

## Women and the Public Space in Muslim Majority Countries and the West

IBRAHIM OLATUNDE UTHMAN<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*The increasing visibility of Muslim women in the public space in the Muslim majority countries and the West has led to incidences of religious condemnation and even, in some cases, violence against these women. Many fatāwā (Islamic legal verdicts) have been issued against some of these women, which have contributed to various acts of violence. Many Islamic scholars have been blamed for creating the fertile grounds for religious fanaticism, and espousing violence against women. This has brought to the front burner the feminist activism of these women in both Muslim majority countries and the West as they contest the outcry and violence against their female agency and sexual orientation, hence, the need for this study. It aims at the interrogation of the role of five women in Muslim majority countries and the West in resisting the religious opposition and violence against them. Secondary data drawn from extant literature, interviews and internet sources is used to interrogate the discourse of the purposively selected women in the context of their resistance against the opposition to their agency and choices. It adopts the intersectional and colonial/postcolonial theories to analyse the arguments of the women within the complex contexts of modernity and feminisms as illustrated by the women's lives in contemporary societies. Whereas the women under study make no claims to any Islamic piety movements and in fact, mostly reject them; their feminist activism can still resonate with women in Islamic piety movements' opposition to the gender arrangements supervised by the religious authorities. The study, thus, encourages us to see how both Islamic scholars and Muslim feminists can unite in their deprecation of the use of Islam in supporting the perpetuation of Muslim women's subjugation and, thereby, call for a synergy between Muslim feminists and Islamic authorities in addressing the legitimate feminist concerns among women.*

**Keywords:** Muslim feminists, binary division, female agency, Shari'ah, Hisbah

One important feature of feminist activism in the world today is the growing number of successful Muslim women and leaders in commerce and industry, education and academia, government and politics as well as entertainment and the cinema, to mention a few. However, as they attain these leadership positions and gain control of the public sphere, they are usually condemned by the religious authorities for denigrating Islamic teachings and aping the West in their political, economic, professional and educational advancement etc. This study focuses on the role of five women in deconstructing the use of the Islamic teachings in stigmatising the public display of their bodies, sexual orientation and feminist activism and against the attempts to label them bad Muslims who are championing western notions in Muslim majority countries. These women fall under the category of Muslim feminists as expounded upon in a recent study (Uthman 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> **Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman**, Ph. D. Reader in Islamic Studies, Dept. of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Ibadan, Oduduwa Road, 200132, Ibadan, NIGERIA. Email: ibrahimuthman17@gmail.com

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The study sets out to examine the feminist activism of five women described as Muslim feminists in Muslim majority countries as they generally uphold the liberal and poststructuralist ideals of freedom in respect of their female agency and choices different from Islamic feminists for whom the ideals of freedom emanate from commitment to the religious doctrines of their beliefs (Uthman 2022: 114- 115). The study, however, does not aim at denigrating any of the two feminisms in their engagement with the threat posed by the Islamic scholars' unequivocal preoccupation with women's agency and sexual choices. The aim here is to explain how the selected feminists engage with misogynistic traditions and oppressive practices in both Muslim majority countries and the West with the prism of Islamic teachings.

Hence, the activism of these Muslim feminists in their deconstruction of the religious authorities' opposition and, at times, even violence against the display of their female agency and sexual orientation in the public space is the focus of this paper. The rejection of the female agency in the public space in Muslim majority countries and the West is usually supported by different Islamic teachings such as the Quranic precept to women to "lower their gaze and guard their chastity" (24:31), to dress modestly so that "they may be respected and not be molested" (Q33: 59) and avoid "seductive speech, lest one in whose heart there is a disease should lust after" them (Q33: 32). This scriptural evidence is used to support the harassment, victimisation and punishment of women for various crimes of public immorality such as improper dressing, gender-mixing and singing and dancing in the public space while their male counterparts often go scot-free (Adamu 2017: 35 cited in Uthman 2022).

The above unequivocal position of Muslim women in virtually all Muslim majority countries has been the focal point of feminists of various shades who lampoon the denigrating conditions and abuse of Muslim women. The denigration of the rights of women has been at the forefront of feminist activism, which according to Nawal El-Sadawi seek to protect women from all forms of misogyny and oppression of women by the societies with the active support of Islamic scholars. For this reason, she is highly critical of practices such as female genital mutilation, child marriage and female segregation, which are endorsed to protect men from the "seduction of women" (El-Sadawi 1980: 47-71).

This extreme protectionist view of the power of seduction is largely responsible for the binary division of space and the attempt to silence women in the Muslim majority countries contrary to the activism of Muslim feminists. Hence, these Muslim feminists are in the forefront of stamping their female voices, choices and sexual orientations in the public space throughout the Muslim majority countries and the West as they engage religious authorities and wield political, religious and economic powers, among others and consequently refuse to be restricted to any separate domestic space. In short, these Muslim feminists refuse to be "quietly submissive subalterns, hidden from the public eye" (Cooke 2001: 69).

This binary spacial dynamic in Muslim majority countries like Nigeria has attracted the attention of many Muslim women such as Hajiya Bilikisu Yusuf, a former National Amirah (President) of the Federation of Muslim Women Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN) who falls into the category of Islamic feminists as explained earlier. Her writings on both domestic violence and other violent activities that dominate life all over the country and affect Muslim women disproportionately reveal the intersection of the Islamic and Muslim feminists. She has documented cases of how male relations, colleagues and combatants, apparently, share in common their penchant to hurt women. This can be seen in their assault and battery against women and raping of thousands of women brutally, in a country where access to medical, psychological and therapeutic care is limited. She has also criticised the *Hisbah* (A *Shari'ah* institution which originally referred to the office of the market Inspector charged with the task of regulating the market, preserving the public health, protecting the rights of consumers, resolving commercial disputes and promoting good market conduct), which

today mainly supervises over what she has described as the indiscriminate spying on women involved in adultery. Accordingly, she criticises its operation, which is characterised by ignorance, denial of the childgirls' education and female rights in general. These girls who are often sent to the streets, by parents and guardians, to cater for their families or married off to usually men; who are old to be their fathers are suffering the stigma, pain and anguish of VVF, FGM, abandonment and various forms of domestic violence (Yusuf 2002).

The above critique of the Nigerian experience of gender discrimination and violence against Muslim women by a woman described as an Islamic feminist is greatly telling. It reveals the blurring of the binary categories of Islamic and Muslim feminists in addressing the legitimate feminist concerns among Muslims. This shows that regardless of Muslim women's commitment to Islamic core precepts, there appears to be a common understanding that gender activism is crucial for achieving social justice, security, peace and health for women as certain practices and steps can be sources of gender violence and hardship, especially in the areas of sexuality, identity and agency.

Here, it must also be mentioned that since the return of the criminal aspects of the Islamic Law in 2000 in Northern Nigeria, the *Hisbah* has transformed into semi-judicial police whose functions covers all aspects of public morality such as enforcing codes of dressing, stopping gender-mixing, banning the exposure of the female body and regulating singing and dancing. Whereas when it was established by the second caliph, 'Umar in Madīnah; the *Hisbah* was headed in Madīnah by a woman named Shifā' bint 'Abdullah as the *Muhtasibah* (Market Inspector) while another woman named Samrā' bint Nuhayk al-Asadiyah was the *Muhtasibah* in Makkah (al-Tabarani, 1984), today it has almost become the space of men. This, may explain partly, the inequitable way the *Hisbah* and indeed, many Islamic scholars relate discriminately to the male and female bodies.

Hence, this paper interrogates the stories of Muslim women in some Muslim majority countries and the West. It employs secondary data on the activism of the women concerning the public display of their bodies and sexual orientation, examines the extent to which they conform to the *Shari'ah* rulings as understood by the religious authorities and the opposition and violence against them.

This study adopts a complex, dynamic and multi-layered methodology, employing the framework offered by intersectional and colonial/postcolonial interpretations to analyse the argument of the five purposively chosen women within the classification of Muslim feminists in complex contexts of modernity as illustrated by the selected Muslim women's lives for the study. Here, Saba Mahmood's framework has been engaged, even if in critical dissent, to strengthen the weightiness of the study's contribution to the understanding of the stories of the women with respect to their feminist concerns among Muslims.

The study takes up Mahmood's intersectional theory on the female agency. He has argued that Muslim women's turn to contemporary piety movement in the mosques of Cairo poses a dilemma for liberal and poststructuralist feminisms, which construct female agency on the binary model of conformity and resistance or subordination and subversion. This model, is however, contradicted by the women studied by Mahmood as they employed subordination as the instrument for the attainment of their agency. For example, veiling is part of their effort to achieve piety as well as to activate their agency. In line with Mahmood's conceptualisation of agency as a synonym for women's actions freely undertaken by themselves and consequent upon their own accord even if grounded in behaviours that are usually considered to demonstrate their conformity or subordination; the study will argue that the five purposively selected women in this study do not embrace this meaning of agency. Rather, they demonstrate the poststructuralist conceptualisation of agency as they are liberators who champion resistance or subversion against relations of subordination and more importantly are opposed to agency "as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" (Mahmood 2001: 210).

Similarly, the study also employs the colonial/postcolonial models of feminism to explain the discourses of the five women under study. Though several scholars have debated the impact of colonial and postcolonial feminisms on the binary dichotomy between men and women in nonwestern societies with some arguing that gender is a Western concept that only became common in nonwestern societies such as the Muslim majority and African countries with the advent of colonialism, others have countered that Muslim majority and African countries had been patriarchal even before the advent of colonial and postcolonial feminisms, which albeit, came to accentuate the subjugation and segregation of women in these societies (Amadiume 1987; Ahmed 1992; Oyèwùmí 1997; Viner & Ho, 2007; and Bailey 2011).

The colonial and postcolonial feminisms have contributed in no small measure to the feminist movement in nonwestern societies such as the Muslim majority and African countries, where the representation and conditions of women have been at the front burner of the imperialist designs to subjugate and control these societies. The obsession with the conditions of women was the focal point of both the cultural and moral battle between the West and the native nationalists to gain ascendancy. Ahmed (1992: 163) observes how the need for the West to create artificial urgency to save the women of these societies from their men was the basic objective of colonial feminism. As a result of western obsession, a section of the feminist movement colluded with the imperialists to appropriate feminism in advancing colonial interests, designs and wars of occupation. In the words of Ho (2007: 290), "part of a broader history of colonial feminism" is the legitimization of "Western supremacy through arguing that colonial societies oppressed 'their women' and were thus unfit for self-governance."

A very good example of a Muslim majority country where colonial feminism has been very successful is Egypt. According to Bailey, the attention given to the conditions of women during the reign of Lord Cromer as the British Consul-General in Egypt (1883-1907) "adds to his overall mission of saving the Egyptians from themselves" (2011: 148). At the same time, it is an irony that Lord Cromer who seemingly championed "the emancipation of Egyptian women" was totally opposed to "women suffragists back home in England" (Abu-Lughod 1998: 14).

This confirms the use of colonial and postcolonial feminisms by the imperialist "to morally justify the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe" (Ahmed 1992: 54). The study will, therefore, argue that the five purposively selected women under study clearly show the influence of colonial/postcolonial feminisms in their different modern and western forms of liberal and poststructuralist feminisms, which construct female agency on the binary model of conformity and resistance or subordination and subversion in the struggle for the emancipation of Muslim women.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

This section discusses the stories of five women who fall under the category of Muslim feminists and are contesting the traditional roles of Muslim women in their attempts to reshape and reinterpret the popular notion of women in the public space in both the Muslim majority countries and the West. Their stories expose how Muslim feminists not only choose new identities but also profess their beliefs, sexual orientations as well as project their bodies, according to their choices, in the public space even in Muslim dominant societies. They are contending the use of Islam in delimiting female liberty and freedom and in doing so, their idioms are grounded in feminist discourses that have historically opposed behaviours of conformity and subordination such as shyness, humility and modesty. In fact, they openly profess the superiority of choices.

The first example and perhaps also the most daring of these Muslim feminists who promote sexual revolt, resistance and subversion by Muslim women is the Bangladeshi born-Swedish Muslim

turned atheist, feminist, secular humanist, human rights activist and writer, Taslima Nasrin who has become popular for her writing on Muslim women's oppression and denigration in Bangladesh and Pakistan (Deen 1999 & 2006). Nasrin's childhood experiences, which later influenced her feminist struggles of resistance and subversion began in a Muslim family in Bangladesh, where girls and women were raped by apparently pious Muslim men, a factor that contributed greatly to her becoming an atheist. Thus, she was inspired to start her mission of empowering women to claim ownership and authority over their bodies as she openly and strongly criticises the Muslim dominant societies of Bangladesh and Pakistan. In all, she has written poems, essays, novels, short stories, and memoirs in which she shows her anger for the denigration and abuse of women. In her works, she employs the "third-rate commentaries written by uneducated mullahs" in her condemnation of Muslim majority countries (Deen 2006: 128).

Sadly, to counter her unyielding attacks on Islam, various *fatwās* were issued calling for her death with some of her books banned in Muslim societies such as Bangladesh and the West Bengal part of India. The publication of her breakthrough novel *Lajja* (Shame) in 1993 attracted wide condemnation because of its controversial subject matter on the struggle of a patriotic Bangladeshi Hindu family in a Muslim society. In spite of the sale of 50,000 copies in Bangladesh within six months, it was banned by the government the same year and Nasrin was physically attacked several times for her deprecation and denigration of the *Shari'ah* on the status of women. In the following year, she granted an interview in which she called for the abolition of the *Shari'ah* and for this in August 1994, "charges of making inflammatory statements" were brought up against her and hundreds of thousand demonstrators who tagged her "an apostate appointed by imperial forces to vilify Islam" also demanded for her execution. During the several violent eruptions and backlashes, many people were killed, including two teenagers "during the height of anti-Taslima Nasrin campaign in Bangladesh in 1994" as well as "in the Indian state of Karnataka in early March 2010" (Hasan 2010: 549).

One important point in the feminist struggle of Nasrin is that her personal experience of sexual abuse during adolescence, college and as a gynecologist influenced her views on the need to subvert the teachings of Islam and the gender structures of Muslim majority societies. Right from 1989 when she began to contribute to the weekly political magazine *Khaborer Kagoj*, edited by Nayeemul Islam Khan, and published from Dhaka her radical secular feminist views and anti-Islamic remarks shocked the traditional Islamic communities of Bangladesh. Again, during her stay in Kolkata, she contributed a weekly essay to the Bengali version of *The Statesman*, called *Dainik Statesman* where she advocated for the nullification of the *Shari'ah* to pave way for an Indian Uniform civil code and secularism in the Muslim countries. In 2003, Nasrin equates the Islam with "the black cobra" (Nasrin 2003: 45), which could by extension be understood as a call for the extinction of the religion. She equally attacked the *Shari'ah* Triple *talāq* (divorce) as despicable and called for its abolition in India (Taslima Nasreen, *The Times of India*, 23 January 2017 and 5 May 2017 retrieved 22 June 2020). All this only confirms Nasrin's conceptualisation of the female agency as resistance or subversion of the norms of Muslim majority countries and the teachings of Islam. Thus, altering the historically male dominated public space and women's life, to her, can be achieved only through the liberal and poststructuralist models of agency.

The second story of the Muslim feminists is that of Maryam Usman, a popular film actress in Northern Nigeria who was accused of making a pornographic film, considered a case of contestation and personal reinterpretation of Muslim female visibility and performance in the public space of a Muslim majority community. This occurred when a private recording of her engagement in mutually consenting sex with her boyfriend surfaced in the Hausa Film Industry in 2007. Consequently, she became known as "Hiyana" (fraud) after her so-called "blue film" video-clip went viral and the local newspapers and radio stations became awash with condemnations of her act and the entire film



industry. The Motion Picture Practitioners' Association of Nigeria (MOPPAN) was forced to set up an investigative panel and Usman was banned from the Kannywood film industry for five years by MOPPAN. The Kano State Censorship Board also suspended all filmmaking activities for six months (Adamu 2017: 46-47).

The story of Maryam may be perceived as a clash between her individual rights and her roles in a society that operates a binary division of space, especially in relation to the conduct and appearance of Muslim women. However, it is paradoxical that a sexual act that is meant to be personal between two lovers found its way into the public space in society that operates a binary division space in relation to the conduct of men and women. Whereas the *Hisbah* in Northern is viewed as the *Shari'ah* or "vice police" that sets out to promote public sexual morality with special responsibility to monitor the conduct, appearance and performance of women in the public space (Adamu 2017: 35), this conception of the *Hisbah* as instrument for regulating the conduct of women, it might be argued, is what Maryam was seeking to subvert by employing the liberal and poststructuralist feminist models of agency, which conceives of female agency as resistance or subversion. She, therefore, abandoned shyness humility and modesty as means of projecting her agency as observed by Mahmood (2001).

Thus, Maryam applied her agency to the fullest extent to claim ownership of her sexual conduct in the public space where today's revolution in the information and communication technology has allowed her to embark on subversive acts that were historically impossible especially by women. Now with the new opportunities created by the agents of globalisation, women can carryout various shades of resistance and subversion even though appearing to be passive. This ability is, therefore, emblematic of the power of Muslim feminists who not only have the power resistance or subversion but also possess various technologies to activate their agencies. In line with Mahmood's conceptualisation of agency as a synonym for women's actions freely undertaken by themselves and consequent upon their own accord, Maryam has shown that her above subversive action is well grounded in behaviours that are liberating for her as opposed to agency "as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable" (Mahmood 2001: 210).

Maryam's public advertisement of her private sexual life is in fact, similar, to that of another Muslim woman feminist outside Nigeria, the Canadian educator, writer, former journalist and television presenter, Irshad Manji has deliberately chosen to be an open Muslim lesbian. She was born in Kampala in 1968, studied at the University of British Columbia and got married to Laura Albano in 2016. As a lesbian who is married to another lesbian in the West, she is "a harsh critique of Islam," an advocate of a reformist interpretation of Islam and critic of literalist interpretation of the Qur'an who makes a case for reformist and not moderate Islam (Hirshi Ali 2006: 71-72). This reformation, she argues must be carried out through the Islamic tradition of individual *Ijtihad* (independent, critical and creative reasoning, thinking and reinterpretation) as the Qur'an invites Muslims to think and be creative. Thus, there is no trouble with Islam including the power used by terrorists to define Islam that cannot be corrected through *Ijtihad* by equipping a new generation of Muslims to think for themselves (Manji 2005).

Most books published by Manji just like Nasrin's have also been banned for the attack on Islam. In "the Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim Call for Reform in her Faith" that was originally published in 2003 and republished by Vintage Canada in 2005, she relives her childhood, how her father, a nominal Muslim used to beat and chase her through the house with a knife, how she was taught a lot of hate, falsehood and lies by her teacher who was anti-Semitic, harsh and dreadful in the *Madrassah* (Islamic school) and how she was eventually kicked out of the *Madrassah* for asking too many questions (Manji 2005).

Additionally, her story also reveals how she perceives the denigrating and oppressive conditions of Muslim women, the barbarity of the *Shari'ah* as interpreted by Islamic scholars and the

terrorist acts of Islamic groups, all of which she refers to as the troubles with the religion of Islam in the contemporary society as she argues that Muslims constitute the main trouble with Islam since they reject its diversity and employ their tribal cultural appropriation to make the religion intolerable and imperialistic. According to her, Muslims define Islam by refusing to embrace the diversity of Islamic teachings and presenting their cultures to the world as the religion of Islam (Manji, 2005). For her views, Manji's commands popularity and acceptance in the West as she postulates the polarisation between Islam and the West, the progressive Western world versus the backward Muslim world where Muslims are socially brought up to abdicate individual agency in the face of the tyranny of their families and communities. Manji's reinterpretation of Islam as she extrapolates from her childhood experiences, making universal and global conclusions is believed by many to be selective, essentialist, anti-Islamic and empowering those who nurse phobias about the religion (Hasan 2012).

The above feminist activism of Manji is clearly built upon the colonial/postcolonial feminisms as she seeks to define Islamic teachings in line with western imperialist feminisms accentuate the oppression, denigration, subjugation and segregation of Muslim women (Ahmed 1992; Ho, 2007 & Bailey 2011). Her approach is similar to the brand of feminism of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali born Dutch-American citizen, feminist, author and former Dutch lawmaker. Although, she was born a Muslim in 1969 and named Ayaan Hirsi Magan, she underwent genital mutilation and in 1992, she was married against her will to a distant cousin residing in Canada but on her way to join him, she fled to the Netherlands and applied for political asylum. She also fled Islam, changed her name, turned atheist, and became an unrelenting critic of Islamic teachings and practices and an advocate for women's rights, opposing minor marriage, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and honour killing (Gewen 2008).

Further, Hirsi Ali who graduated from the State University of Leiden with a master's degree in political science in 2000 left for the United States where she promoted her first book, "the Caged Virgin" published in 2006. She became a citizen of the United States in 2013 and afterwards she wrote her book, "Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now" published in 2015. In her books, she argues like other Muslim feminists that the *Shari'ah* as a penal code is incompatible with Western democratic values, human rights, especially rights of women. Following her western models of feminism, she underscores the patriarchal influence of Muslim culture and socialisation when she writes that "it is very difficult for" young Muslim girls who "are brought up according to the Koran and example of the Prophet Muhammad, to live subserviently submissively" and independently "liberate themselves from this cage when they are older" (Hirsi Ali 2006: 23). Perhaps this explains why she was named by Time Magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world in 2005 and has since been dubbed a Muslim feminist anomaly who is counterpart to the famous Salman Rushdie (Grimes, 2007 "No Rest for A Feminist Rethinking Islam" (The New York Times retrieved 22 June 2020).

The last story of these category of feminists is that of a successful French actress, model, singer and self-proclaimed unbeliever Golshifteh Farahani, who was born an Iranian Muslim named Rahavard Farahani in 1983. In 2008, her journey as a "controversial actress began" when, under the contemporary wave of western and modern values; she starred with Leonardo DiCaprio in Ridley Scott's Hollywood film titled "Body of Lies" and posed in a "nude photo-shoot for the French magazine, Egoiste (Madame Le Figaro, January 12, 2012).

She also starred in the film, "About Elly" by Asghar Farhad, which won the Best Picture Award at the 2009 Tribeca Film Festival and a Silver Bear Award at the Berlin International Film Festival and heralded what was to become her critical questioning of the Iranian cultural and Islamic traditions. Later in January 2012, she provides another daring example of a liberal and poststructuralist feminist when she became the first Iranian woman who appeared half-naked by

bearing her breast in a French promotional short black-and-white video “with 30 other ‘young hopes’ of the French cinema” (The Guardian, September 6, 2012 retrieved 22 June 2020).

Though she was immediately banned by the Iranian government from leaving the country, she took advantage of a loophole in the country’s border and relocated to Paris. Whereas she became Iran’s biggest film star, as a result of the film’s western influence and critique of the Iranian society, it was banned in Iran before it could be aired. Though Farahani ignored the ban, her career in the country was terminated and she moved to live in exile in Paris, France, where she changed her name to Golshifteh, acquired the French citizenship and westernised culture, discarding all traces of Islam and Muslim culture. Thus, she “slipped her shoulder out of her shirt” as she became “a lightning conductor for the divisions within Iranian society” (The Guardian, September 6, 2012 retrieved 22 June 2020). In an interview, she told the magazine, *Madame Le Figaro* that:

If you wanted to swim naked, you entered the water fully dressed and then undressed once you are submerged. I’ve done that a hundred times...And Hijab? Just wear it but it does not hide all the hair. It also sometimes falls! It is a traditional costume for many women like me who are not believers... My country is full of contradictions. I could have stayed but I would not have been allowed to work the way I wanted. When a regime asks an actress to hide her hair and body, I think she should leave (Farahani quoted in *Madame Le Figaro*, 2013 retrieved 22 June 2020).

Whereas she was Iran’s biggest film star since she made her debut in “Dariush Mehrjui’s *The Pear Tree*” in 1997 at the age 14,” as a result of the above film’s disdain for Iranian religious beliefs and promotion of western liberal feminism; it shattered “a taboo of unimaginable proportions” in the Iranian society and the “cultural earthquake” that followed turned Farahani’s exile in France into banishment and she became a “lightening rod for the divisions in the Iranian society.” In fact, the Fars News Agency in Tehran described the film as revealing the hidden contour and “disgusting face of cinema” (The Guardian, September 6, 2012 retrieved 22 June 2020).

Consequent upon the above, “the collateral damage,” that followed Farahani’s banishment affected her father who was admitted to the hospital. However, the damage soon ended and her family became reintegrated into the community by the local people who expressed their love for Golshifteh. Thus in the story of Farhani, we see another feminist resistance against the religion of Islam and Islamic teachings such as the veil, which she believes limits her performance in her profession as an actress, model and singer. In her interview with the *Hindu* in 2012 (retrieved 22 June 2020), she explains clearly that her subversive use of the cinema, “rebellion against injustices” and intolerance of “violence against women” started in her teenagehood when as a teenage girl, she “used to shave” her “hair to be able to walk on the streets without the veil.”

However, as many Muslims and the Iranian conservative Media became critical of Farahani, she presents herself as an unbeliever contesting the imposition of the Islamic conceptions of the female agency, sexual orientation and the veil on her in the Iranian society. She equally espouses the liberal and poststructuralist feminist notions of resistance against the subordination of her female agency, independence and power to choose for herself on how to use her body; hence her decision to move to France, the city of liberty and the libertine. Her justification of her decision to leave Iran in the 2012 interview with *Madame Le Figaro* against the condemnation of the Iranian society of her involvement in the pornographic promotional film, French magazine and photo-shoots also shows that she believes that such misogynist ban imposed on her by the government has no place or relevance for modern society.

The attempts by some Islamic scholars to subordinate the female agency, roles and sexual orientation is being challenged in recent times by a brand of new Muslim feminists such as Nasrin, Usman, Manji, Hirsi Ali and Farahani who are acting contrary to the feminism of members of the contemporary women’s piety movements studied by Mahmood. Whereas the women in the mosques of Cairo conceive female agency in a manner that conflicts with the wishes of their husbands and



family relations while attempting to adhere closely to the authority of the Islamic doctrines, the five women in this study advocate the liberal feminist notion of allegiance to an unquestionable ideal of individual freedom as well as the poststructuralist understanding of agency as resistance or subversion of societal, political and religious norms and values.

Consequent upon their own will, the above women also seek solutions to the subjugation of Muslim women in foreign ideologies such as western liberal and poststructuralist feminisms. In doing so, they denigrate and deprecate Islamic teachings and practices by situating themselves between Islamic and western values of feminism, human rights and modernisation. Though many Islamic scholars are appalled by this development and past fatawa condemning these feminists, they however tend to uphold the violations of the *Shari'ah* in ways that sustain the denigration of the rights of Muslim women.

Going forward, therefore, there is the need for the feminists and Islamic scholars to come together and promote gender structures that support justice for all. In short, they can unite against the age long hiding of the female agency, the traditional delimitation of Muslim women's rights to work, identity, and the public spaces. They may also stand together in working for the promotion of individual beliefs, human rights and identities, even within the prism of the *Shari'ah*.

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