

91 | the reinvention of feminism in Pakistan

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abstract

This article argues that there has been a significant turn in the discourse of feminist politics in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. The author suggests that the rise of a new feminism – rooted in Islamic discourse, non-confrontational, privatized and personalized, whose objective is to ‘empower’ women within Islam – is not a post-9/11 development but rather a result of unresolved debates on the issue of religion within the progressive women’s movement. It has been due to the accommodation of religion-based feminist arguments by the stronger secular feminist movement of the 1980s that paved the way for its own marginalization by giving feminist legitimacy to such voices. The author argues that the second wave of feminism may have become diluted in its effectiveness and support due to discriminatory religious laws, dictatorship, NGO-ization, fragmentation, co-option by the state and political parties in the same way as the global women’s movement has. Yet it has been the internal inconsistency of the political strategies as well as the personal, Muslim identities of secular feminists that have allowed Islamic feminists to redefine the feminist agenda in Pakistan. This article voices the larger concern over the rise of a new generation of Islamic revivalist feminists who seek to rationalize all women’s rights within the religious framework and render secular feminism irrelevant while framing the debate on women’s rights exclusively around Islamic history, culture and tradition. The danger is that a debate such as this will be premised on a polarized ‘good’ vs ‘bad’ Muslim woman, such that women who abide by the liberal interpretation of theology will be pitted against those who follow a strict and literal interpretist mode and associate themselves with male religio-political discourse. This is only likely to produce a new, radicalized, religio-political feminism dominating Pakistan’s political future.

keywords

Pakistan; secular feminism; identities; Islamic feminism; Islamic revivalist feminists; religio-political feminism

introduction

Much of the literature tracing the women's movement of the 1980s and 1990s in Pakistan tends to be statist and in opposition to military dictatorship and religion (Mumtaz and Shaheed, 1991; Jalal, 1991; Iqbal, 1992; Bhasin *et al.*, 1994). Colloquially, the slogans that Pakistani feminists have used in their political resistance include 'men, money, mullahs¹ and the military'. This approach has given the movement its structural moorings and clarity with regard to its confrontational and dynamic relationship with the state, the military and capitalist development. However, during this time, the biggest challenge has come from within the movement: that of the personal and, necessarily, that of religious identity. Personal ambivalence on the part of Pakistani feminists and global political attention over the war on terror has made this an unresolved issue. Consequently, today the issue of religious identity confronts activists within the women's movement in Pakistan, which has serious implications for its feminist future.

The 1977 military take over and the subsequent decade of General Zia-ul-Haq's rule made women direct targets of a misogynist state under his purported Islamization project (Jahangir and Jillani, 1990; Zia, 1994). One of the most important legacies of this troubled decade has been that, seemingly, the only tool for analysing women in Pakistan is faith-based politics and a woman's acceptance or resistance to expressions of this politics. This article traces the trends within the women's movement that led to this point. The article contends that geo-political influences such as modernity and globalization have been just one aspect with which women have had to consciously contend, negotiate or engage. Moreover, it has been the simultaneous resistance and co-option of liberal (modern) ideals by women in right and Islamic fundamentalist movements that have enabled a newly constructed identity of feminism and women's relationship with the state. In the process, the agenda as well as the methodologies of the progressive Pakistani women's movement have been challenged, redefining feminism in our context.

This historical perspective is important in understanding that the emergence of these identities can not be exclusively attributed to an external, western influence, nor can it be seen as an outcome of imperialism or globalization alone. Feminist politics in Pakistan has been trying to grapple with the issue of fragmented, polarizing identities in relation to religious identities for many years. The central case in this article is that, in fact, the empowering strategies of Islamic feminists² working within the framework of religion have not only been successful but have also subsumed all other forms of feminist expression along the way. It is the contention of this paper that, unwittingly, the apologist, insider, inclusive approach of the women's movement on the issue of religion has enabled and assisted the *political* expressions of Islamic feminism as we see it

1 Self-appointed male preachers, outside the scholarship associated with Islamic learning. Historically, such scholars have no legitimacy within the larger religious discourse but exert an important cultural influence within communities. During Gen Zia-ul-Haq's rule (1977–1988), maulvis/mullahs practically gained state sanction to operate as vigilantes particularly in enforcing the state prescription of chador and chardevari (the veil and the household) for women.

2 I use the term here to refer to those feminists who are concerned with looking for empowerment of their gender within a

'rethought Islam' and are involved in reinterpreting and re-examining a masculinist reading of the Quran and Shariah. Two Pakistani scholars leading this field are Riffat Hasan, working in the USA, and Farida Shaheed, who represents the South Asian chapter of the Women Living Under Muslim Laws network, WLUML.

today. This was not the purported motivation behind such a revisionist agenda but its expression is certainly visible in Pakistan today. This article will argue that these internal imperatives and the lack of clarity on the issue of religious identity within the secular or progressive women's movement have contributed quite effectively towards forming a new brand of feminism, one rooted in a predominantly religious identity.

war on terror as a marker of women's identities

It would be an academic inaccuracy to suggest that the events of 9/11 created 'new' religious identities for women. The subsequent global war on terror, however, has influenced women's political identities so as to render a deeper division between the perceived modern, liberal Pakistani woman and the talibanized, regressive, conservative one. Rather than consider this a structural divide brought on by 9/11, the debates within the movement show that the spectrum of diverse feminist strands is really continuous from the past.

To the extent that both stereotypes mentioned above are constructed within a larger patriarchal discourse of both the war on terror and nationalist identities, it would be more accurate to suggest that the political identity of the Pakistani woman has coalesced rather than been 'born again'. What is new is a general acceptance of a clearer West vs. Islam dichotomy in post-9/11 Pakistan, and its attendant political challenges.

Women have become, once again, symbols for the (western) audience of either the progressive, modern, potential of the nation or the veiled, traditionalist, threatening reminders of faith-based politics. Muslim women's identities seem to have indeed become a project worthy of study within this new framework – a new brand of academic interest.

This article argues that these strains pre-existed 9/11, which then can merely be seen as an event that speeded up the dichotomies and gave currency to the unresolved issue of women's identities, particularly with regard to religion, in Pakistan. The war on terror furthered this cleavage and has lent a certain political credibility and legitimacy to faith-based feminism as the alternative to a larger imperialist, US-sponsored, westernized women's rights discourse.

Further, we may see growing feminist expression that will prove challenging in political terms as well, in which religion will not be so much of a 'bridge [between] the realms of the spiritual and social' (Shaheed, 2002: 366) but very much to the political realm as well. This would debunk the suggestion that *political* expression of religion lies outside the faith-empowering, personal agenda of Muslim women in Pakistan.

the interplay of secular and Islamic feminisms

A short overview of the debates that took place within the mainstream women's movement over the issue of religion throws light on the ambivalences that marked the movement. This can be traced to the decade of the 1980s, which saw a rich debate on the issue of religion, both as a contention and as a strategy of empowerment, within the urban-based women's movement in Pakistan (Khan, 1994). This debate was most vocal within the Women's Action Forum (WAF),³ an alliance formed in 1981 of women's groups and individuals fighting against Islamization and Martial Law.

Initially the women's movement, including WAF, decided to employ the strategy of using progressive interpretations of Islam to counter patriarchal state religion (Khan, 1992). They succeeded in this strategy to some extent and, importantly, garnered unlikely support in the process, from moderate and right-wing Islamic feminists⁴ alike – at least strategically. This was a most unlikely source of support, as the urban women's movement included several women from progressive political parties, left politics, professional women's groups including trade unions and also development groups. For example, on the issue of rape, women from right-wing fundamentalist political parties participated in protests against the state, but would distance themselves on WAF's slogans against the Hudood Ordinances or Islamization.

In 1991, after years of debate, WAF took a radical departure from its liberal feminist history and decided to declare itself secular – in principle. However, this also initiated a series of further debates within the movement at large and which arguably remain unresolved till now.

In the light of this historical experience, Saba Mahmood, professor and scholar of Islamic revivalist feminism, makes an interesting departure with reference to her own personal involvement in the progressive feminist movement in Pakistan. She recalls that activists during the Islamization years considered Islamic forms of patriarchy as the root of women's oppression and that 'feminist politics came to require a resolute and uncompromising secular stance' (Mahmood, 2005: x). My own membership of the Lahore-based WAF and participation in the debates that informed the movement in the 1990s suggest that this stance was not as resolute, and if not compromised on principle, was always open to negotiation and strategic rethinking from the very beginning.

One criticism of the secular stand by modernist Islamic feminists⁵ is that it did not help to mobilize women across classes and after all the time-consuming debate may, after all, have been a misplaced identity to adopt (Shaheed, 2002: 373). Interestingly, the same strand of criticism suggests that women have 'priorities and agendas other than gender' and 'dominant feminist groups' (*ibid.*) did not recognize this and merely reacted to and allowed the state to lead the

3 WAF is a women's rights organization founded in 1981 and which has a presence in several cities in Pakistan. It is a non-partisan, non-hierarchical, non-funded, secular organization. It lobbies on all aspects of women's rights and related issues, irrespective of political affiliations, belief system or ethnicity. It was the lead organization that took to the streets in protest against the promulgation of discriminatory Islamic laws during the military dictatorship of Gen Zia-ul-Haq.

4 Muslim modernist scholars such as Azza Karam use the term 'Islamic feminists' to distinguish feminism and non-feminism within a broader Islamic activism. See T. Rashid (2006: 71). This distinction is applicable and acknowledged within the Pakistani women's movement too.

5 This term refers to scholars and activists who argue for gender equality through their interpretation of the Quran and Shariah which seeks an understanding of

Islamic law in a historical context and a methodology that ensures women greater freedom and rights.

resistance discourse. The modernist Islamic feminists suggested that instead of 'entering into a headlong confrontation, a better policy may be to... distinguish between the various strands of religion, customs, and culture' (*ibid.*: 381). This liberal positioning argues against a prescribed 'either...or' choice between religious and secular identities forced upon women by politico-religious forces or 'dominant feminist groups', respectively. This is the exact space that I am suggesting left the movement wide-open to be co-opted and absorbed by a force larger, more overwhelming and more rewarding than the progressive women's groups could offer; personally, politically or in spiritual sisterhood.

During the 1980s, the Pakistani Intelligence agencies, funded by the US government, created an ideological and armed guerrilla force (the Taliban) to fight against the communist invasion of Afghanistan (Rashid, 2000). Almost as a parallel, some sections within the Pakistani women's movement were complicit in the creation of an alternative, Islamic feminism as a tool to fight patriarchal state religion. Activists advocating progressive women's rights may not have been directly responsible for finding or funding women activists of the fundamentalist Islamic movement. However, the strategy of making alliances, mobilizing and accommodating the religious perspective, gave feminist credentials to those working within the Islamic discourse, regardless of how much it was defined and constrained within an overall patriarchal framework.

This is not to take away the agency of women in the religious right, but to point out that their politics was always critical and unaccepting of western, modern, liberal feminism (Rashid, 2006). Both the state and sections of the women's movement used Islam as a political defence against 'foreign' ideologies (communism and western feminism, respectively). This gave agency and credence to new religious movements. These gradually formed into independent Islamic organizations and forces, which took on a pro-active, socio-political agenda beyond the original resistance goals. These movements have morphed into forces that offer the most serious political confrontation with the state today.

The irony is that the empowerment and solidarity strategies that attempted to demystify, translate and bridge western feminist theory with local, indigenous culture were far more successful than progressive women's rights advocates could have hoped for or are willing to take credit for.

Through field research, strategies and programmes, Muslim women's organizations have been actively working towards eliminating religious and cultural impediments to advocate for and pursue justice and equality for Muslim women. Several such initiatives such as the Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML)⁶ are funded by international donor agencies. The larger, visionary 'project' necessarily revolves and centres around Islamic values and reinterpreted texts.

The academic debate around these issues makes for very interesting reading. Tahmina Rashid's research based on Pakistan makes a useful categorization of

⁶ WLUML is an international solidarity network formed in 1984 that provides information, support and a collective space for women

Muslim women's ideological relationship to Islam based on the 'woman question'. These categories range from traditionalists, modernists, secularists and socialists (Rashid, 2006). Quite rightly, she considers Riffat Hasan (Pakistani-American theologian) and members of Shirkat Gah/WLUMI including Farida Shaeed, in Pakistan as Islamic modernists, seeking modernist interpretations of religion towards ensuring women's rights as outlined in the Quran.

whose lives are shaped, conditioned or governed by laws and customs said to derive from Islam. <http://wlumi.org/english/index.shtml>.

Although not mentioned in Rashid's feminist categories, Dr Farhat Hashmi has been instrumental in bringing about what is loosely referred to as the 'Al-Huda phenomena' in Pakistan. She established the Al-Huda Academy for women to re-learn Islam as early as 1994. This institutional approach to reinterpreting all issues in a 'modern' way and 'within the parameters of the Quran'⁷ challenges masculinist but not necessarily state or orthodox discourse directly and, most importantly, pre-dates 9/11. With this background, Riffat Hasan's challenge to Farhat Hashmi's aspirations to be a scholar of Islam makes interesting reading within the Islamic feminist discourse.

7 Dr Farhat Hashmi in an interview with Samina Ibrahim, Newslite, Karachi, February 2001.

Hasan does not accept Hashmi's claim that the male ulema challenge her attempts to 'liberalise Islam'. Instead, Hasan considers Hashmi 'no more "modernist" than she is "feminist" or "liberal"' (Hasan, 2002: 18). In examining the content of her message, Dr Hasan considers Hashmi's ideological stance to be 'still very markedly right-wing' (*ibid.*: 17).

This ongoing debate is indicative of and is shaping future academic discussion. A generation of post-9/11 Pakistani scholars are increasingly involved in researching, revising and redefining Islamic legal, social and economic history, in order to graft a new interpretation to socio-political movements in the Muslim world. The debate has become internal and, with regard to the issue of feminism, it is the Islamic modernists who would be more acceptable to the fundamentalist or neo-fundamentalist Islamists today.⁸ This is because the former provide a much-required modern, liberal, palatable form of Islam that can counter Islamophobia in the West. Some of these 'empowering' methodologies that attempt to give a 'new and progressive' face to Islamic expressions are discussed below.

8 Olivier Roy defines neo-fundamentalism as a 'common intellectual matrix that can nevertheless be manifested in various political attitudes' (2004: 232).

In retrospect and despite criticism of WAF's secular stand, two important points emerged from their positioning. First, historically WAF remains one of the few avowed secular organizations in the public sphere. In the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, this anomaly in itself is a political comment that few others are willing to embrace. Secondly and paradoxically, this stand allows members to belong personally to other non-secular organizations, movements and even political parties, and yet continue to express their 'politically secular' position within WAF. In other words, WAF has become a political comfort zone for activists where they can take radical and feminist positions. This is true even when such stands may be inconsistent with the more diluted, comparatively conservative politics of

organizations that WAF members have founded, or belong to professionally, or support ideologically. It is a brilliant compromise and convenient separation of the personal and the political.

Traditional criticism of the women's movement has tended to focus on its ineffectiveness at bringing about radical, visible progress for women, particularly working-class women. This external critique has focused on the upper-class background of women activists and the non-governmental organizations (NGO) culture that has encouraged activists to be donor-driven rather than independent or 'indigenous' in drawing their agendas; often the criticism has been directed at the personalities of women activists and their 'western' outlook. More importantly, the little reflective critique within the women's movement that has taken place has often raised the question of funded projects defining the direction of the movement, as well as globalization and the weakened Left, banned trade/student unions movement and general de-politicization, as well as the fall-out from years of cumulative military dictatorships and lack of democratization as reasons for the loss of active membership. This critique also recognized that increasing social conservatism was threatening secular feminism, but this criticism was almost always directed against a state that was growing increasingly theocratic in nature. However, by externalizing the causes and accommodating the faith-based approach that attempted to look for 'moderate' alternatives within Islam and by insisting on situating the debates on the women's question within Islamic tradition and history, such reclamation projects merely squeezed out and delegitimized the secular feminist approach that sought to redefine women's rights outside the religious framework.

the success of the empowerment strategy

Although the term 'empowerment' is a popular one among the non-governmental sector (NGOs) and has a specific historical significance in developmental discourse, it is one that has become co-opted and bandied by groups who seek to portray themselves as 'progressive'. Faith-based activists who consider themselves 'moderate' promote their brand of women's rights as one that empowers women, just within the Islamic framework. Many faith-based activist initiatives mask themselves as development organizations, are often registered under the same law, and raise funds by including gender rights within their proposed aims and purposes. Apart from mimicking the perceived successful formula of secular feminist activism, the more right-leaning women's groups have also furthered their radical goals by increasingly confronting the state. This has been possible because they are confident of outnumbering and overshadowing the secular activists. The strategy of accommodating seemingly apolitical cultural Muslim feminists and empowering them to challenge patriarchy from within progressive interpretations of Islam has thus been partially successful. It has

taught them political strategy but has not been able to harness their larger goal of turning the state into a true Islamic nation that functions according to the Shariah.

The women's movement had managed to negotiate a fairly successful relationship with governments in the democratic interregnum (1988–1999) between the two military dictatorships of Generals Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) and Pervez Musharraf (1999–2008).

The women's movement gained maximum influence in policy making in general and women's issues in particular during the two terms under Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's liberal leadership (1988–1990; 1993–1996). During this time, NGOs found more negotiating space and a less threatening state, and shifted their efforts towards sensitizing, negotiating, influencing and 'infiltrating' government policy. Bhutto's pro-women agenda galvanized the women's movement to engage with her government in a more meaningful manner. This was a time for realizing the possibility of a democratic and if not directly secular, then at least a liberal, modernist future. Bhutto and her party categorically supported the removal of Islamic laws such as the Hudood Ordinances, although her government never managed to do so while in office. The World Social Summit for Development and International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women 1995 took place during her time, and we saw very close co-operation and collaborative work between women's groups, NGOs and the government in Pakistan.

However, between 1997 and 1999, under Nawaz Sharif's leadership and the government of the Muslim League party, women's groups found themselves losing ground to growing political conservatism, as well as religious revivalism increasing at the socio-political levels.

For example, the Council of Islamic Ideology in its annual report of 1997 recommended 'the obligatory wearing of Hijab' (veil) (Rashid, 2006: 147). The Punjab government announced a ban on cultural activities in girls' schools and colleges, directing them to abide by Islamic dress code, and in 1998 banned dance performances by women. Tahmina Rashid notes that since these announcements were neither official nor legislative, the legal status of such measures remained ambiguous and made it difficult for women activists to target their response (*ibid.*).

Honour killings during this period extended from rural and tribal areas into the larger urban centres. In 1999, a young woman was murdered by her father for filing for divorce in a human rights office in Lahore (Rehman, 1999).

NGOs came under criticism and suspicion from the conservative government, which attempted to regulate their activism, which it termed

9 Newspaper reports quoted in T. Rashid (2006: 150).

as the 'spreading [of] vulgarity, immorality and obscenity in the name of human rights'.⁹

Unlike the military dictatorship of the 1980s where General Zia-ul-Haq's project of Islamization (1979–1988) targeted women both symbolically and by making them repositories of punitive discriminatory and misogynistic policies, General Pervez Musharraf's rule (1999–2008) was one of self-acclaimed 'enlightened moderation'.

As early as 2001, Musharraf stressed the need for the political empowerment of women and, in an unprecedented move, increased women's political participation through the reservation of seats in parliament (33 per cent). He also set up a permanent National Commission on the Status of Women in 2000 and while all the recommendations were not accepted from this Commission, the Women's Protection Act of 2007 did reform the controversial Zina Ordinance. This reform was a central concern of the Commission and the women's movement for the past twenty-five years. Musharraf supported women's public activities, such as contentious mixed-gender marathons in the conservative Punjab province, and called for increased numbers of women in the armed forces as well as the appointment of women guards at the mausoleum of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of the nation.

However, by now the backlash against NGOs, who were increasingly perceived to be run by western anti-Islamic forces, particularly in the conservative and tribal North Western Frontier Province that borders with Afghanistan, had become a systematic drive.¹⁰

10 A woman's shelter, Mera Ghar, was forcibly shut down in 2005 under pressure from the MMA provincial government in doubt of its 'religious' credibility.

11 A reformist movement for Indian Muslims formed in 1941, which later went on to become a right-wing Islamic political party in Pakistan. Its mass base includes an educated middle class. Despite its ideology for a gradual Islamization, the party has never done well in any national election. For the 2002 elections, they allied with five other religio-political parties to form the MMA and

It was during this period that right-wing women's groups started adopting and using strategies that the mainstream secular movement had so far been using, as reported in a monograph on the activities of the MMA (a coalition of religious parties that were part of the Opposition in Parliament, 2002–2007) (Brohi, 2006). In 2004, the Jamaat Islami¹¹ held a World Conference entitled 'Strong Family; surety of our survival and women's rights' (Brohi, 2006: 68). They also launched an 'anti-obscenity campaign' for the 'protection of women', which their youth wing (Shabab e Milli) claimed was a 'feminist' act (*ibid.*: 71). Advertising hoardings that carried women's images were defaced with black paint as part of this campaign in all major cities. It was reminiscent of radical feminist direct-action strategies of the 1970s in Europe and USA. In 2005, the MMA proposed a 'Prohibition of Indecent Advertisements Bill 2005' that would make publishing 'indecent' and 'humiliating' advertisements a criminal offence.

This attack against media stereotyping was a concern shared by the progressive women's movement. At this time, it was the Islamists who were seen to be taking the lead on this agenda, and progressive women's groups should have tried to re-occupy this space. An intervention was necessary in order to 'convert every opportunity in a creative and even opportunistic manner to fight [the

progressive] battle...to ensure the proposed MMA Bill [did] not become a vicious means of rendering women invisible in an already under-represented society' (Shehrbano, 2005).

subsequently formed part of the government.

The strategy of right-wing religious parties has been to articulate conservative demands through women representatives. Brohi observes the motive is to make 'women talk[] of women's confinement and curtailment of rights [so that it] makes the talk more legitimate, more "indigenous", less "imposed"' (Brohi, 2006: 74). This is how modernist Islamic feminists seek legitimacy too. Women seek to reinterpret religious texts in a modern, indigenous, culturally relevant context rather than in an 'imposed' western feminist discourse.

The threads that bound the women's movement together historically and across the feminist spectrum were the controversial Hudood Ordinances, especially the discriminatory Zina (adultery) laws.¹² There was a loose consensus from progressive to right-wing Islamic feminists on the need to review, repeal and amend this law. However, by 2003, for the first time in twenty-five years, a pro-Hudood demonstration was held by right-wing women activists of the Jamaat e Islami to protest against the recommended repeal of the laws by the National Commission on the Status of Women.

12 These laws were passed in 1979 as part of General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policy. The Zina Ordinance makes adultery a crime against the state punishable by death and blurs the line between rape and consensual intercourse. Many hundreds of women have been victimized and jailed under this law. It has since been amended in 2006/2007 under the Women's Protection Act.

These challenges and pockets of conservative expression peaked in the direct confrontation between Islamist forces and the state at several points during Musharraf's government. With regard to women, such subversive challenges were perhaps best exemplified in the Jamia Hafsa incident in early 2007.

creating and co-opting feminist spaces

The activism of the Jamia Hafsa women students in Islamabad first appeared in the media in January 2007. These students belonged to a religious school or madrassa that was part of the Lal Masjid/Mosque in a posh neighbourhood in the capital, Islamabad. These young women illegally occupied the premises adjoining the Lal Masjid, in protest against the government's threat to demolish it and reclaim it as state land. The women also allegedly kidnapped a woman from the neighbourhood whom they accused of prostitution and only let her free once she 'repented'. Most civil society members were disturbed by the threat to liberal life-styles, rather than looking at this occupation as a politics of protest that challenged the state. The Jamia Hafsa women, who wore complete black veils and carried bamboo sticks in their occupation of the mosque library, were mocked by the liberal, English-language media as the 'veiled brigade' or 'chicks with sticks'.¹³

The liberal elite in Pakistan condemns 'extremist forces' and portrays them as new arrivals from nowhere, or at best as straight out of a madrassa. This tendency tends to elide over and ignore the serious political spaces they have

13 See, for example, www.dawn.com/weekly/mazdak/20070414.htm; www.dawn.com/2007/04/24/

letted.htm;
www.dawn.com/
weekly/dmag/
archive/071209/
dmag26.htm
(all last accessed
September 2008).

14 Joint press
release by WAF,
Pattan, Sustainable
Development Policy
Institute, Rozan,
Aurat Foundation,
Small Projects
Office, The Network,
Sungi, 2 April 2007.

15 Section of the
Pakistan Criminal
Procedure Code that
bans public
gatherings.

come to occupy. Progressive women's groups, as expected, made more salient statements on this incident, bringing out a historical perspective and linking extremist violence to the past thirty years of state policies. However, in a press release a group of clearly identifiable 'progressive' organizations claimed to 'slam the action of female students of Jamia Hafsa who have become pawns in the hands of political forces and use religion to gain political power and control over the state'.¹⁴ WAF activists also organized a street protest in Lahore against the actions of the Jamia Hafsa women students, for which they were arrested by the local administration.

There are a couple of points that need to be addressed here. First, twenty-five years ago, when the 'progressive women's movement' was protesting dictatorial rule, women would apply direct action strategies such as '*gherao*' (encirclement) of TV studios, in protest against 'misogynistic programmes' or workplaces where women were harassed. Given that section 144 of the Criminal Code¹⁵ was almost a permanent feature, these activists would regularly risk breaking the law, and court arrest as part of their activism. Rural-based organizations, such as Sindhiani Tehriq (ST), have historically undertaken, and today continue their brave, direct action in the form of 'rescue kidnappings' of women from forced marriages or as victims of abuse. It was peculiar then that when the Jamia Hafsa students defied a military state and the police, and resorted to illegal forms of protest, their action was condemned. Women's organizations were seen to be empowered, and they were also seen to be autonomous. Both WAF and (at least on women's issues) ST worked to a feminist agenda, over and above male politics, and hence their actions were praised as successful strategies from a sisterhood of activism.

However, the *modus operandi* or indeed the agency of the Jamia Hafsa women needs to be looked at afresh. There was no evidence that they were 'pawns in the hands of political forces that use religion to gain political power and control over the state'. Hence, the question that arises is why the activism of some groups is considered more autonomous than others. The Jamia Hafsa women did not proclaim political allegiance to any political party, and their activism was part of a moral crusade. Even if they were following male dictates, given that the 'women's wings' of other political parties, or women activists from the 'progressive' Pakistan People's Party, do not waver from the party line, why did the movement expect more from women representatives of religion-based political parties? In fact, the Jamia Hafsa women were indeed following an autonomous agenda in seeking salvation for the suspected 'prostitutes' and liberating them when they repented of their activities. Prostitution has never featured in male religious rhetoric. In fact, there has been a silence on the issue, given the ambivalence in Islamic literature and also some well-documented cases where male religious leaders themselves have been accused of indulging in illicit sexual practices.

Also misplaced is the condemnation of their activism as a means of gaining state power, since this is the aim of *all* political activism – to gain control and power over the state.

The statement from progressive organizations also claimed to 'reject [Jamia Hafsa students'] attempt to enforce their misguided version of morality'. One is tempted to ask then, where can one find the 'good guidance version?' Once again, the standard back-tracking within the progressive movement becomes obvious when they take the oblique position that they are not against morality *per se*, nor against religion *per se*; it is just someone else's 'misguided version' that is offensive.

This form of liberal side-stepping and inability to resolve any issue, and not going beyond issuing strategic apologies for, or issuing strong verbal statements against Islamic forces, betrays a hang-over from the activism that was mounted against General Zia's Islamization policies. The state has learned to use religion either in its most oppressive form or by donning a more liberal enlightened garb, to co-opt and bankrupt civil society. However, with regard to dealing with violence in any form, neither method has worked.

This is not to trivialize the criminality of the act of the Jamia Hafsa women when they kidnapped and held women hostage, nor even their appropriation of state land on which the madrassa Hafsa and Lal Masjid are built. However, what is critically dishonest among the establishment and elite was their unwillingness to acknowledge that this incident was neither about the hostage taking nor about land grabbing. It was about the liberal fear of the potential of obscurantist forces, who had now demonstrated their ability to appropriate (state and one day possibly private) property, as well as waging a moral crusade that goes against liberal life-styles.

It is also a comment on the complete failure of the so-called progressive potential of Islamic feminism and the revivalist, reformist, apologist approach that is a major part of the women's movement. Today, those very same empowering strategies of WLUMI have come back to haunt them in their most triumphant form. It is about the complete failure of the non-governmental sector to propel a progressive politics outside its projects and donor-driven agendas. Today, the same international funding agencies that funded and supported the dictatorial regimes of the 1980s are, in the new millennium, scrambling back to the drawing board looking to fund projects that can help fight 'extremism' and 'talibanization', as if it appeared post-9/11 and is an indigenous, madrassa-empowered phenomenon.

More interestingly, while revivalist Islamic feminists talk at length about reclaiming the agency of Islamic feminism (see Mahmood, 2005), in the above incident, the progressive women's movement, including modernist Islamic feminists, condemned the autonomous spaces the Jamia Hafsa women students

sought. Mahmood talks about the need to understand that 'both positive and negative notions of freedom have been used productively to expand the horizon of what constitutes the domain of legitimate feminist practice and debate' (*ibid.*: 13). However, this radical expression of autonomy and political confrontation against the state, which led to the ultimate death of many students when the state stormed the Lal Masjid in July 2007, elicited no response, let alone support, from the modernist Islamic feminists.

Religion has taken on a new force after 9/11, with women seeking political expression within male-defined religious resistance to western Islamophobia. Many young women, particularly from the lower-middle classes, found sanctuary in religion in an otherwise disempowering society where they were losing rights and representation. One example is found among those who took on the 'hejab' (veil) as a religious symbol, and then found it a convenient refuge against male harassment and a way of negotiating for more space in the public sphere. Female religio-political leaders earned some form of power, even if it is really an illusion of power, by compromising with a militarized, dictatorial state that assumed a moderate religious and liberal rhetoric. Religion has in many ways become privatized and women home-based preachers found power in their small followings (*dars*), which compensated for the absence of democratic or domestic importance. Women preachers now give short sermons at funerals to women mourners of the community, with their own translations and interpretations of Quranic verses. Individual mourning and reading of the Quran is being increasingly substituted by the *dars* phenomena.

It is seriously unlikely that the women's movement will raise another political campaign against the Hudood Ordinances as it has over the last twenty-five years. Just as tribal justice 'settles' disputes at the local level, the state has resolved women's issues by tweaking some parts of this law without questioning its premise or purpose. It is unlikely that another government will have the power to remove discriminatory laws on principle, or by arguing from the angle of international imperative. Instead, the state has co-opted and absorbed an adequate amount of liberal forces, as well as enough good will from civil society groups, to steer the direction of liberal or progressive activism in the future.

Women's activism will, in all probability, focus on women's political participation, but not necessarily on empowerment; will focus on violence against women with a focus on victims rather than on prevention; and will fail to challenge networks of informal negotiation between men or misogynistic cultural practices. Most of all we are likely to witness the growing polarization between 'good Muslim' and 'bad Muslim' women, such that women who abide by the liberal interpretation of theology will be pitted against those who follow a strict and literal interpretist mode and associate themselves with male religio-political discourse.

a new feminism?

Historically, the claim that working within the religious discourse helped cut across and bridge class differences is a strategy that has proved to be ill-founded. Interestingly, in arguing the 'success' of forging links with grassroots mass organizations based on identities other than gender, Shaheed (2002) quotes the importance of urban women's groups' links with rural-based ST (which has a membership numbering in tens of thousands). What she does not mention while quoting this example is that ST is part of a clearly secular political nationalist movement.

On the other hand, the criticism of the upper-middle class and feudal identities of activists who are a part of the urban women's movement has not proven to have necessarily been an impediment to their larger cause. In her criticism of the movement, Sumar (2002) quotes instances where the activists of WAF and NGOs failed to organize their own actions along feminist and class critical lines. However, to the extent that these are lobby groups, there are an equal number of instances where the same women fought cases and campaigned against their class and economic interests.

Many outside and within the women's movement recognize that Zia-ul-Haq was unable to convert the nation to Islamic fundamentalism or to bring about any fundamental changes in its capitalist economy (Khan, 1992), yet they concede that the state became increasingly theocratic during those years. Thus, the process of internalizing an Islamic identity over the years and succumbing to political positioning within the Islamic discourse in the women's movement has been commented upon. However, this in my view was not so much due to 'political naivete of the activists' nor even 'a substitute for their inability to organize for power' (Sumar, 2002: 428–429) but, instead, a result of genuine ambivalence on the personal level. These include the contradictions wrought by the identity split that motivated activists to attempt to reconcile their personal Muslim identity with their political activism.

More than political stands, it was personal identity politics that often stumped the debate within the movement. Over the years, this has included issues such as membership for polygamous wives, relationship with Benazir Bhutto as a woman PM, misuse of organizational identity for legitimacy or even whether a protest should be temporarily interrupted because of the Azaan (call to prayer).¹⁶ On one level, the women's movement successfully challenged the state's attempt to impose a dress code on women. On the other, it remained silent on Benazir's strategic choice to drape the dupatta/veil on her head as a personal decision. The importance given to the personal (though some complained it was not enough) as well as the political strategies needs to be highlighted here. I would argue that apart from the inability to resolve on clear secular strategies in vision as well as methodology, the movement also did not rethink the controversial

16 Personal observations from the Lahore and Islamabad WAF meetings and conventions.

issue of multiple, often conflicting, membership identities and clearly defined leadership criteria.

By taking a purist stand on the principle of non-hierarchy and secularism, WAF in particular seems to have become the purgatory for the movement. It is also a misleading notion because clearly the 'founding members' of the organization always refer to themselves as such and thereby automatically render a hierarchy anyway. This also empowers them to make decisions because of their commitment to the liberal cause, but in fact WAF in reality remains a forum in theory rather than in practice. If this forum took advantage of its historical relevance and reorganized itself as a *practicing* secular, feminist, street activist, like-minded, oppositional organization (instead of an open, inclusionary forum) not just to the state but to neo-fundamentalist and revisionist Islamic forces, including those run by and for women, it could play a more meaningful role today. Challenging organized religious movements and such organizations headed by women would mean that it would involve taking the bold task of clearly defining secular feminist goals. It would mean rejecting all those defined by or within a larger religious vision, whether modernist, progressive and/or feminist.

This break is imperative and requires honest reflection. It is important to highlight that apart from personal discomfort and strategic disagreement, the political stands of the urban women's movement, including members of WAF and other NGOs, simultaneously accommodate faith-based and religio-cultural diversity, and yet when Islamic feminists challenge the state, they condemn such action.¹⁷ Al-Huda is tolerant of women who choose not to veil in their religious gatherings or schools; Jamia Hafsa required women to veil themselves completely in black. The liberal women's movement has no criteria nor any symbolic requirement for its membership. One can change personal and political positions on any issue at any historical period and still continue to be an ideological and permanent member.

On one level, sociologists would reject the false binaries among moderates, liberals and extremists and argue that instead they are all part of the same social spectrum. Feminists have celebrated the diversity and range within the women's movement from liberal to Islamic feminist politics.¹⁸ However, the historical lesson should have taught us that, repeatedly, spaces made to accommodate cultural expressions of religion have merely eclipsed, negated and delegitimized the progressive feminist movement in Pakistan.

As late as 2002, women's rights activist Farida Shaheed was still arguing against those urban-based activists who, she suggests, have dominated the discourse of the women's movement. She criticizes their attempt to subjugate 'culturally challenging' practices, which include religion (Shaheed, 2002). In highlighting the need to recognize that religion operates simultaneously as a potentially spiritually empowering quest on a personal level as well as a mobilizing force in

17 In an advertisement calling for a protest against religious extremism in April 2007, WAF welcomed participants of all 'faith or religious school of thought or other ideology' to join its rally demanding the 'freedom to worship in accordance to personal belief'. *DAWN* newspaper, 18 April 2007.

18 T. Rashid notes this when she categorizes two main groups who debate the interplay of religion and women's rights in Pakistan. She places Fareeda Shaheed and Khawar Mumtaz among those seeking to recognize the appeal of religion for lower- and

politics, Shaheed's work has consistently suggested that cultural customs merge and sometimes contradict religious doctrine. Towards this, she suggests that middle-class activists versed in feminist theory must be wary of 'presumptiveness' when they challenge feminist interpreters of Islam. She warns against challenging those revisionist projects that contradict the secular feminist stand within the movement (Shaheed, 2002: 378).

The success she quotes of empowering strategies such as *dars*, *khatams*¹⁹ and other religious modes defining social relationships are precisely the ones that enabled the privatization of religion²⁰ with political repercussions as discussed above. Shaheed emphasizes the importance of such *personal* expressions of women's relationship with religion. Mahmood challenges the notion that modes of sociability, as defined by those who choose to conduct themselves in an 'Islamic manner', and in opposition to 'Western-liberal' life-styles, are 'apolitical in nature' (Mahmood, 2005: 73). Instead, she suggests the assumption that 'piety movements do not confront the state directly' is a 'mistake' (*ibid.*). I agree. This political reclamation of religion by women is the outcome of the very 'presumptiveness' that led modernist Islamic feminists to invest a progressive political possibility in a redefined culture and religion. Whatever their assumptions may have been, today they are unable to stop the dynamic political and regressive direction that such movements are taking.

Now the dangers come from a second generation of the revisionist school – those who try and find feminist, modernist and even secular tendencies and bents within right-wing organized political (Jamaat e Islami) and seemingly non-political (Al-Huda) forces.²¹ I argue that by following the same trend from a different approach, these revisionists too will end up enabling and empowering a discourse that romanticizes Islamic traditions and indigenous cultural practices. In the process they render secular political feminism a marginal westernized, NGO-ized resistance or 'outside' voice on women's issues rather than a legal, economic, sociological, political and personal, alternative challenge to all forms of patriarchal expression, including religion. While modernists continue to reject radical Islamic feminist expressions and politics, their revisionist approach will not curb the radical and extreme political expressions.

The Islamic apologists therefore look around for a third way, a cultural revisionizing within Islamic history and discourse that seeks no political confrontation with men, money, mullahs or the military state. Instead they advocate for the privatization of religion by claiming a rational space between the ideological cracks of political religion and the secular. What is being suggested is a segregated, artificial, stateless, social suspension or political nunnery where women can interpret Islamic texts, educate and empower themselves, within religious discourse. While the collective discourse may challenge patriarchal religion in theory, there seems to be no clarity as to the nature of the relationship of such a discourse with the modern Islamic state, its

lower-middle class women and Asma Jahangir, Hina Jilani, Fauzia Gardezi, Nighat S. Khan and Afiya S. Zia as representative of 'upper and upper middle class feminists' who state that women's rights fall into the realm of secular human rights (Rashid, 2006: 58–59).

19 A *dar* is an informal religious study group, and *khatams* are funeral prayers, usually segregated for men and women.

20 This is not to imply that religious expression shifted into the private realm, thus dissipating from the public. Instead, social conservatism increased precisely because religions seeped into domestic realms and expressions too.

21 My readings of the unpublished works of Humeira Iqtidar, '*The Islamist Challenge to Secularism's Universalism*' and '*Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan; Learning from the Opposition*', and of Faiza Mushtaq, '*Al-Huda: New Forms of Islamic Education*', point towards this tendency (papers shared at the 'Miskeen' study group in Karachi). Others, such as those of Sadaf Aziz and Moeen Cheema, '*Beyond Petition and Redress: Mixed Legality and Consent in Marriage for Women in Pakistan*', and of Moeen Cheema and Abdul

Rahman, 'From Hudood Ordinances to the Women's Protection Act', papers presented at the Third Social Sciences Annual Conference at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, December 2007, look to tackle the woman question from a new perspective located entirely within Islamic jurisprudence. Amina Jamal's work and doctoral thesis similarly explores the potential of a 'balanced modernity' among right-wing women activists inspired by modern Islamic revivalism, <http://www.amss.net/pdfs/35/abstracts/Aminajamal.pdf>.

laws or its politics. Instead, the revisionists stand as a buffer between the confrontational sections of the movement and the state.

The danger here is that the strategy of the earlier progressive women's movement is being repeated, reminiscent of the 1980s when women attempted to fight patriarchal fundamentalism from within an equally patriarchal Islamic discourse. In the process, it successfully empowered neo-Islamic political feminism as a side effect. Today, this form of feminism has captured the imagination of feminist possibilities in a more symbolic, confrontational and rewarding way than any vision that secular feminism can put forth. So there is every possibility of the fruition of such a new, radicalized, religio-political feminism dominating Pakistan's political future.

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