

Title—Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences

Author—Margot Badran

Year—2009

Categories: Islam, Feminism, Theory, Religion, Orientalism

Place: The 'Muslim World' (Middle East)

Time: 1870-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Badran's book is focused on the indigenous roots of Middle Eastern feminism and the relationship between Islamic feminism and secular feminism. For her, Islamic feminism articulates a discourse that relies on a single religiously-grounded discourse and secular feminism draws upon and is constituted by multiple discourses. Badran claims that these constitute two parallel but intersecting modes of feminism, despite many claiming the two are antithetical. She argues that Middle Eastern feminisms originate in the region and are not imported from the West—demonstrating that Western forms of feminism are not the patrimonial home of feminism from which all other feminisms stem from. Badran claims this is an important point to counter the Islamist critiques of feminisms in the region with the aim of undermining their authenticity by casting them as Western arms of domination. She investigates the compatibility of Islam with feminism by relaying the vast history of Muslim scholars who engaged with modernity and modernization. She draws the majority of her evidence from Egypt and concludes that Middle Eastern feminisms are locally rooted and unaffected by Western forms of feminism.

The book is a collection of thirteen previously published articles. The first half focuses on the secular and Islamic women's movements in the specific case of Egypt from the late nineteenth century through the 1990s. The various experiences of Egyptian women come to the fore in ways that document their diverse approaches when trying to transform the converging realms of secular and religious meaning systems. The second half focused more specifically on the definition, strategies, and sources of Islamic feminism by drawing comparisons between the Egyptian case and other Middle Eastern and African societies. She largely focuses on the emergence of Islamic feminism, the contextualization of a new paradigm, and the methods employed. She sets out three major arguments. First, that feminism in the region does not emerge as a consequence of contact with the West; it has a trajectory of its own dating back to late nineteenth century modernist movements. Second, Middle Eastern and African feminisms did not start with nationalist male elites' attempt to construct a new emancipated, nationalist woman. Third, that secular and Islamic feminisms share more in common than is usually presumed. Badran argues that both brands of women's activism are deeply entangled in their society's experience of Islam as a cultural system and Islamic modernism as a political reform movement. She warns against viewing these two forms of feminism as mutually exclusive when in actuality they are characterized by fluidity and relationality. She argues that the increased interaction of secular and Islamic feminisms subvert binary constructions of the religious and the secular. Badran demonstrates how the mere existence of Islamic feminism challenges assumptions regarding the secular nature of feminism.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Middle Eastern feminisms are locally rooted and unaffected by Western forms of feminism
- Islamic feminist interpretations induce and bring about a variety of discursive, legal and cultural changes within Islamic communities
- Muslim women's feminisms are not disconnected from their religious persuasions, but in fact emerge organically out of their faith commitment