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Understanding Muslim Women's Self-Identity and Resistance

to Feminism and Participatory Action Research

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INTRODUCTION

"There is no single brain area responsible for consciousness; consciousness is not an entity but an active process that requires the participation of many components." (Restak, 2000: 70-71) In this chapter, I propose that the relationship of feminism and participatory action research (PAR) is analogous to that of the brain-mind relationship. That is, together they promote an active process of individual consciousness-raising [2] and collective social action. For Muslim women scholar-activists, however, the use of gender as a central construct in this conscious-raising process may interfere with their personal and collective transformative process. Indeed contemporary western academic discourse that analyzes Muslim women's issues through the ethnic, race, and/or gender lens interferes with, rather than supports their conscientization. Academic discourse, particularly feminist discourse often dismisses Muslim women's views as "religious" and considers the prevailing Muslim males' interpretations as representative of Islamic view on gender.[3] This could explain why some of my Muslim women co-researchers resist feminist-informed PAR. I will demonstrate that the route for Muslim women to conscientization and collective action is instead through *Taqwa. Taqwa* (from Arabic) means the individual's conscientious balance of her autonomy with social heteronomy/hegemony and her interaction with natural and divine laws. It is also the only criterion that distinguishes individuals from one another (Qur'an, 49:13)[4]. I will argue that an understanding and meaningful integration of *Taqwa* in any participatory action research process that focuses on Muslim communities can lead to the same goals as feminist-informed PAR; the creation of just behaviors and social structures for all.

1

As a Muslim and as an academic feminist action researcher affiliated with Cornell University Women's Studies Program (in the Fall 2002 the name has changed to Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies), I will discuss a collaborative research project with some Muslim women scholar-activist leaders in the United States. For years my overall research concerns have grown out of my experiences as a Muslim woman scholar, activist, and feminist. Identifying primarily with the Islamic worldview helped me focus my scholarship and activism on the Qur'anic foundations of gender justice and how the prevailing Muslim male interpretations of the Qur'an resulted in gender bias. Assuming that my secondary identification with feminist-informed PAR would support rather than hinder my being a Muslim, I formulated the research question as follow: If the Qur'an, as the primary reader of Islam, is intended to dismantle hierarchies and social heteronomy/hegemony, and to enact social justice, particularly gender justice, then how did contemporary discussion concerning the status of Muslim women is so polarized? Muslim women, in general, accept the Islamic worldview as a rational and just one, and yet their social realities are evidence to the contrary. True, the social realities of Muslim women, in general, are strikingly oppressive--Muslim women have the highest illiteracy rate and the highest infant mortality rate, for example. Yet, by focusing on these realities as the problem instead of understanding them as behavioral manifestations resulting partly from colonialism and mainly because of biased interpretations of the Qur'an, feminists did not support Muslim women's self-identity with Islam as a means to achieve social justice. Furthermore, by attributing these sad realities to Islam, non-Muslim or westernized Muslim feminists caused a defensive attitude among Muslim women. Meanwhile, Muslim male elites who wrongly attribute to the Qur'an the prevention of women from public participation caused women not to be empowered with Qur'anic tools of liberation. At times, Muslim women experienced a tension in their identification with Islam because they were erroneously made to believe that males' interpretations are as binding as the Qur'anic principles themselves.

My earlier research suggests that a combination of ideological and scholarly dichotomies between two views of Western and traditional Muslim interpretations of Islam and gender justice have resulted in polarized interpretation (s) of the status of Muslim women. There is also a discrepancy between the Muslim community ideals and actual community practice, wherein women are idealized as mothers, daughters, and wives, but not recognized in practice as autonomous moral and rational beings as intended in the Qur'an (Barazangi, 1996). In addition, there is a

confusion of identity between the Islamic worldview and ethnic identity such as the Arabic culture (Barazangi, 1991a and 1991b). A Muslim needs to conscientiously and autonomously choose Islam as a primary identity in order to translate the Islamic worldview into concrete action for social justice. Meanwhile, the Arabic language of the Qur'an and the Arabic culture in which Islam grew, though have considerable influence on the Islamic mindset, are only secondary to being a Muslim.

 With this in mind, I bring to the surface underlying assumptions that may reframe how a recent tension in the relationship between academic feminists and some of my co-researchers might be understood and, consequently, changed. In the process, I unravel other tensions that might lead to friction because some participatory-oriented feminist researchers focus on global "solidarity" without enough attention to worldview variation (e.g., Afkhami &Vaziri, 1996). These tensions are manifested on four levels; value claims - the ontological, knowledge claims- the epistemological, cultural or historical claims, and praxis or socialization claims, which I collectively call "worldview claims." In this chapter, I focus on the relation between the power of knowledge and social constructs.

Through feminist participatory action research, my overall research goal has been to develop a self-learning pedagogical process that will improve, through study groups, my capacities and those of my co-researchers to control our destinies as Muslim women more effectively. Effectiveness means to change life situations in the home, in the learning/teaching/research environment, and in the larger social context to support self-realization and *Taqwa*. Our intention, in addition to bridging individual consciousness and social action, is to effect a cognitive and attitudinal change on the individual level. We also seek a transformation of social structures that we hope will alleviate potential resistance to feminisms and PAR. My pedagogical assumption is that once a woman changes what is in herself, she will be able to work with others to question and change social structures (Qur'an, 13:11). While this assumption was well founded among a grassroots Muslim women group in Damascus, Syria with whom I collaborated, it was not confirmed in my work with my American academic Muslim women co-researchers. I believe that the latter group overlooked the power of the largely unquestioned western approach to academic knowledge generation and dissemination process. Specifically, western approach had marginalized the worldview of Muslim women by both dismissing their views as "religious" and taking, unknowingly, the prevailing Muslim male elites views at their face value.

In the rest of the chapter, I will summarize two differing feminist participatory action research projects to analyze and explore what went wrong with the evolving pedagogical framework we created to assist us as Muslim women to achieve *Taqwa*. I identify the "worldview claims" that differ for Muslim women and non-Muslim academics. By understanding these differing worldviews, I identify implications for future feminist-informed participatory action research with Muslim women. In addition, I suggest a means for both Western feminist and Muslim women alike to resisting academic uncritical assimilation.

RESEARCH PROJECT

My action research work with Muslim women's self-identity began in 1994 with the intent that we would interpret the primary text of Islam, the Qur'an, in order to address Muslim women's human rights. Pressure to adopt a universalistic version of feminism mounted in preparation for the Beijing Conference (the Fourth World Conference on Women), which hoped to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) document (The U.N., 1996). In response, Muslim women scholar-activists launched their own study groups to rewrite the women's human rights declaration from within the Islamic perspective of justice and human rights. Since the Qur'an defines *Taqwa* as the only difference between individuals, the groups with whom I collaborated were working with the assumption that gender, whether as a biological sex or as a social construct, could not be the unit of analysis for the new interpretation of the text even though our goal as Muslim women scholar-activists was gender justice—similar to other women organizing for the Beijing Conference. Since our goal was also the Qur'anic goal, our strategy was to explain how the CEDAW items may or may not express Qur'anic intention.[5]

I worked with two groups of Muslim women on this topic, one in the United States and the other in Syria. The Syrian women were of the same ethnic and national background (Barazangi, 1997, 1999b), while the American women had different ethnic, racial, and national-origin backgrounds (Barazangi, 2000). Both groups were attempting to reclaim their primary self-identity with Islam through Islamic higher learning, but they were going through different transformation processes. The American were relying mainly on scholarship, while the Syrians began with grassroots activism moving toward scholarship.

In the following section I narrate two events with members from the American group to illustrate how the differing worldview claims resulted in tensions between American Muslim women and other academic feminists (Muslims and non-Muslims). Two strategic assumptions directed our American 1994 group, and its 1995 academic context. In 1995, I placed some of the American scholar-activists' work on the agenda of 1995 Middle East Studies Association annual meeting. This interaction culminated in the book, *Windows of Faith* (Webb, 2000). We assumed that (i) biological differences between the sexes do not mean different rights and responsibilities for males and females under Islam, and (ii) by understanding the major historical factors that led to the prevalent Muslim male-biased interpretations of the Qur'an and their subsequent unjust practices, we might be able to change some of their present biases. Changing these biased interpretations, being mainly manifested in preventing women's public participation, especially the interpretation of the Qur'an, could also mitigate other oppressive practices toward women that are not consistent with Qur'anic principles.

My work with this ethnically diverse group of Muslim women leaders in America was to develop a self-learning process of feminism within the action-oriented Islamic worldview. I hypothesized that if we remained aware of the other hindering social constructs, such as ethnicity or academic prestige and knowledge structure, just as we became aware of gender construct, we could develop *Taqwa* and be better equipped to control our destinies and improve our capacity to do so. Some results of my previous projects suggest that a learner who consciously chooses the Islamic worldview as her primary identification is actually furthering the broad sense of feminism, as the latter is rooted in the Qur'anic principle of social justice (Barazangi, 1999b). That is, a learner who self-identifies with the basic principles of the Qur'an frees herself from both the social and biological constraints of gender, race, and ethnicity. Such an individual becomes capable of exposing any discrepancies in the exclusionary interpretive process that was generated by academia and the community. This exclusionary process stems from both the academic (mainly white, non-Muslim) women's studies marginalization of Muslim women's worldview claims, and the Middle Eastern and Middle Eastern Women's Studies that purports a different knowledge structure that largely stems from outside the Islamic worldview. She will also be able to do so by asserting that the authority lies only in the text of the Qur'an and not in its interpretations, nor in its historical analysis. She will be able to do this by looking at the Qur'an as a collective, cohesive guide that has its own criteria for interpretations as well as a course of action for each individual to learn within its particular framework and to act on what one learns within that guidance. To the contrary, while

striving to satisfy the western "academic" demands on knowledge generation, American Muslim women may have overlooked the diverse epistemological claims among members of the group--such as whether or not to use the traditional male elites' interpretation of the Qur'an or the historical tools of academics. Muslims typically reference four "traditional" types of Islamic texts (the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad's extrapolation of Qur'anic guidance documented in books of *Hadith*, major commentaries on the Qur'an, and major jurisprudence interpretations of Qur'an and Hadith). These sources are considered principles of all Islamic thought. What concerns us here is both the absence of women from this process of interpretation and the variations in which some Muslim male elites have combined these principles, deviating from the Qur'anic intended meaning and method of interpretation. Meanwhile, looking at the Qur'an as mainly a historical document, as is done by most non-Muslim academics, deviates from the Qur'anic religio-moral-rational purpose. Furthermore, documenting some historical events as evidence for women's social oppression or agency may not corroborate with Qur'anic content and method for determining gender justice. Finally non-Muslim academic feminist discourse on Muslim women mainly within the context of the Middle/Near East Studies, relies on analyzing the anthropological or sociological relationship between cultural differences, ethnicity, race, and gender.[6] These relationships as analytical tools add more variables to the existing paradigmatic tensions instead of balancing them. By doing so, academics (women and men), perhaps unknowingly, created tension between themselves and Muslim women, and between these women and their communities.

THE NARRATIVES

The First Event

Shadey (a pseudonym) a leader and an activist-scholar I have known for about 30 years, devoted herself to the founding of a national Muslim women council-- an umbrella encompassing several grassroots Muslim women groups--to the point of sacrificing much of her personal life. The goal of the council is to educate through collective activism, and through research and production of booklets on topics that directly affect Muslim women's lives in North America (USA and Canada). As a founding member and an advisory board member of this national council, I was in close contact with Shadey. When I met with her during a professional conference, we had barely begun talking when she broke into tears, saying that no one respected her any more or thought of her as intellectual enough.

Shadey was intellectually and professionally capable of writing. She, however, often lamented that she did not know the Arabic language fluently—a necessary skill to directly access the meanings of the Qur'an. Her approach to participation in the interpretation process may have been influenced by the traditional interpretation of the Qur'an promoted by the male Muslim group with whom she had professional relationships. Her long-time association with this group and the support she received from its members for her activism—as long as it was within the parameters of their interpretations—seems to have led her to believe in and trust their terms. She often lamented that translating the work of these males from Arabic into English could become a "good" source for other women to learn about Islam. Yet, when she faced a personal problem, this same Muslim male dominated group declined to support her own interpretation as to how to solve the personal problem. Perhaps, as academics, other women in the group, being pressured to publish and therefore unavailable emotionally or intellectually and/or dismissive of her life experience as a valid knowledge base, have not facilitated her self-realization. This may have caused her continuous resistance to the legitimacy of her own and their "voice," and driven her to uncritically adopt the elite Muslim males' interpretation of the Qur'an as authentic. Furthermore, as long as she continued to use the traditional interpretations of the male group, the feminist-PAR voice remained, in her view, a distant rather than a supportive, active voice. Not only academic feminists and those academics who study Islam and Muslims in general have not concerned themselves with the validity of the underlying assumptions behind these predominantly male traditional interpretations (often viewing these interpretations as representing the Qur'anic view of gender justice), but non-Muslim Academic feminists who investigate Muslim women also overlooked the variations in the worldview claims between the Islamic view of gender justice and that of feminist gender equality. Instead of capitalizing on the similarities between a feminist worldview and *Taqwa* or the Islamic worldview, non-Muslim feminists did not learn from Muslim feminists scholar-activists about Qur'anic gender justice. Furthermore, academic feminists' emphasis of gender, combined with dismissing Islam as a patriarchal religion, and dismissing Muslim women's explanation of Qur'anic social justice because, in their views, it represents a "religious' worldview has resulted in a defensive attitude concerning everything "Islamic" among Muslim women like Shadey.

The Second Event

On a different occasion, Muna, (a pseudonym) a scholar-activist from the 1995 project, was telling me about some transformation in her life, views, and work. She suddenly stated, "I do not want to spend all my life searching through historical volumes to find few incidents to prove that Muslim women can be leaders or that they had a place in the public arena during the early Muslim community 14 centuries ago." Muna was referring to the historical discourse that she and some other members in the group have been using to support their arguments that a precedent in Muslim history affirms contemporary women's rights to participate in public affairs. These arguments are generally thought to further attitudinal change. On one hand, Muslim male elites would be reminded that indeed gender justice was one of the goals of the Islamic revolution. On the other hand, non-Muslim academics, particularly feminists, would realize that historical tools (i.e., analyzing the Qur'an as a historical document and dismissing Muslim women's views as "religious") do not suffice for understanding Muslim societies and gender issues. However, due to her discontent with a subgroup in her community who would not allow women to enter the community mosque, she became oblivious toward the entire process of knowledge production that she and her other Muslim women colleagues have been attempting.

This event, and the surrounding circumstances, reminded me of Middleton's (1993) description of how British and American influence dictated the sociology of education even among the feminist thinkers, and how Middleton had revolted against it because it was too condescending to the point of oppression. As a young assistant professor who was raised mainly within the US educational system, Muna felt oppressed by the system and its scholarly methods. She was discontent with both the traditional male Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an and with the Western Orientalist representing the Muslim woman as either the powerful slave, or the helpless, weak, secluded woman (Shirazi, 2001). So when an extremely conservative group of students took over the mosque leadership at her university, she did not have the capacity to determine her destiny when the system did not support her. That is, as neither the western images of Muslim women, nor the historical analysis of early Muslim women resulted in a change in perspectives and attitudes, including the acceptance of women's participation in the mosque as members of the collective Muslim community, she began doubting the entire discourse of her scholarly work. In addition, she could not revolt against the student group's values because they were of a similar ethnic background and belief system to hers (hooks, 1994).

It seems that Muna was bound by the Muslim community in which she associated to the point that she could not foresee herself revolting against its recent system of operation. Having grown up in a highly profiled active Muslim Arab family she could not detach herself from those "privileges." Instead, she revolted against the knowledge discourse that she has harvested from the two systems; the academic system that she trusted for giving her the power of knowledge, and the Islamic system that was supposed to have led to change in her surroundings. Not being able to change academia--as a young assistant professor--seems to have constrained her ability to transform her community. So, not only did she continued to transform herself, but she also wanted to transform the knowledge claims—the historical findings. Just as "being white" remained invisible to white teachers in McIntyre (1997:1), it seems that "Islamicity," and being academic remained invisible to Muna and to those of us who think that they "benefit from these terms." Since neither Islamicity, nor academic knowledge about it was constructed by the individuals who self-identify with Islam, they did not help Muna translate her individual consciousness into concrete social action. The Islamicity that was constructed by the colonization and orientalism projects and that which academic studies of Muslim women perpetuate and reinforce further complicated the existing tensions in Muna's mind.

The non-Muslim academic studies have stifled her efforts, and those of Muslim women in general, to proactively re-frame the studies of themselves in order to free the process of knowledge creation from both the framing done by non-Muslim (women and men) as well as the bias interpretation of the Qur'an by traditional Muslim men.

RESEARCH DELAMINATION

Initially I wondered what might have led some of these academic Muslim women, like Shadey and Muna, to resist the continuation of a journey that they themselves had chosen. Did it have to do with their view of feminism, with their aspirations for Islamic activism, or with their lack of awareness of the worldviews that underpin their own perception?

Clark (2000) relates theory to experience, instead of relating theory and practice, arguing that one cannot remain static before such practices and, hence, one's experience becomes part of the theory. I believe that it is the uneven

plane (i.e., not having the authority as interpreters of Islamic text nor as equal participants in their communities affairs, and being perceived as "others" by Western feminists) coupled with the worldviews that began to be imposed on the Muslim women by their real presence in the academy and the society at large. The increase in number of Muslims and their institutions in Western countries has been a reality that many, particularly academics have been trying to ignore. This uneven plane was reinforced by the academic-generated paradigm that views these women as the objects of change, i.e., oppressed that need to be researched, rather than agents and subjects of their own change as they define it from within the Islamic worldview.

Secondly, I wondered, if the social composition of North America is continuously changing, why hasn't the structure of knowledge governing the different individuals in this society and its academic community also changed? Why, for example, do administrators and faculty talk about diversity in terms of student enrollment and faculty recruitment, but do not allow these diverse views in the curricular and extra-curricular choices --the life experience of students and faculty--to accommodate this diversity? (Barazangi, 2001) Unless such issues are addressed, the study of Muslim women and the relationship of these women to academic feminism, and to academia, will remain superficial. Women's studies curricula are not reflecting the dynamics of the historical and social forces on knowledge generation and dissemination most likely because academic hierarchy and social constructs are still the main factors governing the politics of knowledge despite the introduction of feminist and gender theories.

In contrast, hoping to re-activate the Islamic pedagogical view as summarized in the concept of *Taqwa*, I relied on the Islamic premise that an individual may not change her surroundings unless she educate herself in Islam and approximate *Taqwa* as the goal. Academic Muslim women, including myself, were able to change ourselves, but we could not get the premise to help changing the university context or Muslim community structures and relationships in the ways we hoped. Yet, neither the academic Muslim women nor the academic researchers in general were prepared to exert themselves to balance individual consciousness and social action, as if traditional academic settings were canceling out the collective consciousness-raising process of the academic Muslim women and their community. That is, because in its attempt to understand the community,[7] academic feminists rely mainly on the analytic relationship of difference (in gender, race, and ethnicity, for instance), instead of understanding Islam. In reality, gender, race and ethnicity represent imposed social constructs and, therefore, produce another kind of

tension between the individual's consciousness, Muslim woman in this case, and her communal action instead of resolving existing tensions, as evidence in the two case studies of Shady and Muna. Despite my utilizing both feminist theories and PAR approach, the academic setting did not allow us, as Muslim women, to reflect on, and assess our own problems as stakeholders in the process. Consequently, some of us lost our awareness of our own worldview claims.

To change our immediate surroundings, self-identification with the Qur'an, not only gender equity, was the goal and the means for our collaboration. Being identified as a Muslim who knows the Qur'an (i.e., being literate in reading and interpreting the Qur'anic text) and having the power of self-identification with the Qur'an are not the same. The self-learning process that helped improve grass root women's capacity to control their destinies more effectively, change their life situations, and achieve self-realization should do the same for the academically situated Muslim women. Self-identity, in a sense, is building simultaneously individual and social consciousness that is explicitly recognized as one, not as a double self (Dubois in Lemert, 1994, 388). As long as academics marginalize Muslim women's underlying assumptions, these women's individual consciousness and social action cannot be realized. Perhaps when the academics and the Muslim community benefit from understanding how self-identified Muslim women pursue their own concerns will we eliminate the politics of difference (Cornwall, 1998) and the politics of knowledge. We would also overcome the potential resistance of Muslim academic women to bridging feminisms and action research, and the inability of feminist action researchers to understand the Islamic worldview of gender justice.

WORLDVIEW CLAIMS

Worldview claims determine both the understanding of the relationship between Muslim women in general and the academic community of feminists and action researchers. These claims also determine the implications of these relationships for research and/or educational intervention (knowledge production and transformation) intended to promote social justice for Muslim women, and to effect a perceptual and structural transformation in the system for a sustainable change.[8]

Ontological or Value Claims

The Qur'an, the primary text of Islamic values, knowledge and pedagogy states that *Taqwa* is the measure by which a course of study is considered "Islamic" (Barazangi, 1998). Muslim women who work from within the Qur'anic framework rely on reason, as the distinctive characteristic of human beings and as the means that enables individuals to achieve *Taqwa*. Feminists' emphasis on gender as central concept is viewed by Muslim women scholars as replacing patriarchal power with feminist power instead of balancing individual and social relations. Similarly, action researchers' focus on group for social change is viewed as tipping the balance toward social solidarity without securing individual cognitive and attitudinal transformation. This transformation is seen as essential to change conventional social discourse and structure. Within this context, I analyze my understanding of the active process of individual consciousness and social action. Though I recognize racial, ethnic, gender, and religious differences, and the real material consequences of these differences, I do not invoke these differences as the criteria by which I measure social justice and individual consciousness. By theorizing about the consciousness process of my co-researchers, I am also attempting to understand and change the politics of knowledge as it relates to Muslim women in general and to my collaboration with some of them.

Epistemological or Knowledge Claims

The goal in the Qur'an is not only to seek knowledge for its sake, nor is it only for utilitarian benefits, but rather to change the nature of the relationship of the knower (the human) with the natural law, from that of domination into a balanced creativity (Qur'an, 22:46). To realize the epistemological relationship between Muslim women and academic feminism we need to understand western academic discourse that created, defined, and attempted to address issues related to Muslim women long before feminism. There are many theoretical arguments and empirical evidence showing how some Orientalist inferior images and perceptions of the Muslim people and their culture had served the colonial imperial governments and missionary dominating views and policies in Muslim/Arab societies (Said, 1978, 1981; al Faruqi, 1998). Yet, less known is that the discipline of Middle Eastern Studies (MES) not only formulated a large research endeavor, but also resulted in the field of Middle East Women Studies (MEWS) *without benefiting the women of the region*. Muslim women either rejected the MEWS or attempted to set their own research agenda, but they found that they could not go far enough by framing the issues within their own framework. Even international development institutions' agenda was framed by Western

worldview. Kramer (2001:6) argues that MES research is irrelevant to American policy in the region because it does not succumb to American government policies. I argue that most of this research is irrelevant, but *to the people of the region.* MES is an area studies discipline that is uniquely American created during the Cold War. Within the fold of this discipline lies the study of Islam and Muslim societies. Muslim women studies are the youngest field in this discipline, but it barely recognize the presence of Muslim women in America. MES also operates within the premises of Orientalism and MES, in addition to those of conventional social and psychological theories, postmodernism, literal critical theory, and feminism. Despite their rich literary production, very few of these studies made an impact on the lives of the people there. The recent UNDP 2002 report on Arab Human Development takes an honest look at the results, concluding that despite the significant strides in more than one area of human development in the last three decades, Arab countries (where the majority population is Muslim) still suffer from three deficits relating to freedom, empowerment of women, and knowledge (2002: Forward).

As I attempt to bridge participatory feminism and AR in the context of my collaboration with the American Muslim women, I realize why the individual consciousness and social epistemological relationship was not balanced. The tension between these women's premises and feminists' premises seemed compatible given that they both are forging an argument for gender justice. Yet, Muslim women's relationship with Western academic feminism and academia remain unchanged (Barazangi, 2001). Despite being in the same critical plane, as Sandra Harding (1987,11) suggests, sharing academic knowledge production among Muslim women scholars and academic feminists did not actually make a significant impact on the Muslim women scholars' life experiences, nor on academic policy concerning the understanding of Islam and Muslim community. Neither had the "new knowledge" changed the feminists' attitude. Many Feminists still view their Muslim colleagues as the "other," "women of color," or "third world women," instead of viewing them as agents of change for their own situation, as partners in the struggle for social justice, and as a living experience to learn from. In addition, Muslim women's scholarly work is viewed as applied sociology or activism. When I argued that a course on Muslim women at Cornell ought to be taught from these women's perspectives, I was accused of proselytizing and as being a fundamentalist by some of my colleagues.

Cultural or Historical Claims

Academic studies of Muslim women have created many images of these women, but instead of producing change in these women's lives, it has reinforced their status quo, adding to the negative images of the "marginal" Muslim woman.[9] Westerners valuing individual liberty over human dignity—as is the case in Arab/Islamic culture--coupled with the old philosophy of dichotomized fields of studies have dominated Western academic cultural and historical claims about Muslim societies and "their" women. The divide between humanities and social sciences also created a gap between grassroots and academic feminisms. Having placed the study of Muslim women as either under the humanities (Oriental studies) or the social sciences (area studies of the Middle East or South Asia, and more recently South East Asia) resulted in a dominant dichotomy in understanding Muslim women. A recent report by the Curriculum Committee of the Cornell College of Arts and Sciences still classifies reasoning skills into quantitative and qualitative, with an add-on of moral reasoning. Furthermore, engagement in learning is mainly still treated as a practical skill for the arts and sciences and not part of their main mission of the curriculum. How would it be possible in this context to address Muslim women's issues from the moral-cognitive rationality of the Qur'an?

The dominant dichotomy is also evident in the knowledge structure and its effect (or lack thereof) on changing the cultural and historical effectiveness of these women. The knowledge structure about Muslim women naturally followed the premises and the cultures of either of the two strands of knowledge. Oriental studies rested on philological decipherment and translation of texts, the latter also recently became prevalent in literary criticism. Meanwhile, Middle East Studies viewed strategy as having more important role than either the culture or religion of those studied, let alone their role as subjects. Smith (1956,108) expounded on the "invalidity" of the disciplines whose approach was marred by "preoccupation with the techniques and methods rather than with the object of the study, and, correspondingly, with manipulation and control rather than appreciation." As a result, the worldview claims of these women seem to have been lost both at the university level and within their particular communities. The preoccupation of academics with the promotion of "scientific" theories and interpretations of Islam, Muslims and Muslim women, has blinded many of them from realizing that they placed themselves as spokespersons for these women and their culture. Meanwhile, Muslim communities have grown either defensive about these theories and/or suspicious of academicians because the latter are perceived to fulfill the strategy of the colonizing/controlling

governments. Consequently, Muslim authoritarian elites backlash on Muslim women who use Western methodologies, as aiding the conspiracy against the Muslim social fabrics.

Praxis or Socialization Claims

Despite the fact that both academic feminists and academic Muslim women have their origin in their own suffragist movements, much of academic feminism has grown oblivious to scholarship **"of the other"**. Most of the rich literature resulting from feminist attempts to understand women and gender have been made within the existing discourse of the dichotomous disciplines, and the focus on the "self" or the "other" as the problem did not change either. Furthermore, university pedagogy has become so abstract that women's studies began losing touch with the real issues facing feminist teachers and learners. As I continue to modify or change my own course of action (praxis) to approximate the Islamic goal (*Taqwa*), I also hoped to facilitate the same process for my co-researchers and my academic colleagues. Being a member of a university community, my active research collaboration with some academic Muslim women may have contributed some ideas and case studies to feminist theories and action research ethnographies, but the claimed "objectivity" of Western academy has uncritically assimilated both feminism and the study of Muslim women.

If an academic institution functions as a source for understanding communities, *then it needs to understand them enough to make a significant change in its structure and paradigm in order to aid these communities* to change themselves. Social research that does not contribute to *self-control* by involved subjects cannot be validated. That is, because it overlooks the inquisitive process that a learner goes through as s/he attempts to make sense of and to act on the nature of knowledge, its origin, and evolution, with the goal of self-realization as a citizen. In addition, academic institutions claim to build a relationship with the surrounding community, but many of them have not made enough change in their own structure and policy to be credited with evidence of understanding and caring for the community's input. American Muslim women live among a loosely structured community of feminists and action researchers like *myself who are part of academia and who claim to understand Muslim women*, but whose praxis has hardly begun to be realized. How then could the academic community realize these women's self-identity with Islam as a worldview?

15

By self-identity, I am neither assuming psychological ego, nor the construct "identity politics." Rather, I am concerned with the Muslim woman's ability to identify with Islam as an autonomous individual, realizing that without this ability and without reading, interpreting, and applying Islam's guidelines as presented in the Qur'an on her own, she may not be able to claim such an identification. *This primary identification will no doubt be affected by the secondary multiple, socially constructed identities (gender, ethnicity, race, class, and/or academic privilege as Mary Brydon Miller argues in this volume) that will determine her re-interpretation of the text. Thus, the more difficult task for the Muslim woman is that she remains conscious of these determinants in every process of her own literacy--be it in the text or the world* (Barazangi, 1999a)--*as well as her self-identification with Islam.* She could remain conscious of these determinants without making them central concepts of analyzing her own problems and determining her own course of action to solve them. *But because of the academic conformity to the dichotomous knowledge production process (between cognitive and moral development and between disciplines) such autonomous integration was not possible.*

As my other work (Barazangi, 1998) suggests, though this consciousness was achieved through self-learning, using a metacognitive process that integrates the rational and the moral, some academic Muslim women have not used this process because they confused it with the processes used by either academics or people in the community. Muslim women's resistance to the academic dichotomous process has led them to resist academic feminism and PAR, instead of resisting concepts generated within the academic worldview claims. Muslim women could benefit from feminist-informed PAR by learning some conscious-raising strategies or the tools of deconstructing hierarchies, for instance. Meanwhile, their resistance to moral hegemony had led them to resist processes of knowledge generation coming from the academy, instead of refuting only the interpretations coming from such processes.

Patricia Maguire emphasizes the need of asking feminists themselves as to how they have grounded action researchers' work in order to balance the "uneven ground." By the same token, she listened to some action researchers who have expressed "concern that thirty years into second wave feminism and over a decade into third wave feminism, feminist scholarship remains unfamiliar ground to many in the field" (2000, 59). The challenging task for Muslim women, therefore, is how to ground and *balance* their individual autonomy with the social hegemony of academia when each is still operating from within its own worldview claims. The challenge also is to

balance their individual autonomy with the community heteronomy, when Muslim males perceive themselves as the moral guardian of women and the authority on interpreting the Qur'an.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the goals of bridging feminism and PAR is social justice. Another goal of bridging the two is also to create an approach to knowledge generation that includes both women and men in defining transformation for a more just, caring, participatory society respectful of individual autonomy and natural laws. *For Muslim women to achieve these goals, they need direct access and conscientious knowledge of Islam and feminist-oriented PAR, and autonomous action void of the intermediary of institutionalized paradigms. Be they the paradigms of administrators who are guarding the academe "values", the faculty who are guarding the old borders of the disciplines, or the institutionalized criteria of Islamicity, professionalism, and success, all must be secondary to Muslim women's self-identification.*

Feminism, instead has focused on knowledge-generation more so than on those Muslim women whose issues and indigenous knowledge became hidden behind feminist, gender and development theorizing and teaching. A Muslim learner who consciously chooses the feminist worldview as a reference, cannot identify with feminist goals unless she reclaims her education (looking beyond the theory and the curricula). Essentially, she needs to free the curriculum from the hidden discourse (s) and worldviews of those who are writing and teaching about her before she free herself from the social construction of gender. She needs to expose the *existing* ideological and scholarly dichotomies between the two views of Western and traditional Muslim interpretations of Islam, and between the disciplines in the curriculum. These dichotomies exist in both the content and the form of the curriculum and in the underlying premises, as well as between the ideals and practice of the traditional liberal arts curriculum and the Muslim community. While the first emphasizes "objectivity" without appreciating the variations in worldviews, the latter emphasizes a "subjective" belief system without allowing individual autonomous rationality.

Moving from these scholarly dichotomous paradigms, including that of academic feminism, into the paradigm of human moral and cognitive autonomy may shed new light on understanding the American Muslim woman and her education both within her own worldview and by means of the interactive rationality of Benhabib (1992). Such

rationality does not in any way exclude individual human experience because one can become universal and interactive only after one is able to understand her/his own particularity (Barazangi, 1993). Action research might be the approach to move this experience from the particular into the universal without imposing one's voice or paradigm, but unless it remains vigilant of the individual consciousness and its worldview claims, it will be uncritically assimilated by the institutional paradigms just as was often the case with academic feminism.

I suggest that non-Muslims, particularly feminists and action researchers, become more aware of Muslim women's worldview and not only look at Muslim women through the veil issues, the politics of difference, or globalization. I also suggest that Muslim women feminists unveil their conscious process in order to make their worldview claims accessible. In addition, even though academic institutions claim to affirm reason as the distinct characteristic of their operation, they are not recognizing that choice and consciousness of the learner go hand-in-hand with reason to achieve effective learning (Barazangi, 1998). Free choice and consciousness affirm reason as also essential for personal identity. Benhabib suggests that such a premise allows one to "move beyond the metaphysical assumptions of the Enlightenment universalism" (1992, 5-6). Because these assumptions ignore individual worldview, they have separated reason from moral and ethical premises. Therefore, in order for the process of *Taqwa* to be completed, we need to replace human dominance of nature with creative understanding of nature. We also need to replace human dominance over other humans with a better understanding of the different worldviews.

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[2] In Freire's (1973) term: individual conscientization.

[3] I define Islam as an action-oriented worldview that encompasses cultural and social elements, including religion. This worldview relies on human capacity to reason, and its goal is constructive and just behavior to balance individual and social consciousness (*Taqwa)* (Qur'an, 5:93). I define feminism "as a creative theory of human relations aimed at transforming social structures that dismiss individual contributions, particularly those of females, because these contributions are perceived not to fit the 'cultural standards'" (Barazangi, 1999b, 2). I define action research (AR) as "a form of research that generates knowledge claims for the express purpose of taking action to

promote social change and social analysis [wherein involved members may] control their destinies and improve their capacities to do so" (Greenwood and Levin, 1998, 6). I define ethnicity as pertaining to people of distinctive linguistic, racial, or cultural tradition.

[4] The Qur'an is the Primary Text of Islam. I mainly use the original Arabic text, making my own English translation. English readers may access *The Holy Qur'an: Text, translation and commentary* by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, 1946. Printed in the US by McGregor & Werner, Inc.

[5] See, for example, the author's (2000) "Muslim Women's Islamic Higher Learning as a Human Right: Theory and Practice"; Also, Maysam al Faruqi. "Self-Identity in the Qur'an and Islamic Law" In G. Webb, ed. *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, 2000: 72-101.

[6] The same units of analysis are used, for instance, in both of Fernea's books despite the apparent difference of emphasis. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Basima Qattan Bezirgan, Eds. *Middle Eastern Muslim women speak*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976; Elizabeth Warnock Fernea. *In search of Islamic feminism: One woman's global journey*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

[7] See for example, Kaye Haw's emphasis on discussing Muslim girls as being non-whites (*Educating Muslim Girls: Shifting Discourses*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998).

[8] Though I share Sandra Harding's assessment of "some important tensions between the feminist analysis of such issues and the traditional theories of knowledge and between the feminist epistemologies themselves," (1987, 181), I am more concerned here with the tension between the Islamic worldview that Muslim women accept and are keen to practice its pedagogy, on the one hand, and the feminists and participant action researchers worldviews, on the other.

[9] One can detect this image easily by surveying the number of "visiting", non-permanent academic positions that Muslim women in North America occupy vis-à-vis the number of regular academic positions, and by understanding Orientalism and the study of Islam. See Maysam Al-Faruqi "From Orientalism to Islamic Studies," 1998.