Steadying the Tectonic Plates: On Being Muslim, Feminist Academic, and Family Therapist

This chapter offers the reader multiple 'mini-narratives' and defines Islamic feminism and postmodernism which provide the base for the feminist praxis. It weaves between and across the postcolonial and white western feminist constructions of "Muslim women" who have developed a feminism within the context of Islamic tradition and are continuously translating their ideas for change into practice.

Daneshpour, M (2009). Steadying the Tectonic Plates: On Being Muslim, Feminist Academic, and Family Therapist. In Allen, K, Few, A. & Lloyd, S. Handbook of Feminist family Studies (PP. 340-351). Sage Publications, Inc.

My Story

My country is Iran. I was twenty-one years old and newly married to my twenty-three year-old spouse when we immigrated together to America to pursue our educational and professional expeditions. Although my spouse and I were both born in Muslim families, our perspectives about organized religion differ significantly. He claims not to be religious while I passionately claim to be a devout Muslim. Our ardent, yet respectful differences take root in my choice to wear *hijab* (Islamic head cover) which puts me in a rather unconventional position in both my personal and professional life. While in the Western world, the *hijab* has come to symbolize either forced silence or radical unconscionable militancy, I choose to wear it to simply obey God and also to represent myself as an example of modesty and as a sanctuary to female independence. Yet in my personal life, my spouse does not support my choice to wear the hijab for a number of reasons—which have nothing to with my feminist values or independence. As a veiled image by his side walking the streets of America, it is difficult for him to ignore stares rooted in the common "perception" that he is yet another Middle Eastern oppressive male who demands his wife to be completely covered. His frustration is complicated but his dilemma is simple. He feels that my decision to wear *hijab* puts him in the position of "perceived oppressor" by *default* and thus he adamantly insists that I explain to everyone that the choice to wear it is one that is uniquely my own. I often explain my religious identity and how it is my own choice to wear *hijab* when we meet a new person.

My professional life follows much in the same suit. As a Professor and a marriage and family therapist, I am greeted with curious looks from students, clients, and professionals when I walk in to a classroom for the first time, enter the lobby to greet a client, or when I present at a conference. To put people at ease, I begin with an introduction to my faith and *hijab*, welcome

and solicit questions, especially those that are politically incorrect, for conforming to political correctness would inevitably make people walk away with more stereotypes than those they held before approaching me. Only when these formalities are over do I talk about my professional training and experiences. When I emphasize that my *hijab* represents my hard-core feminist ideology, some people claim to have a deeper understanding regarding Muslim women's status, choices, and within-group diversity. Some others believe that my work in academia in the U.S. while holding on to my Islamic and professional identity proposes an unexpected, different kind of intellectual and personal freedom.

In my experience, both my feminist and religious ideologies are constantly being challenged and questioned. It is thus that I find myself on the surface of two tectonic plates in motion: my feminist values and my religious beliefs. If I defend my Islamic identity, my feminist values are questioned and if I defend my feminist identity, my Islamic beliefs are challenged. These clashing plates are what form the multilayered complexity of the identity experienced by Muslim women like me—a complexity that not only is the cause for the frictions that consistently place the likes of us between a rock and a hard place but also threatens to quake what inherently makes us who we are.

Third wave feminism rightfully rejects the essentialized category "woman" (DeReus, Few, & Blume, 2004), I am consciously choosing to discuss "us" or "Muslim women" as a group. This choice is based on the belief that while there are significant group and individual differences that distinguish Muslim women from each other such as class, ethnicity, and region, there are some shared experiences that should not be ignored in cross-cultural understanding of this group. A contemplation of the complexity and similarities of these shared experiences in turn, will hopefully lead to more enhanced awareness of Muslim women's struggles without

adopting a stereotypic approach. I do realize that generalization may be one of the inevitable costs of discussing group characteristics or even of conceptualizing several observations within one concept. However, I believe discussing "Muslim women's" experiences collectively will be the first critical step to get to know their experiences individually.

Further, I believe that since we are acting out of some theoretical position(s) at all times and theory and practice are always praxis, as a feminist family scholar I strive to do the kind of research that can affect Muslim women's lived experiences and generate change in their lives. My Muslim feminist praxis includes disseminating knowledge to different audiences by writing articles, presenting at workshops, and/or providing therapy that fosters behavioral and emotional change. In addition, I believe that I do praxis by offering perspectives about the impact of colonization and Western hegemony on Muslim women, explaining Islamic perspectives about women's rights, describing Muslim women experiences in their relationships, and speaking on behalf of Muslim women who do not have a very strong voice in the West.

Throughout this chapter, I offer the reader multiple 'mini-narratives' about my praxis in the family therapy field as a scholar, teacher, therapist, Iranian, woman, and researcher. My first narrative defines Islamic feminism and postmodernism which provide the base for my feminist praxis. My second narrative weaves between and across my understanding of the postcolonial and white western feminist constructions of "Muslim women." I share some of my own experiences as a Muslim woman dealing with these constructions. The final narrative is my own reflection on my ongoing praxis as a Muslim feminist researcher and family therapist. I end the paper with the conclusion that because in every group, in every place and at every time, the meaning of 'feminism' is worked out in the course of being and doing. Muslim women like me who are confronted by dilemmas imposed by colonialism, White Western feminism, and Islamic

fundamentalism have developed a feminism within the context of Islamic tradition and we are continuously translating our ideas for change into practice while struggling to steady ourselves on the tectonic plates.

Islamic Feminism Defined

Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. It derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence (Badran, 2002). I base my Islamic feminist perspective on three essential principles. First, Islamic principles and perspectives are important in my daily life. I practice my religion closely. I value all of my connections to my family, and I believe women contribute a great deal to their societies as mothers. Second, the theoretical foundation of Islamic feminism continues to be grounded in Qur'anic interpretation of gender equality. Therefore, as a devout Muslim I am deeply troubled by inequalities and injustices perpetrated in the name of my religion by patriarchal ideas (ideology) and practices.

Islamic jurisprudence, *fiqh*, consolidated in its classical form in the Ninth Century, was itself heavily saturated with the patriarchal thinking and behaviors of the day (Haifa, 1996; Hassan, 1999). It is this patriarchically-inflected jurisprudence that has informed the various contemporary formulations of the Shari'a (Islamic Law) (Haifa). The *hadith*, the reported, but not always authentic, sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohamed, have also been often used to support patriarchal ideas and practices (Badran, 2002). Sometimes the *hadiths*, as just suggested, are of questionable provenance or reliability, and sometimes they are used out of context (Badran). Finally, I connect strongly with the feminist hermeneutics that has revisited *verses* of the Qur'an to correct false stories in common circulation, citing *verses* that unequivocally enunciate the equality of women and men while deconstructing *verses* attentive to male and

female difference that have been commonly interpreted in ways that justify male domination (Abou Bakr, 1999; Al Faruqi, 2005; Hassan).

Until recently, because of a pervasive sexist and oppressive presentation of women in Islam, Muslim women often felt the only way to be liberated intellectually, socially, politically and economically was by abandoning Islam. They felt that Islamic Shari'a restricts women's activities and limits their decision making power. Therefore, Muslim feminism was viewed as an oxymoron and a contradiction in terms (Ahmed, 1992; Mernissi, 1987; Moghissi, 1999). However, postmodernism, which like feminism is a western model, created a space for Muslim women to embrace these contradictions and complexities. It allowed us to envision non-dichotomous possibilities, challenge cultural constructions of sex and gender, and gave us permission to reclaim and redefine Islam. I believe postmodernism can allow Muslim feminists to reject grand narratives and favor "mini-narratives," stories that deconstruct our experiences with men, family and society. Postmodern "mini-narratives" became situational, provisional, contingent, and temporary, without making any claim to universality, truth, reason, or stability. Postmodernism challenged the static interpretation of Islam by Islamic scholars who have always claimed with certainty that their interpretations of the Islamic texts and *hadiths* were universal, reasonable, stable, and were based on the absolute truth. The work of Muslim women as they struggle for equality, as well as the activism and writing of Islamic feminist scholars, serve as key examples of such situated 'mini-narratives' reinterpreting the Islamic ideology.

Muslim feminists review Islamic history from an egalitarian perspective, recall contributions of Muslim women over the centuries, critique current practices, texts, and laws from an Islamic point of view. Consequently, there appears to be a growing movement of Muslim feminists using postmodernism to demand that the rights guaranteed by Islam must be

applied in their communities (Moghaddam, 2000). In addition, women are joining the ranks of Islamic religious scholars in Islamic seminaries, thus providing alternative points of view to what has heretofore been addressed by men.

Western Colonialist Constructions of "Muslim Women"

The dawn of the Nineteenth Century marked the commencement of an era of worldwide social change that has continued to challenge the religious and social basis of all societies to this day. European colonial powers formed the political and economic ideological framework that was to influence the Islamic world. The gradual emergence of the global economy and the political superiority of the West dictated a global trend that was not easy for non-Western nations to avoid. These changes have invariably been multidimensional in nature--from the emergence of territorial states in the Middle East in their current format to educational reforms. One of the areas to undergo a radical transformation in the Islamic world has been relations between the sexes. Muslim women searched for their identity and place in the new world at the same time that Islamic scholars viewed female sexuality as a potent and aggressive force with the potential for provoking social chaos. Many secular feminists claim that this rigid Islamic interpretation has been the reason for practices which have traditionally symbolized women's relegation to the private sphere like veiling, seclusion, and social resistance to welcoming women to the university and the work place (Mernissi, 1987; Ahmed, 1992; Moghisi, 1999). Modernity, imposed by colonialists was perceived as a threat by hegemonic Muslim (male) interests because it was a force attempting to renegotiate spatial (public/private) boundaries.

It is not surprising then, that Western colonizers used the role and status of the Muslim woman in Islamic societies to achieve one of their many imperialistic goals. The classic example of such a colonizer was Lord Cromer, British Consul General in Egypt from 1883 to 1907.

Cromer was convinced of the inferiority of Islamic religion and society but his criticism was the loudest on the subject of how Islam treated women (Ahmed, 1992). Lord Cromer declared that it was Islam's degradation of women, its insistence on veiling and seclusion, which was the "fatal obstacle" to the Egyptian's "attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilization"(Moghissi, 1999, p. 37). The Egyptians should be "persuaded or forced" to become "civilized" by disposing of the veil (Moghissi). Thus, “unveiling women became a stick with which the West could beat the East “(Malti-Dauglas, 1991, p.174). The Muslim woman was to be exploited by the Western man but protected from enslavement by the Muslim man. She was to be liberated from her own ignorance and her culture’s cruelty (Moghissi). Hiding women from the gaze of the Western viewer and guarding women’s bodies and their minds from changes produced by foreign intervention symbolized protection of Islamic identity, communal dignity, and social and cultural continuity (Moghissi). This is to say that perhaps the resistance of Islamic societies to alter their perceptions about women’s status was the reaction of a culture that had been stereotyped and made to feel inferior for its treatment of women. Hence, in this view, “it was colonialism which made the Muslim woman and her rights central to its imperial policy in the Middle East” (Moghissi p. 39) and it was Islamic fundamentalism which continued to embrace women’s subjugated status. For instance, Moghissi argues:

> In the end, ironically, Islamic fundamentalism, by embracing the female body as the symbolic representation of communal dignity, and by drawing only on the Qur’an and orthodox texts to explain, as divine, the historically developed subjugation of women in Islamic societies, recycle the totalizing colonial conception of Islam and women’s rights as a static, unchanging and unchangeable

> order. As with other forms of extremism, the two opposing poles end up on the same side on certain important issues. By manipulating the female body as a playing card in oppositional politics, fundamentalists, in fact, embrace, however unsought and uncomfortable, the views of the Western colonizer. (Moghissi p. 30)

This discourse about the equivalency of being veiled and oppressed and about the urgency of emancipating the claustrophobic heads of Muslim women from their burdening fabric, continue to be part of many major debates. In my doctoral program, there seemed to be lots of confusion and some discussion among faculty, staff and students about my Islamic ideology and *hijab.* Thus, I offered to do a presentation to explain my ideology, Islamic perspectives, and the reason behind my choice to wear *hijab* despite the fact that I was an educated woman living in a Western society. This whole idea was extremely intimidating and uncomfortable, but it became exceptionally librating to actually explain my choice to wear *hijab* as a Muslim feminist. It gave me an opportunity to discuss how both Islamic and Western cultures have oppressed Muslim women in the process of either protecting or librating them. I explained that Muslim women believe that God gave beauty to all women. When she covers herself she puts herself on a higher level and men will look at her with respect. She is noticed for her intellect, faith, and personality, not only for her beauty. I talked about how chastity, modesty, and piety are promoted by the institution of veiling and the fact that *hijab* in no way prevents a woman from playing her role as an important individual in a society nor does it make her inferior. It was important to me to discuss the fact that in this present period of decline from true Islamic principles, many Muslim women are alienated, isolated from social life, and are oppressed by Muslim men and rulers who use religion for their injustices. In this instance, the *hijab* has been used to isolate women and weaken their status. But as many Muslim women

study Islam and understand the Islamic ideology which is based on gender equality, they come to recognize that they have the same dignity, honor, progress and prosperity as men. I then talked about how I am reclaiming my true identity and role in society by wearing the *hijab*, I am embracing its concept of liberation for women and taking my rightful place that Islam had endowed upon me fourteen hundred years ago. This conversation became the base for many other good discussions among my classmates and professors. This was indeed my first attempt as an activist to translate my postmodernist Muslim feminist ideology into practice.

White Western Feminist Constructions of "Muslim Women"

White western feminist discourse about women of the third world is not exempt from charges of universalism, colonialism, and misunderstanding third world women's experiences because it removes the cultural differences that distinguish us from each other (Aguilar, 1997; Mohanty, 1995; Sandoval, 2000). It constructs all of us third world women, regardless of our ethnic origin, as a collective "us" versus the White Western women's "them" (Mohanty). "Wow, I didn't know Muslim women go to elementary school. What are you doing in a Ph.D. program?" This was the first conversation I had with my main advisor who claimed to be a feminist in my doctoral program. This interaction was not surprising because such a construction allowed her to have a "monolithic image of us third world woman as passive, powerless, backward, uneducated, [and] victimized, a construction that makes it easier for white western feminists to theorize 'us' in generic, exchangeable, and co-modified ways" (Mohanty, p. 44).

I was definitely a perplexing phenomenon in the eyes of my advisor from the first day we met. Her surprise that I was allowed past elementary, much less into post secondary education was a common theme in the department. The addition of a Muslim woman into the program was

somewhat shocking for everyone. My enthusiasm began to subside slowly as marriage and family therapy faculty explained that getting my doctorate in family studies was a better option than pursuing a clinical degree in marriage and family therapy. They explained that finding a placement for my clinical internship was going to be extremely difficult due to my unpronounceable foreign name, National Geographic appearance, and Middle Eastern accent. Indeed, my ability to provide quality individual, couple, and family therapy to American families was a concern to them, who imagined all the barriers working against me. Thus, in the years I spent earning this degree, I truly believe I worked harder than my fellow students. My accomplishments were not due to any kind of affirmative action nor were they a product of opportunities afforded for the sake of empowering a Muslim woman to acknowledge her own potentials. I felt alone, unsupported, and usually on the defense. It was not easy to prove myself in a world where the odds were always against me. It seemed to me that everyone was comfortable with their own conceptualization of who Muslim women are and I was throwing their perceptions out of balance. All the concerns about the status of women in the Middle East did not inspire anyone to give me an easier time or even believe in my abilities. I struggled in the middle of a paradoxical limbo between concerned professionals feeling sorry for my category of people while refusing to believe in my abilities to challenge the Muslim women's static and ahistorical image. This is what I and many other "third world" women find problematic in White Western feminist scholarship about Muslim women because it tends to constitute third world women as an ahistorical group undifferentiated by other factors such as class, ethnicity, and geographical location. Our identities are understood as constituted prior to our placement in a variety of social institutions, such as our families, rather than meaningful identities being produced through these institutional relations. Gender is thus taken to be the origin of

oppression, rather than oppression producing particular forms of gender. White Western feminists have used a model of subjectivity that does not allow for sufficient agency in any of us "third world women." All through my professional journey, I had the audacity to redefine the category in which White Western feminists or neocolonialists have created for me and placed me. By creating my own category and by defining my own box in which to sit, I tried to survive the learning curve of this ordeal.

Nevertheless, I have to admit that White Western feminist perception of Muslim women was not created in a vacuum. There has been a secular feminist movement in Muslim countries that emerged from third world women's own willing participation in being viewed as modern with all its colonial discourses and hegemonic First World formations. In their attempts to free themselves from the oppression placed on them by Islamic fundamentalists, secular third world feminists joined White Western feminists in describing the fellow veiled third world woman as having "needs" and "problems," with few if any having "choices" or the freedom to act (Mohanty, 1995, p 45). This participation wittingly or unwittingly led to the oppression and exploitation of many women who were struggling to deal with the contradictions of being placed between the imperialism of modernity and narrow-mindedness of tradition (Aguilar, 1997). In order to understand these contradictions, we have to analyze the way that a culture of modernity is produced in diverse locations and how these cultural productions are circulated, distributed, received, and even co-modified. There have also been dichotomies created by defining the basic concepts of what is modern only in contrast to what is traditional. As a result, many Muslim women's movements do not get acknowledged partly due to the tendency to judge modernity by sect, dress, or language. For example, a woman who is well-dressed in European modern clothes and tied to a consumer lifestyle while remaining subservient to her husband, is seen as modern

because of her knowledge of Western languages and her costume. On the other hand, her less-affluent counterpart who wears the traditional head cover, speaks only Arabic, works in the fields or factories, and who perhaps has joined an underground movement against the Israeli occupation with all her independence and political awareness, is considered backward because of her appearance, dress, and language. My postmodern Muslim feminist praxis is based on fighting against this definition of modernity that creates dichotomous and conventional view of Muslim women as being secluded, uneducated, and controlled if she chooses to wear *hijab*.

Postmodern Muslim Feminist Praxis

On Being an Academician

For many years now the majority of Muslim countries struggle to recover from the effects of colonialism. Many of our societies cry out for political and social change to establish a political system in which the supreme power lies in a body of citizens who can elect people to represent them and to get rid of pro-western and authoritarian governments and monarchies. However, any political initiatives such as electing government officials who are not pro-west, or moving toward economic self-sufficiency, based in Islamism or Socialism, are opposed by the West. Social initiatives from the West, feminism or liberalism, threaten the politics of the East and are in turn rejected by strict Muslim leaders, authoritarian governments and traditionalists. These battles, cultural and political, invariably end up impacting Muslim women and their status and rights. A good example is the Islamic revolution in Iran which overthrew the pro-western monarchy and created the professed Islamic republic. The new system was openly against westernization at the same time that it closed many doors to women by a political system with overly misogynous policies. Nevertheless, Iranian women using Islamic ideology made impressive progress in terms of relationship issues with men, social issues in their communities,

and political issues with the government but in the U.S. media, they were portrayed as being ineffective and powerless. My dissertation project was my attempt to actively challenge this notion by studying the relationship between stress and satisfaction in Iranian couples' relationship. My plan was to examine the contradictions and complexities of Iranian men and women lives. "It is like comparing apples and oranges!" This feedback I received from my dissertation committee and then the University Internal Review board when they reviewed my dissertation proposal. My plan was to use the Multisystem Assessment of Stress and Health (MASH) developed by Olson and Stewart (1991). This model focuses on stress, coping resources, and satisfaction of individuals at the personal, couple, family, and work level. My intention was to determine if this model could also predict the relationship between stress and satisfaction among Iranian couples by examining the impact of coping and systemic resources as mediating variables between stress and satisfaction.

My committee argued that Iranian couples do not experience equal partnerships in marriage and using terminologies like cohesion, flexibility, and communication may not even be relevant for Iranian couples due to their Islamic ideologies which constructed non-negotiable and extremely hierarchical marital relationships. Nevertheless, my data analysis revealed that stress has strong effects on adaptation and satisfaction at all four areas of life (i.e., personal, couple, family, and work) for both men and women. The findings also revealed that couple and family coping resources (problem solving and communication) and couple and family systems (cohesion and flexibility) were highly correlated for both men and women and Iranian men and women did not significantly differ with respect to personal issues or work stress. There were no significant gender effects for personal, couple, family, and work satisfaction, communication, problem solving, cohesion, or flexibility (Daneshpour, 2004). The same correlations existed

when the same model was used with women living in Norway (Piper, 1995) and the United States (Steward, 1998). To me, the findings indicated that Iranian women deal with the same relationship issues that are pertinent to western women. Iranian women do want and demand the same rights in their marital relationships despite the fact that they are Muslims and Islamic Shari'a tries to define their experiences in their marital relationship. When I presented the findings of this study in Iran, many women claimed that if other Iranian women have been successful in renegotiating hierarchies in their marital relationships, they are empowered to do the same thing. It also seemed to inspire many men to understand that relationship stress impacts every person in the relationship and a happy marriage brings satisfaction for both husband and wife.

The challenges and obstacles I faced during this entire process were so immense and the findings were so contrary to what was expected, that it changed my whole outlook on my professional aspirations subsequent to receiving my doctorate. Before finishing my degree, my plan was to return to Iran and with my family, start a career as a university professor teaching marriage and family therapy courses, and managing a small practice on the side. Instead, I decided that there are plenty of professional woman in Iran that can provide these services but that I needed to stay in the U.S. and try to decolonize people's preconceived notions about Muslim women and as a category of people. I had to represent other Muslim woman like myself who also have many personal stories, choices, and alternatives. My choice to stay portrayed my decision to create an alternate image than what has been painted on this side of the world of the veiled, downtrodden Muslim woman. I would use my postmodern Muslim feminist identity to try to break the stereotypes about Muslim women one idea and one person at a time. I was going to emphasize dialectics, margins, borders, and spaces in between that Islamic feminists and

activists like me have occupied for some time. I planned to reject grand narratives about Muslim woman in favor of mini-narratives, stories that explain small practices, local events, rather than large-scale universal or global concepts (Flax, 1990). The work of Muslim women like myself as we struggle for equality, as well as the activism and writing of Islamic feminist scholars, serve as key examples of such situated 'mini-narratives'.

Eventually, it became evident that living completely out of my own comfort zone in a country that is not very friendly to my kind was to be the norm of my everyday living. It seemed like my colleagues could write, show concerns, and be troubled about the status of women in the other part of the world but seeing one of these women step out of the literature pages they inked onto grounds where she can make a difference was a concept they found difficult to digest. Perhaps, my colleagues were continuing to use colonial discourses in order to equate the "colonized" with "me," creating essentialist and monolithic categories that suppress issues of diversity, conflict, and multiplicity within these categories (Grewal & Kaplan, 2002). Thus, once again, a postmodernist lens integrated with my Muslim feminist identity became an immensely powerful tool for my feminist praxis when I decided to publish an article pertaining to family therapy with Muslim families, highlighting women's rights in Islam. I believed that as a Muslim, it was my duty to draw attention to my insider's interpretation of the status of women in Islam so that family therapists could challenge the status quo in Muslim families. Initially, in 1996, I submitted this article to the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. After several reviewers criticized the article for being too optimistic and naïve about the status of women, the editorial board on the JMFT decided that although the article had no technical or methodological problems, the next editor should make the definitive decision. In 1998, Dr. Froma Walsh became the editor of the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. After living in Morocco for several

years, she recognized the issues discussed about women and Islam to be of importance and the article was published (Daneshpour, 1998). To date, this has been the only article in family therapy journals about therapists working with Muslim families.

Over the past twelve years, I have based my activism on the theoretical position that theory and practice are always praxis so my research interests and projects have primarily been grounded with my Islamic ideology and feminist theories. For example, based on my interest in gender dynamics, Islam, and women's issues, I noticed that while there were many articles dealing with the intricacy of Christian/Jewish marital union, there were none about Christian/Muslim couples' relationships. Therefore, I used my postmodernist Islamic feminist lens and wrote an article to encourage couples to reevaluate their relationships based on a better understanding of Islam and Christianity. Thus, in my study partners were asked to discuss their relational issues as well as their spiritual journey to understand one another's religions. The result of this qualitative study showed that since Islam and Islamic cultures were viewed negatively, partners in interfaith Christian/Muslim relationships who explored and co-defined the meaning of their cultural and religious identities were more satisfied with their marital relationships as opposed to those who did not explore these issues. I encouraged several Muslim women who were Christian converts and who were struggling to understand Islamic perspectives about women to read books and articles about Islamic feminism in order to have a better understanding of women's rights in Islam. The results also revealed that the exploration of each partner's worldview and cultural biases could assist the couple in understanding some of the reasons for their relational difficulties (Daneshpour, 2002).

As a feminist activist, I also volunteered to do a very controversial research project on the issue of gender and sexual abuse in Iran for the *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*

(Daneshpour, 2004). The topic was controversial because it attempted to challenge the notion that there is no sexual abuse of women and children in Islamic societies due to the combination of modesty and the segregation of sexes. This study summarized several unpublished and published studies which were done in Iran to reveal that in reality, incest, sexual abuse of women and children have a relatively high prevalence (Olyae-Zand, 2002; Ibrahimi-Ghavam, 1991). These articles used Islamic perspectives as the base to motivate lawmakers to find ways that the perpetrator could be punished and not be protected by misogynous laws. Another article attempted to provide clinical information to assist researchers, supervisors, educators, and practitioners using postmodernist and hermeneutics philosophies to understand contemporary Muslim couple's relationships and to challenge practitioners to rethink and reinterpret their own assumptions about Muslim women (Daneshpour, 2008).

I had to work hard to sell these unpopular new topics to my professional colleagues and deal with their skepticism based on their own biases about my kind. Nevertheless, my own postmodern feminist framework has only gained an audience with every successful step forward.

On Being a Family Therapist

For Muslim women living in the United States, negotiating identities across different cultural terrains became decidedly more challenging after the events of 9/11. Two days after the events of 9/11, my 56-year-old White male client said, "You should be detained and questioned by the FBI." I should not have been too surprised to hear this statement from him. He was among many of my clients who knew that I am from Iran and of my recent visit back home just two weeks before that historic day. To him, my visit back home automatically linked me to the attack. He truly believed that all Muslims should be questioned, including his supposedly friendly and effective therapist who was helping him with his chronic anxiety. A week later,

another White female client arrived wearing a T-shirt sporting Osama bin Laden's picture. Underneath it said, "Wanted: Dead not Alive." I couldn't help glancing at her T-shirt while escorting her to my office. Noticing my scrutiny, she covered it and said: "Oops, I am sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. You might actually admire the guy!" A year later, an upper class White woman who was *not* suffering from any kind of paranoia or delusional thinking proclaimed her belief that all Middle Eastern men, including my father and brothers, have definite plans to kill her son—an army commander in Iraq. Recently, a middle class white woman told me that she is highly skeptical about my ability to challenge her spouse in breaking the chain of a very painful hierarchical relationship because she assumed that I was not capable of recognizing my own "rights" as a Muslim woman.

Although these insensitive comments oftentimes came off harsh and offensive, I adamantly refused to take them personally as they led to open, yet painful conversations about Muslim women and Islam that would eventually lead to some understanding and tolerance. I could validate their preconceived notions. I had become a symbol for everything that most Americans wanted to hate and blame. Standing before them was a veiled Muslim woman explaining her Islamic heritage at the start of the evaluation session. How *could* she be anything but a fundamentalist and terrorist when her constant oppression and violation of rights would lead her be an enemy of freedom and democracy? Changing such perspectives, opening minds, and developing empathy and understanding toward Muslim women—all were the products of engaging my clients with such skewed imagery of Muslim women and the culture as a whole. It was such that over time, providing therapy became a form of feminist activism for me.

The majority of my clients are middle class White families and though it takes time for them to become comfortable with the idea of a veiled Muslim therapist, they are often amazed at

my ability to understand their pain and connect to their stories. With a foundation of trust, our connections based on my clinical skills becomes fruitful ground for some conversations regarding gender dynamics which keeps women in a subordinate position and discourages balanced family dynamics.

In my work with ethnic minorities—especially multicultural interfaith couples who tend to view the majority of their relationship difficulties as the consequence of either cultural or religion differences—I have been adamant to help them recognize that the main issue is the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the gender relations based on their culture or religion. As a consequence of this additional layer of consciousness that I carry with me to every session, my clinical work can become very exhausting and at times overwhelming. Whether I am providing therapy to upper, middle, or working class American couples or families, or working with traditional immigrant Muslim families, I have to reevaluate and redefine my Islamic principles. It is equally shocking to both my white American and immigrant Muslim families to hear my so-called radical ideas about gender relations in Islam. I have often told men and women from all different cultures that based on their socializations they are more alike than different. I share with them that while their mini-narratives are highly valued, they all are influenced by socialization processes more than the predetermined biological realities and it is simply important that they change their perspectives.

Conclusion

There is no question that the injustice against women in Islamic countries perpetrated by the system of patriarchal power is very real. There has been more than enough pious preaching about how Islam is great for women (in an ideal world), and not enough correcting of the injustices perpetrated on the ground. In the beginning, Islam was the most revolutionary

liberalization of women's rights the civilized world has ever seen. But now, centuries later, much of the Islamic world has lost touch with its cathartic roots and has harbored some of the worst current abuses of women's rights. Nevertheless, the colonial perception and conceptualization of Islam and Muslim women's rights as a static, unchanging and in fact, unchangeable, along with the White Western feminist monolithic image of Muslim women as a passive, powerless, backward, uneducated, and victimized, have simply been fuel to the fire of challenges that Muslim women face.

It is such that over time, Muslim women like myself have realized that we have been used by colonialists, misunderstood by post colonialists, undervalued by most Western feminists, and controlled by Islamic fundamentalists—all while we have been busy raising our families and contributing to our societies. In the 21st century, then, what has emerged is a global women's movement accented by a philosophy that draws on the feminist "classics" but that also reflects the social realities and concerns of women in various parts of the world (Mojab, 1999). We have come to understand that feminism is a theoretical perspective and a practice that criticizes social and gender inequalities, seeks to transform knowledge, and aims at women's empowerment. Fortunately, feminism has come to acknowledge that around the world women will pursue different strategies toward such empowerment and transformation (De Reus et all, 2004).

We have also come to realize that Muslim feminists have been inspired by third wave Western feminism and postmodernism and are attentive to feminist writings from the developing world (Moghaddam, 2000). Any reading of the women's press in Muslim countries reveals that women activists and scholars, including those who define themselves as Muslim, are aware of or familiar with postmodernism and international writings on feminism.

Thus, I have come to believe that women have always suffered the consequences of gender inequalities, and feminist politics are often shaped by specific historical, political, and cultural contexts. Therefore, if feminists should be defined by their praxis rather than by a strict ideology, then Muslim feminism seems to have prospered as one feminism among many (Moghaddam, 2000). However, we are still painfully situated in an awkward place between Islamic fundamentalists trying to control us and neo-colonial oppressors trying to emancipate us. We are struggling to stay connected to the "holy" sphere of family while latching on to the broader sphere of the professional life with all its contradictions and challenges.

As for my own personal and professional journey, for many years now, I have been indeed battling several different wars, and implementing many different strategies. As a family therapist and researcher, I have strived to seize both my feminist and religious identities while continuing to maintain deep connections to postmodernism and its anti-essentialist perspective as the base for my feminist praxis. I also feel responsible to use the therapy room to explore Muslim women's concerns and challenges and try to offer information about ways that they can use their religion to be empowered and change their destiny.

Over time, I have come to believe that Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse expressly articulated within an Islamic paradigm, behaviors, and activisms. It derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, and seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence. This belief has helped me untangle patriarchy and religion; it has also given me Islamic ways of understanding gender equality, societal opportunity, and how to hold on to my own potentials. Further, my exposure to Muslim women's writings and praxis has made me recognize how Islamic feminist discourse is equally relevant and highly active in my home

country and other predominantly Muslim countries. It has constituted a different statement of the views of people and their understanding of and attachment to their religion and culture by attempting an Islamic articulation of gender equality.

I am very encouraged that Muslim feminism has become acknowledged as a viable new option for change among all feminists. I anticipate that it may even become a center for activism and praxis that includes the uniting of both Muslim men and women in order to incur better and greater changes in all Muslim countries. With this, I understand that unless we can create a paradigm shift in using postmodernism to authenticate our “mini-narratives” as Muslim women, we continue to waver on the unsteady tectonic plates that threaten a quake beneath our determined and active journey. I refuse to loosen my footing. By representing myself as a postmodernist Muslim feminist, and allowing my own growth in the feminist world, I will remain grounded in the belief that one day, the opposing plates beneath me will settle into a land that I can walk on, as a woman, as an activist, and as a feminist with her veiled head held high.

References

Abou Bakr, O. (1999). *Gender perspectives in Islamic tradition.* Retrieved October 15, 2006 from http://www.minaret.org/gender.htm.

Aguilar, D. D. (1997). Lost in translation: Western feminism and Asian women. In S. Shall (Ed.), *Dragon ladies: Asian American feminists breathe fire* (pp. 153-165). Boston: South End Press.

Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

Al Faruqi, L (2005). *Islamic Traditions and the Feminist Movement: Confrontation or Cooperation?* Sha'raw Press.

Badran, M. (2002). Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name? *Al Ahram Weekly Online*. 569, 17-23. Retrieved October 15, 2006 from http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu1.htm.

Daneshpour, M. (1998). Muslim Families and Family therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. *24*, 287-300.

Daneshpour, M. (2002). Lives Together, Worlds Apart? Lives of Multicultural Muslim Couples. *Journal of Couples Relationship. 2*, 57-71.

Daneshpour, M. (2004). Stress and Adaptation among Iranian Families: A Multisystem Model of Personal, Couple, Family, and Work System. *Journal of Family Psychology and Family Therapy*. *4*, 34-54.

Daneshpour, M. (2004). *Women, Gender and Child Sexual Abuse Inside and Outside Family: Iran*. Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures.

Daneshpour, M. (2008). Couple Therapy with Muslims: Challenges and Opportunities. In Rastogi, M. & Volker, T. *Couple Therapy with Ethnic Minorities*. Sage Press. (in Press).

De Reus, L., Few, A. & Blume, L. (2004). Theorizing Identities and Intersectionalities: Third-Wave Feminism, Critical Race Theory, and Families. In Bengtson, V.L. Acock, A. Allen, K, Dilworth-Anderson, P. & Klein, D. (Eds). *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research* (pp. 447-469). Sage Press.

Flax, J. (1990). Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory, in L. Nicholson, (Ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism* (pp. 39-62). London: Routledge.

Grewal, I. & Kaplan, C. (2002). *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Haifa, R. (1996). Muslim Women between Tradition and Modernity: The Islamic Response. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, *16*, 99-110.

Hassan, R. (1999). Feminism in Islam. In A. Sharma, & K. Young (Ed.), *Feminism and World Religions* (pp. 248-278). State University of New York Press.

Ibrahimi-Ghavam, S. (1991). *Study on the level of Anxiety and self esteem among victims of sexual abuse*. Unpublished manuscript, Tehran, Iran.

Malti-Douglas, F. (1991). *Women's Body, Women's World: Gender and Discourse in Arab Islamic Writing*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Mernissi, F. (1987). '*Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, Revised Edition, Indiana University Press, Bloomington.

Mohanty, C. T. (1995). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. In B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, & H. Tiffin (Eds.), *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (pp. 259-263). London: Routledge.

Moghaddam, V. (2000). Transnational Feminist Networks: Collective Action in an Era of Globalization. *International Sociology*, *15*, 57-84.

Moghissi, H. (1999). *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*, New York: Zed Books.

Mojab, S. (1999). Women Undertaking *Ijtehad*: Hoping for a Feminizing Democracy. *Arash, 70*, 48-52. (in Persian)

Olyae-Zand, S. (2002). Unsuitable Marriage: A fundamental Ground for Prostitution, *Journal of Scientific Research on Social Welfare*, 2, 40-55.

Olson, D. & Stewart, K. L. (1990). *Multisystem Assessment of Health and Stress (MASH) Model and the Health and Stress Profile (HSP).* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. St,. Paul, MN: Family Social Science, University of Minnesota.

Piper, J. (1995). *Clergywomen and Work.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. St, Paul, MN: Family Social Science, University of Minnesota.

Sandoval, C. (2000). *Methodology of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Stewart, K.L. (1988). *Stress and Adaptation: A Multisystem Model of Individual, Couple, Family, and Work Systems*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. St, Paul, MN: Family Social Science, University of Minnesota: *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 49, 8A, p. 2410 (University Microfilms No. 88-23570).