



# Situating Islamic feminism(s): Lived religion, negotiation of identity and assertion of third space by Muslim women in Pakistan



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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of an exploratory, qualitative study with Pakistani women to explore how Muslim women studying English in higher education contexts in Pakistan engage with feminist thought. The broader aim of the study was to capture the relationship between these women's 'secular' education and their religious (and secular) social identities as young, urban, middle class working women in a Pakistani higher education context. In particular, the study sets out to explore how Pakistani women at higher education institutions interact with and use 'new' forms of knowledges, particularly those dominated by western frameworks of intellectual thought and reasoning, in the context of their own potentially different social lives and self-identities as Muslim women. The findings show that the young women academics in addition to negotiating with the Western notions of Feminism also simultaneously challenge the indigenous patriarchal hegemonies and conservative religious discourses in their social context by attempting to rework notions of Muslim women's identity in Pakistan, envisaging what Bhabha has termed a third space.

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## 1. Introduction

Pakistan occupies a central place in the current global debates about gender and Islam. Not only have 9/11 and recent attacks on Malala Yousafzai and girls' schools in Northern Pakistan by the Taliban generated a lot of interest within the Western academia on the linkages between gender and Islam, some Western countries have actually taken actions to uproot those cliches and practices that supposedly weaken women in Islamic countries. Therefore the issue of gender has also come up in recent geopolitical campaigns and gained importance in the international relations with Islamic countries (Raihaneh 2016). This paper brings forth the voices of Pakistani women academics, their engagement with English Literature and feminist literary texts and theories in relation to their own social and familial roles, their preoccupation with pressing issues of their rights and duties as intellectual women, who engage with issues of relevance of feminist epistemology and gender equity to their own lived lives in contemporary Pakistan. By debunking the myth of the veiled and domesticated Pakistani woman, the research foregrounds the subaltern voices of a group of intellectual women – albeit small in number – which hitherto remain invisible or seldom heard in western discourses and media representations. This research seeks to fill a wide gap in existing knowledge about

the multiple and shifting identities of young intellectual women living and working in Pakistan. It also purports to make significant contributions to the current global debates about gender and Islam, race and ethnicity, Islamic and transnational feminist studies.

This paper focuses on the theme of reception practices surrounding the dominant western ideologies within the current postcolonial Pakistani context – particularly one characterized by new global and transnational connections, structural inequalities and hierarchies of power, with the related resurgence of strong ethno-religious and national affiliations and identities. Using data from focus groups and participant observation, we illustrate the complexities and ambivalences the teaching and learning of English Literature creates for (young) women within this context, specifically in relation to their own parallel and intersectional gender identities, social locations and positionings within Pakistani society, state and culture. The narratives of young female academics are cited to deconstruct: the hegemony of imperialist knowledge and patriarchal religio-political discourses within institutions of higher education as well as the hegemony of white feminists. Pakistani women's assertions of a *third space*, their engagement with white feminists' ideals and their perceived western notions of autonomy and independence viz.-a-viz. the construct of *free women* (discussed below) signify a departure from and a reaction to the imperialistic agenda of a monolithic and universal Feminism (with a capital F). They also come out with a strong and forceful critique and rejection of indigenous patriarchal discourses and monolithic hegemony of male clerics over Islamic jurisprudence.

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## 2. Postcolonialism and transnational feminism

We (a collective we for the researchers and their participants) in postcolonial Pakistan contend that our indigenous (decolonized) identities are highly at stake if we keep on promoting the epistemological hegemony of white men (and women) at the center of knowledge and marginalising ourselves at the periphery. To understand what feminism means to people in Pakistan, we need to look at it as reminiscent of the colonial rule, sexual liberation and autonomy of women in the West, while also keeping in view the polarizations within Pakistani society between extremist groups and unveiled or anglicized women.

The western discourses on Muslim women remain reductive by ignoring the wide variety and diversity of women as individuals within any given culture by constructing a monolith Muslim 'other' with intellectual, professional and working women being no exception to this general rule. Jeffery's (1979) work titled: *Frogs in a Well*, is a telling example wherein the title itself is deprecating followed by a list of contents on purdah-observing Muslim women which reads: Behind the curtain; Pirzada women; Islam and the Seclusion of women; Complaining and complying; the tribulations of life at home; The trials of going out; The two faces of Burqa. In a similar vein, representations of Malala (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013) and Mukhtar Mai (Mai & Coverdale, 2007) by their orientalist co-authors in their (auto)biographies are cases in point where they are positioned as poor, weak, oppressed and backward. Elsewhere, as Afzal-Khan points out (Afzal-Khan, 2015) the 'individual heroine syndrome' is promoted by celebrating individual women like Malala and Mukhtar Mai, who somehow rose above these limitations by virtue of their extraordinary capabilities, strength and drive. As Afzal-Khan observes:

Today, as a cover for imperialism at home and abroad, white middle class feminism directs its appeals to young white women (and women of color from erstwhile colonies aspiring to western privilege) through the rhetoric of individual self-empowerment. This rhetoric is used to cover up western imperialist ideology when western nations invade/bomb Muslim lands like Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan, in the name of rescuing oppressed Muslim women who can then be mobilized to empower themselves as individuals with the help of western feminism and 'aid', in the process becoming model subjects of Empire (2015:152).

Teaching feminisms and feminist texts has thus been not overtly political but also invariably politicized in such patriarchal, peripheral contexts as feminist thought challenges and threatens the dominant discourses, and tends to *decolonize epistemology from this inherent imperialist desire* (Davis, 2010).

We problematize two issues surrounding transnational feminism: First, effectiveness in terms of theory and second in terms of practical application in the context of Muslim women's lives in contemporary Pakistan. Recent theoretical debates have moved beyond the earlier concepts of global sisterhood to embrace postcolonial and transnational feminisms (Mendoza, 2002; Ang, 2003; Mohanty, 1988). Mohanty's seminal article *Under Western Eyes* challenges the myth of universalistic notions of synthetic sisterhood and 'the production of the Third World Woman as a singular monolithic subject in western feminist texts:

This average third-world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being third world (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized etc). This, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the 'freedom' to make their own decisions (2003: 53).

Similarly, Ang (2003) argues that the otherness of other women once they come into self-representation, works to disrupt the unity of 'women' as the foundation for feminism. After a close examination of the notion of transnational feminism, Mendoza (2002) observes that the notion still implies a global solidarity which transcends the boundaries of race, class, religion. In this sense it is quite similar to the earlier notion of global sisterhood which was questioned due to diversity in

women's experiences in terms of race, class, nationality, geographical location, age and religion. Hence, the notion is tied in inextricably to the notion of a globalized world and the concepts of globalization, neo-colonialism, eurocentricism, postcolonial feminisms as well as diaspora identities. We draw on Mendoza's theoretical insights on transnational feminism to highlight our participant's engagement with the Western feminist epistemology illustrating that the term itself like its twin term global feminism is a slippery one when applied to actual practices in diverse contexts as has also been shown by Mendoza's analysis of the practices in Latin America. Similarly our participants in their particular social context in Southern Punjab may be able to engage with the theoretical terms 'exhibiting rhetorical agency' (Sinha, 1999) but such epistemes implying universal feminism cannot be unproblematically coerced into actual practice as it can lead to serious consequences such as death threats, violence and harassment, social ostracization, loss of jobs, charges of blasphemy (Zubair, 2016a).

Before moving on to present the research methodology and data, it would be pertinent to give the readers a brief overview of the concept of Islamic feminism as it is used in the current literature.

## 3. Islamic feminism

As pointed out above, the feminist movements in Pakistan are enmeshed in the global politics as well as polarizations and divisions in the country in terms of diverse groups, classes, genders and urban/rural populations. Raihaneh (2016) defines Islamic feminists as women who are trying to make changes to provide new interpretations of Quran and other Islamic texts. Similarly, the Pakistani feminist and women's rights activist Zia (2009) uses the term to refer to those feminists who are concerned with looking for empowerment within a 'rethought Islam' and are involved in reinterpreting and re-examining a masculinist reading of the Quran and Shariah. Schneider (2009) observes that muslim actors in local, national and transnational spaces argue that believing Muslims do not depend on religious authorities in order to understand the Quran for themselves, hence the global discourse of Islamic feminism is misleading as a singular movement with a common agenda. Zia (2009) goes on to argue that the indigenous secularist feminist movements in Pakistan have become diluted in their effectiveness due to discriminatory religious laws, dictatorships, NGO-ization, co-option by the state and political parties in the same way as the global women's movement has. She further contends that by allowing Islamic feminists to redefine the feminist agenda in Pakistan, the secular feminists have set a bad precedence which will lead towards the bifurcations of good vs bad Muslim woman; women who abide by the liberal interpretation of theology will be pitted against those following a strictly literal interpretist code and thus secular feminism will be rendered irrelevant. Hence, this new feminism is rooted in Islamic discourse, with its main objective to empower women within Islam and Islamic jurisprudence.

While scholars based in the West have focussed (Mahmood, 2005, Barlas, 2013) on veil and piety movements viewing it as Muslim women's agency in relation to the socio-cultural context of Muslim women's lived lives particularly in the western contexts, in the context of the actual lived realities of Muslim women's lives within Pakistan, this resurgent phenomenon appears to be far more complex and ambivalent. It was strategically and systematically promoted through the discourses on *chaddar aur chaar diwaari* (veil and four walls for women); popularized and imposed during the military dictatorship of General Zia during the early 1980s by the Council of Islamic Ideology, through strict control of the state media, the education policies and the textbooks. Almost two decades later, when Pakistan became an ally of the US during Musharraf's regime (1999–2007) in its war on terror, US funding came through in abundance for scholarships and research, educational reforms, revision of curricula, women development, opening of Women's Studies and American Studies Centers at the state-run universities. During the war on terror in the post 9/11 era, the West viewed the

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