as a response to the colonial imperative

> *"I think it's our responsibility to be educated about how orientalism has influenced the identity of Muslim women."- Waraqa*

In the introductory chapters of *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, Aysha Hidayatullah explains the historical legacy of the term "feminism." She describes its inherent assumption that societies did not have their own cultural movements toward gender equality until the West coined the word and laid out its terms. Feminism, in this vein, has been an ideological used to aid and abet imperialistic agendas. For Muslim women, this legacy reared its head during the first "War on Terror," when the "liberation" of women was used as a justification for wreaking havoc in the Middle East, and has continued unfettered within our own borders. Western feminism has become normative, and the assumptions laden in that norm have sparked a countermovement among Muslim women of all backgrounds. Hidayatullah describes that Islam "became a "site of resistance" to violently imposed "Western notions of progress" (Hidayatullah, pg 39). Among Muslim women that resistance has come in the form of rejecting norms and molding a unique gender identity. In her interview Tasneen spent some time describing her resistance:

"you have to find a way of explaining that you maintain the same ideals of equality without rejecting or watering down the religion and its traditions. You have to push people to understand that feminism isn't a monolith. The hijab discussion is a big one, but it doesn't end there- I've had to explain the fact that I don't shake hands with men, don't date in the traditional sense, and

not be embarrassed or self conscious. I have to project that my understanding of my role as a woman is not less than just because it's different. Honestly, it's made me stronger in my convictions, made me see empowerment where I might not have seen it otherwise.

Tasneen's roles as a practicing women are outlined by her understanding of faith- she acts modestly, and abstains from certain practices- but the *meaning* behind those practices is inextricably tied up with her social space. Refusing to shake hands is not a form of repression but an act of defiance, a means of asserting her physical boundaries. In her interview, Waraqa identified knowledge as another form of resistance against neo-colonial forms of feminism.

"Colonization has impacted a lot of eastern religions in ways that they don't even realize. Settlers brought homophobia into a region where you had books like the Kama Sutra, which has plenty of homoeroticism. Historically, Islam wasn't sexually repressive at all, the Victorians brought that into our culture to "civilize" us. Third world woman had to be created as an entity to validate a certain feminist discourse, and we're still suffering from the ramifications of that. Muslim women have been fetishized for two centuries. You have to be educated about these things, to know how the western world sees you and why before you break down that mold."

The ramifications of western hegemony even infiltrate scholarship on Muslim gender roles. In *The Sources of Gender Role Attitudes among Christian and Muslim Arab-American Women,* Jen'nan Read offers the simplistic analysis that Arab ethnicity and religiosity are correlated with gender traditionalism, without qualifying that "traditionalism" is defined from a Western standpoint of normative gender roles. (Read, pg 219) She highlights the differences between Christian and Muslim Arabs from the perspective that Christianity allows for greater flexibility, revealing a tendency to compare traditions from a Christian-centric standpoint. Hidayatullah explains this as a trend, in which Christian feminist theology is often used to define the norms of feminist exegesis, despite the vastly different interpretive frameworks between the faiths.(Hidayatullah, 49)

Due to a pervasive legacy of feminism and feminist exegesis being grounded in Western normativity and Christian-centrism, gender roles have become a site of resistance for Muslim

American women. In these manners, the influence of Western feminism is salient social factor that shapes Muslim women's gender identity.

Part 2- On having a hyphenated identity; Gender identity as a response to cultural expectation

"Being a woman is like being a box of Legos. You have to morph into different shapes, depending on what people want us to be."- Tasneen

As women whose parents emigrated from Muslim countries, Tasneem, Mavish, and Waraqa occupy a uniquely challenging social space. They must navigate the role of preserving a cultural identity while adapting well enough to the American identity to thrive. When asked about dissonance between the Islamic "ideal" of gender and their lived reality of gender, their overwhelming responses were that the Islamic "ideal" didn't present many challenges, but the cultural ideal was a heavy weight to carry. "It's a source of daily dissonance," said Waraqa. She explained,

"You get caught in between your parents who come from a culture that's very Victorian, like straight out of a Jane Austen novel, and your reality as a western educated independent woman who's writing about sex and periods. I remember there was a bully at my school, and my parents told me to stick up for myself. To speak up .But when I talk too much about "black lives matter" suddenly they want me to quiet down so that I don't seem too intimidating or outspoken."

That dissonance is particularly exacerbated when the topic of relationships arises. All three women described coming from households that encouraged independence and success, but that these realities were suspended when the topic of marriage came up. The anxiety over marriage in Muslim American women, according to Waraqa, is the result of a massive gender divide. Whereas many Muslim women have adopted the position of marriage as an equitable partnership, a disproportionate number of men cling to the notion that women belong in the private sphere and men belong in the public sphere. Reticent to give up their power in relationships, they use religion and tradition to justify their positions, and leave a generation of

women in the lurch, forced to accommodate traditional expectations or risk being alone.

Tasneem vented,

"Men are spoon-fed this fantasy of a perfect woman, and she's both the cultural and American fantasy. She's a beautiful virgin who can cook, clean, and speak the language. She's smart but not too challenging. She preserves the cultural and accommodates the man. And if you don't present yourself as someone who fits into that mold they lost interest. And then your parents freak out, and that's where the pressure to be more traditional comes in."

Navigating the role of being an empowered woman entrenched in this patriarchal reality is one of the salient consequences for Muslim women straddling two disparate cultural identities, but being a child of two cultures is not without its benefits. Waraqa identified some of the benefits of having insight into different cultures, including a more fluid concept of gender identity.

"I don't know, I feel like there is a gender binary [in Islam], but we have plenty of historical examples that deviate from it. In terms of culture in South Asia, religion in practice, the concept of the third gender- which is something that defies the binary completely- has always existed. So the religious binary is not as consistent with the cultural reality. The cultural reality is in some ways more "progressive" than Western culture, in my lived experience."

Adding an alternate perspective to the mix, Mavish described the high cultural expectations as a source of motivation. Her understanding of a woman's role is informed by the women in her life who navigated cultural dissonance by being both successful career women and involved homemakers.

"In my Islamic schooling there wasn't much teaching about roles, so it was by example, and I chose the best examples. If ever I was in a class where someone said "women should…" that never had an effect on me. That's so pedagogical. I don't fixate on gender, I was raised with all girls, and my dad raised us as "men"- to be strong, successful, etc, so the lines were blurred from the outset. And then we had the typical girl expectations too, so I had to be everything, and that was fine. I think some people see all that expectation as unrealistic or damaging, but really it pushes me forward."

Across the board, these three women expressed that, while examples to the contrary were prevalent in their communities, they chose to base their Islamic understanding of a woman's role on those women in their lives who demonstrated strength, versatility, and empowerment. Their Islam was informed by their reality, and as educated, career bound women, their reality exposed them to role models who balanced faith, professional fulfillment, and an emphasis on family. Though they occupy a very particular social niche, these women's gender identities were challenged but not crippled by the weight of multiple cultures of expectation.

Part 3- The Sheikh's son; Gender identity as a response to patriarchal exegesis

> *"I ask Allah- most high- to bring these bright minds back to the vastness of their culture and heritage, and the origins and reality of their existence"- Hasan Mah'mud Abd al-Latif al-Shafi'I* "The movement for feminist interpretation of the Qur'an and Religion and its threat to the Arabic language and tradition"

The original concept for this paper was going to include interviews of Muslim men in addition to women. The first person I scheduled to interview, Omar, was the son of a sheikh. Over the course of an hour he explained that men and women are equal but, Islamically, are meant to occupy fundamentally different roles. That the man is meant to be the head of the household, a community leader and a provider, while a woman's role was primarily to raise the household. He expressed that he felt uncomfortable following a female religious leader, and that he felt that the modern feminist movement was a reaction to women coveting men's roles because they didn't understand that their own roles in the home were just as important and valuable. He backed his claims with select religious citations and examples.

After the interview, I decided that the disparity between this worldview and the ones expressed by the women I interviewed was too large to reconcile in one paper. I chose, instead, to fully focus on the social realities of Muslim women. The interview, however, was significant in that it highlighted the very real obstacle of male-centered interpretation and leadership within

the Muslim community. Hidayatullah explains the feminist exegetical countermovement born as a reaction to this reality. “Qur’anic interpretation undertaken by women in the United States in particular has been characterized by a critique of traditional exegesis… [it] exhibits a critical transition in the understanding of women's identity from “relational” to “independent vicegerent” of God. This new set of readings emphasizes “women’s individual agency,” proclaiming “women’s right to a direct relationship with God with no human (cleric) mediators. …these interpretations are thus shaking the very foundations of knowledge, of what constitutes “truth” in Islam insofar as they “shift the [interpretive] lens from viewing religious knowledge as authoritative and incontestable to viewing it instead as constructed, value-laden and context-specific.” (Hidayatullah, pg 36) The feminist exegetical movement is roughly in its second generation, and although none of the women interviewed addressed it by name, they all discussed the obstacles they faced in understanding and evolving their gender identities in the context of their patriarchal Muslim communities. Their identities were, once again, defined by resistance, this time to forces within their own religious communities. Waraqa described her initiative in taking charge of her own religious education;

“I feel that as I’ve grown up I've become more educated about things. Religion was always an issue for me, always something I grappled with. I’ve become more educated in high school and college in terms of the more historic and important things that Muslim women have done. They’ve been owning businesses and winning battles. I feel like once you become educated and stop going to Sunday school you learn important things that empower you.”

I asked the women to describe obstacles they’d faced in asserting their roles in different spaces- their households, religious arenas, leadership positions, etc. For the most part, they felt that they had equal footing with men in their own homes;

“There are responsibilities not roles in families. My brother is terrified of dishwater, so yeah I unload the dishwasher and he takes out the trash. But that’s not gender roles, that’s shared responsibilities. They’re flexible.” (Waraqa)

“I believe the sons and daughters should have same role. Everyone should be cooking and cleaning, one person shouldn't have more or less freedoms. Any disparities in my household aren’t inherent difference in gender, but in personalities.” (Tasneen)

“We had help in the house, so I did the minimum in terms of chores, both in and outside the house. It never felt gendered, except when my sister’s in-laws came to visit, then suddenly everything became super traditional” (Mavish)

Though they’d negotiated fairly equal roles in their own homes, the public sphere is where they encountered great opposition, particularly in religious spaces and leadership positions.

“I was just at a religious conference, and everyone was gravitating towards the male speakers. We’ve internalized that those messages are better, or somehow more legitimate, and it’s just not right. You’ve got to gravitate towards understandings of faith that empower equal access.” (Mavish)

“I’ve started defining a good male leader as someone who acknowledges their male privilege, and isn’t belittling in their decision making, and that’s really hard to find. I truly believe there’s no reason why a woman wouldn’t be able to do any job as well as a man. That being said, I’m uncomfortable with changing the prayer formation, or having women lead prayers. I’m fine with that cultural norm.” (Tasneen)

“When it comes to women navigating religious spaces- everybody has an opinion. You can shop around for fatwas (legal rulings) about it.The issue of women praying behind men rather than side to side. The issue of women leading prayer or giving a khutbah (friday sermon.) It’s incredibly frustrating. But at the same time, as a reaction to that, the majority of people I know in religious leadership positions are women. More MSA presidents are female, because we tend to be more educated and assert ourselves more and gain language and vocabulary for those types of things. Our generation of women are just fighters, they’re all gonna be boss bitches like Linda Sarsour, I’m sure of it.” (Waraqa)

These women went on to detail various obstacles they faced in asserting their roles, and the frustrations they felt daily with the barrage of opinions they encountered. They were bombarded with criticisms on everything from the way they dressed and prayed to the permissibility of their relationships. There was a perceptible force in each of their communities

trying to push them towards one specific ideal of a Muslim woman. To varying degrees, they expressed their rebellions against that mold. And in the same breath that they expressed frustration they expressed hope, because as gradual and painstaking as it was, they could see things changing. They themselves were agents of that change.

"I've realized that my voice is just as valuable as someone that has taken more, or different steps in their religious journey. That's a beautiful thing about Islam. That my voice is important. And I plan to use it to ensure that people are given every right to pursue their journeys exactly the way that they want." (Waraqa)

Conclusion

Hidayatullah writes, "Advocates of Islamic feminism must 'navigate the terrain between being critical of sexist interpretations of Islam and patriarchy in their communities while simultaneously criticizing neo-colonial feminist discourses on Islam.'" (Hidayatullah, pg 40) Over the course of my interviews I found this sentiment to be unequivocally true. Rather than being exclusively defined by religious texts and traditions, gender identity among young Muslim women is shaped by resistance. Though the women I interviewed came from similar lines of social and educational privilege, they represent vastly different religious backgrounds. That their responses coincided so clearly along lines of resistance demonstrates the collective sentiment that women should be able to define their own roles.

Muslim women are poised in a social milieu in which their religious freedoms, their rights to make their own choices and live unapologetically, are overtly and clandestinely under attack. Keenly aware of this reality, they are fighting back and reclaiming their gender identities. In oppressive circumstances, rather than falling helpless, they are actively chasing their own freedoms. It remains to be seen whether their efforts bear fruit, or whether a greater proportion of Muslim men will ally themselves with the cause, but in light of their infectious optimism I can't help but hope that "Verily, through hardship will come ease." *(Qur'an, 94:5)*

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