Peripheral Feminisms: Literary and Sociological Approaches

Edited by Petra Broomans and Margriet van der Waal
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Centre for Gender Studies - Euroculture - Globalisation Studies Groningen
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On 19 May 2010 the Centre for Gender Studies of the Faculty of Arts, in cooperation with the Erasmus Mundus Master of Arts programme, Euroculture, organised the first annual Gender Lectures with the symposium “Peripheral Feminisms. Literary and Sociological Approaches”. Why the topic “Peripheral Feminisms”? In both history and literary history, feminism and gender studies have been presented as a Western phenomenon. Along with the second feminist wave in the 20th twentieth century, women’s studies and gender studies became new disciplines at the universities in the Western world. In other parts of the world women started to reflect on and contextualize their own position as well, and may have started doing so even earlier. At the symposium, the main question was how eurocentric is gender studies in the Western world? How can we learn from each other with an open mind? Speakers from different areas and traditions discussed this important matter at this first Gender Lectures’ symposium. In cooperation with the Centre for Globalisation Studies (CGS) selected essays are published in the open access Research Reports of the CGS.¹

The first contribution is by Swati Shirwadkar (India). In “Journey of Sita’s daughters” Shirwadkar writes about Indian immigrants in North America and the issue of violence against women. She emphasizes the importance of the family networks and the fact that immigrants do not leave their cultural backgrounds behind when they migrate to another country. Shirwadkar pleads for a dialogue between the different cultures and understanding of each other’s cultures. This could create better possibilities and opportunities for third-world women to get access to institutions and policies in first-world contexts in order to improve their situation. Shirwadkar uses the Indian community in Canada as an example.

She starts with an overview of the women’s movement in India related to violence against women and gives a short survey of the immigration of Indians to North America. In the central part of her paper, Shirwadkar discusses the outcomes of a study of Indian immigrant women in which “the Canadian policy provisions and programmes were contrasted against the cultural practices and experience of the immigrant women”. Shirwadkar comes to the conclusion that

¹ See www.rug.nl/gsg/Publications/ResearchReports/Reports/researchReports.
though the Canadian policies are advanced, the needs of this specific group whose members are subject to domestic violence, are not taken care of sufficiently. Shirwadkar states that a sensitive dialogue has to be created between government agencies and third-world communities. She also indicates that concepts such as family and home have to be redefined in such heterogeneous contexts and the understanding of cultures more developed with an eye that takes the internal differences more into consideration. This creative package will help to understand the complex issue and adds to the formulation and implementation of a more gender-sensitive policy.

Malihe Maghazei (Iran) argues in her contribution, “Islamic Feminism: At the Periphery or Growing Trend?”, for a better understanding of the importance of Islamic feminism that she calls “an increasingly growing global emancipatory project during the last two decades”. After an introduction of the historical background and influential elements, Maghazei discusses the general trends in Islamic feminism that has two aspects: activism and epistemology.

Maghazei focuses on the epistemological part, which includes all kinds of research that is often carried out in the context of re-reading the Islamic texts. Maghazei discusses the re-interpretation of the Qur’an, the re-interpretation of the Ahadith and Fiqh, as well as the re-visiting of historical texts. As characteristics of Islamic feminism, Maghazei mentions that Islamic feminists often have to multi-task and that they have to take on multiple identities: to act as politic activists, as feminist activists and/or as scholars. They have to cope also with various discourses in local as well as global “knowledge-producing systems”. Islamic feminists thus have to develop complex strategies. Besides local strategies and activism in countries such as Iran, Maghazei observes an internationalization of Islamic feminism that becomes visible in networking and sharing information.

In the last part of her paper, Maghazei discusses Islamic feminism in Western discourse and feminist studies. Maghazei explains that many of Islamic feminists, inspired by Edward Said, believe that Muslim women in the Orientalist literature are homogenized and victimized. In the dominant Western discourse Islam is depicted as the cause of the oppression of women. On the other hand, a negative influence of the Orientalist tradition on Middle East gender studies can be pointed out with the result that Islamic feminism is “situated on the periphery of feminist scholarship in the West”. This is due to the fact that there are too few academic courses on Islamic feminist, existing courses are too often combined with old stereotypes (Islam as oppressor of women, feminism and Islam as an oxymoron) and the persistent idea that feminism originated in the Western world. Maghazei states that the image of Islam and Islamic feminism is rooted in historical and geographical traveling of thoughts, not only in the West but also in Muslim societies. Maghazei concludes that Islamic feminism needs to be demarginalised. It is a promising new way of thinking and it indicates the way to epistemological transformation. The tools are rereading texts and visualizing
women’s agency. It is thus an emancipatory movement that she describes the contours of, ready to leave the periphery of Western feminist scholarship.

The third contribution, “Nordic Girlhood Studies: Do We Need to Get over the Pippi Longstocking Complex?” by Maria Österlund (Finland), brings us to another geographical and academic periphery: the Nordic countries and girlhood studies. Österlund discuss Nordic girlhood studies with “Pippi feminism” and the way it is presented in children’s literature as a point of departure. Österlund gives first an overview of the various negative and positive perceptions of the Pippi Longstocking ideal, both in the time when the Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002) published the book in 1945 and in modern times. Österlund depicts the impact of the Pippi figure on society and literature. A good example is Stieg Larsson’s heroine, Lisbeth Salander, who Österlund regards as a “comment on the Pippi ideal”.

In her presentation of Nordic girlhood studies Österlund states that one of the tasks of Nordic girlhood studies is to go beyond the “common Pippi Longstocking complex of a strong individual”. She describes the several girlhood studies networks and academic tools such as journals and networks that make up this discipline. Nordic girlhood studies have in common a feminist perspective and the use of constructivist theories. Though the field is relatively young, this does not hinder a critical discussion of concepts, paradigms and fundamentals of the field. In this part of her paper Österlund discusses the societal, institutional and academic contexts of the Nordic girlhood studies.

Here we see also a connection with the contribution of Swati Shirwadkar. How a girl functions and how a girl’s agency fits “into the gender power structure” is seen as cultural representation. As with the Indian immigrant women in Shirwadkar’s case, girls are situated in the periphery of a gendered power hierarchy. Furthermore, Österlund deals with the differences within the Nordic countries as well with the differences between Western feminism and Nordic feminism. She concludes that Nordic girlhood studies is “in the periphery of Western feminism, and thus not visible in the ‘Western’ English discourse on childhood studies”. Herein lies a similarity with Islamic feminist studies in Maghazie’s contribution. Pippi Longstocking can serve as an “example of how a peripheral feminism can work its way through historical and geographical contexts and shed light on key questions within feminism”.

This quotation of Österlund is applicable to all the contributions of this publication. Whether or not belonging to peripheries/minorities, centres/majorities and/or going across each other’s borders enables dialogue and avoids isolation and stigmatization.
Introduction

Myths have generally tended to establish domination and power of the ruler over the ruled. For a majority of Indians, for instance, the archetypal symbol of Sita, drawn from the epic Ramayana is a strong role model.\(^1\) It embodies the quiet suffering of a woman, ingrained values of respecting family and following the husband but being strong when the crisis of self-respect comes up. For the majority of Indian women, regardless of caste, religion and regions, the values of respecting marital family, silent suffering in staying with the husband, as in the role model of Sita, are internalized through different social and cultural resources. However, there is also a history of conscious struggle to change the structural constraints that govern women.

Briefly tracing the journey of the women’s movement in India and its concerns, I will bring out the issue of domestic violence against immigrant Indian women and the barriers to access policy initiatives related to welfare provisions and help for domestically abused victims in developed countries. Given the increasing influx from less developed countries to the developed ones, this issue warrants attention. The immigrants also bring cultural practices and family circumstances with them to the developed countries where the policies to stop domestic violence are progressive. Do Indian women have access to these policy initiatives? What keeps them from benefiting from these policies? An exploratory study of Indian immigrant women in Canada provides some answers to these questions.\(^2\) It emphasizes the role and context of immigrant community, family

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1 Following a palace coup, king Dasharath is forced to exile his beloved son Ram to 14 years of exile in deep forest. His wife Sita gives up all her comforts and dutifully accompanies him, reminding him that this is her *Dharma* (religion, i.e. duty). There she is abducted by the demon king Ravan, and is finally won back by Ram after a battle. Ram asks her to undergo *Agni Pariksha* (test of fire), but Agni, the lord of fire, raises Sita unharmed, attesting her purity. On their return from exile, a washer man questions her chastity. To further remove any doubt in the minds of his subjects, Ram sends her in exile, back to the forest. For him, the king’s rule should be beyond any doubt. Sita’s sufferings do not end as she is pregnant while in the second exile. She raises her sons with the help of the sage, Valmiki Rishi. When subjects realize their mistake, much later, and send Ram to bring her back, she shows her individuality by refusing to return. Instead, she prays to mother earth for release from the unjust world. Mother earth splits open and Sita is given shelter in her depths from where she had arrived.

2 Shirwadkar, “Canadian Domestic Violence Policy.”
networks and culture related to the issue of domestic violence. With this example I propose that a creative dialogue and understanding of cultures would make institutions and policies more open to access for third-world women.

A brief review of the women’s movement in India and the issue of violence against women

Women’s issues were part of the discourse of the Indian reformist as well as the nationalist movement. Research on the women’s movement in pre-independence period shows that women’s issues such as age of marriage, widow remarriage, custom of Satee or women’s education were debated in the reformist period. However this was contested later by nationalist leaders since fighting the colonial rule was a priority and such issues were considered to be linked with cultural identity.\(^3\) The context of colonial rule and entry of capitalism also needs to be taken into consideration while looking at the discourses in this period.\(^4\) With Gandhi’s use of the traditional Stree-Shakti (power of women) for the nationalist movement, women’s public space was legitimized to some extent. However, an analysis of earlier literary traditions shows how women challenged patriarchy,\(^5\) while some folksongs show how women manipulated cultural symbols for asserting rights even in pre-independence times. The story of Meera Bai goes back to the 15\(^{th}\) century, whose love and devotion for God Krishna even after her marriage became a challenge for the existing norms. The legend of Mahadeviakka, the Kannada poetess of Virsashaiva tradition, similarly places husbands (and men) in an asexual relationship by using the strategy of Bhakti (devotional approach to God).\(^6\) These revolts against patriarchal norms or sexuality of the female body also resulted in death punishment at times, such as in the case of the poisoning of Meerabai by her husband and mother-in-law. Thus women had to use different strategies for rebellion. Some of the folksongs in a conservative state like Rajastan also bring out the same trend. In Maharashtra, the Varkari and Bhakti (devotion) movement that surged from the thirteenth century onwards, brings out the protests as well as an urge for emancipation in novel ways through the oral tradition, such as Abhang (devotional poetry), Ovi\(^7\) songs, riddles and proverbs. In the debates surrounding the reformist and later nationalist movement periods, there were ‘traditionalists’ and ‘modernist’ sides of discourse. However, looking at the past, one can understand why the existing framework of culture was not totally challenged even by the modernists.

In the development of post-independent times, the women’s movement has linked itself with various issues ranging from work opportunities, land rights,

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\(^3\) Lingam, “Taking Stock.”
\(^4\) Chaudhuri, “Gender in the Making of the Indian-Nation State.”
\(^5\) Shinde, Stree Purush Tulana; Shirurkar, Hindolyawar.
\(^6\) Jain, Indegenous Roots of Feminism.
\(^7\) Songs from oral tradition. Women used to sing Ovi while grinding grains before sunrise.
environment, protesting against liquor-shops, to dowry deaths and other forms of violence against women. Campaigns against family violence, rape or against liquor shops emerged, cutting across the class-caste hierarchy.\textsuperscript{8} There were demonstrations across the nation against the coercive power of the state, reflected in police atrocities. The women’s movement, however, was not without ideological cleavages and fragmentations.\textsuperscript{9}

During the mid 1970s and 1980s the focus was on the issue of violence against women. Spontaneous or organized efforts to fight against some atrocities took a form of consistent effort to battle against violence against women. The movement also started making an effort to conceptualise the issue of violence, in relation to violence within the family and outside. The late 1970s and 1980s were marked with protest against dowry and bride burning. Mechanisms to counter violence ranged from public shaming, to community action for lobbying for amendments in law. The role of the state was criticized for reinforcing patriarchal and subordinating oppressions. Around the same time as the international decade of women in the 1980s, Indian feminists demanded amendments in law. There were efforts to counter different forms of violence such as trafficking of women, sexual harassment, and custodial rape. There were widespread movements and rallying by women’s organizations in the post-emergency period, to deal with the violence and atrocities against women and to bring legal reforms. The campaign was focused mainly on reforms in the laws against dowry and rape. The Dowry Prohibition Act, passed in 1961, had proved ineffective due to the loopholes in the law.\textsuperscript{10} The late 1970s to 1980s was the period marked with protests against dowry and bride burning that received nationwide support. The campaign demystified the private nature of domestic violence by bringing it in the public sphere and discourse. Studies have brought out the importance of the creative use of different methods to carry feminist notions to far-flung villages, such as activists using street plays as an innovative method.\textsuperscript{11} Women’s groups also demanded changes in the dowry law to make it more effective. The campaigns against different forms of violence against women and their demand to make changes in the law brought the issue in public sphere.\textsuperscript{12}

After 1983 amendments in law were made by criminalizing the act of domestic violence, and the dowry Prohibition Act was again amended. The dowry harassment issue had started a debate and it was realized that issues such as physical torture, cruelty to wives, etc. may get sidelined and hence the demand of the domestic violence bill came to the forefront. The need to broaden the

\textsuperscript{8} Lingam, “Taking Stock.”
\textsuperscript{9} Kumar, \textit{The History of Doing}; Butalia, “Confrontation and Negotiation”; Lingam, “Taking Stock.”
\textsuperscript{10} Singh, “Women and Law.”
\textsuperscript{11} Mitra, \textit{Domestic Violence as a Public Issue}.
\textsuperscript{12} Butalia, “Confrontation and Negotiation.”
definition of domestic violence for law reform was felt.\textsuperscript{13} There were consistent demands, lobbying for amendments in laws and policies for plugging the loopholes, giving more rights to women in the marital home and to increase the purview of the law. The movement participated in the discourse, acted as a lobbying force and worked with the government for achieving policy reforms. The recently reformulated and passed act to end domestic violence is one such example. There was a conscious and consistent effort from the movement to draft the bill, to debate it and to give final shape to the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005.

Needless to say, such legal control cannot stop such social menaces. The increasing purchasing power of some sections in society, coupled with the rising power of black money and increasing consumerism have unleashed the market forces in spiraling demands for quick money in different forms through dowry. Unfortunately, it has spread not only in urban but also in rural areas as well as in castes and tribes which did not have this practice. The issue of domestic violence remains far from resolved.

Compared to this situation, one finds the case of developed countries where substantial policy and programmatic advances have been made in the field of domestic violence to reduce violence against women. These advances are most pronounced in North American countries. However, the case of Indian immigrants in Canada presented here shows that the domestic violence policies of a developed country such as Canada, may not necessarily accommodate the diversities of cultures. The women’s movement in the developed countries would benefit from developing a creative dialogue with the immigrants from less developed countries.

\textbf{Indian immigrants in North America and policy provisions}

In the past few decades, trends in immigration show that there has been a substantial flow of Indian immigrants to North American countries. The increasing number of Indian immigrants to the U.S. is reflected in the data showing that approximately 70,000 Indians immigrated to the U.S. in the year 2001.\textsuperscript{14} The history of immigration to Canada dates back to the famous incident of ‘Komagata Maru’ of 1914 and the treatment of the British and Canadian exclusionary laws. Yet the presence of Indian immigrants in Canada is strongly felt in some parts of Canada, especially in British Columbia and Ontario. Toronto, in Ontario province, has the largest population of Indian immigrants (4.9% of Ontario’s total population).\textsuperscript{15}

For the National Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey of the United States, women from Asia/the pacific region were interviewed and it was found

\textsuperscript{13} Mitra, \textit{Domestic Violence as a Public Issue}.
\textsuperscript{14} Natarajan, “Domestic Violence among Immigrants from India.”
\textsuperscript{15} Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, \textit{Proportion of Asian Immigrants in Canada and the U.S.}
that the suffering from physical assault in this group was lower than other racial groups.\textsuperscript{16} However, the writings of scholars show that though the Indian immigrants’ image is of a ‘model minority’, the issue of domestic violence is silenced and remains underreported.\textsuperscript{17} Hence, the question whether the programmes and policies accommodate the diversity of cultures within those developed countries remains an unanswered issue. Given the increasing influx of immigrants to the developed countries, bringing their different cultural practices and family circumstances along, this shortcoming of the policy intervention is an important area to be investigated.

\textbf{An exploratory study of Indian immigrant women}

A small exploratory study was conducted to assess the needs and the problems that are faced by Indian immigrant women against the programmatic help available to them. For this, the Canadian policy provisions and programmes were contrasted against the cultural practices and experience of the immigrant women. Official documents and manuals on relevant policy provisions were reviewed to examine Canadian domestic violence policy. In addition to this, interviews with activists, battered women’s advocates and social workers and prominent community activists were used for in-depth understanding of the issue. A snow-ball sample of selected Indian immigrant women from the Toronto area was used to identify the issues related to domestic violence and barriers faced in accessing policies and programmes. These women were from five different states of India and belonged to different religions such as Hindu, Sikh and Islam. Some of the unstructured interviews were spread over a period of approximately two to three months. The victims gave information as per their convenience, in personal interviews, by telephone or by e-mails, especially in some cases where there was a fear of husband or in-laws intervening. Additionally, participant observation of community gatherings such as festival celebrations, formal and informal community activities was also used. These gatherings were also helpful to understand the cultural milieu of the community and the issue as well as perception of domestic abuse. Canada has a policy of multiculturalism and the Canadian domestic violence policies are of the most advanced in the developed world. The health and education facilities in Canada have created better life chances for its citizens. However, the established community of Indian immigrants appears to still encounter barriers to access programmes and support.

The major policy initiatives of Canada include its Criminal Justice Program, which, apart from several amendments to protect women facing domestic violence, gives training to judges and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) supports traditional public

\textsuperscript{16} Tjaden and Thoennes, \textit{Extent, Nature, and Consequences of Intimate Partner Violence}.
\textsuperscript{17} Abraham, \textit{Speaking the Unspeakable}; Natarajan, “Domestic Violence among Immigrants from India.”
housing and ‘transitional housing’ for survivors of domestically abused women. However, the majority of beneficiaries are Canadian born. During the interviews of this exploratory study, the social workers and counselors corroborated that Indian immigrant women often prefer not to choose the transitional housing option but to buy a place in a ‘suitable locality’. During the interviews conducted for the study, a social worker conceded that there is racism within social service organizations.  

**Social context of domestic violence issue in India**

The embedded nature of violence against women in the Indian social structure is reflected in studies that show the impact of patriarchal extended joint family and imposing marriage customs to shape the role of women. An Indian woman traditionally faces a range of expectations associated with the principle of service or *sewa* or selfless service (something implied even in role of Sita), looking after in-laws, maintaining respectful and amicable relationships, entertaining guests and providing a constant flow of gifts to the in-laws. The construct of femininity emphasizes submissiveness, being docile and dependent in the patriarchal joint family. Deviations from these gender roles are likely to meet different forms of abuse and is often justified as an inevitable part of marriage. Studies on domestic violence in India bring out several correlates of domestic violence such as young age at marriage, family hierarchies, poverty and even economic independence. This context helps us to understand why strategies by women to subvert male domination are effective in some places but not everywhere. Studies on regional variations in domestic abuse show that development indicators such as education and employment, may work effectively to reduce violence or dowry demands in some regions, but not in others. Strategies to subvert male domination are effective in different ways in various communities.

**Indian immigrant women’s experience of domestic abuse**

Indian immigrant women’s experience of domestic abuse is complicated, not only because of the cultural context that they carry with them, but also because of their immigrant status and the new society in which they reside. South Asian feminist activists have voiced their dissatisfaction with the mainstream battered

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18 Shirwadkar, “Canadian Domestic Violence Policy.”
20 Dube, *Anthropological Explorations in Gender*.
21 Shirwadkar, *Women and Socio-Cultural Changes*.
women’s movement which emphasizes just one aspect of women’s life, namely the violent relationship.

Indian immigrant women, who are usually dependents, are also often unaware of immigration laws. Since their usual, extended kin network is suddenly lost, they become isolated. This isolation results in compensatory psychological, financial, physical and even spatial control by their husbands. Indian women, particularly from middle-class background are ‘ashamed’ to admit domestic abuse in public or to seek assistance. In the immigrant context, the community takes the place of the kin group but the fear of ‘gossip’ is found to be strong. Even among educated, middle-class women, the pan-Indian character of Sita or Sati-Savitri (that idealizes the quiet suffering of woman) is ingrained into women to believe that the marital home is the only alternative. Acceptance of this virtuous, faithful devotion to one’s husband as an ideal of a wife, regardless of class or regional variations, extended even in the time of the spread of television all over India, as is pointed out by scholars.25

The most prominent factor related to domestic violence among Indian immigrant women interviewed for this study was family constraints derived from culture and tradition. A woman’s identity is shaped by several complex and dynamic factors, such as religion, customs, beliefs and tradition. Socialization is also influenced by a mix of recent Bollywood movies, literature and the invasion of satellite TV.26 Apart from rising demands of dowry, marriage ceremonies are becoming expensive and opulent, as is depicted in Bollywood movies. Breaking such a marriage and returning to one’s own family carries a stigma. There was a case where the mother-in-law controlled the son and the opulently celebrated marriage sadly ended in the wife killing the husband when he tried to kill her. This case was reported on and in Canadian media. In my research, it was found that in some cases in-laws could control the behaviour even though they were not physically present. The family control can expand across various activities including venturing out to dress code. One respondent told that she observes the Indian dress code because of her mother-in-law’s dictates and her husband’s disapproval of ‘Western’ culture. In another case, the young respondent was always accompanied by either the husband or the brother-in-law and was not allowed to go anywhere apart from her scheduled classes. In fact, on the suspicion that she was in contact with the researcher, not only her visits were restricted but even the contact through e-mail was cut off. The story in the Hindu epic, Mahabharat, of Kunti’s decision and Pandav’s marriage,27 is used as an

25 Kakar, The Inner World; Derné, “Making Sex Violent.”
26 Derné, “Making Sex Violent”; Kishwar, Off the Beaten Track.
27 While in exile, Arjun, one of the Pandavs (the five brothers), wins in a contest because of his accurate archery and is offered princess Draupadi’s hand for marriage. When the Pandav brothers come back home, they announce that they have got excellent alms that day. Their mother, Kunti, without knowing who is with them, tells them to distribute that day’s alms equally among them as was their practice. So
illustration to demonstrate the authority of the mother-in-law. The role of in-laws in inciting violence is frequently depicted in folksongs of oral tradition and also brought out by scholars.

Economic independence does not necessarily mean that women will have all the rights of decision making for spending their income. There were some respondents in this study who told that their pay was used for buying gifts for relatives or funding the trips of in-laws going back to India, even though they resented it. However, they also expressed that speaking against it would invite frictions in the family and they try to avoid it to keep the marriage intact.

There was one case of a handicapped woman who faced physical torture and financial abuse because of the husband’s affair with another woman. Yet she kept suffering silently in the hope that “some time he will come back to me……..maybe like that in a movie…..asking for an apology!” However, the same woman later revealed her situation to a group of community workers and as an effect, at least the physical torture stopped because the husband got worried about his reputation in the community. This brought out the role of community pressure in stopping the violence. Immigrant communities are usually close-knit ones and this makes the family status and relationships a matter of concern.

Many Indian women prefer legal intervention rather than going to shelter-homes or transition-houses, according to the social workers and some victims. For them, losing family status, community support and their network is a great setback. It also adds to their isolation. The victims expressed that legal options are better than depending on state welfare because that way they feel their self-respect and honour will remain intact.

**Conclusion**

The policies of Canadian government to counter domestic violence are more advanced than those in India. However, Canadian policy initiatives do not appear to meet the complex needs of Indian immigrant women. Multiple layers of domination subjugate them. It is essential to understand the aspects of the dynamics of this complex process. Apart from gender inequalities, the family hierarchies combined with community pressures and beliefs cannot be ignored. Some studies suggest caution against the strategies that challenge existing structures and beliefs without being culturally sensitive. Therefore, not only policies need to be culturally sensitive but even the women’s rights movement

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29. The traditional folk songs of Bhondla festival in the Marathi language depict this.
30. Raheja and Gold, *Listen to the Heron’s Words.*
31. Shirwadkar, “Canadian Domestic Violence Policy.”
32. Ibid.
needs to creatively think about the new strategies to address the issues immigrant women, who come from different cultural backgrounds, face.

This should not be understood as the third-world women being victims of a ‘cultural trap’. The issue of domestic violence is all-pervasive and universal. Making a specter of the crime of domestic violence needs to be avoided. There is a need of redefining the notions of family and home, as well as of creative understanding of cultures.\(^3\)\(^4\) Going across borders to create a sensitive dialogue with the peripheries will help in this understanding and redefinitions. Strategies used by activists and movements need to be planned in a creative and inclusive way, such as creating support networks that include the community, reduce the isolation of the victims and establish an ongoing dialogue with the community. The emphasis only on ‘rescuing’ victims from abusive situations may not succeed in reality. A dialogue between the government agencies, mainstream activists from developed countries as well as from the third-world communities is needed to understand the complexities of the issue and for creating more gender-sensitive policies.

\(^{34}\) Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*. 
Bibliography


Islamic Feminism: At the Periphery or Growing Trend?

Malihe Maghazei

Introduction

The post-colonial challenges to and critiques of the dominant, Western discourse’s categorizations and assumptions of women of non-Euro-American societies have entered a complex phase and produced a dynamic debate. However, conventional doctrines and paradigms persist. It has been three decades since post-colonial scholars in the framework of critical thinking first challenged Western-constructed broad categories of third-world women, Muslim women, Asian women, African women and Latin-American women as singular, monolithic, powerless and unified subjects. However, the trend of generalizations and reductionist assumptions has continued. This trend has produced the marginalization of some aspects of feminism of these societies including that which is popularly called Islamic feminism, in spite of which it has become an increasingly growing global emancipatory project during the last two decades.¹

Historical background

Islamic feminism, like other social phenomena, was not formed in a vacuum. Although the term Islamic feminism was coined in the 1990s, the seed of the movement was sown during the process of a hundred years of women’s movements in the region. The feminist movement of Muslim-majority societies, since its inception in the late 19th century until the present time, have fluctuated and adopted various ideologies and strategies and has continued despite all kinds of limitations, obstacles and pressures. But, it constantly had to change its shifts, renew its demands and strategies, find new channels and shape and reshape its discourses. By and large, the feminist movement in the region has never been purely secular. From the beginning, pioneers of the feminist movement never detached themselves from Islam and in most part they integrated Islam as part of their discourse.

In the framework of Islamic revival, the reinterpretation of the sacred texts on women’s position began in the late 19th century. In 1892, Zaynab Fawwaz, an

¹ Because of ambiguities and diverse implications of Islamic feminism and lack of agency in this label, I prefer to use Muslim feminist instead. But since this term has gained common currency among both academics and activists throughout the world I will stick to the first label in this paper.
Egyptian woman scholar, wrote in *al-Nile* that there is no evidence in Islamic law that prohibits women to participate in public life.² Another religious scholar, Nazira Zayn al-Din, a Lebanese woman who was trained by her father, wrote a book called *al-Sufur wa al-hijab* in 1928, in which she demonstrates that veiling has no religious sources.³ This trend, which increased from the middle of the 20th century, reached its zenith in the 1970s. Thinkers in this period such as al-Ghazali Harb, an Al-Zahra educated thinker, or Shariati, an Iranian sociologist who called for understanding Islam by careful studying the main sources and opposed the misogynistic way of interpretation, enlightened the young generation of educated women in the region. Harb stresses gender equality, women’s full participation in social and economic activities and rejects veiling as an Islamic-required code.⁴ Shariati, in *Fatima is Fatima* exemplifies Fatima, daughter of the Prophet, as a socially active model for all Muslim women.⁵ All these writings paved the way for developing Islamic feminism during the next decades.

**Influential elements in the growth of Islamic feminism**

New local and global changes and developments since the 1980s, including the disillusionment of women by the Iranian Revolution of 1979, expansion of ‘fundamentalist’ groups in the region, the establishment of women’s studies in many Asian and African countries, launching the third-wave of feminism in the West and the growth of critical theory all helped in expanding Islamic feminism during the 1990s. Another important factor is that Islam had become integrated in all aspects of life of Muslim-majority societies and in order to bring change to gender perspectives and consciousness in these countries, Islam had to be taken into consideration. Mir-Hosseini maintains that “if we are Muslims, whether or not believing or practicing, Islam is part of our identity, our way of life, a culture, a system of values.”⁶ With the same emphasis, Fatima Mernissi, states that “being Muslim is a civil matter, a national identity, a passport, a family code of laws, a code of public rights.”⁷

Moreover, during the last two decades, establishing and expanding women’s studies as an inter-disciplinary subject in the universities throughout the Muslim-majority societies and also introducing gender studies to the Middle East studies and Islamic studies programmes in Western countries, have prepared the global circulation of scholarly works on various topics of gender in Islam. All these fields directly or indirectly have helped nourishing knowledge of Islamic feminism.

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² Fawwaz, “Fair and Equal Treatment.”
³ Zayn al-Din, *al-Sufur wa al-hijab* (Unveiling and Veiling).
⁵ Shariati, *Fatima Is Fatima*.
Furthermore, during the last three decades, despite the complexities of socio-economic and political systems of the region and the diversity of women’s social roles and legal status, women of the Muslim-majority countries have faced common dilemmas, challenges and inspiration. They confront continuous gender inequality, the imposing or re-imposing of gender inequality by patriarchal interpretations of the Islamic texts by religious authority and political establishment, rising Islamic ‘fundamentalist’ groups and the persistence of Western clichés about the role of women in Islam. These common challenges and situations have brought about this new voice among Muslim feminists throughout the world.

**An overview of general trends in Islamic feminism**

**Re-interpreting the Qur’an**

Islamic feminism has two aspects: activism and epistemology. Its activism includes a range of global and local feminist activities for gender equality and justice and an end to women’s discriminatory status in the Muslim-majority societies. The epistemological aspect includes all studies, research and investigations to understand and formulate gender roles and women’s position in both private and public spheres through re-reading the Islamic texts.

Scholarly works of Islamic feminist include reinterpreting the Qur’an through gender perspectives, investigating the historical era of the Prophet Muhammad in terms of his behaviour toward women, contextualization of the Ahadith (the Prophet’s sayings and actions) and separating these Ahadith by distinguishing the forged from authentic, and critical reviews of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh).

Some, like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Fatima Naseef, Barbara Stowasser, Na’eem Jeenah and Riffat Hassan, concentrate their works on rereading the Qur’an from a gender perspective. Others, like Fatima Mernissi and Hidayet Tuksal, have reviewed the Ahadith, while still others, such as Azizah al-Hibri and Shaheen Ali, have focused on the Islamic jurisprudence. These scholars, in the framework of hermeneutic thinking, argue that pre-understanding of the readers is effective in understanding the sacred texts, in other words,

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8 As examples: in Iran after the Revolution of 1979, in Pakistan during Zia ul-Haq (1977-1988), and in Egypt a number of times the government changed the reformed personal status code.  
9 This is a loosely, commonly used label and is not a comprehensive definition; there is a vast diversity and complexity among these groups. I rather prefer to use reactionary groups for those who are advocates of the patriarchal system.  
12 al-Hibri, “Islamic Law and Muslim Women in America.”  
emphasising the relationship between what we read and what we think. In this respect Wadud states “every reading reflects, in part, the intentions of the text, as well as ‘prior text’ of the one who makes the ‘reading’.” Elaborating on this point, Jeenah quotes Fatima Mernissi: “Depending on how it is used, the sacred text can be a threshold for escape or an insurmountable barrier. It can be that rare music that leads to dreaming or simply a dispiriting routine. It all depends on the person who invokes it”.

Islamic feminists argue that since the traditional exegesis were written by patriarchal-thinking men, women’s experiences and needs have been excluded and the Qur’an has been interpreted through male vision and desires. Thus, in the feminist hermeneutic, the female experience and voice is situated at the centre of reading. Barlas states instead of blaming Islam for oppressing women, we should blame Muslims for misreading Islam. Those who concentrate on the interpretation of the Qur’an from a gender perspective are working toward the formulation of Islamic feminist theory – in other words, moving toward the realization of an epistemological transformation as one of the main goals of Islamic feminism. In this process the traditional methods of exegeses, or the “linear-atomistic” approach (meaning literal meaning of one verse at a time) as it is also called, is challenged. Islamic Feminists move beyond these methods by proposing a holistic approach or “systematic rationale for making correlations and sufficiently exemplifies the full impact of Qur’anic coherence.”

In presenting the egalitarian aspect of the Qur’an, Islamic feminists cite those verses that signify gender equality such as verse 13 (aya) in chapter (sura) 40: “Oh humankind. We have created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other. The most honoured of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you.” They infer from this verse and other similar verses that the Qur’an believes in the ontological equality of all human beings, and human beings are judged on personal deeds, not biology.

Feminist scholars emphasize that many of the Qur’anic commentary texts are rooted in cultural and customary and legal praxis and are affected by many texts, including those texts from other faiths and the pre-Islamic period. They argue that in the process of reading the Qur’an, the dynamic between a Qur’anic universal and particulars, meaning the universal principles of the Qur’an as the

15 Wadud, Qur’an and Woman, 1.
17 Wadud, Qur’an and Woman, 2; Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam, 5–21.
20 Wadud, Qur’an and Woman, xii.
main path for all human being and those specificities of 7th century Arabia, should be addressed. Thus, in order to analyse different and contradictory interpretations of the Qur’an on the position of women, internal relationships of texts, (intertextuality) and also context of readings (extratextuality) should be deeply studied.  

Emphasis on historical circumstance is not new. The concept of asbāb al-nuzūl (circumstances of revelation), differentiation between those time-specific verses (Medinan) and those principles of the religion (Makkan) have existed in classical Islamic scholarship. However, these methods are innovative in terms of their emphasis on a holistic approach and critical look at the atomistic method, integrating new hermeneutic theories and a female inclusive approach.

Part of the Qur’anic re-readings from a gender perspective has been focused on the position of women’s figures in the Qur’anic historical narratives. In the Qur’anic stories, some figures, including females, portrayed in both positive and negatives ways, are presented as examples of human behaviour. These examples are used as a teaching devise and ideological guidance. The Qur’an, apart from the Prophet’s female relatives and followers (sahabiyeh), relates some women’s stories from other traditions, where they are mostly associated with prophets, including the wives of Noah, Lot, Abraham, Zulaykha, Mary, Bilqis (the Queen of Sheeba), Hajar, and women in the life of the prophet Moses, including the wife of the Pharaoh. These women are attributed with all kinds of contradictory dispositions, including impiety, sagacious, faithfulness, treachery and idolatry. But all reflect various actual dimensions of human nature and at the same time represent symbolic messages of the Qur’an on the capabilities of women. Stowasser, in her study about females associated with the prophets, from Adam to Muhammad, points out that the way the Qur’an presented these female figures reveals that male and female are considered as free and equal human agents.

Some Islamic feminist scholars, such as Hassan, Ahmed, Stowasser, Barlas, Wadud, and others, have contemplated the symbolic message of the Qur’anic creation story of the first woman in their work. These studies show that, as the essence of Qur’anic epistemology, a spouse or partner was created with Adam, from a single Self or Being (4:1). These scholars also emphasize the fact that in the Qur’an there is no indication of the order in which the first male and female were created, and there is no mention that Eve was created from Adam’s rib.

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21 This method is extensively discussed in the works of scholars such as Barlas, Jeenah, Mernissi, Rahman and Wadud.
22 Stowasser, Women in the Qur’an, Traditions, and Interpretation, 27.
23 Ahmed, Women and Gender in Islam, 5.
In this respect, Hassan raises an interesting point:

none of the (...) passages which describe the creation of humanity could be interpreted as asserting or suggesting that man was created prior to woman or that woman was created from man. In fact, there are some passages which could – from a purely grammatical/linguistic point of view – be interpreted as stating that the first creation (“nafs in wahidatin”) was feminine, not masculine!\(^{24}\)

**Re-interpreting the Ahadith and Fiqh**

The persistence of misusing Islamic sources, especially the Ahadith in the Muslim-majority countries and their deep roots in the consciousness of the ordinary Muslim, has induced Islamic feminists to reread the Ahadith by contextualization and assessing their authenticity. The Ahadith are composed of sayings attributed to the Prophet in various situations which were collected during the first three centuries after the death of the Prophet. The Ahadith were formed partly in response to needs of the people as an ideological guidance in the vast territory of Islam, and partly in response to needs of the rulers to use as a theoretical backbone for social and political policy.

During the Islamic history a series of formulas for the separation of authentic and unauthentic Ahadith were designed, which led to the development of a science. These methods include inconsistency with the Qur’anic views, inconsistency with other Ahadith, contradiction with reason, laws of nature and common sense, and also inconstancy with the grammar rules of the Arabic language. Based on these criteria, many Muslim scholars and intellectuals are sceptic about the authenticity of those collected works, like that of *sahih*, which have been considered as the most authentic. Many factors have been identified in producing the forged Ahadith, such as fabrications by factions involved in political and theological disputes, forgetfulness of the exact Ahadith and their historical contexts by the pious believers due to the long time of transmitting Ahadith.\(^{25}\)

Attention of Islamic feminists to Ahadith is due to the important place of this source in the Islamic official discourse on gender positions. Ahadith are the second important source for exegesis (Tafsir), the basis of Islamic laws, and also have widespread and deep roots in the culture and consciousness of the people. Stressing the widespread misogynistic Ahadith, Mernissi, in the introduction to *The Veil and the Male Elite*, relates her dialogue with a grocer and his customer about the illegitimacy of a woman ruler. In fact, when a customer quotes a

\(^{24}\) Hassan, “An Islamic Perspective,” 345.

misogynistic Hadith to her, she became motivated to launch serious research on these kinds of Ahadith.\(^{26}\)

In this study, Mernissi describes in detail the time when the Prophet Muhammad was in political power in Medina and how women could participate in the councils, debate with the powerful men, express their opinion directly to Muhammad and be involved in the management of military and political affairs. This historical evidence, along with the contextualization of misogynistic Ahadith, convinced her that there is a big gap between the Qur’an and the Prophet’s tradition and the tradition of male elites who have been successful in sustaining their monopoly of power by manipulating the religious sources. She adds: “the elite faction is trying to convince us that their egotistic, highly subjective and mediocre view of culture and society has a scared basis.”\(^{27}\) Throughout this study she identified those misogynistic Ahadith that were uttered in response to certain questions and reacted to specific historical situations, or were related by unqualified narrators.

It should be mentioned that not all Ahadith on women are misogynistic. Many contain liberating, ethical and egalitarian messages. In this respect Jeenah remarks that “the challenge that faces feminist scholars of these scriptures is to develop and use hermeneutical models that reveal such liberatory potential, to realize within Islamic scriptures ‘a threshold for escape’ and to hear ‘that rare music that leads to dreaming’.”\(^{28}\)

Another area of attention of Islamic feminists is Fiqh – which literally means understanding or Islamic jurisprudence – as one of the important fields of the official Islamic discourses. Fiqh is a body of laws dealing with the observance of rituals, moral and social legislations, including criminal laws and family and personal laws. The main school of laws were formed in the first four centuries of Islam, and, which ever since, has been used with some minor changes. Fiqh is based on an understanding of the Qur’an by jurists, backed by selected Ahadith. It originated in the cultural and customary laws, and is therefore heavily “saturated with the patriarchal thinking and behaviours of the day”.\(^{29}\)

The Fiqh-based family and personal status laws are still enforced in many Muslim countries controlled by the clerics, whether in the Islamic states such as Iran, or in secular countries. During the last two decades Islamic feminists, such as the Lebanese scholar, Aziza al-Hibri, the Pakestani scholar, Shaheen Sardar Ali, who both are professors of law, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and international networks – including Women Living Under Muslim Laws, women’s journals such as Zanan in Iran (1992-2008) and many others have re-examined Islamic jurisprudence on gender issues and women’s positions. Islamic feminists and gender-sensitive

\(^{26}\) Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, 1.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., ix.

\(^{28}\) Jeenah, “Towards an Islamic Feminist Hermeneutic,” 36.

\(^{29}\) Badran, *Feminism in Islam*, 247.
critics find the Islamic jurisprudence very patriarchal. They aim to deconstruct these interpretations through a critical look at the Fiqh, by using *Ijtihad* – which literally means struggle – the classical method in Islamic scholarship, which implies an independent, rational interpretation.

**Re-visiting historical texts**

Besides rereading the Islamic texts from a female-inclusive perspective, Islamic feminists have begun to reread and deconstruct history by giving voice to the hidden subjects in the official historical texts. Since the late 1970s a series of studies have begun to restore the actual role of women in the history of this part of the world. These studies show that despite all restrictions and limitations of the patriarchal system, women have always participated in social, political and economic lives of society.

Unlike conventional historical books throughout the world, the early Muslim historians, such as Ibn Hisham, Ibn Hajar, Ibn Saád and Tabari, recorded details of women’s lives, including their participation in Islamic scholarships, their political, social and economic activities and even their personal life histories. This is what Mernisi stresses when she mentions that reading all these works gave her confidence in her past and its civilization.\(^{30}\) These historians wrote extensive women’s biographies and some even devoted whole volumes to women’s lives, such as the 8\(^{th}\) volume of Ibn Sa’d, the 9\(^{th}\) century Muslim scholar. With the expansion of the Muslim territory and influence from various cultures, these societies become more patriarchal and women gradually became more secluded. Consequently, they gradually disappeared from historical texts. In this respect Guity Nashat maintains that “it is much easier to study women in the first century of Islam, when they were highly visible and active in their own right. The abundant mention of women in the official chronicles reflects their visibility.”\(^{31}\)

However, women’s visibility and contribution to society did not completely disappear. They continued their role according to time and place, but their visibility in the historical texts almost disappeared. Thus, historians suggest referring to indirect sources, including personal documents, literary and artistic works and courts records in order to understand the real roles of women.\(^{32}\) Leila Ahmed explains the dearth of scholarly historical works on the subject in both Western and non-Western languages as recently as the early 1980s, when she started her work. She says, “I soon realized that my task would not after all be as simple as I had first imagined”.\(^{33}\)

This is the reason why Islamic feminists and contemporary scholars of gender in Islam have attempted to fill this vacuum. They have reviewed all kinds


\(^{31}\) Nashat and Tucker, *Women in the Middle East*, 35.

\(^{32}\) See Nashat and Tucker, *Women in the Middle East*.

of public and private documents to show women’s agency in history. These studies show that besides participation of ordinary women in labour jobs, many upper-class women in the medieval period were investors, even in public buildings.\textsuperscript{34} These studies have also identified a number of strong, female, and independent rulers in Islamic history.\textsuperscript{35} These works directly challenge the common assumption of Muslim women as being passive, secluded and being victim. Researches and studies of the last two decades show that women in the Muslim world, as human agents, have always employed all their potentiality in culture, society and religion to make differences in their individual and community lives.

Besides the works of internationally recognized Islamic feminist scholars, some of which have been mentioned in this article, there are many valuable writings and Ph.D. dissertations on different aspects of gender relations and women’s position in history and in the sacred texts. Some of these works are published in local languages, and consequently has not received global recognition and circulation. However, these works have benefited Islamic feminism, whether the authors call themselves Islamic feminist, Muslim feminist, feminist or neither of those. But, because of centuries of sexual-textual oppression, the deep roots of the dominant paradigm in culture, the consciousness of people in the Muslim countries, and also the widespread Western, negative assumptions about gender in Islam more work should be done on the subject.

Besides textual-oppression various factors are involved in gender inequality in the Muslim-majority countries, such as sexual politics of the authoritarian states.\textsuperscript{36} Therefore, scholarly works will not terminate the discriminatory position of women in these countries. This is the reason why activism is necessary and, in fact, put the re-reading of the sacred texts in practice.

The strategy and agenda of Islamic feminism activism is not uniform and vary according to socio-political context, gender official policy and level of gender consciousness of societies. Mir-Hosseinni points out that “Gender and Islam are huge, vague topics. (...) It has been addressed at three levels. The first is that of the varied interpretations and reinterpretations of the sacred texts (...). The second level is that of local and national political ideologies (...) [The third level is] that of the lived experiences of individuals and local communities (...).”\textsuperscript{37}


\textsuperscript{35} See Mernissi, \textit{The Forgotten Queens of Islam} and Uçok, \textit{Zanan-i Farmanrava}.

\textsuperscript{36} In some countries such as Iran this is the most important element in gender inequality.

\textsuperscript{37} Mir-Hosseini, \textit{Islam and Gender}, 3.
These three levels, proposed by Mir-Hosseini, are intermingled in intricate ways in all aspects of activities of Islamic feminist to such a degree that it is hard to distinguish them from each other. In other words, while interpretation of the sacred book is important as the source of authority and legitimacy for particular ideologies or standpoints, it is not the sole source of determining gender roles in these countries. Also, while these interpretations are used by the political establishments to make gender policy, it is also used by women for counter-authority strategies, as source of consciousness and inspiration for participation in public affairs. The scale of each level and overall situation of the society produce various strategies.

In those countries where “fundamentalist” or reactionary groups are very active and widespread, conservative authoritarianism takes a firm adversary policy against feminists. For example, in Egypt the state, facing opposition of the fundamentalist forces, has always taken a contradictory policy toward women’s rights in order not to antagonize these groups. Alternating between tough and conciliatory attitudes, it often resulted in a conservative stance regarding gender roles, such as revising the reformed personal status quo of 1979 in 1985. But in countries such as Iran, where political power and religious authority are incorporated in the dominant establishment, state gender policy constantly changes according to the ideological tendency of the powerful group in the government. And then there are those countries with secular political systems, such as Turkey, that do not always adopt a comprehensive tangible gender policy to actualize real gender equality or to meet needs of all classes of women. Consequently, various forms of gender resistance are found in these societies, including individual scholarly and artistic works, direct confrontations with the state in the form of public protest, activities organised by non-governmental organisations (both in the form of professional and women’s groups) and other forms of indirect confrontations and resistance.

**Characteristics of the movement**

Islamic feminists, in order to bring about a deep transformation of the dominant paradigm on gender in Islam, both locally and globally, have to multi-task and take on multiple identities. Sometimes they have to act as political activists, sometimes as feminist activists, sometimes as scholars, and sometimes carry all these identities simultaneously. The movement has to be engaged in critical debates with a number of discourses and systems of knowledge, namely discourses of the political and religious authority in the Islamic countries, the Islamic “fundamentalist” or reactionary groups and finally the Western discourses (including media, official political discourse and feminist scholarship). In other words, the actors of Islamic feminism aim at challenging both local and

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global knowledge-producing systems. The multi-task character of this movement is found in both individual and women’s groups. Hence, in order to develop the egalitarian potentiality of Islam, Islamic feminists hold various identities, employ a variety of discourses, and adopt diverse strategies.

One of the features of the feminist movement of Muslim-majority countries, besides local specific feminist strategies, is collective actions, which, as a new phenomenon, appeared in the feminist movement during the last two decades in Muslim-majority countries. Badran, in *Opening the gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writings* calls it “gender activism” and Iranian feminists call it a “demand-oriented movement”. Feminist collective action in Iran is a great example of gender activism and pragmatism since the 1990s. In fact, the diverse strategies, agendas, ideologies and actors involved in this collective engagement for a common cause on a widespread scale, is a new phenomenon in the history of the feminist movement in Iran. The current feminist movement in Iran is broad and encompasses all classes, ages and all intellectual and ideological tendencies. Activism takes in all cultural, artistic and literary products such as novels, paintings and films produced by women writers and artists to express women’s problems and needs. Overall, the movement today is less committed to totalizing ideologies, grand theories and less affiliated to political organizations than during the pre-revolution era. This feature of being less ideologically committed has made the movement dynamic and self-motivated and has led it toward more collective action, such as a number of protests against gender discriminatory legislatives in recent years. For instance, the parliament intended to pass a law in 2008 to make it easier for men to marry a second wife. A large group of activist women from all ideologies, including secular and religious strains, and from all professions gathered in parliament to explain to the representatives the negative consequences of this legislation, including destroying family relationships. The result was the withdrawal of the proposed legislation by the government at the time. Another example of this trend is a grassroots movement called *One Million Signature Campaign*, aimed to end the gender discriminatory policy in Iran by gathering signatures on the streets. However, the activists were detained and their publications and websites were closed down.

39 There are many women multi-task groups in the region that offer resistance along different lines. Here I skip other countries and I bring an example of Iran which is my native country and of which I have first-hand experience. A women’s NGO called Women’s Association of History Researchers (WAHR), was established in 1999 in Iran. Its goal is to raise consciousness about gender issues, to promote the study of the role of women in Islamic history and to bring about dialogue and closer scholarly collaboration among historians and scholars of related fields on gender issues. Its members are all historians. They are informed about women’s movements in other parts of the world and network widely. They set up national and international seminars, publish journals and use different ways of raising consciousness.

Another important feature of Islamic feminism, besides its local specificity strategy taking and collective activism, is its increasingly international character. In fact, the nature of the movement necessitates moving toward networking and global forms strategies. There are many international groups who focus their activities on women in Islam including (but not limited) to Sisters in Malaysia, the Federation of Muslim Women’s Association in Nigeria, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUMIL) in France, and the Association Independent pour le Triomphe des Droits des Femmes in Algeria. As Cooks points out: “Intellectuals who have written Islamic feminism texts are drawing on their transnational political, religious, and gender identities in order to speak effectively to, with, and against several audiences”.\(^{41}\) As Islamic feminists benefit from sharing their work, establishing international networks facilitated the exchange of their writings and research. This motivates them to translate their works into different languages of the region, but sometimes they run up against restraints of the authorities.\(^{42}\)

One of the recent international Muslim women networks is Musawah, which was initiated in 2007 by Sisters in Islam (a Malaysian NGO) with the goal of advancing women’s rights within the framework of Islam. Many NGOs, individual activists, scholars, academics, legal practitioners and policy makers around the world, including North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, South Asia, central Asia, North America and Australia are involved with Musawah. They share information and contribute to the conceptual framework toward bringing equality and justice in the family. As part of international gender activism, in addition to all those networking activities, a major effort is undertaken by women activists of Muslim-majority countries to join the United Nation’s Convention on the “Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women”, despite resistance of certain governments.

Islamic feminism in Western discourse and feminist scholarship
Writing on women in Muslim-majority societies has a long history in the Western tradition and discourse, but until recently impartial and objective works on the topic were limited. Following the publication of Edward Said’s Orientalism, a trend of critical works toward Orientalism and the Western discourse on women of Muslim societies appeared. Scholars like Mohja Kalf, Ra’na Kábbani, Malek Alloula, and Sara Graham scrutinized different genres of Western writing, including travel accounts, literary works, official documents and Orientalist works. These studies reveal that the status of women in Muslim societies have been “the subject of images, generalization and romantic tales”.\(^{43}\)

\(^{41}\) Cooke, Women Claim Islam, 81.
\(^{42}\) For example: The Veil and the Male Elite by Mernissi was translated into Persian, but the book was banned in some countries and the translator was put on trial.
\(^{43}\) Esposito, Islam, xi.
These studies demonstrate that in the dominant, Western discourse women of Muslim societies have always been depicted as a homogenous group: static, a-historical, and victimized. Following Said’s notion of hegemony and power-knowledge relation theory (which he had developed from the work of Gramsci and Foucault), these scholars stress the power of knowledge in constructions of “truth” about Others. They argue that in the dominant, Western discourse, the position of women in the Muslim-majority countries has been used as representing an ontological difference between the culture and societies of East and West, and always highlighted Islam as the main cause of women’s oppression.  

Along with the critique of the Western dominant discourse, the hegemony of Western knowledge has been the concern of critics and scholars in the field. Since the 1980s, a series of challenges were launched against the hegemony of white, Euro-American perspectives in Western scholarship on women of the Middle East and Muslim societies. For example, during the annual convention of the Middle East Studies Association of 1988, critical views were presented by Arab scholars on this point, while in the same year the critical work of Altorki and El-Solh was published, in which white privileges in the field of Arab women studies were discussed. As the hegemony of Western knowledge continued, challenges also continued. During the annual meeting of the Middle East Association in 1997, scholars from Arab countries complained that their projects were inevitably controlled and evaluated by Western constructions and interventions.

Deniz Kandiyoti, in the introduction to her edited work, Engendering Middle East Studies, states that the field of Middle East gender studies has been negatively affected by the Orientalist tradition. She, like other critics, emphasizes the fact that the works of binary thinking of many scholars in this field are limited in terms of social analyses and demonstrating the internal heterogeneity of the Middle East.

These limitations and problematic scholarly trends in the field of Middle East Studies and Muslim women’s studies influence feminist scholarship on the topic of Islamic feminism. Apart from some individual scholars (some of whom I have cited this article), overall, Islamic feminism is situated on the periphery of feminist scholarship in the West. There is some evidence that indicates this peripheral situation, including the lack of academic courses on this subject in women studies and Middle East Studies’ faculties in Europe and America. Further evidence is the limited number of articles on this topic in the Journal of Middle Eastern Women’s Studies during its five years of publication and the almost absence of this topic at many seminars and conferences on women in Islam.

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44 See Alloula, The Colonial Harem; Kabbani, Europe’s Myths of Orient.
45 Altorki and El-Solh, Arab Women in the Field.
46 Kandiyoti, Engendering Middle East Studies.
Surprisingly, this silence is in spite of an increasing public concern and intensified academic interest, as in the past, about the whole subject of gender in Islam.

This silence is partly due to old stereotypes and assertions on gender in Islam, such as Islam being the main oppressor of women, ignoring many studies in recent years about various important factors in gender inequality in the Muslim-majority countries. It is also rooted in the West-East paradigm, and reminds of the old conjecture that feminism originated only in the West, and insists that feminism and Islam is an oxymoron. This outlook encompasses an over-simplification of the religion, history and diversity of cultures of the region. Edward Said, in *The World, the Text*, talks about the travelling of ideas. He states: “Like people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another”.47 Reviewing the Western discourse since the 19th century on the position of women in Muslim societies is a good example of the travelling ideas, paradigms and assumptions among Orientalists, literati, politicians, social scientists and historians. In fact, the journey of ideas about gender in Islam and Islamic feminism is both historical and geographical and is happening across a variety of individuals and groups.

This presumption that feminism and Islam is an oxymoron is not restricted to the West, but because of the hegemony of Western knowledge and the travelling of ideas, it has become a universal assumption, in both local Muslim societies and the West. Haideh Moghissi, Shahrzad Mojab and Hammed Shahidin, Iranian scholars with deep roots in left-wing politics and in the women’s movement, are among those who follow this line of thinking. They worry that the influence of Said’s *Orientalism* and post-colonial and post-modernism approaches might diverge Islamic feminists from challenging local religious and political forces, believing rather in the opposition between Islam and feminism.48

**Conclusion**

Islamic feminists, representing multiple discourses and a wide range of standpoints, address diverse audiences and challenge various local and global systems of thoughts. On the one hand they seek to deconstruct the deep roots of assumptions and stereotypes in the dominant, Western discourse and on the other hand, have to be engaged critically with Western secular, feminist scholars and activists. On a local level, they have to challenge internal forces including the political establishment and religious authorities, and lastly they have to converse with secular, left-wing anti-Islamic feminists.

The novelty of Islamic feminism lies not only in its new path, new messages, and giving voice to forgotten and misrepresented subjects in history, but also in reviving the latent dynamic scientific methods in Islamic classic scholarship and

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48 Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*. 
enriching hermeneutic theories. In other words, its scholarship is moving toward epistemological transformation.

This movement, by rethinking and redefining old conventional methods and challenging common assumptions, conveys heterogeneity of feminist thinking and demarginalises Muslim women’s agency. This demarginalisation would, as Cook declares, “strengthen those moving in from the margins, even as it threatens others previously located closer to the centre of the knowledge-producing industry.”

Overall, Islamic feminism is not a product of the East or West, but it is the result of the contribution of scholars in both the East and West. In other words, scholars in both Western and Muslim countries have participated in developing liberatory and egalitarian readings of the Islamic texts for the purpose of improving women’s status. While it keeps its cultural identity, it enriches its intellectual project by employing scholarly works, theories and feminist experienced from all countries, including those in the West. While it deconstructs official Islamic discourse, it also develops the dynamic potentialities of Islamic scholarship. In fact, the nature of the movement, as both locally specific and international, has expanded its horizons and enhanced its possibilities and potentialities.

In short, Islamic feminism, by rereading the Qur’anic texts, by bringing to surface women’s agency, by using local and contextual strategies and by connecting with the wider, global network of knowledge, has brought the feminist movement of this region to a new phase. Although this movement is situated on the periphery of Western discourse, it is a global, growing movement, which in fact moves beyond the binary paradigm of West versus Islam. In other words, while Islamic feminists produce their own knowledge and own discourse, they emphasize a humanity with no borders at the same time.

Above all, the general approach of Islamic feminism to history, society and religion is not limited to the feminist movement; it can be employed in other movements and will impact all components of social change. In other words, this movement, as an agent of change, is moving toward transforming these societies as a whole. All these elements in this emancipatory trend have given the movement impetus to grow exponentially, even though it has remained on the periphery of Western feminist scholarship for too long.

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49 Cooke, Women Claim Islam, 150.
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Nordic Girlhood Studies: Do We Need to Get over the Pippi Longstocking Complex?
Mia Österlund

Introduction
The Pippi Longstocking ideal has been and still is conspicuously strong among Nordic girls. The ideal consists of an imagery of the strong heroine, who, driven by her agency, creates her own life by herself, just as she wants it to be. This article presents and discusses Nordic girlhood studies with special attention to the distinctive Pippi feminism common in Nordic countries and mediated through children’s literature.

The Pippi feminist is a loner. Oinas and Collander, who study health promotion in feminist girls’ groups in Finland aimed at strengthening girls during their teens, suggest that this Pippi ideal is dangerous and harmful for the girls’ self-esteem and emancipation, since it leaves the girl with a feeling of an individual responsibility which limits her psychologically and places the individual girl in a ‘blame yourself’ trap.\(^1\) The Pippi ideal builds on an individual-based agency feminism and overshadows the parallel paradigm of performative gender which underlines structural patterns and collective agency.\(^2\) In Finland this burden of the solitary agency, the Pippi Longstocking complex, has led to a lack of a societal discussion on girlhood as a structural and collective experience. The Pippi ideal thus threatens to overshadow collective agency and analysis of structural repression.

But is Pippi really as dangerous and deceptive as Oinas and Collander suppose? The strength of girlhood studies is evident precisely since the focus on girls and girlhood enables questioning of normalised paradigms such as the Pippi ideal, as Oinas and Collander does. When Astrid Lindgren published *Pippi Longstocking* in 1945 it was immediately considered as being a bad influence on child readers.\(^3\) The initial version of Pippi was turned down by one publishing house and a revised version was published later on.\(^4\) Pippi was obviously too much of a norm-breaking girl during her time, and, as a matter of fact, she still is, both in the Nordic countries and world-wide.\(^5\) The Pippi Longstocking books have

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2. Ibid., 277.
5. Lundqvist, "Original-Pippi Var för Vild för Sin Tid."
challenged girlhood prominently. Children’s literature as a category has had an undisputable impact on generations of readers. With Pippi it certainly has made its imprint on both societal debates and discussions on feminisms. Over the years Pippi has been much debated as a girlhood prototype. Pippi has been called “a super child, an alpha girl, a power princess, a witch, a punker, a feminist icon, a crossover-figure”. Since the Pippi Longstocking books were first published in the 1940s Pippi has, as many of her literary comrades, outgrown the context of her fictive surroundings and become the iconic meeting place for an emancipatory imperative of the Nordic countries. Each country has its own version of Pippi, modified by translations in accordance with prevailing norms for childhood and girlhood. Pippi has become the paradigm for the emancipated girl, but at the same time this focus on a lonely, rich, super strong girl has overshadowed a variety of girlhoods less provocative but possibly as emancipated as the Pippi figure. Yet this phase has been crucial in the development of girlhood and also in the theorizing of girlhood. Oinas and Collander thus raise an important question, but this does not mean that we should ban Pippi books due to their dangerous potential. A sensitive reading of the Pippi character can trace other supplementing traits in her: she acts very caring towards her friends, thus integrating strength and independency with caretaking. Pippi is das fremde Kind per se; she is a catalyst figure who brings estrangement to traditional values. And, moreover, Pippi is such a rich and intriguing character that she will continue to provide inspiration for generations of girls to come. For instance the bestseller Millennium crime books by Stieg Larsson uses Pippi as intertext in the creation of the heroine Lisbeth Salander, who performs an extreme, individual war against male perpetrators as a comment on the Pippi ideal.

Nordic girlhood studies
The challenge for Nordic girlhood studies, which is an interdisciplinary field where social sciences and the humanities merge, is, among other tasks, to overcome and nuance the common Pippi Longstocking complex of a strong individual as discussed above. The international and interdisciplinary network Flickforsk!, based in Sweden, and the national equivalent Tyttötutkimusverkosto, based in Finland were both established around 2007, gathering researchers with an interest in studying girls and girlhood. Nordic girlhood studies have one thing in common; they all take a feminist standpoint and use constructivist theories in contrast to research on girls and girlhood that merely examines girls without this theoretical framework. The research area intersects with youth studies, childhood studies and women’s studies. Key concepts of Nordic girlhood studies are power, agency, change and difference. The field of girlhood studies is

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6 Söderberg, “‘Lillasyster Ser Dig!’”.
7 Österlund, “Långstrumpan Var Århundradets Maktflicka.”
8 Surmatz, Pippi Långstrump als Paradigma.
9 Söderberg, “‘Lillasyster Ser Dig!’”. 
becoming more established, as the North American journal *Girlhood Studies. An Interdisciplinary Journal*, founded in 2008 and bringing together researchers world-wide, demonstrates. In Finland this research field had its small-scale breakthrough already in the 1980s but it is only now that a more structured study of girlhood has been possible thanks to predecessors such as Sari Näre and Jaana Lähteenmaa or Sanna Aaltonen and Päivi Honkatukia who have provided groundbreaking studies and raised crucial questions on girls and girlhood in their co-edited volumes.

The new Nordic networks begun by producing textbooks collecting knowledge from earlier studies of girlhood and bringing the field together, contextualising concepts and mapping paradigms in the research of girlhood in different areas such as literature, art, medical history, history, sociology, folkloristics, etc. A critical discussion of girlhood studies has also arisen, questioning the fundamentals of this research field. Duits and Van Zoonen stress the risk of ignoring more than 30 years of research on girlhood when claiming that the field is ‘new’. They also question the way in which girls have been represented as vulnerable and endangered by girlhood studies. The risk within girlhood studies is a tendency to focus on minority, shocking, or transgressive aspects of girls’ culture, thus under-theorizing girls’ everyday lives. It is true that studies of girls and girlhood have existed for three decades, but it has been scattered within a plethora of different disciplines. The creation of a separate research domain should therefore build on earlier efforts, learn lessons from methodologies of earlier girlhood studies and strive to re-imagine girlhood studies as an interdisciplinary productive field.

Different aspects of the Nordic welfare system have dominated societal institutions as well as academic disciplines for a long time in the Nordic countries and have thereby been reflected in normative formations of girlhood. In a time characterized by post-industrialization and globalization the Nordic-welfare system has been challenged and in many ways disintegrated, even if it is still present as a strong discursive formation, central to the Nordic self-image and as subject matter for academic research. Nordic girlhood studies investigate how these changes are reflected in the situation of girls and how they transform girlhood. For example, one point of interest is how girls challenge the institution of Pippi feminism by raising relevant questions about how this dominant paradigm has produced Nordic feminism. Nordic girlhood is thus performed in relation to varying contexts such as new gender politics and shifts in societal expectations on girls. Changing discourses on gender as well as on childhood are exemplified in girlhood studies.

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11 Frih and Söderberg, *En Bok Om Flickor Och Flickforskning*; Ojanen, Mulari, and Aaltonen, *Entäs Tytöt*.
12 Duits and Van Zoonen, “Against Amnesia.”
13 Ojanen, “Tyttötutkimuksen Tytöt.”
Girlhood

Recent studies of girlhood are influenced by post-structural theory and therefore considers girlhood as a performative negotiating and as a fluid, context-bound process. Girlhood is seen as part of a girl matrix at work in relation to material factors.¹⁴ This perspective theorizes girlhood on several levels: the individual, the collective and the structural. This suggests that girlhood is to be seen as a continuum of negotiations. Girlhood studies focus on underlying the importance of gender in categories such as youth and childhood. It includes critical studies of boyhood, especially in relation to the construction of girlhood. Boyhood studies have also emerged as a separate research field. The journal *Thymos. Journal of Boyhood Studies* was established in 2007. Girlhood studies examines expectations of girls and what content is connected to girlhood in different contexts and how the cultural concept of girl functions and also how girls’ agency fit into the gender power structure as cultural representations. Nowadays, girlhood is not interesting merely as a state of growing and maturing, but in itself as performing girlhood through everyday practices. Girls are usually marginalized in relation to the gendered power hierarchy. Therefore girlhood cultures include counter practices which highlight these mainstream power structures. Girlhood studies in different fields can show how structures, norms and cultural concepts work by discussing girls and girlhood on these different levels.

Girlhood studies also focus on differences within and among girls. In this perspective Nordic girlhood studies build on impulses from Anglo-American research which are applied and modified within the Nordic context, showing differences in attitude, upbringing, societal norms, rules and possibilities for girls in the Nordic countries.¹⁵ Thus girlhood is historicized and contextualized, but also examined in relation to debates and paradigms relevant in Nordic countries. For example the discussion on otherness, whiteness and intersectionality is quite specific in the Nordic context.¹⁶ The common image of the Nordic countries in international relations, as open minded towards development aid, peace building, focusing on cooperation rather than on colonialism and imperialism, can in fact be challenged. The Nordic countries are not hegemonic either; differences between Finland and Sweden are considerable, despite the long common history and similarities in legislation and societal structures. Finland, for example, is to a larger extent marked by war, and the countries have different urbanization and migration histories. All these factors are also mirrored in how girlhood is constructed at a specific historical moment. An intersectional analysis or an understanding of a girl’s place in culture and society is also defined by other entities than gender. This view has enriched research on girlhood and has led to research where gender is explored as interconnected with class, sexuality and

¹⁴ Österlund, *Förklädda Flickor*.
¹⁵ Oinas, *Making Sense of the Teenage Body*.
¹⁶ Keskinen et al., *Complying with Colonialism*. 
Alongside the white, middleclass, heterosexual Nordic girl other types of girls such as coloured, working class, and homosexual have been taken into consideration, thus widening the scope of girlhood studies. For example Mari Käyhkö discusses working class and ethnicity in an ethnographical study of girl cleaners, while Mia Franck, Marjo Laukkanen and Jukka Lehtonen all include sexuality in their research on Young Adult Fiction, internet communities and coming-out practices.

The most striking difference between Nordic feminisms and Western feminisms lies in the Nordic gender discourse where liberty and welfare are key concepts. During the 20th century all Nordic countries applied the Nordic welfare model and despite of globalization and networking on European level the model is still the number one trademark of the Nordic countries. There are vast differences in welfare between eastern Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland) and western Nordic countries (Iceland, Greenland and the Faeroe Islands), but the image of a homogeneous Nordic welfare system is nonetheless very vigorous. The Nordic welfare model constitutes strong civil guaranteed, social security, equal opportunities, democracy, cultural and sociopolitical equality as overarching ideals. Nowhere else in the world is such a welfare ideal as far-reaching as in the Nordic countries. On the one hand this results in a high level of taxes; on the other hand the social security system is advanced and generous. The Nordic region is also labeled by highly developed social capital; Nordic citizens trust their fellow humans and societal institutions more than anywhere else in the world.

Recent changes in demography and world economics have weakened the welfare model, but it still plays a strong ideological role in Nordic countries. High welfare, good health conditions, high life expectancy, high educational level and high technological standards also are important indications for women’s and girls’ lives. Dismantling of the Nordic welfare model has taken place over the last twenty years, but women still benefit from individual social security, day care and individual taxation, adding up to circumstances benefitting girls’ agency in the long run.

Conclusion
Nordic research on girlhood is in the periphery of Western feminism, and thus not visible in the ‘Western’ English discourse on childhood studies. In Finland, research written in Finnish is also more isolated than research written in the second national language Swedish, which is available to other Nordic countries since Swedish is part of the Nordic language family and Finnish is not. Although

17 Ambjörnsson, I en klass för sig.
18 Käyhkö, Siivojaksi Oppimassa; Franck, Frigjord Oskuld; Laukkanen, Sähköinen Seksuaalisuus; Lehtonen, “Kaapissa Avoimesti Ja Piilossa Julkisesti.”
20 Sundelius and Wicklund, Norden i Sicksack.
Peripheral Feminisms

Finnish researchers write in English as well, the interest in this peripheral feminism is low, except as topic within the studies on the Nordic countries as a welfare dilemma. A broader scope within Girlhood studies, where peripheral feminisms are included in the development of theoretical tools will broaden the field and perhaps help finding blind spots within a more hegemonic tradition.

With the help of Pippi Longstocking, Nordic gender equality has already come a long way. Still, and this is even truer today when the welfare state is shaken by economic crisis and political agendas circumscribe girls’ agency, studies of girlhood and new methodologies for girlhood studies are much needed. Pippi Longstocking has made an enormous footprint – not the least in fiction –, creating tension in the depiction of girls’ negotiations of different ways of being a girl, but also in the lives of girls reading Pippi books and consuming Pippi ideals mediated through Pippi merchandise. In this sense Nordic girlhood studies have much to offer. An obvious strength is the interdisciplinary grip on the field; one is able to interpret Pippi ideals from multiple, preferably historicized and contextualized perspectives. Another aspect is to meet the need for a renewed theorizing of a category which for a long time has been under-theorized, marginalized and scattered in separate disciplines. Nordic girlhood studies can consider the importance and implications of Nordic Pippi feminism so vividly present in girls’ everyday lives in the Nordic countries and at the same time question the Pippi Longstocking complex of the Nordic countries as a welfare dilemma. Pippi Longstocking is a fine example of how a peripheral feminism can work its way through different historical and geographical contexts and shed light on key questions within feminism.
Bibliography


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The term ‘gender’ denotes the meaning cultures ascribe to the difference between the sexes. The meaning of the concepts of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ varies from culture to culture, and from period to period. The Arts Faculty-based disciplines focus on how these meanings are created, in word and in image. This question guides both education and research of the Centre for Gender studies of the Faculty of Arts (CGS). A number of departments participate in the CGS: Arts, Culture and Media Studies, Communication and Information Studies, Dutch, English, Finno-Ugrian Languages and Cultures, History, International Organisations and Relations, and Roman, Scandinavian and Slavic Languages and Cultures. Research on gender is embedded within the research institutes of the Faculty of Arts, such as the Institute for Cultural Studies (ICOG) and the Center for Language and Cognition (CLCG).
More information on: www.rug.nl/let/genderstudies.

Euroculture
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The cooperation with the University of Groningen Gender Studies programme has been one event in the research framework of the programme. Apart from facilitating regular staff-exchanges within this network for research and teaching purposes, this framework also hosts the annual Euroculture research conference. These conferences on relevant Euroculture topics were initiated in Groningen in 2010, with a conference on the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the Euroculture programme. This conference was followed by one hosted in Göttingen in 2011 on the topic of transculturalism. In 2012 the Euroculture conference was held in Bilbao on the topic of cultural citizenship. A selection of conference papers of the first two conferences have been published under the title: Europe: space for transcultural existence? (Edited by M. Tamcke, J. de Jong, L. Klein and M. van der Waal, Göttingen University Press, forthcoming). A follow-up publication of a selection

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