

**A FEMINIST DIALOGIC STUDY
OF
MUSLIM FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS**

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Words belong to nobody, and in themselves they evaluate nothing. But they can serve any speaker and be used for the most varied and directly contradictory evaluation on the part of the speakers.

Mikhail M. Bakhtin (*Speech Genres*, p. 85)

Depending on how it is used, the sacred text can be that rare music that leads to dreaming or simply a dispiriting routine. It all depends on the person who invokes it.

Fatima Mernissi (1991: 64)

[The] nature of Muslim women shall not accept those interpretations of religion which are not true, and which are not genuinely supported by the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Qamaruddin Khan (1934/1990: 43)

I. INTRODUCTION

Sacred texts do not in themselves constitute sacred discourse. As many feminists in the West are critically aware, it is not only (and for some not primarily or not even) the codified voice of God speaking to humanity in sacred discourse.¹ Sacred discourse invokes the participation of members of religious communities who have legitimate power to hear, codify, interpret, and institutionalize Divine utterances. In virtually all religious traditions, including Islam, such mediators and participants have often been the male elite,² who, in their writing and interpreting of sacred texts, have knowingly or unknowingly perpetuated and normalized dominant gender ideologies that legitimate the subjugation of women to male domination. As one Muslim feminist observes, "social attitudes are so pervasive that even

¹ See, for example, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds), New York: Harper San Francisco, 1979; *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, Ann Loades (ed), Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.

² Ibid.

progressive scriptural norms get affected and are so interpreted as to fit into the prevailing mental slots. Thus the male-dominated society often harnesses even just and egalitarian norms laid down for women in divine scriptures to perpetuate male domination" (Ashgar Ali Engineer 1990: 180). I would suggest that sacred texts and the sacred tradition within which and around which they have been formulated, interpreted, and have functioned and continue to function authoritatively, therefore, together make up a religious tradition's 'sacred discourse'.

From this perspective, I shall borrow anthropologist Clifford Geertz's definition of religion to define sacred discourse as "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in people by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz 1966: 4).³ This understanding of sacred discourse provides a way of understanding the socially prescribed and defined interaction between gender roles and religious symbols, for the latter are both models of divine existence and for human behavior (see Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, 1979: 2-3). As part of the symbolic system of sacred discourse, sacred texts function powerfully as divine utterances which serve to communicate metaphysical truths and principles for guiding humanity. The spiritual and practical dimensions of sacred texts function to circumscribe and define the human condition, answering fundamental questions such as, Who are we? Why are we here? How did we get here? What is our purpose here? and To whom are we responsible? I believe these are questions of fundamental concern to all feminists, for they deal with definitions of woman, women, and self (i.e., their subjectivity) and with the roles and responsibilities of women (i.e., their agency) in and to the divine and social realms.

³ Cited in Emily Schultz and Robert H. Lavenda's (1990), *Cultural Anthropology: A Perspective on the Human Condition*; Second Edition, p. 203. } orig. article

Given their sacred and canonical status in a community, therefore, sacred texts profoundly shape the beliefs, attitudes, values, and actions which constitute relationships with and within the realms of the divine and human existence.⁴

The Qur'an and the Hadith of the Prophet, the sacred texts of Islam, and their interpretations have been and continue to be powerful forces in the social and political organization of gender relations in Muslim societies.⁵ This statement does not so much homogenize particular state-defined social and political policies into a religious mold, in as much as it points to the fact that dominant gendered ideologies that are reflected in and justified through the sacred discourse of Islam, are found also to be embedded in the social and political discourses of secularized Muslim societies.⁶ Muslim women, then, who are struggling to legitimately participate in the dominant discourses of their secular and Islamic societies⁷ in order to change the relations of power in these societies must engage with their sacred discourse on theological, social, and political levels. While Muslim feminist scholars offer no monologic assessment or critique of either their sacred texts or of Muslim tradition, they do believe that it is both their human right and religious responsibility to participate as equals with men in their sacred discourse (Bouthaim Shaaban 1995:

⁴ See Serenity Young, "Introduction," (pp. ix-xxiii) in *Sacred Texts by and About Women*. This anthology is a good source book of many primary and secondary sacred texts in the world's major religions that deal specifically with women.

⁵ I am limiting the geographical scope of this paper to considering Muslim societies in the Middle East. This does not mean that the feminist scholars with whom I am dialoguing in this paper write solely from this location. Some native Middle Eastern Muslim feminists continue to live and write from within a Middle Eastern geographical context, while others have moved to North America or Europe. Unfortunately, I do not know the biographical information of each of the feminists I am including in this paper; however, when it is possible, I will advise the reader.

⁶ Azar Tabari, for example, argues that "much Islamic legislation on women is quite explicitly contained in the *Qur'an* itself," and "in most of the Islamic countries, even those not claiming to be Islamic states, the civil and criminal codes are derived from or at least claim to be derived from Islamic jurisprudence" (1982: 17, 22).

⁷ By 'Islamist' society I mean a society governed by the twentieth century religious revolutionaries of the Islamist Regime, such as Iran. By 'Muslim' society I mean a society whose governmental, judicial, and familial policies and structures have their roots in Islam's sacred discourse-- the Qur'an and the Hadith, as well as the Sharia, Islam's code law. I use 'Islamic' as the adjectival form of 'Islam,' unless it is in the context of referring to the 'authentic' or 'ideal' community of Muslims about which some feminists speak.

61). The dialogic relations they establish with their sacred texts and traditions are inextricably linked to the unjust and oppressive social, political, and religious issues with which they choose to contend.

A cursory glance through Muslim women-authored religious and secular academic and popular texts on the subject of 'Muslim women' demands that the researcher listen to each of the many different voices engaged in their dialoguing with and within their sacred discourse and with their individual and collective life experiences. For it is not an abstract discourse, engaged, for example, on the level of textual or historical criticism, or literary or social analysis. Rather, it is a vibrant dialogue characterized by the specificities and commonalities of real women's struggling to be heard and understood, to listen and understand, and to ultimately effect change in the more vociferous, male-dominated sacred discourse which has, for many women, been a patriarchal voice of oppression. It has been a voice, in fact, which these women (and some men) claim has distorted, even silenced, the liberating message of their God, the words of His last Prophet, Mohammed, and the voices of religious women and men in the past who conversed as equals in an otherwise patriarchal Arab world.

My aim in writing this paper is to explore the ways in which Muslim feminists have engaged with their sacred discourse-- their sacred texts, their sacred tradition, and their interpretive communities. It is to create a space within which I can listen to and understand the diverse voices of Muslim women striving to legitimately participate in their sacred discourse, present and past. I have chosen a feminist dialogic perspective that is based on the conceptual ideas about discourse developed by the Russian philosopher of language and culture, Mikhail M. Bakhtin. My approach is therefore a post-structuralist approach that adheres to several assumptions. The first is that utterances (such as sacred texts and traditional or

feminist interpretations of those texts) are meaningful only as they are particularized in the multi-dimensional contexts of a dialogic event that is historical, social, psychological, ideological (political), and theological. In establishing a dialogue with a text by way of exegeting it, feminists establish dialogic relations not only with the text itself, but with the myriad of utterances and contexts which have created it and those which it has subsequently created in response to it. This act of agency, I believe, is consonant with the objectives of many Muslim feminists, who, in their struggle to articulate and reclaim their egalitarian rights, grapple with their sacred texts and attempt to socially, historically, and ethically contextualize them within their religious and cultural traditions. The second assumption is that as discourse is meaningful only in concrete socio-historical situations, and as these situations and consequent meanings change, discourse becomes the site of ideological struggle between a society's stabilizing and destabilizing forces. Thus, for Bakhtin every sign, every utterance, every text is a site of counter-voices and competing ideologies. I believe that this concept of 'heteroglossia' is also consonant with the efforts of many Muslim feminists who have chosen not to reject their male-dominated sacred discourse but to demand that it be transformed in order that the counter-voices of women and progressive, non-traditional ideologies may be engaged as equal participants.

In the research and writing of this paper, I have endeavored to create this dialogic space in an ethically responsible manner. However, in the process of researching and reading feminists' texts that have been written by non-White, non-Western scholars such as myself,⁸ I became aware of the fact there are ideological, ethical, and practical issues in studying the religious, social, or economic status of

⁸ See, for example, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology* (1993); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (1984); Chandra Talpade Mohant, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" (1991); and Marina Lazreg, "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria" (1988).

women living in Muslim countries and their definition of and quest for liberation. Ideologically, one danger is imposing upon this study theoretical concepts and constructs that "don't fit the data," that have, in fact, developed in a vastly different intellectual and cultural climates. As one Iranian feminist queries, what relevance do Western concepts, definitions, and objectives of feminism have to a Muslim woman's experience and definition of oppression and liberation within the context of her experience living as a Muslim? (Moghissi 1994: 6-7). Ethically, another concern is studying these women *as data*, and more specifically, as a homogeneous group that can be objectified under Western scholastic lenses, even so-called unifying and sympathetic 'feminist' ones. To be sure, there is great diversity among Muslim women's experiences *and* there is great diversity among Western women's experiences. To homogenize either 'group' (and I hesitate to 'group' them), is to disempower the real women who are perceived as representatives of these groups. To be sure, the historical particularities of our respective political and academic orientations have left a wide gulf of misunderstanding and mistrust from which has emerged discourses characterized by polemics and hasty over-generalizations on the parts of both Western and Eastern interlocutors. The practical danger follows from choosing myself to be a participant in such a discourse which has sometimes seemed so distant from the particularities of my own life experiences and which at other times has seemed all too near. The limitations of language and the tendency to interpret another's experience from our own worldview mean that we sometimes assume that concepts such as 'patriarchy,' 'oppression,' 'liberation,' and 'gender' share the same experiential referents because we who are globally engaged in a 'feminist' dialogue share a 'feminist' vision for a world transformed. An important reason for my choosing to study Muslim feminist hermeneutics from a dialogic perspective is that I believe that it can respond to some of these concerns by

providing me with a conceptual language with which to talk about the issues and experiences of concern to Muslim women in a way that is neither particularly 'Western', nor particularly 'Eastern' but, hopefully, in a way that would make sense in both Western and Eastern feminist contexts. I can neither deny nor bracket my own Western academic and religious heritage nor the privileges (or limitations) I as the researcher bring to (and impose upon) my study.⁹ I have chosen, therefore, to acknowledge my full participation in this dialogue, and in my own responses to Islam's monologic sacred discourse, I choose to hear in it the counter-voices of Muslim feminists who are striving to be heard. |re

My paper is structured in the following manner. The salient points of Bakhtin's thought that are relevant to conceptually framing Muslim feminist hermeneutics will be briefly summarized. Since Muslim feminists have chosen to engage with their sacred discourse-- their sacred texts and their sacred tradition, I have introduced Islam's sacred texts, the Qur'an and the Hadith, in order to better appreciate a traditional view of their nature, role, and influence in Islam. A summary of the established principles and strategies of early Muslim hermeneutics precedes an overview of the ideological precedents and exegetical strategies that characterize Muslim feminist hermeneutics. Against this historical and ideological backdrop, I have summarized what I have found to be some of the salient theological and epistemological premises and hermeneutic strategies which seem to characterize reformist and modernist Muslim feminisms. Finally, I will aim to

⁹ I believe that my privilege as a Western educated white woman can be balanced somewhat (although not abolished) by acknowledging the fact that my own text is a particular construction, the writing of which is creatively motivated and yet constrained by several factors: my academic interests in Muslim and Christian scholarship; my participation in and commitment to a postmodern feminist academic milieu; my preparing this paper for academic credit; and my personal involvement in a male-dominated Christian tradition. Notwithstanding the tremendous influences these factors have had on the research and writing processes of the present essay (and the power relations they inevitably establish), my endeavor to construct a feminist dialogic space is motivated by one more factor: the assumption that a dialogic space is never monologic nor monolithic; it is always multivocal and polysemic. Thus, it is always a space that has the potential to change, and to create anew.

demonstrate the complex dialogic relations Muslim feminists have established with the Qur'an and with their tradition by considering how they respond the legitimization of the practices of polygamy and veiling.

^ to

II. THEORETICAL ISSUES: KEY CONCEPTS IN BAKHTIN'S THOUGHT

With the present emphasis on language and discourse in all theoretical disciplines, Bakhtin (1895-1975), with his focus on living language as the expression and construction of Being-- or more accurately, Becoming, has become an important theoretical thinker in literary studies, cultural studies, linguistics, philosophy, semiotics, feminism and post-colonial studies, Marxism, ethics, and Soviet studies.¹⁰ The recent popularity of Bakhtin has not been without controversy surrounding both his thought and his relationship with Soviet intellectual contemporaries, Pavel N. Medvedev (1891-1938) and Valentin N. Voloshinov (1884/5-1936).

Although Bakhtin's ideas about language are revolutionary in that they challenged the theories of abstract objectivism and individualistic subjectivism that was popular at the time in Western European thought,¹¹ many of his concepts can not be defined in absolute terms. Some scholars, perhaps working from within a positivistic paradigm, have found this theoretical fluidity unsettling. While others, perhaps more motivated by the theoretical implications of post-positivist/post-modernist theory, have found it epistemologically more gratifying.¹² In fact, it is in keeping with the major premise of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism-- that is, texts,

¹⁰ See Pam Morris (1994) for a concise, yet thorough introduction of Mikhail Bakhtin's, biography, thought, and the controversy surrounding his intellectual relationship with his contemporary Soviet scholars -- Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev (1891-1938) and Valentin Nikolavvich Voloshinov (1884/5-1936)-- and the question of authorship of works signed by them.

¹¹ Abstract objectivism rejects the speech act, the utterance, as something individual and therefore not a linguistic phenomena that is pertinent to the system of language; individualistic subjectivism takes the opposing view in that it is precisely the speech act or utterance that is wholly relevant to language theory. Voloshinov/Bakhtin rejects both views of language because they both espouse individualism: "the speech act, or more accurately, its product-- the utterance, cannot under any circumstances be considered an individual phenomenon in the precise meaning of the word and cannot be explained in terms of the individual psychological or psychophysiological conditions of the speaker. *The utterance is a social phenomenon*" (1973: 82).

¹² See Tzven Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle*, (1984: ix-13).

signs, utterances, and discourse are meaningful only when they are particularized in concrete socio-historical communicative contexts. For myself, the dialogic nature of Bakhtin's own thought may then be considered one of its heuristic strengths.

There is also controversy surrounding the question of Bakhtin's writing under the guised names of Medvedev and Voloshinov. Medvedev and Voloshinov were contemporaries of Bakhtin and together they conferred as intellectuals on issues ranging from Marxist theory, philosophy, language, culture, literature, and psychoanalysis. Because of the politically tumultuous time in Soviet history in which they lived, conversed, and wrote, it is thought by some scholars that in order to protect himself, Bakhtin signed several of the texts he wrote with the names of Medvedev and Voloshinov.¹³ While not all Bakhtinian scholars would argue in favor of Bakhtin authorship due, for example, to a detection of different political leanings in the texts, it is generally agreed that in each text Bakhtin's influence and contribution can be detected (Morrison 1994: 4-5). This is especially cogent given the fact that in each work, the emphasis on language and its dialogic nature is central (ibid). Because this controversy remains unsettled (and even though such a format is admittedly cumbersome) I will follow Bakhtinian scholar Pam Morris in acknowledging the authorship of works signed by Voloshinov and Medvedev while leaving open the possibility of a Bakhtinian authorship in my citations.¹⁴

A third major area of controversy surrounding Bakhtin which cannot be overlooked is his seemingly deliberate exclusion of women from his theoretical dialogizing. Perhaps this should not be taken as an index of a sexist or misogynist

¹³ See Pam Morris for a general discussion of the issues surrounding this controversy (1994: 2-5). See Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark, *Michail Bakhtin*, (1984: 146-70) who argue for a Bakhtinian authorship, and see Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson (eds), *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*, (1989: 31-60), who argue against it.

¹⁴ For example, although I will assume a single authorship of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, I will reference it as 'Voloshinov/Bakhtin' in order to acknowledge the fact that it was signed by Voloshinov but attributed to Bakhtin by some scholars.

tendency in Bakhtin in as much as it could be taken as a reflection in his work of the process of knowledge production in a pre-feminist intellectual milieu. I would argue that the epistemological and theoretical implications of Bakhtin's ideas are sympathetic with feminist goals and with post-structuralist and post-modernist critiques of foundational views of knowledge and objectivist methods of research. It is for Bakhtin's thought and for the transformability of his concepts into a post-modern feminist paradigm that for me makes a feminist dialogic study of Muslim feminist hermeneutics feasible.

(i) Utterance as Discourse

Bakhtin's emphasis on discourse is important to a feminist dialogic study because Bakhtin sees in the spoken and written words the social community within which language is created and used. "[The] utterance," writes Voloshinov/Bakhtin, "...is wholly a product of social interaction, both of the immediate sort as determined by the circumstances of the discourse, and by the more general kind, as determined by the whole aggregate of conditions under which any community of speakers operates" (1973: 93). Discourse, as human communication, encompasses cultural signs and the understanding and interpretation of and response to those signs in concrete utterances. For Bakhtin, the utterance and its dialogic nature is of paramount importance in understanding the dynamics of human social interaction, particularly power relations and class struggles. Not only does language embody such dynamics in its structure, more importantly, specific meanings and intentions are communicated in the ways in which language is spoken, written and used in a responsive way between social beings and groups (Morris 1994: 65). The meaning and meaningfulness of each utterance, therefore, cannot be analyzed on its own, but only in its dialogic relations with and within the particular contexts of its present, prior, and future uses. The utterance, in other words, can never be seen as complete

in itself; its form and its meaning are always socially constrained, yet its meaning potential is always open-ended.

(ii) Text as Utterance¹⁵

The utterance is not restricted to verbal speech communication alone. Specialized works and written texts of complex cultural communication (e.g., sacred texts) are utterances in that they are connected with "the overall processes of speech communication in that particular cultural sphere: from the works of predecessors on whom the author relies, from other works of the same school, from the works of opposing schools with which the author is contending, and so on" (Bakhtin 1986a: 75). As utterances, they are oriented toward the active, anticipated future responses of others, and are, for example, influenced or persuaded by them, or critically engaged with them. It is through these responses that the processes of understanding and interpretation occur. As we shall see, the texts produced by Muslim feminists are not univocal. They have been written not only as responses to Islam's sacred texts; but as participants in the cultural sphere of Muslim tradition, they are also responses to established and traditional interpretive schools of theological thought and jurisprudence with which they affirm, contend, or contextualize. To be meaningful participants in this sacred dialogue, to understand as well as to be understood, Muslim feminists must therefore articulate their responsive utterances in forms consonant with Islam's established discourse. But as they are also engaged in dialogue with critics and allies living in a predominantly post-modern Western intellectual and cultural milieu, they are also responding to the dominant voices which are guiding and constructing theoretical discourse in a variety of religious, political, and academic domains. As feminists participating in these varied and sometimes conflicting discursive fields, many are choosing to

¹⁵ See a more complete discussion of the text and its dialogic nature in "The Problem of The Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis" (Bakhtin 1986c: 103-131).

critically "borrow, and change, any and everything from everywhere which would be of interest and of use to [them]," as Western feminist critics Liz Stanley and Sue Wise advocate (1993: 137). In their endeavor to challenge the traditionally accepted content of the genres typifying Muslim hermeneutics (and theology), the utilization of familiar forms within and outside of Muslim scholarship will serve, from a Bakhtinian perspective, "a necessary bridge to new, still unknown content" (1986b: 165). A feminist utilization of established discursive forms may be necessary, in fact, to gain the support of the political elite.¹⁶ This, in turn, may effect changes in the forms themselves so that their feminist insights may transform established Muslim hermeneutic paradigms in a way that is consonant with their socio-political goals.¹⁷

(iii) Dialogism

The juxtaposition of utterances is what Bakhtin calls a *dialogic* relation. "Any utterance," writes Bakhtin, "is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances" (1986a: 69). Any speaker is not the first speaker, is not "the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe" (ibid: 68). The dialogic nature of the utterance reveals not only the dominant ideologies and social values which are reflected in and constructed by a text;¹⁸ it also reveals those subversive ('heteroglossic') responses which the text itself anticipates and addresses and which in turn challenge the dominant discourse. The responsive nature of the utterance, then, is key to understanding both the semantics of that utterance, and, more importantly, its intended underlying communicative meanings. A speaker always

¹⁶ For example, writing about the efforts of Iranian women to be recognized as citizens in their own right during the Pahlavi rule, Iranian feminist Mahnaz Afkhami observes that "[a]s a rule... support was not forthcoming unless demands were couched in a language acceptable to traditional sensibilities. It was imperative to take traditional sensibilities into account so as to nurture this support to grow strong enough to withstand clerical opposition" (1994: 10).

¹⁷ See, for example, Patti Lather (1988).

¹⁸ Literary critic Paul Simpson (1993) writes that "[a]s an integrated form of social behavior, language will be inevitably and inextricably tied up with the socio-political context in which it functions. Language is not used in a contextless vacuum; rather, it is used in a host of discourse contexts, contexts which are impregnated with the ideology of social systems and institutions. Because language operates within this social dimension, it must, of necessity *reflect* and some would argue, *construct* ideology" (p. 6).

presupposes and anticipates the response of others. It is in this way that dialogic links are established between utterances and contexts, and speakers and hearers. As these dialogic links are relational and not necessarily oppositional, they can build on one another, polemicize with or against and affirm or refute each other, or simply presume their familiarity in the mind(s) of the listener(s) (1986a: 69).¹⁹

An utterance, therefore, cannot be confined to a monologic signification. That is, any utterance, even those authoritative or established utterances which convey a dominant ideology or univocal truth, is not in fact monologic. Because it is meaningful only in particular communicative contexts, and because those contextual situations change, an utterance is inherently polysemic and conflictual. As Voloshinov/Bakhtin writes: "each word, as we know it, is a little arena for the clash and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual person is a product of the living interaction of social forces" (cited in Morris, 41). And Bakhtinian scholar Michael Holquist puts it this way,

A dialogic world is one in which I can never have my own way completely, and therefore I find myself plunged into constant interaction with others-- and with myself. In sum, dialogism is based on the primacy of the social, and the assumption that all meaning is achieved through struggle (1990: 39).

Dialogism, therefore, admits many voices, many contexts, many meanings. But the voices, contexts and meanings of an utterance are historically or materially bound to the competing and/or affirming contexts and meanings of other utterances. For a feminist dialogic study of Muslim feminist hermeneutics, Bakhtin's concept of dialogism is particularly relevant. For it assumes that sacred discourse-- texts, interpretations, traditions-- is dialogically constructed and constituted. Rather than assuming a monolithic signification of any text (sacred or feminist), it assumes a

¹⁹ Shared presuppositions may be in the form of the interlocutors' knowing explicit information previously communicated or, more generally, sharing in the cultural repertoire of implicit or taken for granted knowledge (ideologies, social scripts and norms) which shape and inform our worldviews.

text's inherent multi-vocality and sees it as a site of ideological struggle.

(iv) Contexts as Dialogic

If, in Bakhtin's view, an utterance, in the form of a text, for example, is a link in a chain of texts, then the process of understanding any given text is a dialogic process of (1) situating the text within its *textual context*-- by linking it with other texts in the chain of utterances that have preceded it, that are contemporaneous with it, and that are anticipated to respond to or in it, on the one hand, and (2) responding to the text in the context of one's own subjectivity and historicity (in other words, creating one's own text even if that 'text' is one's own inner speech), on the other hand (Bakhtin 1986b: 161-2, 106-7).²⁰ Like utterances, "[c]ontexts," writes Voloshinov/Bakhtin, "do not stand side by side in a row, as if unaware of one another, but are in a state of constant tension, or incessant interaction and conflict" (1973: 80). The context of any given text, therefore, is complex and multi-level. It will be constituted by several dimensions: the objective and subjective historicity of individual texts that are being quoted directly or alluded to indirectly, or which have influenced its creation (e.g., cultural values and ideologies which shape and imbue a text); and also by the creation of a new, responsive text which the listener or reader constructs in the act of understanding and, I would add, interpretation (Bakhtin 1986a). It is only in concrete speech situations that words, signs, and texts have meaning. "The organizing center of any utterance, of any experience, is not within [words, signs, texts] but outside-- in the social milieu surrounding the individual being" (Voloshinov/Bakhtin 1973: 93). And it is only once they have acquired social value (or "interindividual significance") that they can enter the realm of ideology and establish themselves there.

(v) Heteroglossia

The idea that texts (especially novels) are heteroglossic in nature has been seized by

²⁰ See also Voloshinov/Bakhtin 1973: 118.

Western feminist literary and cultural critics who attempt to identify and reveal the counterhegemonic ideologies in oppressive discourse.²¹ Utterances, or signs, for Voloshinov/Bakhtin convey meaning that is drawn from behavior and ideology in contextualized, concrete verbal interactions between social actors (1973: 70). But even though the same language is used by social members, not all social members will use it in the same way, to convey the same meaning. In other words, differently oriented social interests intersect in the same sign or speech community. It is in this way that signs, characterized by a 'social multiaccentuality,' become the arena of class struggle (1973: 23).

Voloshinov/Bakhtin writes that there are centripetal forces that operate on the sign. These are the unifying forces of the ruling group(s) that try to destroy or suppress the conflictory social value judgements-- the counter-voices and ideologies-- in the sign by imparting to it an eternal, unifying character (ibid). Certainly, all sacred texts that are used as dogmatic, fundamentalist religious statements about women's 'God-given' or 'natural' place and role can be viewed in this way. Thus, in the everyday milieu of social life, the dominant ideologies of ruling groups are made to appear more or less like unified, singular (or monologic) meanings, for their contradictory aspects are hidden. While these contradictions can be found embedded in the original utterance, they are prevented from completely emerging, since the responsive function of a dominant ideology will be to try to stabilize in and through that utterance the social order in order to mask its inherent diversity and to curb social change (ibid: 23-4) . As French critic Roland Barthes has argued, in the process of stabilization, these ideologies become mythologized, naturalized, and presented as common-sense knowledge (1973: 155-56).

Nonetheless, social and historical heteroglossia continue to operate in language as

²¹ See Dale M. Bauer and S. Jaret McKinstry's (eds) *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic* (1991) for a selection of essays which deal with this topic from a variety of standpoints.

centrifugal, refractory forces (Voloshinov/Bakhtin1973: 23). These forces respond to dominant ideologies in subversive, refractory ways. They are voices which counter the socially established and authoritative discourses which attempt to destroy or suppress them. This dynamic of centripetal and centrifugal forces operating in language, Bakhtin calls 'heteroglossia.' It is a situation in which competing voices struggle to stabilize and change the social order through sign use and meaning.

III. ISLAM'S SACRED TEXTS

The following descriptions of the Qur'an and Hadith, Islam's sacred texts, are reflective of traditional Muslim views regarding them. I have refrained from critically analyzing or commenting upon this view, for I believe that it is important to offer the reader a sense of the dominant perception most Muslims have of these texts and into which all Muslims have been socialized. As Iranian feminist Azar Tabari writes, "[a]ll Muslims, from the very orthodox to the most radical reformers, accept the *Qur'an* as the literal words of Allah, unchanging and unchangeable" (1982: 17).

(1) The Qur'an

According to Islam, the Qur'an supersedes the sacred texts of all religions in its manner of revelation, style, content, and function. Residing in heaven as the 'Mother of the Book,' this inspired utterance of God to humanity was revealed once and for all to Mohammed by the Archangel Gabriel in piecemeal fashion over a span of 23 years, beginning in Medina (610 C.E.) and ending with the Prophet's

death in Mecca (623 C.E.).²² Describing the eloquent style of the Qur'an, Sale writes: H 632
"The style of the Koran is generally beautiful and fluent... It is concise and often
obscure, adorned with bold figures after the eastern taste, enlivened with florid and
sententious expressions, and in many places, especially where the majesty and
attributes of GOD are described, sublime and magnificent..." (p. 48). Coward
observes that the "proof that this was indeed God's word is seen in the surpassing
eloquence of language and rhythm embodied in the Arabic words of these
revelations when recited aloud by Muhammad" (1988: 84). Although Islam has been
deemed the religion of the Book par excellence, it has been the recited text that has
held a special place in Muslim piety and faith, for through recitation the numinous
power imbuing its words are said to bring mercy or cause destruction, to provide
protection and to give knowledge, and to evoke miraculous signs for the devout
Muslim (ibid: 86). The power of this recitation comes not only from the words
themselves, however. The practice of memorizing Qur'anic scripture from
childhood and of daily chanting of these texts means that, in the words of Denny,
"from birth to death people are continually reimmersed in the Qur'an," an
expression of piety which "has a powerful unifying and transforming effect on both
the individual and communal psyche" (1985: 102). Harold Coward writes that for
most Muslims "the Qur'an is experienced as the eternal speech of God, the ultimate
source of all truth and the original basis of all authority both religious and secular"
(1988: 81). As the source of truth for Muslims, the Qur'an contains the norms for

²² Frederick Denny (1985) observes that there is some debate among scholars of Islam whether the command Mohammed received from Gabriel was to "Recite!" or to "Read!" the revelatory message that came upon him. The divine authorship of the Qur'an has been proven by interpreting the first word, *iqra'*, in Sura 96:1 as "read" and Mohammed's reply, "I am not a reader" by some authorities. However, as Denny posits, an alternate reading suggests that *iqra'* could be interpreted as "Recite!" to which Mohammed replies, "I am not a reciter". The fact of Mohammed's illiteracy in Islam's tradition has been further supported by interpreting the title ascribed to him in Sura 7:157-8 to mean "the Illiterate Prophet." Again, however, Denny suggests that the modifier, *ummi*, more likely means "unscriptured" rather than "illiterate," especially when understood with reference to Sura 62:2 in which the plural *ummiyun* describes the people from among whom this Messenger was raised "to recite His signs to them and to purify them, and to teach them the Book and the Wisdom..." (see pp. 85, 90-1).

faith and behavior and also the prescriptions for actualizing them in behavior, legally, doctrinally and religiously (Denny 1985: 95). Given its significance and influence to prescribe behaviors and social role definitions and to shape values and attitudes in Muslim societies, even the more secular Muslim feminists must establish dialogic relations with the Qur'an in their social, political, and ethical discourse.

(2) The Hadith

While the Qur'an is revered by Muslims as divine speech revealed to the Prophet, the Hadith is revered as a collection of traditions and sayings of the Prophet. The Hadith, then, is held to be the inspired realization of the Qur'an's message to human life as exemplified in and by the behavior and words of Mohammed. Muslims hold that Mohammed, while not divine, is the exemplary human being. This is a belief that is testified to in the Qur'an itself. Sura 7:156-7, for example, exhorts the God-fearers to follow the Prophet of the common folk, the one written about in the Torah and the Gospel, who calls them to honor and not dishonor, who makes lawful things that are good and unlawful things that are corrupt, and who relieves them of their burdens. Sura 33:21 proclaims that the believers "have a good example in God's Messenger." Sura 33:56 pronounces the blessings of God and the angels upon him, and commands believers to bless him also and pray for him peace. For those, conversely, "who hurt God and His messenger-- them God has cursed in the present world and the world to come, and has prepared for them a humbling chastisement."

The Hadith are variable in their content and style, recounting those things Mohammed said, did, and approved of in others. While some are simple and sober, others are highly theological; still others greatly espouse Mohammed's exceptional character and accomplishments (Denny 1985: 100). Coward categorizes the Hadith

into (1) predictions about the near and distant future; (2) Mohammed's interpretations of Qur'anic texts; and (3) a special category of Divine Sayings (*hadith qudsi*), such as words spoken to a previous prophet (1988: 96).

While it is believed by many Muslims that Hadith relates and characterizes the inspired words and exemplary life of God's Prophet, the authenticity of these recollections, attributed to the memory of Mohammed's close Companions (including his wives), had come under critical scrutiny by religious scholars in Islam beginning in the ninth century. As Denny writes, "there is a great amount of valuable historical information in [the Hadith], but there is also a significant amount of questionable content, and no small amount of outright forgery" (1985: 100). Thus, the science of Hadith criticism developed with the intent to authenticate the reliability of the chain of transmitters (called *isnad*) of each hadith to the Prophet. According to the *isnad's* strength of reliability, each hadith is graded: 'sound' and 'acceptable' through to gradations of 'weak', followed by attestations of outright rejection. Perhaps the most well-known collection of Hadith is that compiled by al-Bukhari. His collection is also the one deemed most reliable; however, it too has come under critical scrutiny by some Muslim feminist scholars who question the strength of the *isnad* of some misogynist hadith and the omission in his collection of sayings which counter or challenge their reliability (e.g., Mernissi 1991: 56-61).

As with the Qur'anic text, feminists in Islam must engage themselves with the Hadith in their dialogue for equal status and /or liberation. In the process, they must contextualize individual hadith on several levels along a chain of utterances which have been shaped by the socio-historical horizon of their collectors and recollectors, and which have profoundly shaped the psycho-social horizon of women's individual and collective experiences. In the process, they are revealing

the heteroglossic dimensions of Islam's sacred utterances. In so doing, they are challenging the monolithic principles and paradigms of Islamic hermeneutics as well as the religious and civil law and duties that are articulated in the Sharia.

IV. ISLAMIC HERMENEUTICS: ESTABLISHED TRADITION OF *TAFSIR*

The principles and tools of exegesis used by Muslim scholars and jurists did not develop in an intellectual or cultural vacuum. Rather, during the centuries following the death of the Prophet, and with changing circumstances facing the growing Muslim community, several types of exegesis developed in a dialogic relation to the sacred writings of other religions (especially Judaism and Christianity) and to the linguistic, cultural, and intellectual heritage of the Arabs. Denny (1985) categorizes three main types of exegesis which form the foundation of hermeneutics in Islam: traditional, rational, and allegorical. Coward (1988) categorizes exegetical principles according to the needs the community encountered in matters of law or duties (Sharia): *ijtihad*, *qiyas*, and *ijma'*, and faith (theology): *kalam*. In addition, the methods of *sabab* and *isnad* became important scholarly tools to understand the occasion in which the Qur'anic revelations occurred and to validate the authenticity of Mohammed's sayings.

(1) *Tafsir ma'thur*

The most authoritative and orthodox manner of exegesis can be translated, "commentary handed down" or "traditional exegesis" (Denny 1985: 95, 96). Its focus is to find the accessible and clear meanings of a text which in turn are validated by the citations of scholarly opinions and positions (ibid: 195). As feminists find themselves contending with conservative orthodox interpretations espousing women's inferior biological and hence social and religious status, they are respondents in a traditional orthodox discourse. To thus be heard amidst clamorous conservative voices, they must channel their own voices through discursive genres

familiar to the establishment, even as they protest their subjugation because of it and proclaim their emancipation from it.²³ Muslim feminists thus encourage women to find in the Qur'an and Hadith meanings which clearly proclaim their equal status and to find in their own intellectual tradition allies for and advocates of their cause.²⁴ Describing the constraints under which Iranian women leaders have worked, progressive feminist Mahnaz Afkhami writes:

On the one hand, they need to transcend the Shii discourse, which meant they had to internalize and implement the Shii discourse, which meant they had to internalize and implement values that were essentially exogenous to their culture. On the other hand, they had to reconcile these values with Islamic prescriptions, if they were to communicate successfully with the masses of women in villages and small towns and to enlist the support of at least a part of the political leadership

(1994: 14).

(2) *Tafsir be al-ra'y*

This type of "rational commentary" focuses on theological issues related to law and orthopraxy. It is more speculative than *tafsir ma'thur* and, consequently, has had a controversial history in Islam (Denny 1985: 95-6). Nonetheless, it appears to be a principle of exegesis used by Muslim feminists who criticize jurists who have used Islam's sacred texts to formulate and justify legal practices and patterns of societal behavior to keep women in a place of subordination and subjugation.²⁵

(3) *Ta'wil*

Originally meaning the same thing as *tafsir*, this type of exegesis came to designate "symbolic" or "allegorical" exegesis. Attempting to delve beyond the plain, surface meanings to uncover the gnosis of God, it is highly speculative and imaginative, and has been influential in the mystical practices of the Sufis as well as in the Shi'ite tradition over the centuries (Denny 1985: 96). According to the Shi'i, the level of

²³ See, for example, Hussain and Radwan 1984:58.

²⁴ Ibid; pp. 60-1.

²⁵ See, for example, Gerner 1984; Yasmeen and Ahmad 1989; Engineer 1990:189-94; Mernissi 1991; and Ahmed 1992.

meaning available to everyone who knows Arabic (*tanzil*) is distinguished from a deeper level (*ta'wil*) which, safeguarded by God, was known only to Mohammed and to the Imam, who inherited this knowing by virtue of their line of descent from the Prophet (Coward 1988: 98). *Ta'wil* is another familiar type of exegesis utilized by some feminists in Islam. Hussain and Radwan, for example, argue that "Muslim women have to understand that the Qur'an is a book of religious symbolism and, as such, open to interpretation in and by every generation" (1984: 61). For many contemporary Muslim women scholars, in their quest to reconcile some of the more 'problematic' texts in the Qur'an and to respond to Western criticism of their tradition, two levels of Qur'anic meaning are distinguished: (1) a revelatory or transcendental level of meaning, representing the ideal, true, and ahistorical message of God to humanity; and (2) an historical or contextual level of meaning, representing the interpretation and actualization of God's message in the community of believers (cf. Haddad 1982; Hussain 1984: 3-5; Engineer 1990).²⁶

(4) Principles of Exegesis Relating to Law: *Ijtihad*, *Qiyas*, and *Ijma'*

When neither the Qur'an nor the Hadith could be a direct source of guidance in matters of jurisprudence, the principles of *Ijtihad*, or 'private interpretation'; *qiyas*, or 'analogy'; and *ijma'*, or 'consensus' emerged. Thus when matters of dispute arose it was the community of learned doctors of the law which translated God's word into a comprehensive code, the Sharia, and which decided upon its practical implication for the Muslim community as a whole (Coward 1988: 96). Overall, it is the Sunni tradition, which is the major division of Islam, which uses the precepts and injunctions of the Sharia to make relevant the fixed revelation of the Qur'an in new circumstances (ibid: 99). The role and function of the Sharia in Islam to shape and to normativize the orthopraxy of the Muslim community, particularly in the

²⁶ See also Hussain and Radwan (1984) for Shariati's view of the "true" Islam, which, according to him, does not exist anywhere in the Muslim world (p. 61).

area of family law, has been an issue of great consternation for Muslim feminists.²⁷

(5) Principles of Exegesis Relating to Theology: Sunni and Shii traditions

Coward (1988) observes that the principles of private interpretation, analogy, and consensus which are operative in matters of Sharia are also operative in matters relating to questions of belief and doctrine in scholastic theology, or *kalam*. The process of *tafsir*, or interpretation, developed differently, however, within the different branches and schools of Islam. One Sunni approach to *tafsir*, for example, developed by al-Tabari (d. 923) is a critical method of exegeting Qur'anic verses by citing relevant Hadith material together with the chain of authority (*isnad*) for these comments (p. 96). This method in turn was further developed by ar-Razi (d. 1209) who, primarily in reaction to the rationalists, introduced into his exegesis philosophical thought (pp. 96-7). Another scholarly tool that is used is *sabab*, meaning 'occasion of revelation'. This method involves a three-fold use of reason to (a) understand the meaning of a verse in its original context; (b) determine whether the verse's meaning is specific to its original context or is relevant to other contexts, and, if it is, under which circumstances it is to be applied; and (c) to establish the historical situation surrounding the text's revelation to the Prophet and to show the development of its meaning in the early Muslim community (p. 97).

The Shi'i tradition, practiced by approximately fifteen percent of Muslims (e.g., in Iran), holds that inspiration knowledge has been given to some of the Companions of the Prophet and to the Shi'i imams. Whereas in the Sunni tradition the imam is an appointed religious leader, in the Shi'i tradition, the Imam is a spiritual leader whose authority is believed to be derived directly from the Prophet who announced that Ali and his descendants were to succeed him. In order to make relevant the eternal truth of the Qur'an and Mohammed's revelations to new situations, the Shi'i Imams maintain that such knowledge is dynamic and ever-

²⁷ See, for example, al Faruqi (1977); Hussain (1984).

changing (pp. 98-9).²⁶ This knowledge, however, is present only in the institution of imam, and it is believed that no temporal power resides in that office (Matthews 1991: 373). Regarding the women's issue in Islam, theoretically, the dynamism of such a hermeneutic tradition could be potentially empowering for women, provided, of course, that (1) women, too, could be the recipients of inspiration knowledge and (2) the inspiration knowledge befalling the Imams themselves would challenge both the authoritative structure of its male-dominated community and the oppressive voices of its more traditional discourse. Although this conjecture will likely never actualize, the method of *sabab* is nonetheless used by women scholars to contextualize not only the sacred texts, but the meanings of their interpretations.

V. FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS: IDEOLOGICAL PRECEDENTS AND EXEGETICAL STRATEGIES

(1) Early Thinkers: Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

At the turn of the century, under the auspices of Social Darwinism; with the backing of science for the superiority of Europeans; with the influence of the Enlightenment period and Industrial Revolution; and with the need for women's participation in the work force (al Faruqi 1977: 91; Gerner 1984: 75), the social, political, economic and religious transformation of the Arab world into a 'civilized' culture was mandated

²⁶ Muhammad Ahmad Khalaf Allah may be an example of a Qur'anic exegete guided by the principle of *sabab*. According to Haddad, Khalaf Allah "attempted to cull out the truth of the teachings of the Qur'an in the context in which they were revealed", although he used modern historical and literary methods to study the Qur'an as literature (1982: 46-7). For Khalaf, the Qur'an does not report history and the truth of the Qur'an should not be found to be contained in so-called historical narratives. Rather, the narratives of the Qur'an are a means to instruct and admonish those who heed the call to worship God by way of instruction, attraction, intimidation, guidance, admonition, and direction. Positing that the Qur'an's narratives are literary, taking the form of history, parable, and allegory, and judging these narratives according to literary and historical criteria Khalaf Allah has met with criticism from orthodox scholars who claim that the authority to judge history is inherent in the Qur'an, not in human systems (see Haddad 1982: 46-53). It has been pointed out by Taraki (1996) that conservative Islamist discourse aimed at women at the popular level is characterized by a means of persuasion that attempts to both attract and intimidate and admonish and direct.

under (French) Colonialism and (British) Imperialism (Haddad 1988: 137). Islamic teachings and values were thus overshadowed by Western values and achievements, which were glorified through educational institutions (run by missionaries), particularly as they related to Islamic family law and the role and status of women. Associate editor of feminist journal, *The Muslim World*, Yvonne Haddad writes: "Islamic family law and regulations affecting the role and status of women were not only ridiculed as demeaning, but were also targeted as the cause of the backwardness of Muslim societies. Among the issues repeatedly raised were the education of women, veiling, seclusion, polygamy and easy divorce" (ibid: 137-138). In consequence of this, Arab intellectuals justified the need for radical social change with the Qur'anic verse "God will not alter what is in people until they alter what is in themselves" (Sura 13:12). The revitalization of society, intended to transform both individuals and society, was endowed with positive meanings, and "the liberation of women became the subject as well as the object of this change" (ibid:138).²⁹

The nationalists, who dominated early 20th century revolutionary Arab thought and who were influenced by the modernist and secularist ideologies of the French and British, thus sought Muslim reform via the transformation of political and educational institutions and popular ideology (ibid: 139). Most Muslim nationalist advocates in Turkey, Egypt, and later in Iran who were supportive of women's rights, therefore, did not identify themselves as feminists per se, but "rather saw themselves as following in the European tradition as crusaders for nationalism and modernization" (Gerner 1984: 75).

Turkey, the last Middle Eastern peoples to convert to Islam, was really the most progressive society in their reforms relating to women (Ahmed 1982: 154). The Ottoman empire realized that, with the spread of the scientific revolution in the

²⁹ See also Leila Ahmed (1992) who offers a detailed account of this period.

eighteenth century, the Europeans were advancing in military technology and they sought measures to learn and adopt Western methods (ibid). New schools were established, both for boys and girls, which were sympathetic to reformist and nationalist ideas, and the emancipation of women and women's education became issues that were frequently discussed and written about. By 1895, the first Turkish women's weekly was published which emphasized the need for women to be educated and which guided women on how to be better mothers, wives, and Muslims. Respected male writers wrote that Turkish ethics must be founded upon democracy and feminism (which involved women's literacy and emancipation), in addition to nationalism, patriotism, and the family (ibid: 155). The following comment by one male writer, "When women are debased, humanity is degraded," later became the slogan of Islam's feminist movement. Reformers attempted to modernize Turkey from within Islam by, for example, referring to Qur'anic texts and quoting hadith and by claiming that it was not Islam but its distortion by corrupt palaces³⁰ that was responsible for women's oppression (ibid: 156).³¹ Conservative voices, however, countered many of the reforms as being in violation of Muslim principles. With a strong governmental position working towards modernization, and with the realization that the old framework could not accommodate radical reform, Turkey was declared a laic state. The last imperial harem was freed in 1909, the veil was outlawed, the Islamic family code was replaced by a civil code in 1926, and women were given the vote in 1930.

As in Turkey, in Egypt, the cause of women's liberation was initially taken up by men. Jamal-ud-din Afghani (1839-97), a well-known male writer and activist, argued that both women and men were equally naturally endowed (al Faruqi 1977:

³⁰ For example, Ahmed notes that "the Turks were responsible for developing furthest the institution of the harem: to the point where it most nearly embodied and was even almost militaristically organized around the notion of woman purely as sex-object and reproduction machine" (1982: 154).

³¹ One hadith quoted, for example, was "the pursuit of knowledge is a duty enjoined upon every soul" (Ahmed, p. 156).

97, n. 36). This would have been a radical statement considering that in its traditional paradigm, Islam holds that women and men are essentially different. As with the early reformers in Turkey, Afghani's student Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), who became the head of the whole system of religious law in Egypt, advocated a return to the basic principles of Islam (ibid: n. 37; Ahmed 1982: 159). Both men supported increased educational opportunities for women and the elimination of mandatory veiling (Gerner 1984: 75).

The first Arab to be identified specifically as a 'feminist' was the Egyptian journalist Qasim Amin (1865-1908), who authored two books, *The Emancipation of Women* (*Tahrir-al-Mara'h*) and *The New Woman* (*Al-Mara'h-al-Jadidah*). He, too, promoted the higher education of women, the elimination of the abuses of polygamy and divorce, and the removal of the veil. While he took a more secular view, his reforms did not eschew the rejection of the sacred texts and laws of Islam; instead, he proposed that the need in Muslim societies was to align practice with doctrine (ibid). While Amin was criticized by the traditionalist and clerical Muslim authorities of his day for his advocating progressive measures towards emancipating women, he is today criticized by some Muslim women scholars for his ideological and political alignment with colonial powers. Egyptian feminist Leila Ahmed (1992), for instance, offers a succinct and insightful critique of his writings (see pp. 155-65). She finds parallels between his discourse, which is critical of Muslim society for its backwardness and inferiority, and the discourse of the colonial West. She observes that his voice calling for the emancipation of women was not consistent with his voice which spoke about the reprehensible moral qualities and physical habits of Muslim women. She concludes that:

In calling for women's liberation the thoroughly patriarchal Amin was in fact calling for the transformation of Muslim society along the lines of the Western model and for the substitution of the garb of Islamic-style male dominance for that of a Western-style male dominance. Under the guise of a

plea for the 'liberation' of women, then, he conducted an attack that in its fundamentals reproduced the colonizer's attack on native culture and society

(p. 161).³²

Together with men, many Egyptian women saw in their nationalist vision a need that they be emancipated into a more equitable and progressive society. A contemporary of Amin, Malak Hifni Nasif (who went under the pen name of Hahithat al-Badiya) was an upper class Egyptian woman who fought for (1) educational opportunities for girls at the primary and secondary levels along with the freedom for girls to choose their area of study and (2) the institution of civil marriage (Gerner 1984: 76). Another Egyptian woman concerned with educational opportunities for girls was Huda Sh'arawi, who was a leader in teaching and operating a girls' school that offered general, rather than vocational, training. In the mid 1920's Sh'arawi established the first secondary school for girls and assisted in opening the Cairo University to women in 1927. She also became involved in political activism, joining the nationalists in demonstrating against the British in 1919 and heading the Women's Executive Committee of the Wafd party. In 1923 this organization was replaced by a combination of school, workshop, and club called the Egyptian Feminist Union for Women's Suffrage. At this time, she launched a movement to abandon to face veil, and until recently upper and upper-middle class women in Egypt have worn Western style dress (Arlene MacLeod 1992: 540). Sh'arawi also played a role in the organization of the All-Arab Federation of Women in 1940. While Egyptian women became more active in their struggle for emancipation than their Turkish sisters, Ahmed observes that many of the rights

³² Yvonne Haddad recognizes Amin's advocacy for Westernization, the attention he called to European women as superior to Muslim women, and the fact that some of his ideas for reform were partial; for example, polygamy should be restricted but not banned, women could show their faces but not remove the veil completely, and women should be consulted over their marriage partner but should not be responsible for finding them (1988: 144). Unlike Ahmed, however, Haddad does not suggest that Amin was thoroughly patriarchal, but rather contends that it was in order to "elicit the support of males for his reforms [that] he showed that the primary beneficiary of the 'liberation of women' is the man" (p. 144, 160).

that had been granted Turkish women in the twenties were not and still have not been granted (1982: 159).

The situation in Algeria was different from that of Turkey and Egypt. Resistance to the education of women, relatively fewer contacts between Algerian women and the French, and the emphasis on women's continuing in their traditional role-- even among Algerian nationalists, characterizes some of these differences (see Ahmed 1982: 163-4). In the confrontation between Algeria and its colonizers, "women and the status of women were to become openly and blatantly merely counters... in the cultural, moral and military battle between the French and the men of Algeria" (ibid: 163). Opposition to the French continued to gain force and by the 1930's, women in Algeria not only joined men in public demonstrations against Colonialist forces, they acted as couriers and messengers, spies, combatants, and terrorists (Gerner 1984: 76). Unfortunately, however, women's extensive involvement did not ultimately improve the situation for women. Gerner concludes: "Although the new Algerian Constitution guarantee[d] full equality of the sexes, the reality [was] much different... Once the war ended, women were put back in their place" (ibid: 76-7).

As with Turkey and Egypt, Iran, under the Pahlavi rule (1923-1979), sought societal modernization and economic progress by inaugurating secularization policies which were based on Western models and which emulated Western ideals. In 1936, under Reza Shah (1925-41), the Iranian state forced women to unveil (Moghadam 1994: 88). "In general," writes Moghadam, "the forced unveiling of women was viewed by many-- including non-traditionalists-- as a symbol of Pahlavi absolutism, and was thus resented.. More importantly, however, the clergy and many other traditionally-inclined people considered unveiling as contrary to Islamic regulations, and viewed the unveiled and made-up woman as shameless"

(p. 88). On many levels, the popular and political perception was that women's morality was being placed in jeopardy. Moghadam notes, for example, that even though the secular leftist opposition and many secular intellectuals did not question the morality of unveiling directly, "they considered unveiling a transformation of women into sexual commodities" (ibid).³³

In general, the prevailing ideology surrounding early twentieth century Middle Eastern reformist and revolutionary thought can be characterized as nationalism. Frequently, the impetus fueling nationalism, was a project to emulate Western cultural values and to adopt Western political models. Concurrently, however, a counter-discourse emerged which purposed to emancipate women through reviving Islamic tradition and by propogating a return to its authentic, religious roots. Both currents-- one which ameliorated societal transformation with Western ways and ideologies and the other which advocated social renewal by eschewing Westernization-- have continued to inform and guide different streams of Muslim feminist thought through to the present.

(2) Mid-twentieth Century Feminist Thought

Beginning around the middle of the twentieth century, a secularist, socialist ideology gained influence in the Middle Eastern world, particularly in Egypt, Turkey, and Iran (Haddad 1988: 140). The socialists sought to centralize all economic policies and power in the state in order to promote economic development and the welfare of society (ibid). Their focus was on the role of women in society and on their intellectual, social, political, and economic development (p. 147). Haddad writes that "[i]n speeches, articles, books and various media programs, the socialist rhetoric portrayed the woman as the symbol of the progress of the nation...

³³ Moghadam argues, however, that such a view disregards the fact that the commoditization of female sexuality has a long history in the Middle East: "It was not unveiling that commoditized female sexuality; it only created the possibility for visual advertisement, and a potential for women to assume relative autonomy in marketing their sexuality" (pp. 88-89).

Consequently the 'liberation of woman' was placed at the top of the goals of the nationalist socialist revolution, with various governments taking control of women's activities" (p. 147). The symbolic role of women in a socialist vision portrayed women as being good producers and active participants in national development (p. 141). Again, however, strong traditionalist currents voiced their opposition, particularly in Iran.

After the abdication of Reza Shah in 1941, and continuing throughout the social upheavals of the 1970's that led to the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iranian opposition to modernization and women's liberation has had strong anti-western and anti-imperialist overtones. While women joined revolutionary forces and participated in fighting against secularization, as was the case in Algeria in the 1930's, so it was the case that after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the integration of state and religion intensified, and in 1980 the Islamic regime forced women to reveal and to assume more traditional roles (see Moghadam 1994: 88).

(3) Late Twentieth Century Feminists

Since the nineteen seventies and especially after the Iranian Revolution, the number of religious and secular scholars concerned with the status of women, the role of religion, and the influence of Western thought in Muslim and Islamist societies has proliferated. Feminist writers in the East and the West as well as non-feminist and anti-feminist writers have once again taken issue with the 'woman problem' in Islam. In a larger and longer study, it would be critical to engage with the many different scholars who represent the various voices participating in this discourse. However, for the purposes of this present, shorter, study, I will only summarily review those feminist voices which are taking issue not only with the situation of women in Muslim and Islamist societies, but with their place in Islam's sacred discourse. Following the ideological currents set in motion in the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it seems fairly reasonable to conceptualize contemporary Muslim feminist thought as following either a 'reformist' or a 'modernist' stream. As I consider how Muslim feminists are contending with the practices of polygamy and veiling, I will be dialoguing with more voices-- feminist, non-feminist, and anti-feminist.

(i) Muslim Feminist Reformers: Anti-Western Rhetoric

As a group, what I have denoted as 'Muslim feminist reformers' constitute a heterogeneous group, whose social, political, and religious ideologies differ in their conservative, traditionalist, and nationalist tenor. My reason for grouping these feminists together is that despite the divergency of their unique voices, even with respect to their fundamental view of women's nature and social roles, their collective utterances are oriented in a convergent, indigenous response to and protest against foreign Western and Marxist political and feminist discourse. This unity finds expression in a hermeneutic presupposition which differentiates two dimensions of Islam: God's transcendent, sacred system and humanity's historical, social and legal system. This presupposition is consonant with the exegetical principle, *Ta'wil*, which seeks to delve beyond the surface meaning of a sacred text to the gnosis or transcendent message of God.

Yvonne Haddad, for example, posits that Islam is both transcendent and historical (1982: 138). To see the transcendent dimension of Islam is to see Islam as the only pure and unchanging revelation of God to humanity: "Islam is one as revealed in the Qur'an, and the ideal and perfect Islamic community is that of Medina where the Umma (i.e., the community of Muslims) lived under divine guidance through the mediation of the Angel Gabriel and the Prophet Mohammed" (ibid: 139). In this respect, there are therefore no local manifestations of Islam, no regional, cultural, or historical differences (ibid: 138-9). While transcendent Islam

has its roots in the eternal God and is therefore not a 'founded' religion, in the process of its being revealed to Mohammed and as the reformation of the existing beliefs and practices of the Arab world were initiated through his actions, Islam can be viewed as a 'founded' religion, since in this sense its roots are in history (ibid: 139). Admittedly, there are numerous voices, new and current, which are expressing the reappropriation of the Qur'anic revelation to meet the challenges of the present. In her book, *Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History*, Haddad observes that there is a strong tradition of divergent voices in the history of Islamic hermeneutics. However, for Haddad the task of *all* modern Muslims is to "appropriate the moral and ethical principles exemplified by the Prophet and revealed in the Qur'an" in history, or, in other words, in society (ibid: 143). There are two implications for feminists in this declaration: first, Islam's sacred texts are to remain the source of truth for all Muslims throughout all history; second, there are competing interpretations of these texts, some which strictly adhere to the textual utterances themselves and others which acculturate the eternal message of these utterances to changing situations (cf. ibid: 141-143).

Freda Hussain (1984) posits a similar distinction between transcendent Islam and contextual Islam, but in terms more specific to the lived realities of Muslim women. Hussain regards Islamic history (transcendent Islam) as the ideal reality for women (pp. 3,5). She holds that Islamic role norms and expectations for women that were established during the period of Qur'anic revelations and the lifetime of the prophet Mohammed, are eternally valid and are thus applicable in any context (ibid). This should not restrict women's roles, she observes, because in the early community they were multi-faceted. She cites Fatima, Khadija, and Aisha, Mohammed's wives, as role models of women whose "struggle, chivalry, and their relations with their husbands and other members of the community point out the

multi-faced role of Muslim women which was a far cry from the role of Muslim women as chattel" (p. 5).³⁴

What resulted over the years when the Imam ruled is that the ideal reality was transformed from an Islamic one (prophetically bound) to a Muslim one (socially/ contextually bound). In this contextual reality, therefore, the roles assigned to women in various Muslim societies became culturally determined and socially structured (pp. 3-4). Moreover, as the Ulama's³⁵ vested interest lay in maintaining its class....through alliance with the ruling class, Hussain argues that "throughout Muslim history, women's rights were infringed and their voices were drowned within the four walls of the harems guarded by castrated slaves" (p. 5). While believing women could read the Qur'an, they feared interpreting it since that would oppose the Imam. Thus the 'ideal' type created by the Ulama suited the feudal rulers and remained in tact for centuries in a male dominated society. Institutionalization of pseudo-Islam took place and role sanctions were enacted for the role behavior of Muslim women (p. 5). Deviations from these roles have been dealt with through various means of social control (p. 4). These social role expectations, while derived by Islam, became corrupted in that female behavior has had to conform to male role expectations (p. 3).

The presence of these two realities has and will continue to foster a conflict in almost all the public and private aspects of the lives of Muslim women. According

³⁴ Consonant with conservative discourses which praise women's roles as mothers and guardians of Islam's heritage (cf. Afary 1997: 89), these women's identities are first acknowledged in terms of their role as wife. Moreover, Hussain writes that while in later Muslim history the ideal was distorted, during the prophet's lifetime it was maintained, for he "was always there to rectify misinterpretations" (p.5). One could question the efficacy of or ultimate value of this ideal when its preservation was achieved only through a male. And yet, with this question, one is faced with a similar issue as that in Christianity: what value could a male savior have for a woman (cf. Mary Daly)?

³⁵ The Ulama are Muslim religious scholars, "who possess (right) knowledge..." and who are therefore authorities for all aspects of Islamic life. Over the centuries, they grew increasingly powerful and became a professional institution governed by consensus and functioning as custodians of the Qur'an, the hadith, and the Sharia. In Shiite Iran, the Ulama are uniquely powerful (W. A. Graham and A. K. Reinhart 1981: 772-3, *Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions*).

to Muslim reformers such as Freda Hussain, however, neither the male-dominated Imam, advocating a pseudo-Islam; nor a Western ideal of womanhood; nor Westernized forces of modernization and Marxism should function as salvific models or ideologies for Muslim women. Rather, Muslim women themselves must assume responsibility for the interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith in the area of personal role definitions, expectations, and performance (pp. 1-2, 3-5). Hussain and Radwan (1984) similarly maintain that "Muslim women should evolve their ideologies from their own religion which is the foundation of their culture and belief system. But this does not mean following the feudal interpretation of Islam....In this struggle the Muslim women have to liberate themselves from the yoke of feudalism in their societies and place themselves under God" (pp. 60).

As part of their hermeneutic consciousness, one could say that for these Muslim feminists, it is the responsibility and right of all Muslim women to investigate their Islamic history and to know their past, for it is their ignorance of the past upon which some Muslim men rely to deny women their full human rights and enjoyments (Mernissi 1991: vii). By studying their past, Muslim women can defend the violation of their rights. (ibid). By reconstructing and remembering their past, women have indigenous role models who were believed to have held positions of influence over and equality with men (e.g., the prophet's wives) in the early Islamic community; even if such reconstructing idealizes the past, the agency women assume to remember for their own sake challenges the controlling powers of defining history (cf. Arebi 1994: 286-7). Moreover, their dialoguing with Islam's sacred texts in the historical contexts of their revelation and of their misogynistic manipulation has been an essential part of their articulating both women's oppressions throughout Muslim history and their legitimate rights and freedoms granted to them by Islam's transcendent message. Thus, while reformist Muslim

feminists see that while the message of their sacred texts is the single and immutable voice of God, the interpretations of them are not. This is true even for the more conservative voices engaged in this dialogue, such as that of Lisa Taraki (1996), who recognizes that as the Islamist constituency is becoming more changed and diverse, there is room for competing interpretations of Islam, even those that are sometimes at variance with the "official" discourse (p. 141).

(ii) Modernist Feminists: Socialists and Secularists

Unlike the Muslim feminist reformers, the modernist feminist scholars I have included here share in common a voice that is engaged in a dialogue with socialist and/or secularist feminist discourse, often adopting and adapting Western critical concepts of gender construction in their analysis of the interpretation and use of Islam's sacred texts. Thus, the principles of interpretation are more far-reaching in terms of their dialogic relations, and, consequently, in the scope of their objectives and analyses.

In their discourse, modernist feminists critically take issue directly and indirectly with the conservative and traditionalist currents in Islam, and even with Muslim feminist reformers. For example, some attenuate the significance of upholding Islam's 'ideal' past as the sole model for equitable and just social relations, while others severely criticize it. Did such an ideal community actually exist in which women and men competed and cooperated on equal footing in the areas of religion, politics, economic, and social life? Unlike most feminist reformers, J. Gerner is not wholly convinced that Islam did in fact improve the status of women as she writes, "it is not clear what position women actually held in the early years of Islam, or how this differed from their status in the Jahiliya" (1984:71). It does appear that women owned property, were active with men in the public observance of religious rituals and obligations, and were involved in the politics of caliphate

succession; however, Gerner contends that the "Islamic ideal of women and men as equally valued and important, with complementary status and rights, did not last...if it ever existed" (ibid: 73).

More radically, Iranian feminist Azar Tabari criticizes religious and secular reformist projects which try to recapture a "mystified Islamic past" (1982: 18). Not only is it undesirable to reconstruct the early Islamic past in this way, what is worse, she contends, is the attitude these reformers have towards the reality of Islam in the present. "Islam," she argues, "is presented both as the banner of the forces of reaction and that of revolution. What is considered undesirable is arbitrarily classified as the reactionary use of Islam, and what is projected as emancipatory is traced to the real essence of Islam" (ibid). Moreover, for these feminists, it is not Islam that is to blame for the conflictory situation in Islam, for any misinterpretations of Islamic principles, and for any ambiguity in Islamic teachings; rather, to blame are imperialist conspiracies, Western propoganda, and CIA provocations (ibid). This reflects a state of deception and self-deception, for, she observes, much Islamic legislation on women is explicit in the Qur'an and there is little room for ambiguity (ibid). In a passionate voice she writes:

That men have the right to beat their wives if the latter are disobedient is explicit in the Qur'an, and not the result of some devilish 'misinterpretation'. For tens of thousands of Iranian women, the imposition of the veil has not been 'imperialist propoganda', inspired by CIA provocations, but a bitter reality they have had to face daily. Hundreds of real women have lost their real jobs, not as the result of some Western press campaign, but because of the actual policies of the Islamic regime that [reformers] so supportively [speak] and [admire] (ibid).

For Tabari, Islam is not merely a religion but an overall political system with a very definite, unified core that is shared by all its sects (p. 20). The unity of religion and politics and the belief that legislation belongs to Allah (e.g., as contained in the Qur'an and the Hadith) and not to human beings are constituents of this Islamic

core.³⁶ Consequently, for her, 'even the most 'reformist progressive' interpretations of Islam could act only as an obstacle in the struggle for women's emancipation (p. 19). For the fundamentals of Islam are incompatible with socialism, democracy, and "any concept of human emancipation" (p. 20). According to Tabari, while Islam itself cannot be ignored or bypassed, the only realistic route for Muslim women's emancipation is via a complete severing of all dialogic relations with Islam as an instrument of liberation.

While Tabari's voice is perhaps the most radical of modernist Muslim feminist voices, it is not the most representative of this group. Other modernist and liberal feminists do not seem constrained by religious ideologies and theologies to take Islam's sacred texts at face value, and may even appraise their spiritual (i.e., transcendent) value as an empowering source for women by holding that, at the very least, they articulate fundamental human rights. The social, human content of Islam's sacred discourse, however, becomes a key constituent of their hermeneutic consciousness. Gerner argues, for example, that it must be recognized that Islam's sacred texts-- the Qur'an as well as the Hadith (and Sunnah) of the Prophet, "like all religious writings in all traditions, represent precept, not necessarily practice" (1984: 71). The declaration that the Qur'an shares in common a fundamental characteristic with "all religious writings in all traditions" is quite radical, for it suggests (1) that the Qur'an is one among many religious texts or, in Bakhtinian terms, one (sacred) utterance along a chain of (sacred) utterances; and (2) that in representing precept and not necessarily practice, the text itself is constrained in prescribing or proscribing concrete specificities of behavioral norms, roles, and expectations. This may be viewed as a powerful epistemological assumption which may serve to delegitimize

³⁶ Regarding the possibility that there are permissible alternative interpretations of Islam's sacred texts, she writes that it is the status and interpretation of the Hadith and possibly the readings of certain Qur'anic verses about which the various disagree; however, "none challenge this wholly anti-democratic notion that legislation itself should not be the subject of human discourse and change" (p. 21).

monolithic interpretations which reduce any given text to ideological or symbolic role definitions (e.g., that women's natural or divinely prescribed role in the private and public sphere is in relation to men as wife and mother). /e

Moroccan feminist writer, Fatima Mernissi (1991) devotes much attention to the original historical and contextual realities of the Hadith in her book, *Women and Islam*. She writes: "Not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies. Since all power, from the seventh century on, was only legitimated by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false traditions" (pp. 8-9). When the Prophet died, it was the elite of the community who negotiated to preserve what was essential to them, and, observes Mernissi, "the essential varied according to the interests of the participants" (p. 39). Regarding the interpretation and meaning of gender in the dominant society, Leila Ahmed (1992) argues that Islam's ethical voice was emphasized by a number of different groups, many of which were marginal or lower-class. While these groups challenged and contested the interpretation and practical meaning of the dominant political order, it was "Establishment Islam's version of the Islamic message [which] survived as the sole legitimate interpretation not because it was the only possible interpretation but because it was the interpretation of the politically dominant-- those who had the power to outlaw and eradicate other readings as 'heretical'" (pp. 238-9).

Writing from a liberal, progressive feminist perspective about women in post-revolutionary Iran, Mahnaz Afkhami (1994) takes issue with the ruling religious clerics who contend that Islam is qualitatively different from other religions by presenting Islam ahistorically and by arguing that the Qur'an, as God's word, defines all aspects of life and prescribes the proper, natural, patterns of

relationships within and among all social institutions, particularly with respect to women and their relations with men (p. 6).³⁷ The Hadith (and the Sunnah), she argues, "were designed to uphold this particular interpretation of 'reality' and in the course of time the interpretation itself, as content and process, was established as the center of historical reality" (p. 6). Precepts and proscriptions subjugating women are thus given divine sanctioning according to the ruling clerics' interpretations of Islam's sacred texts (as articulated in the Sharia, for example). Moreover, both the religious rulers themselves and those exegetical principles or hermeneutic strategies which they legitimate (e.g., *Tafsir ma'thur* and *ijma*, or consensus) are held to be divinely sanctioned in accordance with their authoritative place in Islam's history. Yet the history of Islam is not static; nor are the laws which give it shape immutable. Rather, Islam has evolved and continues to evolve and the Sharia laws, which developed over several centuries, did so in response to particular historical problems and social challenges (cf. Engineer 1990: 186-9). It was in the twelfth century A.D. that the Sharia began to acquire its static character as the dynamic principle of *ijtihad*³⁸ was no longer valid (ibid: 186).

This is true also for the Hadith which came into circulation in the first and second centuries of the Islamic community. Perhaps more skeptical than traditional scholars of established Hadith criticism, Engineer (1990) reports that these traditions should be "treated with great caution and one should certainly not rush to draw conclusions on their basis" (p. 193). Further, she observes that unanimity in the compilation of the Hadith was rare and "on every issue opinions differed... Also, not infrequently, the Prophet's traditions were reported in contradictory ways and it was not always possible to decide which version was correct or whose version was

³⁷ See Maulan Khan (1996) for a typical exposition of the 'natural' character of Islam in general and with respect to women in particular.

³⁸ That is, the creative interpretation and application of Islamic *fiqh*, or jurisprudence, in the face of new circumstances.

correct" (p. 195). Nor were the words of the Hadith necessarily those of the prophet himself, but may have been those based on the companions' understanding of the Prophet's words or behaviors (p. 196). Unfortunately, despite their human element, many Sharia formulations have been based on these hadith and are thus based on social factors and human interests, not divine principles. Engineer proposes, therefore, an exegetical model for interpreting Hadith that clearly combines and elaborates upon (1) the exegetical tool, *sabab*, which seeks to understand particular sacred texts in the context of their revelation, and (2) the principles of Hadith criticism, which seeks to determine the strength of particular *isnad*, or chain of transmission. The following questions are posed: First, how is a legal issue extracted from the Qur'an or Hadith? Second, what was the context of the Qur'anic verse or hadith, and on which traditions do they rely? Third, what is the authenticity and strength of the tradition: weak? forged? or authentic? and upon whom does the hadith depend? Finally, even in the event that the hadith is authentic, how was it understood by the Prophet's companion who reported it? "In all these," she concludes, "human factor is involved and humans can err" (p. 196). What is empowering for women in her model is the fact that she poses hermeneutic questions to all contextual levels of a text's utterance, transmission, reception, interpretation, and utilization, and she hears in these texts human voices.

Unlike other modernist feminists who overtly criticize the ruling religious clerics throughout Islam's history, especially the Medieval Ulema, Engineer is careful to say that the revision of certain Sharia formulations is not intended to challenge the wisdom and intelligence of those jurists, nor their learning and sincerity to the cause of Islam (p. 194). Elsewhere, however, when she declares that even those religious scriptures that laid down some norms which transcended social attitudes could not in their entirety escape them she argues that "the male-

dominated society often harnessed even just and egalitarian norms laid down for women in divine scriptures to perpetuate male domination" (p. 180). These statements should perhaps not be seen as self-contradictory or as one dismissing the other in as much as they could be seen to reflect the "intellectual schizophrenia" of which Mahnaz Afkhami speaks (1994: 14). Referring specifically to Iranian women, Afkhami maintains that this intellectual predicament stems from women's emotional attachment to Shii Islam, on the one hand, and the recognition that achieving meaningful human rights for women within its purview is dubious, on the other.³⁹

I believe that it is not overgeneralizing, however, to suggest that such an intellectual-emotional conflict would be experienced by the many Muslim women who are struggling with their tradition and yet who somehow wish to remain within its compass. Even for women whose feminist orientations are not religious, they cannot dismiss the influence of religion on and in the lives of women living in Muslim societies whose legal systems are founded upon and maintained by Sharia formulations. This means that they must be simultaneously sympathetic to those women whose lives are deeply and diversely affected by the stipulations and enforcements of religious laws and critical of the structures and formulations of those laws themselves. It is true that one could see in this conciliatory discourse a tolerance for oppressive power structures; however, from a Bakhtinian perspective, perhaps one could also recognize in it subversive, counter-voices which are challenging the 'nature-like' and 'transcendent' character of their tradition. By confronting traditional structures of authority, and by taking issue with who or what can or cannot be considered an authority, modernist Muslim feminists are redefining those structures (secular and sacred) and are relocating the authority to

³⁹ Perhaps, it should also be kept in mind that censorship in Middle Eastern countries may play no small role in the expression or form some critiques assume.

interpret and appropriate sacred texts within the context of their own human experiences and hermeneutic consciousness.⁴⁰

Moreover, they are doing so in a way that is responding to their lived realities as Muslim women, and in a way that is also responding to (although not reacting) to Western socialist and feminist ideas. For modernist feminists, then, a tremendous source of empowerment stems from their using all discursive models and hermeneutic principles and tools to re-read, re-contextualize, re-interpret, re-define, and re-authenticate their sacred texts and their tradition.

VII. TRANSFORMING RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES OF POWER: CONTEXTUALIZE, AUTHENTICATE, AND RE-READ

Whether we are looking at the hermeneutic consciousness of Muslim feminists whose political and ideological orientations lean either more to the conservative right or to the liberal left, they must each contend with the sacred texts of Islam in articulating and justifying their positions vis a vis women's emancipation in society, and each must situate their dialogue in established religious and legal discourses of power relations. It seems apparent, then, that most Muslim feminists maintain that in order for their utterances to be heard, they must contextualize, authenticate, re-read and re-interpret Islam's sacred texts according to established exegetic principles. The effect is that their responses to the secular and sacred voices of power throughout Islam's history and in the present sometimes appear to be appropriative, conciliatory, even compromising. One may question, therefore, how such hermeneutic strategies and political enterprising can be conceptualized as a form of feminist resistance to structures and relations of power? I concur with Saddeka Arebi who, reflecting on the dialectics of protest and affirmation in the politics of women's literary discourse in Saudi Arabia, contends that such a "strategy not only enables [these women] to form a discourse of their own, but more

⁴⁰ Cf. Arebi 1994: 295; Engineer 1990: 182-3.

important, enables them to gain access into the field of cultural politics in general, and hence to transform the entire cultural discourse in a most fundamental way" (1994: 293). For feminists who are seeking such change through establishing dialogic relations with sacred tradition, the opportunities to participate in the transformation of the dominant cultural discourse are no less penetrating or profound in their implications for women's individual and collective empowerment. In the following section, I will exemplify how the three-fold feminist hermeneutic enterprise of contextualizing, authenticating, and re-interpreting Islam's sacred texts can function to liberate both women and the text from oppressive, monolithic content and contexts of Islam's sacred discourse. For the purposes of this exercise, I will consider the practices of polygamy and veiling. Following the relevant Qur'anic texts, I will summarize male-centered interpretations of them and afterwards I will dialogue with Muslim feminists' hermeneutic responses. In this process, my objective will be to show the diversity of participating voices, rather than to offer any comprehensive or definitive interpretation of either the texts or the practices themselves.

(1) The Practice of Polygamy

"If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice" (Sura 4:3).

"Ye are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire: but turn not away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air)" (Sura 4:129).

"Wives have rights corresponding to those which husbands have, in equitable reciprocity" (Sura 2:229).

(i) Male-Centred Interpretations

There are different male-centred interpretations of these Qur'anic verses depending

on the exegetical principles and strategies used. Each reading, however, has profound implications for the status of women in Islam in matters not only of theological abstraction but of social, psychological and legal reality. For religious and legal authorities who justify the practice of polygamy in the Qur'an, their argument generally runs as follows: the practice of polygamy was not introduced by Islam; however, Islam limited, regulated and restricted the number of wives a man may *legally* marry. This, they contend, is not only legally and morally just, it is in accord with the laws of nature (e.g., Abdalati 1975). Thus, while for some religious thinkers and jurists it may be preferable for men to have only one wife, multiple wives are permissible provided they are materially, emotionally, and sexually cared for in an equitable manner.

This basic argument is often refined as the following commentaries demonstrate. The translator and commentator Rashad Khalifa reports that this verse has to do with giving orphans a home with two parents. He writes, however, that “[due] to ignorance, misunderstanding, and the invention of ‘Hadith,’ many Muslims are under the false impression that Islam limits polygamy to four wives. The fact is that the Qur'an, while recommending only one wife, does not place any limit on polygamy” (1981:51; original emphasis). Those who make the claim that the Qur'an, and more specifically, the Hadith limit polygamy to four “seem to forget that the prophet left nine wives when he died” (ibid). Abdullah Yusuf Ali contrasts the injunction in the Qur'an which “strictly” limits the number of wives to a maximum of four, provided all could be equally treated, with the unrestricted number of wives permissible during the pre-Islamic “Time of Ignorance” (1934/1989: 184). Commenting on a later verse, Ali agrees with the text which states that it is impossible to be fair and just to more than one wife (4:229). E.M.Wherry⁴¹

⁴¹ While an outsider to the tradition, Wherry bases his commentary on authoritative Muslim religious scholars. It will thus be implied that his voice echoes the 'male-centred' voices of Muslim religious authorities.

(1896/1975) concurs with Ali on the point that if men were to observe the requirement of having to treat their wives equitably, there would be no practice of polygamy (p. 68). He sides also with Khalifa stating that in fact that the words, "or the slaves which ye shall have acquired" nullifies any restrictions on polygamy (ibid). Sale notes that this passage has evoked different interpretations but settles on the understanding that Mohammed advised his followers against marrying female orphans under their care if in any way they were to marry them for the wrong reason (e.g., for their beauty or wealth), or if they could not maintain them (materially), or if they already had several wives, or if they were tempted into fornication (1898: 53). Other legal and religious authorities justify polygamy as a means of safeguarding the family. While Western men divorce their wives only to marry another, Islam, by permitting polygamy, curbs divorce, and thus protects the woman from its pain and shame (Haddad 1982: 64). In cases where the wife is sick, or barren, or is sexually frigid, or during times of war when the population is unbalanced, polygamy solves marital and social problems (ibid: 65).

(ii) Feminist Interpretations

Feminists deal with the issue of polygamy by employing established and modified hermeneutic principles and strategies in order to establish dialogic relations with relevant texts in the Qur'an, with the general pre-Islamic socio-historical context, with the particular socio-historical context of the early Muslim community, and with their present psycho-social context. These dialogic relations function to empower women because they not only respond to and struggle with the sacred texts directly, but also with the established traditions which have used these same texts to sanction misogynist attitudes and unjust practices against women. Some feminists respond in a conservative voice and others in a voice more liberal. While it may be difficult for many Western feminists to include in their discourse

conservative voices which seem to coopt and reinforce patriarchal values in which men are seen to dominate women, for most Middle Eastern feminists these voices have a legitimate contribution to make in a dialogue the tone of which is both conciliatory and confrontational.⁴²

Writing in a very conservative voice, Saneya Saleh (1972) concurs with some of the male authorities that polygamy is a sort of 'remedial law' to be used only when necessary and under the two conditions previously mentioned: one can marry up to only four wives and one must be able to provide for them (p. 39). The provision promised the women, however, is stipulated by her as financial, which likely has as its Qur'anic reference Sura 4:34, which reads, "Men are the maintainers of women, because Allah (God) has made some of them to excel others, and because they spend out their property." Unlike other women writers, however, in her conciliatory efforts she completely overlooks the fact that women need and are entitled to more than economic support despite the fact that she notes that the Qur'an has given women in a marriage relationship new rights and responsibilities (cf. Sura 2:228). According to the Qur'an, women, like men, need and are entitled to emotional, psychological, and sexual support and comfort as well as economic support, even though husbands must assume the financial responsibilities of the

⁴² See Leila Ahmed, who critiques such a conciliatory, diplomatic feminist voice (1982: 161).

household, including the wife's maintenance (Sura 4:34).⁴³ Seemingly, a woman may find a measure of fulfillment in caring for the affairs of the household, for quoting the Prophet, who allegedly said that "...The woman is ruler over the house of her husband and his children," Saleh concludes that "as far as the home is concerned, the wife has the position of ruler in it" (p. 39). Logically and logistically, there are several questions that are raised with this type of reasoning: first, if a man had several wives, which of the wives would run the household-- the first wife who had been with the man longest and had probably already borne him the children over whom her rule extends, or the new(er) wife whose preferential presence grants her special status? Second, to "rule over" something or someone implies the existence of hierarchical power relations; if it is generally held that men are superior to women; that women are dependent on men for their maintenance; that women are under the guardianship of their male kin; and that the house and her children belong to her husband, then to what extent can one argue that women are so positioned in the dynamics of familial and social power relations to legitimately and effectively assume the role of ruler?

Finally, Saleh does not consider the emotional and psychological hardships that are faced by the majority of women who are in polygamous marriages. Such

⁴³ In an eloquent discourse on the virtues, rights, and responsibilities of the marriage relationship, Muslim scholar and feminist advocate Qamaruddin Khan (1916-1985) responds to Suras 7:189; 30:21 which speak of women and men being created from one living soul for mutual comfort and repose, and 2:187 which speaks of women and men being vestments for each other. He writes: "These verses do not speak of the superiority of man over women or vice versa; they convey two things, first that God has made you such that you naturally seek comfort and rest and pleasure by marrying together. Second that to create such a condition He has set between you love and mercy, so that you seek each other in marriage to live in joy and peace. There is also a third implication. All things can be released only when you accept this system of pairs; that is, one man marrying only one woman... if [a man] lives with two or three or four women, this comfort and love would disintegrate and evaporate, and neither would the husband have a taste of these blessings nor would the wives" (pp. 30-1). Moreover, in a radical declaration, he suggests that these verses emphasize that marriage is not only for the purpose of securing sexual pleasure or for procreation: "There is also a higher aim, and that is the real achievement of life; and it is that by uniting together in marriage and showing reciprocal love, affection, sympathy and devotion, and demonstrating the spirit of mutual sacrifice, man and woman should establish the foundations of a happy and peaceful life, and pass their whole life in this environment" (p. 31).

hardships are not restricted to the first wives. These women must live with the threat of competing spouses. However, as Smith recognizes, the subsequent wife or wives are faced with the difficulty of breaking into a household already established (1979: 522).

Encountering the text directly, Leila Ahmed points out that Sura 2:229 is a verse which undercuts those verses which seem to establish marriage as a hierarchical institution, favoring men (p. 63). There are other verses which admonish men who are polygamous to treat their wives equitably in all ways; these verses, she notes, "go on to declare that husbands would not be able to do so-- using the form of the Arabic negative connoting permanent impossibility-- are open to being read to mean that men should not be polygamous" (ibid). Not only does she employ the principle, *tafsir ma'thur*, to get at the clear, accessible meaning of the text, she establishes dialogic relations within the Qur'an to derive a meaning that challenges and undermines those interpretations which legitimate the practice of polygamy by means of the Qur'an.

Following the exegetical principle of *sabab*, or speculating on the occasion of revelation of Qur'anic texts permitting polygamy, some feminist writers establish dialogic relations with the verses in their original context and assess the specificity of their application in subsequent contexts. Their aim is to determine the normative ethical precepts uttered by God over against the societal precepts legitimating the practices of the early Muslim and later Muslim communities. Lamia al Faruqi, among others, notes that the right to unlimited polygamy was a widespread custom in pre-Islamic Jahilyan society and also in Byzantium, Persia, and Syria (1977: 79). These were marriages of the *ba'al* sort, which were marriages of (male) domination that were established either by contractual arrangements made between a woman's male kin and the prospective groom, or through capturing a woman through war;

thus the woman was the captured or purchased possession of the man (ibid).⁴⁴

There was a lot of potential for abuse in these marriages and many captured women were not even married, but were kept as concubines (p. 79). During the early Islamic period, the male dominated *ba'al* marriage type was becoming the rule; the focus of social ties became the extended family, rather than tribal connections; women were to be consulted and not forced into marriage contracts and they were to receive the dowry according to the Qur'an (Sura 4:4); concubinage with either free women or slaves was prohibited (Sura 24:33); and finally, the practice of polygamy was restricted (Sura 4:3) (pp. 82-3). Rather than completely abolishing polygamy,⁴⁵ then, Islam regulated it in practice, prohibited it in principle. Unfortunately, according to Ahmed, the degrading practices and misogynist prejudices against women that were indigenous to the area before Islam were endorsed and licensed by Islamic institutions (1992: 87). The result was that some abusive uses of women were legally and religiously sanctioned (ibid).

It was during the centuries following the Mongol invasions through to the late nineteenth century that, states Lamia al Faruqi, the picture of women's role began to deteriorate so that they relinquished the rights that the Qur'an, the Prophet, and the early Islamic community provided them (1977: 87). Marriage was no longer a contractual agreement made between prospective spouses, but was, like the *ba'al* marriage of pre-Islamic society, an arranged marriage between the prospective groom and the woman's (or girl's) male guardian (ibid). Although Islamic law stipulated that a woman could protect herself against polygamy (and divorce) by

⁴⁴ al Faruqi notes that there was another type of marriage arrangement practiced among the early Arabs, the *sadiqah* marriages, which determined kinship on female descent (1977: 78). These were not arranged marriages, the man joined the woman in her kin group, and their children remained heirs and dependents of the wife's tribe. While this may have given her a good deal of power in her marriage relationship, al Faruqi notes that the woman still "failed to wield much power as an individual in a male-oriented society (pp. 78, 80).

⁴⁵ Saleh argues that Mohammed could not have made a *tabula rasa* of Eastern society. He thus put boundaries on the unlimited freedom of men to marry several women (1979: 39).

formally opposing such in a marriage contract, most women were uneducated and were therefore ignorant of these protective statutes; consequently, they were not frequently followed (pp. 87-8). In Faruqi's assessment, uncontrolled polygamy and concubinage "flourished", especially among the rich, despite clear Qur'anic legislation against them (p. 88).

The cost for women in these marriage relationships would have been emotional and psychological rather than economic. Among the Mamluks, the rulers of Egypt from 1250-1517, marrying the maximum number of wives was not only the norm, it was a sign of a man's class and power. Outside the ruling classes, however, polygamy and concubinage were relatively uncommon (Ahmed 1992: 107, 104). However, when polygamy did occur among the middle and lower classes, Ahmed (1992) remarks that it could bring destruction to the woman, not only emotionally and psychologically, but economically as well, particularly should the new wife gain enough ascendancy to bring about her divorce. As Ahmed states, "[t]he plight of widows and divorcees and their children was perennially tragic" (p. 109). In eighteenth and nineteenth century Cairo, monogamy was the norm among the progressive middle classes, and even though polygamy was practiced among the upper classes, it was viewed to be an unhappy state for women; thus, for those families that were powerful enough to stipulate a monogamous relationship for their daughters in the marriage contract, such women were considered to be fortunate (p. 107). During the period of reform (1900-1970), polygamy had once again been brought under control (Faruqi 1977: 92).

It is interesting to note that in their establishing the historical and social contexts within which polygamy was initially practiced and subsequently sanctioned, Saleh, Ahmed, and Faruqi do not critically question the Prophet's own practice of polygamy. The Prophet did not marry orphans and the number of

women he married exceeded the stipulated number (four) he himself is believed to have regulated. If in their attempts to reconstruct the past as a model for the present they sought to re-articulate its transcendent message spoken in the Qur'an and its ethical principle exemplified in the Prophet's life, they have failed to respond to the apparent incongruence between the Qur'an's injunction and the Prophet's example. Moreover,

using the hermeneutic principle of *tafsir be al-ray*, Egyptian physician, writer, and social reformer, Nawal el Saadawi, suggests that marrying several wives logically implies a preference, a preference of the new wife over the preceding one (if there were no preference for the new wife, he would not seek to marry her; p. 140), thus rendering equality impossible (1982: 196). This is true even if that man were the Prophet himself (*ibid*). She thus dialogically encompasses within her rational discourse the contextual reality of the Prophet, who, she notes, could not treat his wives with absolute equity himself since he preferred to spend his nights with Aisha and loved her more deeply than his other wives (pp. 196-7).

She continues with her rational argument by responding to a supposedly ideal situation according to which a man could treat each of his wives equitably. One could not call this a "right," she argues, since the criterion of any right is that it should be enjoyed equally by all individuals, and if a man has four women, the women really only have one quarter of a man. "The women here," she sums, "are only equal in the sense that they suffer an equal injustice, just as in bygone days all slaves were 'equal' in that sense under the system of slavery. This in no way can be considered equality or justice or rights for women" (p. 140). The slave system originated because it served the interest of slave owners. By way of analogy, or *qiyas*, she contends that the system of marriage was created because it served the interests of men, not those of women and children (*ibid*).

Responding to those arguments which favor polygamy on the basis of men's tremendous sexual urges, Saadawi (1982) writes that "despite the fact that Islam recognized the existence of sexual passion in both women and men, it placed all its constraints on women, thus forgetting that their sexual desire also was extremely strong. Islam never ignored the deep-seated sexual passion that lies in men, and therefore suggested the solutions that would ensure its satisfaction" (p. 138). Polygamy, therefore, was one way Islam ensured that a man could satisfy these passions and still keep himself from sin; although for women, whose sexual passion is recognized to be just as powerful, if not more so, her desires were to be controlled and punished. Hjarpe (1983) also challenges the monopoly of orthodox interpretations that see polygamy as a protective solution against being forced into committing adultery should a man exhibit unusually strong sexual drives, or should he find himself entrapped in a 'triangle' love affair (pp. 17-8). In response to such male-favoring justifications, Saadawi, on behalf of Muslim women, boldly asks:

Why has religion been so lenient towards man? Why did it not demand that he control his sexual passions and limit himself to one wife, just as it demanded of the woman that she limit herself to one husband, even though it recognized that women's sexual desire was just as powerful, if not more so, as that of men? Why is it that religion was so understanding where men were concerned to the extent of sacrificing the interests of the family, the women and even the children, in order to satisfy their desires? Why, in contrast, was it so severe with woman that death could be her penalty if she so much as looked at a man other than her husband?" (1982: 139).

Summary Remarks

It is evident by the preceding dialogue and by Saadawi's questions that the issue of polygamy in Islam is one that delves far deeper than any academic discourse debating whether or not polygamy is permitted in Islam. Even though morally and ethically one can argue that monogamy is the normative ideal and normative

practice for most contemporary Muslims, unless it is expressly forbid in a marriage contract, Muslim women continue to face the threatening reality that their husband may choose to marry other women. As fundamentalist regimes and programs gain political ascendancy in Muslim nations and have the power to effect legal and attitudinal changes in favor of polygamy, women's psychological, social, and economic security are endangered.⁴⁶ If it is true that most Muslim men believe that polygamy is their God-given right *as men* (Yasmeen and Ahmad 1989: 364), then Muslim feminists must return to the sources of that belief to challenge and correct it. But, as many Middle Eastern feminists advocate,⁴⁷ they must do so in a way that does not alienate them or their Muslim sisters from their social relationships (including those with men), nor from their cultural and religious heritage.

(2) The Practice of Veiling

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do (Sura 24: 30).

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brother's sons, or their sisters' sons, or their slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! Turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain bliss (Sura 24: 31).

O ye who believe! Enter not the Prophet's houses-- until leave is given you-- for a meal, (and then) not (so early as) to wait for its preparation: but when ye are invited, enter; and when ye have taken your meal, disperse, without seeking familiar talk. Such behavior annoys the Prophet: he is ashamed to dismiss you, but Allah is not ashamed (to tell you) the truth.

And when ye ask (his ladies) for anything ye want ask them before a screen: that

⁴⁶ Janet Afary (1997) observes, for example, that polygamy has increased among the urban middle classes since 1979 in Iran and is encouraged by the government (pp. 91-2).

⁴⁷ See, for example, Marina Lazreg (1988) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) in addition to the conservative and nationalist feminists previously noted.

makes for greater purity for your hearts and theirs (Sura 33: 53).

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, they should be known (as such) and not molested (Sura 33: 59).

(i) Male-Centered Interpretations

Veiling in the Qur'an

There seems to be little divergence in the male-centred interpretations regarding the practice of veiling in the Qur'an, with commentators elucidating the clear meaning of the texts and reflecting upon the theological, spiritual, and moral issues that render veiling for women a practical and legitimate practice. It is in the traditional rhetoric of the veil that the implications of such readings for Muslim women are clearest, for it re-emphasizes (1) that women are sexual temptors and, consequently, (2) that the responsibility for moral conduct is pre-eminently a woman's.

Regarding Sura 24: 30, commentator Abdullah Yusuf Ali writes that the rule of modesty applies to men as well as to women. "A brazen stare by a man at a woman (or even at a man) is a breach of refined manners. Where sex is concerned, modesty is not only 'good form': it is not only to guard the weaker sex, but also to guard the spiritual good of the stronger sex" (p. 873). Although the need for modesty is the same for both sexes, Ali argues that more privacy is required for women than for men due to the differences in their natures, temperaments, and social life; this is especially relevant regarding their dress and "the uncovering of the bosom" (ibid). Although in the English translation 'bosom' would seem to denote 'breast', commentator George Sale⁴⁸ (1734) specifies that 'bosom' here means head (including face), neck, breast, and even hands (p. 266). It is expedient that a woman not disclose these parts of her body except, as the Sura indicates, to her male kin or, as Sale

⁴⁸ Although Sale is an outsider to the tradition, he bases his commentary on the interpretations of Islam's traditional religious authorities. As was the case with W. Wherry, for the purposes of this paper, it will thus be implied that his voice echoes Islam's 'male-centred voices' of religious authority.

reasons, in unavoidable legal or medical situations (e.g., giving evidence in public or taking advice or medicine) (p. 266). Women need not be covered when in the presence of other women or their near male relatives, including husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, uncles, impotent male slaves, and those men who are believed to be neither sexually threatening nor tempted. Sale writes that the latter include men who "have no desire to enjoy [women]; such as decrepit old men, and deformed or silly persons, who follow people as hangers-on, for their spare victuals, being too despicable to raise either a woman's passion, or a man's jealousy" (p. 266). While the text does not specify to whom a man may show his body, it is only to her husband that a woman is permitted to show hers (ibid).

Regarding the latter part of this Sura, it is not stated by Ali or Sale what 'hidden ornaments' refers to precisely. Ali suggests, however, that the tinkling of a woman's ankle ornaments is "one of the tricks of showy or unchaste women... to draw attention to themselves" (p. 874). One is left wondering whether it was the case that ankle ornaments, presumably worn hidden behind a long dress, called attention to a woman's presence and availability when 'tinkled'. Moreover, was it this manner of announcing their presence alone that signified their immoral character? Or, was it the case that the tinkling of ankle ornaments called attention to their 'private parts', their genitals; in other words, their sexuality? Could it have been the custom of prostitutes, for instance, to advertise their sexual services in such a manner? Unfortunately, neither the text nor the interpretations are very clear on this point.

The addressees in Sura 33:53 are clearly the wives of the Prophet and the male visitors to the houses of Mohammed, who were advised to speak to his wives from behind a curtain, or only when they were veiled (Sale pp. 319-320). The clear meaning of the 'veil', here, would suggest that being secluded from behind a

physical partition serves the same purpose as wearing a kind of cloth as a covering. In both cases, Sale rationalizes that the purpose was to prevent the impertinence "of troublesome visitors" and the followers of Mohammed from becoming too close to or familiar with his wives (ibid). He contextualizes this revelation to an occasion when one of the Prophet's companions accidentally touched his wife, Aisha, which gave him some uneasiness (ibid).⁴⁹

Sura 33:59, Abdullah Yusuf Ali writes, is clearly addressed to all Muslim women, those of the Prophet's household, as well as others. In the context of this revelation, when walking around, the women were to cover themselves with the *hijab*, which, he writes, was a long, outer garment that covered the whole body or a cloak that covered the neck and bosom (p. 1077). It is unclear from his commentary whether or not Ali maintains that this practice is relevant for Muslim women today. However, his use of the present verb form "is" in "This is for all Muslim women," does suggest that it is. Also, the present verb tense he uses when he writes that "if a Muslim woman sincerely tries to observe this rule, but owing to human weakness falls short of the ideal, then 'Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful,'" similarly suggests that he is addressing Muslim women of his day, not of Mohammed's day (ibid). On the other hand, he writes that the purpose of wearing this garment "was not to restrict the liberty of women but to protect them from harm and molestation" (ibid), the verb tense of which suggests that he is here referring to the women in the early Muslim community.

From Sale's point of view, veiling would seem to be a cultural practice rather than a religious observance, for he notes that it was customary for women in the East to cover themselves from head to foot in these large "wrappers" when they went out (p. 320). This cultural signification is strengthened by the fact that veiling

⁴⁹ See also Leila Ahmed (1992: 54-55) for a similar contextualized account of the occasion of this revelation.

carried with it the class or status sign of being a distinctive form of public dress that was a badge of distinction and honour (see *ibid*). If its origin and meaning were cultural and not religious, this would have implications for a reading which denotes its historical and cultural specificity, instead of its universal applicability to all women because it best suits their peculiar 'natures'. Although Sale concludes that veiling in Islam was no different from the practices of other civilizations,⁵⁰ he does not remark on its contextual specificity. Regarding where in public Muslim women may have been traversing, neither Ali nor Sale offer particulars, but, as I have already mentioned, Ali does say that the purpose of veiling was to protect the women from molestation, not to restrict their "liberty". While the nature of this molestation, is translated by Sale as being "affronted by unseemly words or actions" (p. 320), we can only infer that for Ali 'liberty' involves the freedom of women to move about.

Traditional Rhetoric of Veiling: Sign of Honour, Chastity, Obedience to God

In *Islam in Focus*, a book written to clarify the traditional tenets of the Muslim faith to North American Muslims and non-Muslims, we see that the signification of men's and particularly women's clothing is circumscribed by Islam. Author Hammudah Abdalati writes that Islam takes seriously the clothing and adornment of men and women (1975: 111). For men, the principles of decency, modesty, chastity, and manliness should guide the choice of clothing so that it neither reflects false pride or vanity nor weakens their morality or undermines their manliness. Silk and gold, for example, are improperly suited to men's nature: "The handsomeness of man is not in wearing precious stones or flaunting in pure and silken clothes but in high morality, sweet nature and sound conduct" (*ibid*). Women's nature, conversely, permits them to use those things that are forbidden

⁵⁰ Given, for example, that these public attires may have differed between women and men and between civilization, but they have always been worn (Sale, *ibid*).

men, but Abdalati is careful to stress that "Islam does not let woman go loose or wander unrestricted" (ibid). Islam, in fact, aids women in particular to keep and develop their dignity and chastity, and safekeeps them from being the subject of idle gossip, vicious rumours, and suspicious thoughts; Sura 24:30-31 serves this purpose (p. 112). A woman should beautify herself with "the veil of honor, dignity, chastity, purity and integrity" (p. 190). And she should keep from acting in such a way as to stir the passions of anyone but her husband and from displaying her charms and physical beauty before strangers (p. 191). Islam 'helps' her in this way by requiring her to wear the veil, since it "can save her soul from weakness, her mind from indulgence, her eyes from lustful looks, and her personality from demoralization" (ibid). In addition to referring to the Qur'an's stipulation that the veil should cover a woman's bosom and that a woman's modesty should be guarded, hadiths are invoked to prove that the veil should be of a heavy material; that it should be loose-fitting, not revealing the shape of a woman's body; that it should not smell of perfume or incense; that it should be distinct from men's clothing; and that it should not be 'showy' (see ibid).

Summary Remarks

From the purview of the traditional rhetoric on veiling, then, women should dress and behave according to their natures which God has created and men should dress and behave according to their God-created natures (Abdalati, p. 113). While the handsomeness of men is symbolically linked to their moral and spiritual conduct and not with their clothing, it is interesting that the beauty of women symbolically links her moral and spiritual conduct to the veil. While men's nature does not necessitate that his behavior or conduct could evoke the sexual passions of unrelated women, women's nature is seen as naturally arousing the sexual passions of unrelated men. Men's morally sound conduct, then, is manifest by their lowering

their gaze so as to avoid looking at women's beauty; i.e., their sexuality. Evidently, it is not within their moral nature to refrain from seeing unrelated women as objects of sexuality; and nor is it within women's nature to be capable of being aroused by unrelated men. Women's morally sound conduct consists, therefore, in averting their gaze from men (a gesture of sexual purity? or an act of submission?) and in practicing prescribed measures which ensure the moral integrity of men-- namely, covering their bodies and acting sexually chaste. It is thus a woman's responsibility to ensure that her actions and her dress do not arouse any other man but her husband. It is not a man's thinking or attitude or perception for which he must be responsible, for his susceptibility to women's sexuality is evidently part of his nature just as it is part of a woman's nature to be sexually tempting.

From this perspective, the moral signification given to men's and women's different clothing and adornment, especially with respect to the veil, is not only spiritualized (by reference to Islam's sacred texts) it is naturalized. It is naturalized because the Qur'an is deemed to be the ultimate revelation of God, God who is creator of nature, and who through his revelations to Mohammed prescribed to men and women those practices which best suit their different natures.⁵¹ Abdulati writes, in fact, that the Prophet Mohammed is reported to have said that "God condemns those men who behave or act in a womanlike fashion, and those women who behave or act in a manlike fashion" (p. 112). Evidently, for Muslim traditionalists, wearing the veil is best suited to women's nature because it protects both themselves and the men whom they may encounter from their beauty, or more to the point, their sexuality.

⁵¹ Maulana Waheeduddiin Khan maintains that "Islam is a religion of nature, and just as there is no question of our revising nature, neither is there any question of our revising Islam" (1994: 71). Hammudah Abdalati writes that the physical world, created by God, obeys the Law of God; i.e., the Law of Islam or submission. Human beings are also created by God, but unlike nature, are given the power of intelligence to make choices. By obeying the Law of Islam, then, they are obeying the Law of God, the Law of Nature, and God's creation lives harmoniously (1975: 9).

(ii) Feminist Interpretations

Veiling in the Qur'an

From reading male-centred commentaries of the Suras that are evoked to justify or refute the practice of veiling, I am left believing that the Qur'an at least did prescribe veiling for women in the early Muslim community. However, there is uncertainty surrounding its applicability for women today. This uncertainty dissipates within the purview of the traditional rhetoric of veiling, for it clearly rationalizes that the practice is for the spiritual, moral, and practical benefit of both women and men. As I read Muslim feminists' interpretations of these same Suras, however, a more complex picture emerges, both in terms of the dialogic relations they establish with the Qur'an and with the traditional discourse on the veil. Feminists deal with the practice of veiling in the Qur'an by applying the following hermeneutic principles: *Sabab* (or the occasion of revelation) in order to contextualize Suras 24 and 33; *Tafsir ma' thur* (exegeting the clear, accessible meanings) in order to reread the texts; and *Ijtihad* (individual revelation) and *Tawil* (symbolic meanings) in order to reinterpret the significations of veiling as a modern day practice of and for Muslim women.

By contextualizing the above Suras in the occasion of their revelation, some feminists hold that during the lifetime of the Prophet, veiling and segregation applied only to Mohammed's wives in order to protect them (Smith 1979: 521). Arab feminist Arlene MacLeod argues that the Qur'an advocates that it was required of the wives of the Prophet to cover their hair, shoulders, and upper arms and to be secluded from inappropriate viewers (1992: 539). This admonition, she reasons, was historically relevant to their being a religious and socially elite group who had "the special problem of being permanently in the public eye" (ibid).

Leila Ahmed similarly notes that when veiling is talked about in the

Qur'an and the Hadith it is in reference only to Mohammed's wives (1992: 53-56). By using the principle of *Tafsir ma' Thur*, she exegetes the term translated 'hijab' or 'veil' to understand its meanings in the context of its usage in the Qur'an and hadith. She observes that it was used interchangeably to mean (1) the covering of the bodies of Mohammed's wives; (2) a 'curtain' in the sense of separation or partition; (3) a woman's becoming a wife of Mohammed, as in 'she took the veil'; and (4) the practices of his wives covering themselves or separating or secluding themselves from others (p. 53-4). Given these contexts of usage and its semantic referents, the veil would seem to be a practice or expression peculiar to Mohammed's wives. If that is the case, then it would only be in later centuries that veiling would become a practice which would apply to and restricted the freedom of many women.

However, Debbie Gerner (1984), looking at the historical roots of this symbol, notes it that dates at least to the first century of the Common Era. It was a symbol which differentiated free women, who wore the veil, from slaves, who did not (p. 73). Free women who lived in villages or the desert did not wear the veil, since their work made heavy veiling difficult, but they wore it when they went into the city or when they knew that male strangers were in the village (*ibid*). The veil, then, can be read as a cultural symbol of the East which conferred upon women the social values of honor, modesty, and respectability, as the commentator Sale suggests.

Other Muslim feminists who historically contextualize the veil maintain that these practices are not prescribed in the Qur'an. Conservative Muslim reformer, Saneya Saleh, for example, holds to this view; however, interestingly enough, she concurs with Sale and Ali that veiling and segregation were adopted by early Muslims to protect women from the immoral conditions that prevailed in pre-

Islamic Arabia (1972: 40).⁵² While veiling for Saleh is not in the Qur'an, the question regarding its legitimation and enforcement remain unclear.

Admittedly, it is somewhat baffling to read for myself Sura 33:59 and not think that its addressees included *both* Mohammed's wives *and* the believing women: "Tell thy wives *and* daughters *and* the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons..." (emphasis mine). Given that the believing women are differentiated here from Mohammed's wives by the conjunction 'and' would lead me to similarly reason that Sura 24: 31 is also addressed to believing women in general instead of to Mohammed's wives only: "And say to the believing women...that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands [and other members of their household with whom they have a sex-neutral relationship]..." (emphasis mine). I would suggest that its general application is further strengthened in two more ways. First, given that women were forbidden to practice polygamy, the plurality of husbands indicates that these women were not Mohammed's wives. Second, the preceding verse advises "the believing men" to similarly "lower their gaze and guard their modesty." As homosexuality is prohibited in Islam, the believing men, like the believing women, would have been people whose relation to Mohammed was as followers of Islam, not as one who is related to him through marriage.

Freda Hussain and Kamelia Radwan (1984) observe that later in Muslim feudal societies, the "morbid obsession with virginity" led to the practices of segregation and veiling as one of the outcomes of their treating women as property

⁵² Fatemeh Moghadam similarly maintains that there is no direct reference to segregation in the Qur'an but mentions nothing about its complimentary practice of veiling (1994: 87).

(pp. 56-57).⁵³ They argue that these practices operated as mechanisms of social control which purposed to "safeguard the property from being damaged" (pp. 57-8). Neither the practices, nor, presumably, the ideologies which justified them, however, are true to Islam, even though Islamic sanctions have sought to legitimate them throughout the centuries (p. 58). "Islam," they argue, "does not allow women to be treated as private property, but as a person" (ibid). And they remind their readers that both women and men are to be virgins at marriage. Rather than follow the feudal interpretations of Islam, Muslim women should struggle to be free of them and to place themselves under God, for it is only before God and not men that women are accountable (p. 60). Yet if the Qur'an indeed stipulates that veiling is a practice for all believing women, would not placing oneself under God entail adhering to the precepts stipulated in his revealed word-- i.e., the Qur'an? But as these authors do not address the practice of veiling in the early community, they do not address the questions which would implicate the practice for women today: Was veiling a cultural symbol? A practical attire? A status symbol? Or was it a religious costume or habit which only initiated persons wore (as nuns might wear in Christianity or monks, in Buddhism, for example)? Was it a sign of group inclusion, membership, or identification (such as wearing the cross might be for Christians, or the Star of David might be for Jews)? Hussain and Radwan also do not consider whether or not women were treated as property in the early Muslim community. By implication, they seem to suggest that such an ideology and practice was introduced

⁵³ The other practice that was enforced was getting daughters married as quickly as possible (p. 57). See Fatima Mernissi's (1982) "Virginity and Patriarchy" for a critical look at the social value and role virginity plays in Mediterranean countries. Like Hussain and Radwan, Mernissi argues that virginity is a means of social control; it is a matter between men, not women, who play the roles of "silent mediators" (p. 183). She writes: "Like honour, virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation in societies where inequality, scarcity, and the degrading subjection of some people to others deprive the community as a whole of the only true human strength: self-confidence. The concepts of honour and virginity locate the prestige of a man between the legs of a woman. It is not by subjugating nature or by conquering mountains and rivers that a man secures his status, but by controlling the movements of women related to him by blood or by marriage, and by forbidding them any contact with male strangers" (ibid).

by corrupt male rulers of Medieval society. However, they do not consider the texts in the Qur'an which pronounce men's rights over women, including the right to admonish and beat them if they are not obedient (Sura 4:34); or which declare men's right to own and sexually enjoy female slaves (ibid: 25); or which declare women to be men's 'tillage' to which they may come whenever they wish ('Cow': 223). These are difficult texts, because they implicate women's dependence on men and men's right to sexually use, enjoy or control women. Hence, they would seem to be dialogically related to the Suras on veiling. However, no such dialogic relations have been considered in these and other feminist texts on veiling that I have read.

There is another issue that would seem to be imperative to a feminist response to veiling in the Qur'an. That issue would respond to veiling within the context of a feminist hermeneutic presupposition which assumes a distinction between a social, historical dimension in Islam and a transcendent, sacred dimension. While feminists make such a differentiation, as we have seen, there exists some vagueness and ambiguity with respect to the particular case of veiling. Is veiling a revealed practice, universally applicable to all believing Muslim women, as the traditional rhetoric would espouse? or is veiling culturally and historically specific to (1) Mohammed's wives, and/or (2) the believing women of the early Muslim community? If feminists advocate the latter, the entire foundation upon which Islamic hermeneutics is based-- namely, the finality and literality of the Qur'an as God's immutable word to humankind-- is problematized.

Modern Significations of the Practice of Veiling

One thing has become clear to me as I read Muslim feminist- authored texts that defend, contextualize, or take issue with women's wearing the veil in the modern world. What is obvious, firstly, is that the veil is replete with diverse, sometimes

competing symbolic meanings; it is a site of heteroglossic struggle. Secondly, the dialogic relations Muslim feminists are strengthening, establishing, or are trying to weaken with their sacred discourse over the practice of veiling do not seem to be with their sacred texts per se in as much as they are with the traditional rhetoric of veiling based on these texts. Perhaps because many Muslim women are themselves choosing to veil-- notwithstanding, of course, the state requirement of obligatory veiling in post-revolutionary Iran, the semantic field within which veiling is subjectively defined is very broad. In this section, I will briefly consider how Muslim feminists have re-interpreted the meaning of the veil today. They do so primarily by considering some of the private or personal meanings veiling has for Muslim women, and by exploring its socio-symbolic meanings beyond any personal definition.

Yvonne Haddad enumerates nine reasons modern women have given who have chosen to wear the veil (1988: 157-9). As a religious symbol, the veil signifies for some a woman's obedience to God's will; it is an outward expression of an inward conversion or commitment that is akin to being 'born again' in Christianity. It is a way for women to manifestly align themselves with Islam's traditional ways, especially in familial contexts which eschew the practice, or which embrace pseudo-secular, pseudo-religious ways and ideologies (e.g., Odeh 1993: 35). To these women and to those who aspire towards Godliness and obedience, veiling is not regarded as something oppressive to women; instead, it is admired and respected as an expression of piety and righteousness (ibid).

Psychologically, Haddad argues that the veil symbols a return to cultural and religious roots and with it a rejection of Western norms (ibid). It is a way for women who wear the veil to define who they are in opposition to those women who do not (Odeh 1993: 35). In addition, it is a way for some young women to strategically cope

in a socially and sexually integrated world. As Leila Ahmed reasons, wearing the veil enables women to negotiate in the modern world while still affirming the traditional mores of their upbringing (1992: 223). Many of these urbanized women are educationally and upwardly mobile and are the first generation of women in their families to confront the "bewildering, anonymous, cosmopolitan city life for the first time, a city life in which vivid inequalities, consumerism and materialism, foreign mores, and unscrupulous business practices linked to the foreign presence, whether Western or Arab, are glaringly apparent" (ibid: 222-3). Veiling may therefore offer some women the self-confidence and assurance to face the uncertainties and anxieties of urban life.

Politically, veiling continues to be viewed as a sign of disenchantment with a prevailing political order. As I have noted earlier, as Western ideas entered the Middle East as a part of the colonial process, and as women's status became the symbol of the inferiority and 'backwardness' of Muslim societies in the perceptions of both indigenous and foreign critics (especially, for example, in Turkey, Egypt, and Iran),⁵⁴ the politics of women's liberation became inextricably bound to the politics of modernization and Westernized secularization (Afkhani 1994: 9).

Accommodating Western ideologies that married the emancipation of women to national economic and social progress, eminent male writers championed women's rights and in so doing advocated access to education and unveiling. Women's dress thus became the site of competing ideological, political, and religious struggles between secular modernists and religious traditionalists (Ahmed 1992, Afkhani 1994). Then, as now, women were exhorted by traditionalists to wear the veil for the sake of God, her own dignity, and her nation (Afkhani 1994: 8, Stowasser 1994: 130).

As a political symbol, the veil was propagated as a sign of participatory action,

⁵⁴ See Leila Ahmed (1982) and Mahnaz Afkhani (1994: 9); apart from clerical opposition to secular nationalist's goal to emulate the Western Europeans, a notable exception at a state level is Algeria, which fiercely opposed Westernization (Ahmed 1982: 163-64).

nationalistic allegiance, and moral superiority, not as a sign of oppressive backwardness and inferiority. The veil, consequently, was not refuted by early Muslim women reformers in whose nationalist visions were anti-Western polemics. Today, it is upheld by both men and women as a political sign that the wearer identifies with Islamic revolutionary forces for the salvation of society through Islamization (Haddad, *ibid.*).⁵⁵

Culturally, Haddad suggests that veiling signifies to some women their personal allegiance to mores about chastity, modesty and a refusal to be sexually objectified. Socially, it may signify class distinction. Barbara Stowasser, for example, observes that worn as the fundamentalist dress in Egypt, the veil is predominantly a middle class phenomenon which functions to distinguish between educated and uneducated classes (1994: 130). While the lower-class women in Egypt continue to wear folk styles of dress that accomplish the same modesty aims, they are less related to 'pretensions of piety' and more related to community norms (*ibid.*). Arab feminist Lama Abu Odeh, looking at the social significance of the veil in Arab countries, also considers it in terms of class (1993). In concurrence with Stowasser, she states that most women who are opting to wear the veil as followers of contemporary fundamentalist (Islamist) movements are usually young (20's to 30's) and belong to the urban lower and middle classes. They work as civil servants, schoolteachers, secretaries in private enterprises, bank employees, nurses, and university students (p. 27).⁵⁶ As Arlene MacLeod has reasoned, they are wearing the veil to resolve the inner tensions and ambivalence they experience about wanting to be a 'good' Muslim woman, on the one hand, and needing or wanting to work, on the other (1992). As one woman she quotes shares, "Life is like an account book, with columns of numbers on the credit and debit sides. Good and bad actions are weighed

⁵⁵ The most obvious contemporary example of this is women's donning the veil as a symbol of political allegiance with the Islamist regime during the tumultuous period of the Iranian Revolution in 1979.

⁵⁶ The findings of Ahmed's study are similar (1992: 220-223).

at the end. If I work after I am married, this is very bad, so I need to do something very good to make up for it" (p. 550). And another woman says, "This dress looks beautiful and shows people that I am a woman even though I am working. My neighbours feel that a real woman stays at home, but now their tongues are silent about me" (ibid). Veiling helps these women come to terms with the conflictual roles of wife and mother and working woman, and it gives them a sense of defining for themselves how these roles are to be actualized in their everyday lives (1992).

Besides these economic, religious, political, cultural, and demographic meanings, the veil is for other women a practical garment: for example, it means that they do not need to spend as much money on clothing; or it is worn to keep the peace at home, as when male kin insist on their wearing it; or, importantly, it is a way to escape the ever-present and generally unwanted male attention and sexual harassment in public (Haddad, p. 159; Odeh 1993). Regarding the last point, Moghadam writes that in Iran, 'improperly veiled' women are in danger of being assaulted and humiliated (1994: 89). Even in non-Islamist societies, women walking about in Arab cities are always conscious of being looked at and consistently face the disconcerting remarks of men (Odeh 1993: 29).⁵⁷ Odeh observes that a woman is more willing to raise objections to these male intrusions when she is veiled than when she is not: "[h]er sense of the 'untouchability' of her body is usually very strong in contrast to the woman who is not veiled" (ibid). The veiled woman, she continues, may confront an offensive man with self-righteousness: "'have you no fear of Allah treating his believers in such a shameless fashion'" (ibid). Her piety is affirmed also by other people nearby, who may comment to the man that "'Muslim women should not be treated like that. Young men should pray more and read the

⁵⁷ Odeh, for example, gives the following portrayal of women's exposure to public attention: "Unfailingly subject to attention on the streets and on buses by virtue of being women, they are stared at, whistled at, rubbed against, pinched...Comments by men such as, 'what nice breasts you have', or 'how beautiful f.....you must be', or something more subtle in tone such as, 'what a blessed day this is that I have seen you', are not infrequent" (p. 29).

Quran'" (ibid). Not only is woman's virtue more likely to be defended when she is wearing the veil, it is less likely to be challenged in the first place. A woman's protection is therefore in that which makes her inconspicuous as an individual. As Arlene MacLeod argues, however, "[r]ather than charging men with the responsibility for changing their unwelcome behavior, women accommodate by altering their dress to fit the prevailing norms that men cannot help responding to women as temptations" (1992: 552). While this may be a solution for individual women in the short term, MacLeod astutely maintains that veiling serves to reinforce the belief that women invade a male world when they leave their home (ibid).

While these feminists are trying to understand the significance of veiling from the point of view of the women who veil, other Muslim feminists consider its deeper social and cultural symbolic meanings. Exploring the social semiotic significance of veiling in Iran, Hamid Naficy, for example, argues that veiling is a dynamic practice and a space of power for both men and women (1994: 137-8). She writes that "Iranian hermeneutics is based on the primacy of hiding core values (that is, veiling) and of distrusting manifest meanings (that is, vision). Since women are a constitutive part of the male core self, they must be protected from the vision of unrelated males by following a set of rules of modesty which apply to dress, behavior, eye contact, and relations with men" (p. 136). These include veiling and the associated interactions between unrelated women and men. Women must veil themselves and men must avert their eyes from them and must announce their presence before entering a house by voice. This gives the women inside a chance to veil themselves or to "organize the scene for the male gaze" (pp. 136-7). Nafisy purports that veiling as a social practice is neither fixed nor unidirectional, but as a dynamic practice, it implicates both men and women (p. 137). She states that a

dialectical relationship exists between veiling and unveiling: the one who covers is capable of uncovering. "In practice," she argues, "women have a great deal of latitude in how they present themselves to the gaze of male onlookers, involving body language, eye contact, types of veil worn, clothing worn underneath the veil, and the manner in which the veil itself is fanned open or closed at strategic moments to lure or to mask, to reveal or conceal the face, the body, or the clothing underneath" (p. 137). However, it seems to me that in a situation in which veiling is compulsory, the latitude assumed by women in how they present themselves to male onlookers is not a 'great deal'. This is not to deny that given the social space within which women and men can negotiate sexual meanings women play a wholly passive, powerless role. Evidently, they do not. My consternation with Naficy's appraisal of women's empowered role in this dynamic rests on the fact that the social space itself has already been marked for women, that the players have already been chosen, and that the rules of the game have already been established and are more or less binding. To renegotiate the space, the players, and the rules does not seem to be an option open for women, who, as we have seen, are apt to face heavy personal costs of humiliation and even physical danger if they do.⁵⁸

Fatema Moghadam, who investigates the commoditization of female sexuality in Islam, concludes that as "[t]he male-female relationship is assumed to be highly sexual, and male sexual desire is considered to be undeniable, eruptive, and

⁵⁸ See, Janet Afary's "The War Against Feminism in the Name of the Almighty: Making Sense of Gender and Muslim Fundamentalism," who observes that in Islamist Sudan, many women in the legal and medical professions and in the civil service have been expelled from work or placed under severe restrictions (1997: 92). Those women who are not properly veiled are rounded up periodically and their names have been broadcast on the radio to shame and humiliate them. In Islamist Afghanistan, women are permitted to leave their homes only if they are both completely veiled and accompanied by a male relative and the government has called for stoning as the penalty for adultery (p. 93). In Algeria, Afary notes that since January 1992 the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) has killed several hundred women for not wearing a head scarf, for wearing Western clothing (e.g., jeans), for working with men, or for living in their own apartments without a male guardian. "Many more," she continues, "have been stabbed, raped, or subjected to death threats for the same 'violations', or for such offences as teaching boys in school and running hair salons" (ibid). Moreover, the FIS has promised that should it come to power, it would end women's employment, make sexual relations outside of marriage punishable by death, and enforce veiling (ibid).

potentially disruptive[,] [t]he religion provides rules that are aimed at promoting social order by preventing men from being aroused" (1994: 87-89). One of these rules, as Hammudah Abdalati has proposed, is that women need to be covered. This view is not obscure in Islam, but is overtly suggested in its traditional understanding of men's and women's unique natures, and in the responsibility Islam assumes to protect their morality by protecting men from looking upon the bodies, even shapes, of women. In order to protect men from women's sexuality, however, male-dominated society must assume control of it and, as Hussain and Radwan (1984) have observed, men must assume ownership of it (e.g., as husbands over wives). What these feminists claim to be the feudal interpretation of Islam, in treating women as property, must therefore be assumed to be a deeply embedded core value in Islam's sacred discourse. This assumption has lead some feminists, such as Haideh Moghissi, who has examined the importance of female sexuality and its control in Islamic culture, to conclude that veiling "is not about modesty, respect or nationalism. It is about the power of religious groups to impose their views against secularism and nationalism at its most vulnerable point in the Middle East, that is, women's liberation" (1994: 12).

Summary Remarks

There are some notable differences between Muslim feminists' interpretations as to whether or not the practice of veiling is or is not prescribed in the Qur'an and to whether or not it applies only to Mohammed's wives or to all women generally. From my readings, I feel compelled to agree with Azar Tabari, who argues that the Qur'anic requirement for women to veil is indeed explicitly stated (1982: 23). It would seem to me, as an outsider to the tradition, that whether or not the Qur'an explicates the practice of veiling and for whom is a matter that is now secondary to the traditional rhetoric that surrounds the veil. This rhetoric affirms and legitimates

the core values of Middle Eastern culture-- namely that women's chastity or morality is embedded in male honour (see Mernissi 1982: 183, Malina 1993: 28-62). It is true that some Muslim women have professed that veiling is for them an empowering practice, and perhaps it is ethnocentric (even unfeminist) to deny them the power it offers. After all, it does mean that many women who would otherwise be bound to the domestic sphere, safely segregated from men, are taking the liberty to enter the heterosocial space of the public arena, "protected" as it were from all "harm and molestation". The semantic field of the veil thus encompasses many significations. It offers some, even many, women a sense of personal comfort and satisfaction that comes from feeling that she is a 'real' woman and a 'good' woman; it openly declares their religious piety, their anti-Western mores, their Muslim or Islamist identity; it alleviates the stresses of urban living; it resolves the conflict between traditional values and economic demands; it protects them from the harassment of men and the intrusion of male gazes (which, according to the Qur'an, should have been lowered).

Considering the social conditions, norms, and expectations which define its symbolic value at a social semiotic level, the veil's significations are no less compelling or complex. From this vantage point, veiling has been interpreted as a form of control over women's social behavior. Socially controlling women's behavior, especially those sexually circumscribed behaviors, is not unique to Muslim societies, but is typical of all societies in which male authority or dominance over women is legitimated in and through the gendered ideologies which are reflected in and reinforced by their social, political, and religious discourses. The rhetoric of the veil as a sign of a woman's godliness, moral astuteness and chastity may thus be given a peculiarly Islamic justification by virtue of its embeddedness in Islam's sacred discourse. However, Islam is not unique in

legitimizing practices of social control by spiritualizing and naturalizing them. If we consider feminist sociologist Greer Litton Fox's analysis of society's controlling women through a 'nice girl' value construct,⁵⁹ it is possible to see that just as women within the Christian tradition are socialized to value and assume for themselves the 'nice girl' construct of the symbol of Mary (see Daly 1985), so too are women within the Muslim tradition socialized to value and assume for themselves the religious, cultural, social, and political significations of veiling (1977: 805-06). If it is the case that these constructs and the social and religious values they embody are actualized in the lives of Muslim women who assume socially prescribed behaviors, then they (like Christian women), are participating in the rationalization or spiritualization of their own sexual regulation and may be using their sacred discourse in that process.

This should not suggest that they do so passively. Each woman must respond not only to the value system of their tradition, but also to the particular pressures and hazards they experience as part of their lived reality. As a Muslim woman, for example, I may choose to wear the veil not because I embrace any moral or religious ideology which dictates that my place in heterosocial space is no place, and that in an act of submission, when I do venture beyond my home, I move about softly, inconspicuously. Instead, I may veil because I have chosen to traverse in public and because I wish to interact with men as a person and not as some sexualized body. Moreover I may choose to veil because without it I will certainly and consistently be faced with sexual harrassment and perhaps even physical harm. My response to the dominant discourse which is defining for me my identity (i.e., choosing for me the clothes I should wear), and which is circumscribing for me my social place, and which is giving me the rules by which I must engage with others in that space may

⁵⁹ Litton Fox argues that "... because the quality of 'niceness' attaches to behavior and not to the person, and because one's characterization as a 'nice girl' must be continually achieved and cannot be taken for granted, normative control ensures continual compliance" (1977: 812).

be that of inward protest and resistance. Simultaneously, however, I respond with accommodating behaviors because I wish simply to survive. My accommodating behaviors may save my life; but they will also function to more deeply entrench the values, structures, even state policies which make accommodation an experiential necessity.

Many Muslim feminists have focused on the meanings of veiling in the lives of individual women and in the social semiotic space of male honour and social control. In doing so they have recognized that the rhetoric of veiling is a dynamic space in which competing ideologies struggle to influence women's consciousness and to regulate women's behavior. More scholarly research is needed, however, which will integrate their findings into a more comprehensive study which will not only recognize the complexities of that space, but will also dialogically analyze the dominant and heteroglossic forces (or power relationships) at work which keep that space one of accommodation and resistance.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Participating in a society's sacred discourse means that even if one refuses to embrace its dominant ideologies, one is nonetheless so positioned that one must be dialogically engaged with them. As Muslim feminists exegete their sacred texts and contextualize their sacred tradition, they are establishing dialogic relations with their sacred discourse. The form and content of the discourse they enter, however, has already been circumscribed, defined, and articulated by ruling male clerics and jurists throughout Muslim history. Feminists thus become participants in a dialogue fraught with intellectual and emotional conflict and struggle on many social, political, and religious levels and with many competing and criticizing voices. To be heard amidst the clamour of foreign critics and indigenous

traditionalists, Muslim feminists are choosing to speak wisely, not vociferously. They are choosing, for the most part, to be critically conciliatory, not vehemently confrontational. As I have endeavored to show in considering the practices of polygamy and veiling, there is a complex of ideologies embedded in Islam's sacred discourse which Muslim feminists are affirming or challenging. In their responses, Muslim feminists utilize established hermeneutic principles and exegetical strategies, but they do so according to their own feminist agendas. Whether the particular principles and strategies engage with a text itself; re-read and re-interpret it so that they hear for themselves its clear or symbolic meanings; or to encounter once again the social and historical contexts that are constitutive of each dialogic link along that text's chain of utterances; and whether the ideological and religious presuppositions which guide their reformist or modernist directives differ, Muslim feminists are exercising an agency which assumes responsibility for interpreting their sacred texts. It is a responsibility, they believe, that was promised to them and expected from them in the Qur'an, but denied them for centuries by male authorities who sought instead to reinforce those dominant values and practices which favored men over and against women in virtually all aspects of private and public life. By sanctioning certain means of social control, such as polygamy and veiling, within the Qur'an and Hadith, male clerics and jurists have paid and continue to pay homage to a cultural honour value system according to which female sexuality is embedded in male honor and their sexual behaviors are regulated and controlled by religious, social, and political institutions.⁶⁰

As Muslim feminists recognize that their sacred discourses have been inextricably bound to the vested interests of their interpretive communities and male-governed institutions, the authority that these communities and institutions assume over and against women is ideologically contextualized and as a result is put

⁶⁰ See Smith (1979: 525); Gerner (1984: 92); Hussain (1984: 3-5); and Moghadam (1991).

into question. If, as feminist critics Liz Stanley and Sue Wise affirm, "knowledge is power" (1993: 192), and if the socio-political appropriation of sacred discourse has constructed and sustained women's subjugation to male power, then the knowledge of a sacred discourse becomes for Muslim feminists the starting point of individual and societal transformation. No longer can sacred knowledge be male-only knowledge. It must be female-knowledge as well, and women's experiences must become a central trajectory which informs and guides the hermeneutic enterprise.

As the Qur'an, the Hadith, and their interpretations have traditionally been and continue to be carriers of social values and political ideologies, Islam's sacred discourse continues to be a shaper and perpetuator of social norms and expectations. Consequently, it is neither theory nor theology that is ultimately affected by sacred discourse, but rather lived human experience. Thus, while those values and ideologies which impinge upon or destroy the potential and freedom of women may be critiqued, transformed, or transcended at an abstract level, it is only when abstract social theories and theologies are concretized in the lives of real women and men that transcendence into communities of freedom and egalitarianism may occur. Thus, Muslim feminists are striving to participate in and transform their sacred discourse so that (1) women not only become known, they become the knowers and communicators of sacred knowledge, and so that (2) the promises of liberation, equality, and dignity which they believe have been promised to all human beings by Allah, and which can be declared as a call for human justice, can be actualized in their societies.

Because the interpretation and manipulation of sacred texts is a source of real social and political power in Muslim countries,⁶¹ by assuming this responsibility for themselves, feminists authenticate those utterances which declare full equality and human dignity for women in every respect, including their sexuality, by establishing

⁶¹ See Mernissi (1991: 1-2, 3-5).

new links with and within a male-dominated discourse. In so doing, they challenge those religious and cultural definitions of women which see into their essential being a natural, God-given inferiority or 'difference' which renders them incapable of hearing and responding to God's words or of evaluating the Prophet's examples without the mediating voices which sanctify gendered power relations. With each response, with each new link, they are resisting those interpretations of religion that value neither their human autonomy nor their equal place in human society. They are liberating their sacred texts from their oppressive tradition by showing how sacred words, sacred utterances, belong to no one authoritative body.

As Bakhtin has recognized that words can serve any speaker, Muslim feminists and Western feminists alike are realizing that even sacred words can serve any speaker and are dynamic sites of heteroglossic struggle. Sacred discourse, like all monolithic discourse, is a site of ideological contestation between a society's stabilizing voices and its destabilizing, counter-voices. A feminist dialogic study of Muslim feminist hermeneutics creates a space within which these counter-voices can be heard. I have endeavored to listen to these voices with the respect they both deserve and demand, knowing that if change is to indeed occur in our respective societies, many of the myths which inform our perceptions of 'Muslim women' and 'Western women' must themselves be seen as contextualized responses to monolithic discourse. In the end, these responses, I believe, are in danger of keeping not only feminists but all women constrained by and entangled in the very structures of power we as feminists are striving to abrogate. In the process, however, of hearing another's voice and of rescinding our own privilege as researchers, we nonetheless remain responsive social beings. Feminist dialogism denies no voice, but, in my opinion, neither must it affirm and celebrate those utterances and abusive contexts which drown and disquiet and destroy the human spirit.

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