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Issues/Discussion

Velvet Jihad –Muslim Women’s Quiet Resistance To Islamic Fundamentalism

By Faegheh Shirazi, University of Florida Press 2009

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Central to Islamic scripturalist assertion, or ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ as it is often referred to, is the notion of the ideal Muslim woman, whose status, roles and functions are defined by rules and norms deriving from a narrow, restrictive and patriarchal reading of the Islamic scripturalist tradition. The ‘ideal’ Muslim woman in Islamic ‘fundamentalist’ discourse is defined as being submissive to male authority, while being modest and virtuous in a patriarchally-defined sense. She is to be carefully controlled and monitored, at all times, by patriarchal authority. The spread of Islamic ‘fundamentalism’ throughout Muslim communities has had seriously negative consequences for Muslim women’s rights and status. Not surprisingly, groups of Muslim women across the world have begun mobilizing against Islamic ‘fundamentalism’, some on a secular basis, using secular human rights arguments, others, working within a broadly-defined Islamic tradition, employing Islamic arguments for achieving gender equality and challenging patriarchy and misogyny in the name of Islam.

This fascinating book provides a general picture of the status and conditions of women in Muslim communities around the world faced with the challenge of Islamic scripturalist assertion. Shirazi admits that patriarchy is, of course, not a Muslim-specific phenomenon, but argues that the forms that it takes in Muslim communities and Muslim-majority countries makes it particularly problematic and difficult to oppose in that it is generally sought to be legitimised in the name of religion. Hence, challenging such patriarchy is a particularly arduous task as it is easily branded as a challenge to religion itself.

The book catalogues a long list of hurdles and restrictions that millions of Muslim women across the world are subjected to in the name of Islam. These includes stern restrictions on their physical mobility, on their acquiring education, on taking up jobs of their choice, on selecting their spouses, on controlling their own bodies, on choosing their marriage partners, on deciding how to dress, and even on thinking for themselves. They are subjected to

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deeply patriarchal family laws in most Muslim countries, all legitimised in the name of Islam and enforced by the state, such as those that provide Muslim men the right to arbitrarily divorce their wives, to take additional wives at will without the permission of their existing spouses, to control almost completely the lives of their wives, and even, as in some countries, to take the law into their hands and beat their wives and even kill them on grounds of infidelity. Shirazi shows how radical Islamists, mouthing slogans of religious and cultural 'authenticity' and calling for their brand of what they call 'shariah rule', have sought to deny Muslim women a whole range of rights that are afforded to them in some countries, and to scrap progressive laws and replace them with a medieval, patriarchal code which they define as being based on the shariah or divine law. In addition, numerous cultural practices that heavily impinge on Muslim women's lives that are widespread in certain Muslim communities and that sometimes derive from pre-Islamic practices—the most notorious of these being female genital mutilation and forced child marriages—are often sought to be projected as mandated by Islam. All in all, then, Shirazi, very persuasively, argues Islamic 'fundamentalism', combined with local forms of patriarchal culture, pose a major threat and challenge to the quest for equality and justice for Muslim women across the world, particularly the poor.

With abysmal levels of education, and being economically heavily dependent on their men folk, it is not surprising that vast numbers of Muslim women simply have no choice but to accept their lot. Many, as Shirazi tells us, even accept this as mandated by Islam itself. Yet, Shirazi tells us there is what she colourfully calls a 'velvet jihad' afoot in across numerous Muslim communities spearheaded by bold Muslim women who are now vocally and stridently challenging all forms of oppression in the name of Islam. She likens it to the 'velvet revolution', a peaceful movement of resistance that brought down 'communist' dictatorships in eastern Europe in the late 1980s.

What, then, are the means that assertive Muslim women (and there are many, as Shirazi documents) are today adopting to fight patriarchy and misogyny in the name of Islam? They fall into two broad categories. Some Muslim women, who may be defined as 'Muslim feminists', are seeking to oppose patriarchal laws, rules and practices using modern human rights arguments, such as secularism, freedom, justice and democracy, linking up with reformers, both men and women, both within their communities and countries and at the international level, to highlight the oppression of women in the name of Islam. Shirazi describes numerous such Muslim women's groups across the world which are using this approach, with varying degrees of success. This strategy might not, however, have much resonance with

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religious-minded Muslims, who could easily be made to believe that such arguments for women's rights are not just 'un-Islamic', but, rather, represent, as it is often put, an 'anti-Islamic, Western conspiracy'. Indeed, that precisely is what Islamic conservatives and radicals never tire of arguing.

A more culturally-rooted, and, therefore, for many practising Muslims, perhaps a more acceptable way of shaping demands for gender equality and of critiquing misogyny and patriarchy in the name of Islam, Shirazi points out, is represented by the phenomenon often labeled as 'Islamic feminism'. Not all the women (and men) who are engaged in articulating an Islamic feminist discourse and politics might, however, identify with that label, given the political and ideological baggage associated with the term 'feminism'. Be that as it may, Islamic feminism, Shirazi shows by drawing on empirical evidence from extensive fieldwork in Africa, Asia, Europe and America as well as a massive corpus of literature available on the Internet, is today a growing challenge to the authoritarian, deeply-patriarchal versions of Islam zealously upheld both Islamic conservatives and 'fundamentalists', who, despite their differences, are almost unanimous on the 'women's question'.

Islamic feminism, as Shirazi describes it, seeks to recover what its proponents controversially argue is the 'true Islam', one which is based on compassion, equality and justice for all—including, most crucially, women and non-Muslims. In this it forcefully challenges conservative and 'fundamentalist' versions of Islam that are premised on the subjugation and repression of women and non-Muslims, notwithstanding the pious proclamations of their proponents to the contrary. Shirazi describes the various strategies advocates of Islamic feminism employ as they go about their task of seeking to dismantle patriarchy in the name of Islam. A major focus of their efforts is critiquing certain fiqh or juridical rules that harshly impinge on women that were developed by medieval jurists. Islamic feminists insist, contrary to what the ulema or Islamic clerics, and hardliner Islamists, argue, that these are a later development, a human invention, and not part of the shariah or divine law. They point out that these fiqh prescriptions were developed by a class of male clerics who were heavily influenced in their understanding of Islam by the feudal, patriarchal context of their times, and so cannot be said to consist of divinely-revealed edicts. They argue that fiqh must remain dynamic if Islam is to retain its relevance, and that Muslims must come up with new, gender-just fiqh perspectives to conform to the demands and needs of Muslim women today. They see themselves as taking the lead in this task, recovering the lost agency and legacy of Muslim women scholars who, in early Muslim history, played a crucial role in the field of Islamic scholarship.

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In dealing with the other principal sources of legislation and beliefs about women—the Quran and Hadith (statements about or attributed to the Prophet Muhammad)—Islamic feminists, as Shirazi shows through her analysis of a number of Islamic feminist texts—adopt a range of positions. In the face of certain Hadith reports that clearly militate against contemporary notions of gender equality and justice, some contend that the Quran is the only text that Muslims need to follow, and that, in any case, the corpus of Hadith is replete with fabricated traditions wrongly attributed to the Prophet by later Muslims simply in order to sanctify patriarchy and the subjugation of women. Hence, they argue, it is not reliable. Others argue that the seemingly patriarchal prescriptions contained in the Quran and the Hadith need to be viewed in the particular historical context of their revelation, in seventh century Arabia, and as relevant to that context but not as being binding and normative for all times. Yet others argue for distilling what they call the spirit of the Quran and focusing on core values that they discern in the text, such as compassion, justice and equality, rather than being bound by a strictly literalist understanding of the scripture.

Citing the works—both literary as well as practical—of a vast number of Muslim women scholars and activists as they seek to counter patriarchy in the name of Islam, Shirazi concludes that their valiant efforts, derided and fiercely opposed by powerful patriarchal forces, truly herald the arrival of a ‘velvet jihad’, one that can play a key role in not just championing Muslim women’s rights but also in fashioning more compassionate and just understandings of Islam while critiquing and standing up to violent, authoritarian, patriarchal mullahs and Islamists who claim to represent Islamic authenticity. That, in short, is what this inspiring book is all about.

(Courtesy: www.countercurrents.org)