Article

Muslim Women’s Activism in the USA: Politics of Diverse Resistance Strategies

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Abstract: This paper will explore ways in which dynamics of visibility/invisibility of American Muslim women activists are transformed in secular places like USA, while these women struggle surviving on the borderlands. Borderland and boundary are perceived as lived spaces that are culturally hybrid and are seen as a theatre for radical action. In this paper I contend that Muslim women activists in the USA operate from geographies of borderland and while inhabiting this hybrid third space they generate discourses of dissent that challenge stereotypes about them. Hailing from diverse backgrounds and countries, with different cultural roots yet same belief system and faith, American Muslim women activists adapt varied resistance strategies to challenge the Muslim patriarchy and the western hegemony that has persisted to portray Muslim women as an oppressed group of people in need of saving. Tracing Muslim women activists’ emotional and experiential geographies I will look at ways in which dynamics of solidarity between them have moved beyond dichotomous divisions of global-local, global North-global South, and empire-colony. With the discussion of lives and activism of Amina Wadud, Linda Sarsour and Asra Nomani, this paper will contextualize these activists within the spaces of resistance which they inhabit, while navigating their challenges in the context of geopolitical tensions and conflicts which are their lived realities in the USA.

Keywords: women; resistance; Islam; visibility; dissent; agency

1. Geographies of Borderland

The border and borderlands have remained a potent metaphor for displacement and dislocation, as well as ‘a powerful imaginative and theoretical tool for thinking about how difference and conflict is constructed, lived and represented in various historical contexts’ (Harvey 1996; McDowell and Sharp 1997). Notion of western democratic citizenship implies inclusivity of some while marginalizing others, and seen in this context borderlands imply a locational and metaphorical margin which is part inside and part outside the dominant discourse. Feminist geographers have looked at ways in which space and place are implicated in the structural oppression and everyday practices that promote marginality and difference (Nagar and Swarr 2005). In this paper, I categorize Muslim women activists in the USA as marginal subjects existing on social and geographical borderlands in a world that is mapped by and for imperial powers.

The events of 9/11 brought an unmatched amount of attention to Islam and Muslims in USA, and there was an unprecedented increase in hatred directed toward them as well. In this situation, American Muslim women, who were already living with the stigma and stereotype of being a veiled, docile, home bound victim, were further frozen in the Eurocentric and hegemonic discourse as tyrannized by restrictive Islamic laws, Muslim patriarchy and in need of being ‘saved’. Even before 9/11, hegemonic views about Muslims, especially Middle Eastern Muslims, have been distorted by deliberate mythmaking in film and media. Herman and Chomsky (1988) propose that the mass communication media
of the U.S. ‘are effective and powerful ideological institutions that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, … and without overt coercion’ (Herman and Chomsky 1988, p. 306). It is obvious that in the post 9/11 scenario Muslim women are reduced to distorted caricatures of voiceless hijabis/niqabis and are depicted in media as a resource in the politics of fear to encourage distrust and cynicism. Meghna Nayak (2006) argues that Western powers are promoting ‘hypermasculinity’, which is ‘the sensationalistic endorsement of elements of masculinity, such as rigid gender roles, vengeful and militarized reactions and obsession with order, power and control’ (43). Nayak’s concept of ‘hypermasculinity’ is directly connected to her concept of ‘infantilization’, by which she means the representation of certain communities and people as vulnerable, helpless and backward children and women whose lives depend on being saved from the vagaries and horrors of their cultures and religions by rational, enlightened, civilized, and strong political actors mainly hailing from the West. ‘Infantilization’ is thus a form of racialized and gendered violence because it violently denies agency based on race and gender.

Influenced by interdisciplinary paradigms such as gender studies, postcolonial, subaltern, and cultural, feminist interventions have examined how empowerment, oppression, and marginalization operate through regimens of difference. Furthermore, feminist geography has concentrated on the ways in which space and place are incriminated in the structural processes and everyday practices that promote marginality and difference while focusing on gender to explore spatial phenomena (Nagar and Swarr 2005). Feminist geographers have been interested in investigating how sexual differentiation was shaped by spatial norms, such as identifying women with private space over public thus disregarding them in traditional types of data collection (Dowler et al. 2005). It is also imperative to think of feminist geography as the study of “situated knowledges that are derived from the lives and experiences of women in different social and geographic locations” (Staeheli et al. 2004, pp. 1–2). Keeping these implications of feminist geography in perspective, this paper looks at Muslim women in the USA as varied and diverse in both their experience and practice of religious faith, and in terms of numerous other markers of their identity such as ethnicity, geographical location, immigration status, and marital status.

Whilst the process of creating social and geographical margins in both symbolic and material terms is deep-rooted in many cultures (McDowell and Sharp 1997), American Muslim women activists that are discussed in this paper have existed in aporia and the double bind on the borderlands of USA for a long time now. They have been subjected to stereotypes and suffered from coercive containment of female subjugation by religious patriarchy at home and within Muslim community. Their efforts to set themselves free of judgements and stereotypes has never materialized though, as they always find themselves shuttling between opposing subject positions trying to justify being a ‘good’ Muslimah and a ‘good’ American. They are judged if they take a veil and judged again if they decide to unveil; they are judged if they cultivate interreligious and interfaith alliances and then judged again if they attempt to inculcate gender-inclusive approach to Quranic interpretations. This double bind becomes an existential crisis for Muslim women where despite all efforts of liberation the Muslim woman constantly finds herself struggling with the expectations and stereotypes of what it is to be a Muslim woman. Consequence of existing in this double bind is the feeling of never being enough, regret and ‘not self-congratulation’. Spivak (2012) talks of the ‘double bind’ as a productive space only when people are willing to remain awkwardly within it as opposed to exiting quickly. Such a state would create the need to confront trapping of retrieving voices of the subaltern. Here, I argue that Muslim women’s experiences of regret and ‘not self-congratulation’ also contain the possibility of productive spaces on the borderlands in which they, maybe awkwardly, keep resisting the pressures to conform to stereotypes and venture to challenge double binds.

Using theoretical framework of feminist geographers who have mainly focused on real experiences of individuals in their own localities, this paper will discreetly focus
on struggles of three American Muslim women activists who hail from different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities. Asra Nomani is daughter of Indian immigrants and was raised as an observant Muslim at a university town in West Virginia; Linda Sarsour was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York by parents who were Palestinian immigrants, whereas Amina Wadud was born to an African-American family in Maryland. Their Indian, Palestinian and African descents carve the way their activism challenges the geopolitical inequalities in the USA. It has been contended that forged from below, solidarities are constructed through “uneven power relations and geographies (in intersections between different spaces and scales)” (Agustín and Jørgensen 2018, p. 17). Within a structure of social marginalization and disenfranchisement, this varied group of Muslim women activists treat Islamic activism as a social movement by linking the interpretation of religious ideas and ideals to the protection of Muslim women’s rights, freedom, and space in their own respective ways, and underscore that Muslim women are not victims a priori.

Below, while discussing these three women activists I will examine how their everyday acts of resistance redefine their experiences of social relations as they break down dichotomies between formal/informal politics and public/private domains of actions (Cope 1996).

2. Asra Nomani and Ijtehad

McDowell and Sharp argue that “gender relations are both affected and reflected in the spatial structure of societies” (1997, p. 4). Born in India and brought to the US when she was four years old, Nomani was raised as an observant Muslim at a university town in West Virginia. She navigates her complex life in the USA in her memoir (2005) which is filled with the existential angst of being a Muslim woman in America. Her multifaceted identity, that was spatially constructed, geographically intertwined, and paradoxically constructed along religious lines, is defined by her as complex, since “. . . my Indian world is divided into a ‘North’ that includes the West and a ‘South’ that includes the East’ (Nomani 2005, p. 11). Nelson and Seager (2005, p. 1) have investigated that “it is ‘the body’ and the multidimensionality of embodied experience(s) that continue to anchor feminist geography at the dawn of the twenty-first century.” Feminist geography is “anchored in the body, moves across scale, linking the personal and quotidian to urban cultural landscapes and global political economies” (Nelson and Seager 2005, p. 2). In ‘Occultation of the feminine and body of secrecy’, Elliot R. Wolfson (2015) writes that there’s a compelling link between esotericism and eroticism. Muslim patriarchy’s obsession with the concealment of the feminine, which is fenced securely within spatial boundaries, has more to do with cultural perceptions than religion itself, as in most Islamic cultures the sexual modesty of the male is made dependent on the contingency of female enclosure within private spatial boundaries whereas his licentiousness is related to exposure of the feminine. This obsession with ‘concealment of feminine’ continues even when Muslim communities cross bridges to reside in foreign lands.

Usually, a Muslim woman’s being in a Western country is taken as a factor contributing to her liberation and bodily empowerment, however Nomani’s recounts that her experience in the USA after her pilgrimage proved especially traumatic. After coming back from pilgrimage in Mecca, Nomani realized that American Muslim fundamentalists, who believe in the extremist ideologies of strict segregation between genders had entrenched their dogma in the mosques and Muslim communities that they controlled. Nomani writes how she was able to say prayers in Kaaba with everyone, whereas coming back to USA she was forbidden by masjid Imam to pray in main hall since a woman’s presence with men in main hall of mosque could cause ‘fitnah’³. Dwelling on the word ‘fitnah’ Nomani writes: ‘It means ‘conflict’; some men argue that a woman’s presence causes conflict because she is sexually arousing and distracting. Fitnah’s theological root makes this a very serious allegation. I wasn’t about to take responsibility imposed on women over the centuries for men’s sexuality. I wasn’t going to be denied my rights because I was a woman’ (Nomani 2005, p. 79). She recited chapter two, verse 256 of Quran in front of men that says,
'There shall be no compulsion in religion', and told them she was not going anywhere and will say her prayers right in the main hall with men. Nomani observed that American Muslim patriarchy had exploited religious spaces by using them as spaces of power and privilege to perform hegemonic masculinity, and to further marginalize women’s voices and resistance stratagems.

Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt have debated that difference is always constructed through lived experience of geography and space (Hanson and Pratt 1995). However, it has been contended that modernization and westernization in the west cannot bring the promise of change and difference for Muslim women, since this change hardly challenges the patriarchal norms in Muslim communities (Moallem 2006). ‘Indeed, they [in west] merely divide patriarchy into hegemonic and subordinated semiotic regimes positioned to compete for control of women’s bodies and minds’ (Moallem 2006, p. 3). Muslim scholars who are aware of such a conflict between Islamic and Western discourses of fundamental freedom for all have recommended thinking of such divergence in terms of culture. For example, Mahmood Monshipouri ([1952] 1998) writes: ‘The dispute between the two worlds [Muslim and Western in the context of human rights] does not and should not imply a fundamental conflict; instead, one must view the dispute as a cultural dialogue’ (54). Islamic culture is completely made dependent on enclosing feminine potency within the spatial boundaries that are defined exegetically by men through the holy scriptures and Hadith. Such partial patriarchal Qur’anic interpretations are performed in the spaces such as mosques and Muslim community centers that are exclusively controlled by men. Seen in the context of Nomani’s struggle with religion in America, Muslim women’s battles are not against religion, but patriarchy, the system of social structures and systematic erasure of women’s voices that works by distorting the religious discourse through which men seek to oppress and exploit women. She tells Vince Beiser in an interview: ‘Intolerance toward women is like the canary in the coal mine for intolerance toward other people. When you allow sexism to go unchallenged, you allow bin Laden-type mentalities to go unchallenged. That’s why it’s so vital that the expression of Islam in the world be one that is completely affirming of women’s rights’ (Beiser and Nomani 2006).

For Muslim women activists in USA, enactment of everyday religious practices is not merely a survival strategy, but also a potential site of politics. Laliberte et al. (2010) argue that “the implication of space, place in intersectional understandings of identity construction and difference; micropolitics and resistance; and troubling the conceptions of public/private space” (10) lead to expansion of the political action and exploration of difference. For Nomani, politics of resistance starts with advocating for the inclusion of women and their participation in the mosque, which is the major site of Muslim congregations, by making it an accessible public space for all genders. In her quest for equal rights for Muslim women, Nomani, along with Amina Wadud, managed to hold a Friday prayer in Morningside Heights in Manhattan in 2005 which was led by a woman after another woman gave *azhan* (the call for prayer). This was a radical act of defiance since it is considered that giving *azhan* and leading prayer in mosque can be done only by a male Islamic scholar. This was a one of a kind prayer congregation which was a tactic of micropolitical resistance and an attempt at reforming Islam.

The theological term for attempts to reform Islam by interpreting Quran and Hadith (the sayings of Prophet Muhammed) according to modern sensibilities is ‘*Ijtihad*’. Anita Weiss (2014) writes that religious scholars have long conducted some form of *ijtihad* in response to social challenges posed to those who are living in diverse religious societies. Nomani’s calls for reform in the American Muslim community are incessant yet controversial. In her opinion piece where she explores ‘A hostile phenomenon called “hijab Shaming”, she criticizes the Saudi translation of Quran, which adds words that are not found in the Quran’s original Arabic in chapter 33:59, ‘rewriting it to add parenthetical phrases that demand the face veil: “O Prophet! Tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the disbelievers to draw their cloaks (veils) all over their bodies (i.e., screen themselves completely except the eyes or one eye to see the way)”’. Nomani writes that, ‘In colloquial
Arabic, the word for “headscarf” is talha. In classical Arabic, “head” is al-ra’as and cover is ghita’a. No matter what formula you use, “hijab” never means headscarf. The media must stop spreading this misleading interpretation4 (Nomani and Arafa 2015). According to her, with the rise of well-funded Saudi clerics, women who are from open-minded Muslim families are being bullied by men and women alike to get them covered. Other articles she wrote were entitled ‘As Muslim women, we actually ask you not to wear the hijab in the name of interfaith solidarity’ (2015), and ‘Wearing the hijab in solidarity perpetuates oppression.’5 (2016) in which she called for Muslim women in America to stop wearing hijab. Bondi and Rose (2003) argue that “axes of identity such as those of race, class, sexuality, age and gender never operate aspatially but are inextricably bound up with the particular spaces within which, and in relation to which, people live” (232). According to Nomani Muslim women will have to reject hijab to integrate in America since hijab further perpetuates stereotypes about Muslim women’s oppression.

Nomani has been severely criticized by the Muslim community in America including many Muslim women who said that it was very ignorant to assume that Muslim women feel oppressed for wearing hijab. This shows that the blanket description of religious rituals as oppressive is problematic since obedience to a transcendental power is conceptualized as voluntary by many Muslim women regardless of spaces/places they occupy. According to many Muslim women, it is through the acts of obedience to God and by observing hijab that they attempt to challenge social norms. Linda Sarsour falls under this category.

3. Linda Sarsour and Inter-Faith Harmony

Where Nomani has been criticized by a majority of Muslims residing in America for embracing the secular discourse and is accused of disparaging Islam and Muslims, her fellow American Muslim activist Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian Muslim American who devotedly wears hijab and has been defending Muslims against Islamophobia in US, is constantly bashed by the right wing in the USA for being an apologist for radical Islam and Islamists. Sarsour’s parents came to the US from Palestine in the 1970s, and she has been brought up in one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Brooklyn and attended New York City public schools with friends who were from different backgrounds, mostly African American and Latin American. She is one of the most high-profile Muslim activists in the US, and is the director of the Arab American Association of New York. A regular attendee at ‘Black Lives Matter’ demonstrations, she keeps appearing on television as a commentator on feminism and Muslim women. Sarsour’s activism started right after 9/11 happened, when a close relative who was a founder of the Arab American Association of New York asked her to join this nonprofit social service agency. Sarsour later became the director of this agency and started her activism through this platform.

Feminist geographers are critical of dichotomies between formal and informal politics and the public/private divide, since for them theorizing women’s activism as informal when its located in the private sphere contributes in further marginalizing women’s everyday political acts. In 1990, Kofman and Peake theorized politics as a pursuit that is relevant to all domains of public and private life and it implicates the transformative capability of social agents and bodies (Staeheli et al. 2004). Sarsour’s act of wearing hijab while living in New York City can be seen as public and private radical act of political dissent in a place that is already antagonistic to a hijab clad women in the post 9/11 era. Sarsour started wearing hijab when one of her aunts went for pilgrimage to Mecca in 2000 and brought back a suitcase filled with headscarves. Sarsour picked one and put it on and after that never went out without it. ‘The hijab allowed me to reclaim my identity. My classmates asked me many questions and showered me with compliments. I began openly speaking about where I was from, about the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, and what Islam meant to me. But September 11 was a defining moment as my identity was no longer just interesting. I now carried the identity of the enemy’ (Sarsour 2011, p. 354). Sarsour writes that after she started working with the Arab American Association of New York after 9/11, only then she discovered that the things she had never believed could happen in America had
already started happening. She dealt with discrimination cases in the public school system and workplaces, violent fights at local schools between Muslim students and other ethnic and religious groups, FBI raids in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn where she lived (which is home to the largest Arab American community in New York City), fathers detained and separated from their families, and people getting arrested just because they had similar names as the terrorists in 9/11.

Women may feel out of place or disempowered when they attempt to enter certain spaces that are seen as male-dominated or masculine because they don’t share the masculine culture of the place; feminist geographers are attentive to ways certain places promote uneven power relationships (McDowell and Sharp 1997). Linda Sarsour entered the American political scenario when she actively promoted Bernie Sanders during the 2016 presidential campaign and spoke as his surrogate during his promotion drive despite the resentment of mainstream American white patriarchy. At the 2017 Women’s March in Washington DC, which was organized right after Donald Trump’s inauguration as President of US in response to Trump’s offensive position regarding women’s rights, Sarsour was engaged as co-chair of the event⁶. Sarsour emerged as a face of resistance to Trump. For Sarsour, Trump’s election came after years of standing up for people he had maligned—not just women, but Muslims, immigrants and black Americans, too. The power relationships inherent to places are affected by different identity markers such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and age, and Sarsour’s connections during these protests with activists that belonged to different ethnic backgrounds from around the country helped her stimulate different groups during the disorienting period following the election. Sarsour has also been named as one of Time magazine’s ‘100 Most influential People’ along with her three co-chairs.

Sharp and Joanne argue that recent reassessments of imperialism focus on the interactions between center and margins (1997). Young suggests that self-conscious identity of modern societies is heterogeneity and diversity, and the hybrid nature of cultural exchange reinforces the difficulties of separating the local from the global (2017). However claims to exclusive identity based on entitlements of purity (national, ethnic, class) do not withstand this evidence in the USA, where binary divisions have been maintained through essentialist categories such as outsiders and others (Hall and Bornstein 1991). Sarsour has pointed out the negative impact that American media had on American Muslims in their efforts to heal and attain social justice (2017). According to her, during midterm elections in 2010 politicians kept on benefiting from xenophobic discourse in order to garner votes, and media pundits pushed the grievances of Americans with little or no connections to New York City, and our community was once again reminded that the wounds of September 11 had not yet healed (2011). She writes that her heavy Brooklyn accent, her passion for the issues, and determination have shattered stereotypes all while she continued to cherish her heritage and traditions while continuing to empower, engage, and build her community. She has been involved in projects that reconstruct spaces/places to promote inter-faith harmony. In February 2017, after a Jewish cemetery in St. Louis, Missouri was vandalized in a seemingly anti-Semitic incident, Sarsour worked with other Muslim activists in launching a crowdfunding campaign to raise money for repairing and restoring the damaged gravesites and ended up raising $125,000 for this project.

Feminist approaches to gendered identities’ support ideas of the subject as multiple, disintegrated and fragmented entity (Duncan 1996). This view finds common grounds with interpretations of cultural hybridity by Homi K. Bhabha (2012) who refers to the ‘hybrid displacing space’ that takes place through exchanges between dominant and subordinate cultures by challenging and resisting the political authority and authenticity of the dominant culture. Sarsour has been struggling to occupy the ‘hybrid displacing space’ while challenging the political authority, however she keeps getting entangled in double bind of approval and disapproval. Regardless of her work for all communities including Muslim community and others, Sarsour has been constantly stereotyped and labeled as ‘anti-Semitic’, ‘Jew-hater’ and ‘terrorism-lover’ by the media⁸. While the Times of Israel
(2017) made Sarsour’s donation to the Jewish cemetery a headline, the same article also explained that she is a critic of the state of Israel and will keep supporting BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) which is a Palestinian-led movement for freedom, justice and equality. The article also mentions that she has been supporting Bernie Sanders because, “he was ‘a candidate who sees the humanity of the Palestinian people, because I am Palestinian,’ while also saying she favored a one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” (2017). Such details in the article accentuate the covert undertones of disapproval for Sarsour’s humanitarian services by underscoring her condemnation of Israel. Ironically, Sarsour’s acknowledgment that Israel has a right to exist, her support of a Jewish man, Bernie Sanders, for president and her relationships with politicians like Mayor Bill de Blasio have earned her criticism by some radical Islamists as well who called her self-aggrandizing “house Arab” (Hajela). The double bind that Sarsour suffers for being a minority Muslim woman activist in USA is that she is criticized for being sympathetic to people of other religions by Muslim patriarchy, and is seen with suspicion by the other religious communities as well. Her struggles to promote inter-religious harmony, and her failure at pleasing both her own and other religious communities show that we need to carefully consider context-specific power relations and ways in which gendered religious subjects are formed/deformed in spaces and places that are implicated in processing structural oppression, marginality, and difference (Nagar and Swarr 2005).

4. Amina Wadud and Quranic Exegesis

Amina Wadud is American Muslim theologian and philosopher who was born to an African-American family in Maryland. Wadud is hailed as first American woman Imam (religious leader) who has contested the constructed nature of place, space and position of Muslim women in Islam by focusing on principles of equality for women with a progressive focus on Quranic exegesis. She has taken on the task to reread/reinterpret Quran from feminist perspectives and rejecting patriarchal exegesis of the Quran.

Habermasian distinction between public/private dualism points that public space is where political debate takes place, whereas family locates in private space. Feminist scholars argue that such binaries are gendered and politicized, and play role in unequal power relations which lead to operational disempowerment of women on the crossways of class, gender, race and other hierarchical power relationships. V. S. Peterson argues that “the dichotomy of masculine–feminine orders not only our subjective identities but also the concepts that structure our thought” (Peterson 2000), since looking at space as gendered binary tends to render thinking that is “static, reductionist and stunted,” and limits analysis to just two opposing alternatives, rather than scrutinizing the fluidity of possible alternatives. Concept of place was first viewed as a “bounded piece of space or territory,” (McDowell and Sharp 1997), which is infused with certain characteristics that make it peculiar compared to surrounding spaces. Wadud’s criticism of patriarchal Quranic exegesis come from her critique of problematic spatial dichotomy and public/private binary in Islamic culture and tradition which embody power relations by segregating women to private spheres (home), and giving men the authority to control or shape both private and public spaces.

Challenging the notions about the suppression of the feminine, Wadud has attempted to write a counter-narrative not only by engaging in exegesis and exhaustive reinterpretation to locate moments of egalitarian conceptions of gender in Quran and Hadith, but also by being the first woman Imam in USA. She argues that patriarchal culture of Quranic exegesis has promoted uneven power relations between men and women by making women feel ‘out of place’ when they enter certain spaces. An example of such space is mosque, where women are segregated to the back or balconies of main halls, thus rendering them as unsuitable to the major site of religious performance. In Islamic traditions, mosque has been increasingly seen as a space with set of concepts embodying notions of difference where gendered relations are expressed. Staeheli et al. (2004, p. 2) argue that belonging and exclusion are contested terms; Wadud refutes arguments that sustain mosques as gendered
Islamic spaces belonging to men only, thus challenging the patriarchal perception that only Muslim men can lead a prayer in congregation. In 1994, Wadud became the first Muslim woman to deliver a Friday *khutba* (sermon) before the Friday service at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa. In 2005, Wadud again led Friday prayers for a congregation in the US. To conduct the event, three mosques in Manhattan refused Wadud and one mosque that agreed to hold the event received bomb threats, after which the event was shifted to a church. Wadud argues: ‘I don’t want to change Muslim mosques. I want to encourage the hearts of Muslims, both in their public, private and ritual affairs, to believe they are one and equal’ (Hammer 2012).

Location, landscape, place, and space are rendered as political concepts (McDowell and Sharp 1997), and many Muslim feminists have argued that Islamic discourses shape and are shaped by specific moments in specific places and spaces. (Ahmed 1992, p. 10). Leila Ahmed underscores the need to investigate the discourses on women and gender in Islamic societies by observing and studying the societies in which they are rooted, and in particular the way in which gender is articulated socially, institutionally, and verbally in these societies. Looking through the same framework, Wadud contends that the tendency of considering men and women as distinct members of humanity in Muslim cultures has led to the development of an Islamic intellectual ethos in which there is a deep seated prejudice against giving attention to female voice, both as a part of a text and in response to it. To counter the patriarchal interpretive hegemony over Quran and Hadith, Wadud suggests a female-centered and female-inclusive reading of Quran by advocating philological interest in the subtleties of Quran that could lead to in-depth exegetical analysis and enable reading for the construction of Quranic ambiguities. ‘For example, how is one thing brought into relief and another ignored, since both effect textual coherence? What can be learned through the relation-ship between foreground and background in the Qur’an?’ (Wadud 1999, p. xiv). Regarding interpretation and recounting Quran what concerns Wadud is that “they were exclusively written by males. This means that men and men’s experiences were included, and women and women’s experiences were either excluded or interpreted through the male vision, perspective, desire, or needs of woman” (1999, p. 29). According to her, “In these times of post- modernist critique when the very foundations of knowledge are challenged to move beyond certain value laden tendencies”, deconstructing the patriarchal hermeneutics of Quran and pursuing a female inclusive reading of Quran can be viewed as part of a larger area of discourse by feminists who have constructed “a valuable critique of the tendency in many disciplines to build the notion of the normative human” (Wadud 1999, p. ix).

Feminist geography has paid close attention to the interaction between gendering of public and private spaces and subjectivities of women. Gilbert argues that “space is not merely a container for social actions, but rather that identity and difference are constructed, fixed, and contested through space and places” (1997, p. 173). Public space, which is usually examined through lens of power, politics and production, is seen in Islamic traditions as belonging to men while private space is considered as domestic and feminine and thus women who transgress public arena are seen as ‘out of place’ and ‘out of control’. In the Muslim societies, the occultation of the feminine is practiced exegetically through the holy scriptures and Hadith and by situating the essence of sexual modesty in women. A constant subject of discussion about Muslim woman has always included the issue of hijab/veiling. Fatima Mernissi writes: “All the monotheistic religions are shot through by the conflict between the divine and the feminine, but none more so than Islam, which has opted for the occultation of the feminine, at least symbolically, by trying to veil it, to hide it, to mask it” (Mernissi 1991, p. 81).

Wadud underscores the importance of understanding the idea of hijab/veil in the context of events during which the order of hijab was revealed to Prophet Muhammed. She explains that in Arabia at the time of Quran’s revelation, veil was customary for women from wealthy and powerful tribes to signify their seclusion, privilege, and protection. However, she thinks that it is for the principle of modesty, and not veiling or seclusion of
women per se, that verses about veiling were made a part of revelation. Taking Yusuf Ali’s translation of the word (Quran, verse 24:31) ‘that which must ordinarily appear’ (with regard to uncovered parts) Wadud argues that this verse indicates to culturally determined guidelines for modesty that needs to be established by taking into consideration the contemporary customs of a society. “Modesty is beneficial for maintaining a certain moral fiber in various cultures and should therefore be maintained—but on the basis of faith: not economics, politics or other forms of access and coercion” (1999, p. 10). According to Wadud, hijab has no hierarchy over the concept of modesty.

Through this Islamic reformist thought with regard to progressive Islam and flexible decree regarding hijab, Wadud is making it possible for all American Muslim women to practice their respective politics of identity within their chosen comfort zone by either observing or not observing veiling. According to Wadud, living in USA demands Muslims to listen to progressive Islamic scholars and intellectuals who “will intentionally grapple with the complexity of preserving the integrity of the Islamic tradition [while] combining it in a dynamic way with what it means to encounter all of these complexities of modernity or postmodernity” (2016). By addressing to the issues regarding mosques and hijab, Wadud conceptualizes agency and re-evaluates contemporary Islamic landscapes in America to examine and transform the extent to which patriarchal notions of Islamic sacred texts reinforce gender conceptions of public/private space, and if they can be (re)interpreted outside of such binaries. Being an African American Muslim woman is a complex identity marker for Wadud in a post 9/11 USA, and according to her even when her identity is at odds with the mainstream American culture, African American Muslim women inculcate a progressive Islamic identity by living the experience of Islam and combining this experience with a universal understanding of rights to be human in America.

5. Conclusions

Meghan Cope (2004) proposes three tactics for creating a structure to understand intersection of gender, political acts, and space. According to her, first of all we need to assess if women have aggressively created new or different spaces for political action through which they could challenge mechanisms of oppression. Secondly, we need to reflect how women have used socially embedded codes of specific places to emphasize on their grievances and fortify their political efforts. Thirdly, we need to observe if some women’s politics have “jumped scale,” that is, “how political action that draws on everyday life and local resistance can have impacts that jump to broader levels such as the national and global” (Laliberte et al. 2010). Cope argues that everyday acts of resistance can configure experiences of social relations to form the spaces of protest (Cope 1996, p. 180). From above narratives of three Muslim American Muslim women activists, we can observe that all these women are committed to localized resistance to the patriarchal hegemonic global discourses, and though their resistance strategies vary they were able to structure solidarity with Muslim women beyond geopolitics without reinforcing hegemonic feminist agendas (Mohanty 2003). Not only these women are critical of the masculinist processes of advancement, but there is a constant struggle to reform Islamic knowledge while claiming access to knowledge production and dissemination in the spaces that are conceived as forbidden for them. By identifying and entering previously ignored gendered and spatialized inequalities, Muslim women activists have reclaimed uncharted territories through their implementation of gender mainstreaming in private, public and political arenas.

Many feminist geographers have realized that major issues with projects of women empowerment come from not addressing or acknowledging the systematic disempowerment of women that occurs outside of spaces they inhabit (Elias and Carney 2005; Nagar and Swarr 2005; Raju 2005). Women activists under discussion here have analyzed that at the root of Muslim patriarchy’s phobic attitude towards women is the pre-Islamic mentality that seeks to control and manipulate Muslim women’s subjectivity in accordance with hermeneutics that are constrained by exclusive and restrictive interpretation. Mona Domosh talks about “hidden codes of social performance” (1998, p. 210) that are not
necessarily hegemonic but are embodied in the everyday, public actions of the people on
the streets. Muslim women activists in USA have recognized that by taking away from men
the authority to construct “hidden codes of social performance”, they can reconfigure “sites
of political and social transgressions” (Domosh 1998, p. 211). These women activists realise
that everyday acts can be assumed as important sites of power relations since politics is
everywhere and urban spaces can be constructed as either constraining or enabling for
women (Bondi and Rose 2003). Asra, Sarsour, and Wadud have not only interrogated the
binary of public/private but have also critically assessed what and who, exactly, constitute
the “public”. From this perspective, public space is understood to be “constituted by
impositions, negotiations and contestations over which groups comprise the public that
has access to these spaces, for what purposes these spaces are used, and what visions
of society urban public space embraces, enforces, produces and promotes” (Bondi and
Rose 2003, p. 235). By breaking down dichotomies between formal and informal politics,
enacting micro-politics of everyday, and re-asserting their right over Islamic public spaces
such as mosques in America, these activists have contested their right to be visible and
vocal. Sarsour’s hijab, Nomani’s call for letting women be part of mosques, and Wadud’s
reinterpretation of Quranic verses to come up with more gender inclusive approach are all
acts of resistance to the status quo.

Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) argues that it is time to listen to Muslim women instead of
assuming through the noise of familiar stories. According to her, the familiar stories of
Muslim women’s oppression have been made convincing through their association with
the ‘purity’ of the language of universal rights, and “Gendered Orientalism” (213) has taken
on a new life and new forms in our feminist twenty-first century. She asks us to be wary of
the concept of ‘choice’, since the liberation of women is contingent on the circumstances in
which Muslim women live and is dependent on the spaces allowed to them in the public
sphere to practice their choice.

Solidarities are not a given, but shaped through labor and struggle in the formation of
alliances. Challenging East–West, North–South, center-margin and national-transnational
dichotomies, American Muslim women activists demonstrate from borderlands that they
are not victims a priori. Their struggle, activism, and politics of resistance work through
the complex dynamics of double bind of the political, moral, religious, and ethical values
that pose different understandings of responsibility and accountability to them. American
Muslim women’s redemption out of the double bind of identity, in which they are caught
as a result of being positioned in dualistic ideologies of Islam and secular politics, is
possible only if their critique comes from well-informed sources that are committed to
studying discourses surrounding Muslim women in the context of the societies in which
they are rooted. Also, such a critique needs to consider the diverse nature of challenges that
require Muslim women to adapt varying strategies of resistance from different histories
and cultures, ideas and philosophies surrounding the concepts of emancipation, freedom,
and liberation, since such ideals cannot apprehend a universal language. Only such a
renegotiation regarding the issue of redeeming Muslim women’s agency and freedom, and
a universal ‘acceptance of the possibility of difference’ (Lughod 48) within global feminist
movements may lead to an understanding of diverse politics of Muslim women activists.

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There has been an ongoing discussion by scholars on the issues of identity and authority regarding recognition of mufassir (interpreter of Quran). Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûtî (1964), writes in al-Itqân fî 'Ulûm al-Qur'ân (Mastery in the Sciences of the Qur’ân) that a mufassir must be superior in terms of both ethics and scholarship; a mufassir should have good beliefs and intentions as well as profound knowledge. Along with stating the importance of having knowledge of the Hadith and ‘Ulûm al-Qur’ân, al-Suyûtî puts a great premium on the importance of having deep, adequate and authentic knowledge in the Arabic language, including philology, syntax conjugation, figures of speech, and so on. However, when the modern period began, traditional Muslim societies came under the influence of the West, and since tafsîr is the most important of the traditional religious disciplines in Islam, it has been impacted vastly by the changes in society, and has become a focal point for Muslim scholars, who have been trying to establish and verify a new theory defending Islam against Western criticism and advocate its value. Those interpreters born in Muslim minority countries tend to choose methods of scriptural interpretation which are different from the traditional techniques used in Arabic and (or) Muslim majority countries. These minority interpreters are attempting in their interpretations of the Qur’ân to establish a new understanding of Islam based on their own environments. Their distance from the traditional techniques used in Arabic and (or) Muslim majority countries tends to choose methods of scriptural interpretation which are different from the traditional techniques used in Arabic and (or) Muslim majority countries.

Notes

1. Feminist geographers emphasize on gender and class as some of the core organizers of spatial politics and theory of feminist geography has changed the ways we see space and place as constitutive of gendered identities and vice versa. Read: Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World (Domosh and Seager 2001).
2. The matrix of gendered Islamophobia locates Islamophobia within shifting axes of oppression that are simultaneously structured along the lines of gender, race, class, sexuality, and citizenship. Read: (Almahomed-Wilson 2020).
3. Fitna (or fitnah, pl. fitan; Arabic: ﬁتن، فتنة; “temptation, trial; sedition, civil strife”) is an Arabic word with extensive connotations of trial, affliction, or distress. A word with important historical implications, it is also widely used in modern Arabic. https://islamqa.info/en/22899 (accessed on 1 March 2020).
4. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/12/21/as-muslim-women-we-actually-ask-you-not-to-wear-the-hijab-in-the-name-of-interfaith-solidarity/ (accessed on 1 March 2020).
5. Article writes: As mainstream Muslim women, we see the girl’s headscarf not as a signal of “choice,” but as a symbol of a dangerous purity culture, obsessed with honor and virginity, that has divided Muslim communities in our own civil war, or fitna, since the Saudi and Iranian regimes promulgated puritanical interpretations of Sunni and Shia Islam, after the 1970s Saudi oil boom and the 1979 Iranian Revolution. https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/01/06/do-non-muslims-help-or-hurt-women-by-wearing-hijabs/wearing-the-hijab-in-solidarity-perpetuates-oppression (accessed on 1 March 2020).
6. At the Women’s March in January, her voice raised and her index finger in the air, Linda Sarsour was the picture of defiance. The Muslim-American activist from Brooklyn had quickly emerged as the face of the resistance to Donald Trump. “I ask you to stand and continue to keep your voices loud,” Sarsour said, “for black women, for native women, for undocumented women.” https://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/politico50/linda-sarsour/ (accessed on 1 March 2020).
7. While a liberal feminist focuses simply on a woman’s self-freedom, revolutionary feminism proposes a more holistic actualization of the self that can eventually give birth to a global political restructuring. Read: (Biana 2020).
8. ‘BD activist raises $56,000 for vandalized Jewish cemetery’.
9. I use this term with a grain of salt, since ‘radicalism’s Eurocentric character tends to be assumed rather than examined when allied to Islam (Zaheer Kazmi). Read: (Kazmi 2022).
10. Article also describes her as: ‘Sarsour, the executive director of the Arab American Association of New York, cut her teeth as an activist defending the civil rights of U.S. Muslims after the Sept. 11 attacks and came to wider prominence in recent years protesting against police surveillance of Muslims. She’s become a regular at Black Lives Matter protests, too, and a frequent TV commentator on feminism.’ http://www.brooklyneagle.com/articles/2017/1/27/brooklyns-linda-sarsour-muslim-activist-faces-more-threats-after-womens-march (accessed on 1 March 2020).
11. (And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only that which is apparent).
12. There has been an ongoing discussion by scholars on the issues of identity and authority regarding recognition of mufassir (interpreter of Quran). Jalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûtî (1964), writes in al-Itqân fî ‘Ulûm al-Qur’ân (Mastery in the Sciences of the Qur´ân) that a mufassir must be superior in terms of both ethics and scholarship; a mufassir should have good beliefs and intentions as well as profound knowledge. Along with stating the importance of having knowledge of the Hadith and ‘Ulûm al-Qur’ân, al-Suyûtî puts a great premium on the importance of having deep, adequate and authentic knowledge in the Arabic language, including philology, syntax conjugation, figures of speech, and so on. However, when the modern period began, traditional Muslim societies came under the influence of the West, and since tafsîr is the most important of the traditional religious disciplines in Islam, it has been impacted vastly by the changes in society, and has become a focal point for Muslim scholars, who have been trying to establish and verify a new theory defending Islam against Western criticism and advocate its value. Those interpreters born in Muslim minority countries tend to choose methods of scriptural interpretation which are different from the traditional techniques used in Arabic and (or) Muslim majority countries. These minority interpreters are attempting in their interpretations of the Qur´ân to establish a new understanding of Islam based on their own environments. Their distance from the traditional tafsîr varies considerably, both in terms of interpretative style and technique and the resulting interpretation, depending on their stances as mufassirs. However, they have two major things in common: Arabic is not their mother tongue, and they lack the special training they would have needed to become traditional ‘ulamâ’ in a very traditional way. In this regard, Wadud is among the most important contemporary interpreters who are introducing the “hermeneutics of liberation” in the realm of tafsîr, an ideology that is defined as a theology of protest against oppression and social injustice. Read: (Mumisa 2002; Okawa 2013).
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