Introduction

The Politics of Feminist Politics

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Across an imaginative geography defined by “Islam” there is perhaps no more potent figure today than “the woman” or, increasingly, “the girl.” And there are no political projects more vexed by international attention and intervention than those that travel under the label of “feminism,” with its charged cognates from “rights” to “empowerment.” What can critical feminist scholars offer when they work from within specific locations and historical conjunctures that are, by definition, occluded by the homogenized transregional imaginative spaces that both Islam and feminism project? Deep regional knowledge and serious attention to particular vocabularies of women’s rights can expose the workings of dominant frameworks and disrupt their smooth lines. More than that, the work of anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and cultural analysts of and from different regions can do the crucial work of reterritorializing complexly gendered worlds in flux.

The essays in this forum take on not just the circulating figure of the Muslim woman but the gendered bodies of women in the thick of social and political life in particular places. They also explore the multiple languages of justice that invest the political terrain of feminism across different sites in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia with such intensity. From the volatile social struggles of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia to the unexpected convergences of neoliberal development and liberal talk in the strong states of Jordan and Syria, from the apotheosis of a Pakistani schoolgirl shadowed by her dark masculine other in the context of a War on Terror to the shifting power struggles in Bangladesh that give only some options to “seduced” pregnant women, the specific situations these essays examine unseat the “common sense” of liberal feminist discourse. These essays track the everyday languages and institutions of governance, policing, and morality by working carefully through such diverse fields as legal cases and legal reasoning, histories of education, dynamics of marriage, arts of linguistic transformation, politics of religious argument, legitimations of state power, and political economies of labor and housing. They analyze the circulations of terms and bodies in the public sphere and in public...
space. In doing so, they force our gaze toward the social exclusions and selective silencings that feminist projects produce, or reproduce, or to which they are subject.

Scandal, as Dina Siddiqi argues, marks the media discourse on women and girls in these parts of the world: the scandal of marrying one’s rapist in Bangladesh; of sexual harassment in Egypt; of suicide in Morocco; of rural backwardness in Jordan; of closed-minded religiosity in Syria; of Islamist women in Tunisia; of Taliban violence in Pakistan. The registers may shift—tradition/modernity, religious/secular, community/state, medieval/enlightened, custom/law, military/civil—but these public scandals and the politics they justify run stubbornly on familiar tracks.

These essays suggest that the real scandal may lie elsewhere: in our failure to be more vigilant about the ways that feminist political activism and analysis can be caught up in damaging forms of social and political exclusion, especially those based on class; in forms of governance connected to imperial ventures and global capitalism; in state repression and management of populations and marked bodies; and in affective economies that devalue certain ways of living, scenes of struggle, and moral languages.

Because the essays are written by scholars motivated by concerns about injustice and sensitized by their sustained regional investments to multiple forms of social exclusion, they not only question dominant frameworks and their effects but look beyond—to their undoings. They seek their points of openness. They read narratives against themselves to offer new possibilities for a more inclusive politics. Frances Hasso, for example, opens up the multiple valences of the term civil (madani) as it was deployed by different groups in the revolutionary moment in Egypt. Mayssoun Sukarietch invites us to call for more consistency in visions of empowerment by showing the elitist limits of the projections by the Jordanian and Syrian First Ladies of the ideal or empowered woman. She shows how they have covered over the ways that the lives and livelihoods of other women in their countries, from middle-class NGO workers to poor rural women, have been threatened and eroded by the regimes these First Ladies represent.

In Jordan and in Syria, then, feminism cannot belong solely to those whose power actually rests on ties to powerful men and cosmopolitan consumption while they peddle petty entrepreneurship, self-reliance, and traditional craftwork to empower the poor. Zakia Salime shows how popular global conceptions of the oppression of women in the Middle East and North Africa rely on cultural explanations rather than political or socioeconomic analysis to produce outrage about certain events and not others on feminist grounds. While the suicide of Amina Filali, the “child made to marry her rapist,” inspired high-profile, international condemnation, the self-immolation of Fadwa Laroui, the single mother denied housing, was met with silence. But Salime also suggests that these subaltern women staged their spectacular suicides as political speech acts; we must listen to both.

Like Salime, Dina Siddiqi illuminates not just the pernicious effects of global representational politics on commonsense understandings of violence and Muslim women, but the ways that such renderings blind us to complex desires. These desires, and the strategies for realizing them, are revealed through court records in Bangladesh that capture the complex ways that individuals and families make decisions within challenging sexual and class contexts, using the sociolegal tools at their disposal, repurposed inheritances of colonial law. Shenila Khoja-Moolji’s close reading “against the grain” of the cowritten memoir of the celebrated Pakistani icon Malala Yousafzai shows how even a text can undo itself. Eruptions of personal experiences and events undermine the tropes that Yousafzai’s story has been marshaled to support. An alternative feminist politics could amplify this disruption.

The long shadow of colonial binaries continues to shape the thinking and practice of feminist analysis across the region. Attention to the way this shadow affects the limits of feminist solidarities and ties women to larger state projects infuses many of these essays. Susanna Ferguson’s analysis of an online women’s and human rights journal in Syria up until 2010 details precisely how the universalist and dissident/reformist language of women’s human rights helped construct political subjects who shared a faith in modernity and progress,
inflecting an earlier nationalist socialist discourse by shifting the aversion toward tradition to the antigovernment Islamist groups that now wear this mantle. Embedded in the politics of class in Syria in the 2000s, the traditional/modern binary in the political claims of middle-class women’s rights activists served to disable broader feminist solidarities and absolve a problematic state of its abuses. Merieme Yafout’s comparative research on Islamist women’s participation in various political parties in Morocco (Justice and Development, Unification and Reform, Justice and Spirituality) and Tunisia (Ennahda) during and after the Arab uprisings offers a rare glimpse into other languages of justice being developed in circles often abjected, and punished, by secularist regimes or feminist reformers. She outlines the political concepts and modalities debated by Islamist women since the 1970s; uncovers how they are differently imagining an Islamic tradition; and reveals the tensions, ambivalences, and solidarities produced both by the repressive and exclusionary practices of the states within which they live and the political movements within which they struggle to find their place.

It is notable how often the gendered and sexed body emerges as analytically central in the essays in this forum. Embodied experience has long driven feminist politics. In these essays, we are asked to listen to how bodies speak, as in the subaltern Moroccan women’s self-immolations and suicides. We are asked to look at how they can and cannot move through space in the squares and cities and which visibilities are sanctioned and which punished. The troubling vulnerabilities and strengths that imprisonment and torture feed on and create, and the ways in which sexual assault can become part of policing—moral and political—must be confronted. How should we take account not just of the circulations of Muslim “victim-subjects,” as Ratna Kapur long ago taught us in “The Tragedy of Victimization Rhetoric,” but of the dynamics of the difference we call gender, the charge of sexuality, and the compulsions and cares of reproductive work? Hasso shows us best, perhaps, through her rich analysis of the travels and registers of the keyword civil in Tahrir, how women’s bodies cross fields of power, policing, and revolutionary politics in its aftermath. While earlier analyses have shown how female bodies operate as symbols, as they are made to carry the burdens of representation for communities, nations, and assertions of authenticity in colonial and postcolonial formations, these essays move beyond the symbolic register to think through the material and the embodied. Building on the ideas of Jacques Rancière, Hasso argues that an “essential lesson of the 2011 Arab revolutions is that ideological differences and material inequalities do not easily melt, even in emergent, pluralistic, and non-doctrinaire revolutionary politics, because it is difficult to erase positional and embodied differences in the scenes where politics are made.”

The serious study of feminist politics in and around the regions that Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East brings into conversation, and out of which we seek to theorize about the world, forces us to question, finally, how the terms in which feminist projects and interventions are conceived and executed serve not only to empower but to limit, discipline, and divide. Who speaks for whom, and to what effect? What are the lines of power that contain or cross gendered bodies, and how can we grasp the political consequences, including those that might undermine the visionary and inclusive impulses of feminist projects and politics?

Reference