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<div align="center">*The End of History* and the Last Woman[1]</div>

It is extremely easy to criticize the excesses of religions and religious societies, it is much harder to recognize the positive elements of religious experience. The critics of Islamic feminism invoke secularism as the most viable framework for women's liberation projects, while treating secularism as an uninterrogated category. In addition, critics of Islamic feminism compare secular feminism and Islamic feminism without attending to the current global power structure and the obvious double standards which emerge in disparate power relations. They neglect to address the many problems being faced by women in so-called secular societies and posit secularism as universal and absolute. I will examine the ways in which anti-theist approaches limit the possibilities of feminist inquiry by treating secularism as absolute and will try and demonstrate the viability and necessity of an Islamic feminism. Starting with an examination of how "Islam" is treated a designation, I will proceed to the history and unfolding of gender-equality within Islam. Then, I will argue that the presence of Islam in the global community provides a platform for resistance against global corporate capitalism, while promoting a polycentric global arrangement in which multiple civilizational paths are regarded with respect and credulity.

The Clash of Definitions

The first problem with antitheist arguments is what Edward Said refers to as a "clash of definitions," whereby criticisms of Islamic feminism are premised on rigid definitions of Islam.

The term "Islam" is given shorthand usage, without clarifying which community of interpretation is being addressed, or providing any sense of coherence between one community of interpretation and another. Additionally, secularist feminists treat the issue of religion, or culture, as if it does not constantly mutate and permeate into politics, economics and other areas of society. These limited definitions bear no resemblance to the whole, if there can even be such a thing. Thus, the critics of Islamic feminism fall into the realm of essentializing not just gender, but culture and patriarchy as well.

Although secularist feminists point out urgent and legitimate problems in the third world, which are very much in need of attention, they conflate specific interpretations of Islam with Islam as such. Shahidian, Ghashtili, Mojab and Moghissi all use the title Islam as a broad label, casting a large net over a region of the world and yielding narrow, myopic glimpses into the complex reality of the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. Haideh Moghissi even goes so far as to say that Muslim women have no agency, confining agency to the ability to oppose convention. In doing so, Moghissi attributes women's subordination to essentialist notions of gender and culture, resurrecting Orientalist myths of the "wretched Middle Eastern woman." Even when they, namely Mojab and Ghashtili, distinguish that they are criticizing the Iranian government's definition of Islam, they still treat this narrow interpretation as if it has universal application.

Although these criticisms intend to show that Islamic feminism is harmful to women's liberation, they only reveal how governmental entities politicize cultural legacies in a way that serves their own interests. Anouar Majid remarks: "The culturalist argument is not only intellectually constrained by the old Orientalist argument that freezes cultures into unchanging essences, it is also dangerously disabling, since it disconnects Muslims from their larger Third

World and global contexts."[2] Intellectuals who conflate cultural legacies, which carry endless possibilities for emancipation and solidarity, with state-constructed interpretations of religion, limit their own feminist inquiry while accentuating the otherness of alternative communities and social arrangements. Only one critic, Ghashtili, remarks that there is no sanctioned, universal clergy within the Islamic world, indicating perhaps the most important point about Islam: it has no master. Simultaneously, Ghashtili objects to the lack of pluralism in Islam as a foundation for her refutation of Islamic feminism. Is this not, then, an issue not of anti-pluralism, but of *radical* pluralism? The fact that Islam has no governing body which can dictate what is truly Islamic, is precisely the beauty and plague of this most recent monotheistic religion. Any Imam or Mufti can assume authority based on a local school of jurisprudence, and issue decrees which people can then point to and say, "There's Islam." The highly fractured, definitionally ambiguous nature of this theological practice provides compelling evidence that its relativism is to blame for the persecution of women, not a rigid universal structure.

In order to address the problems being faced by women, scholars might benefit from recognizing the "clash of definitions" within the world of Islam and delimit their analysis of women's liberation in the MENA region. Islam, through what Leyla Ahmed calls its "stubborn egalitarianism,"[3] has never had a definite body of leadership but rather, over the course of centuries, a group emerged called the Ulema whose authority is a point of contention for many Muslims. The Ulema were students of Islam, but over time became a class of citizens regarded as authoritative Islamic scholars.[4] As Ahmed and other Muslim feminists have argued, the ethical spirit of Islam, whose egalitarian character has inspired visionaries from Malala Yousefzai to Malcom X, stands in tension with the hierarchical structure of a ruling clergy. Anti-theist feminists target certain interpretations of Islam without considering the many others, neglecting

to explain in full why Islam and feminism are not compatible. When critics point to the Islamic state's institutionalized discrimination, they expose the injustices of the Islamic state, not Islamic theology as an intellectual enterprise. The religious conflation of diverse Muslim communities not only misrepresents women's issues, but also contributes to harmful attitudes toward "others," within a global climate that is threatening to third world communities. Beginning first with a brief history of Islam, as it relates to gender, we will examine the staggering complexity of women's issues in Muslim societies and how they are linked to economic, political and cross-national encounters.

History of Feminism in Islam

The history of Islam and the controversial era preceding the revelation of Mohammed expose many contradictory messages regarding women, at times glorifying them through deification, and at other times oppressing them through misogynistic practices. As Leyla Ahmed points out, the advent of Islam neither lifted women out of patriarchy, like many Muslims argue, nor further submerged them into it—instead, it reformulated society and gender in complex ways that require attention in order to avoid sinking into essentialist claims.[5] It is important to note that the social and political regulation of gender was already in practice in Byzantine, Mesopotamian and Hellenic societies prior to the advent of Islam, yet many customs and norms originating in these societies get solely attributed to Islam.[6] For example, veiling was already legally regulated in Babylonian and Assyrian law centuries before the advent of Islam.[7] This suggests that often times when discussing Islam, or Muslim women, scholars need to be cautious and recognize that religions are fundamentally hybrid and what is generally thought of as Islam, or Islamic, is actually a mixture of cultural practices stemming from many different

civilizations.8 Noting the complexity and hybridity of this history, we will focus on gendered

social practices, as they unfolded in 7th century Arabia—the time of Muhammad's revelation.

The history of Islam includes not only a fundamental hybridity, wherein Islamic practice

is variable based on regional cultures, but also a tradition of suppression toward the era

preceding Mohammed's revelation. It is important to note that the era preceding the revelation of

Mohammed is referred to as the *jahiliya,* which translates as "the dark days" or "the days of

ignorance."9 That an entire period of history is given its own sinister title, provides insight into

the traumatic influence of the *jahiliya* present in contemporary times. Fatima Mernissi argues

that the systematic erasure of the *jahiliya*, as a topic of contemplation, is bound up in current

misogynistic attitudes toward women in many Muslim societies. Mernissi states that research

into this era is often silenced, and wonders if "the notion of women in power is linked in our

collective memory with violence and murder," since pre-Islamic Arab society was notably

centered around goddesses.10 Pre-Islamic Arab society was paganist, ordered along a matriarchal

line of descent, and host to various practices designed to revere gods and goddesses; notably the

blood sacrifice and the burial of live baby girls. The gendered significance of this practice

indicates that pre-Islamic Arab society, while having strong misogynistic elements also

emphasized, even aggrandized, the nature and role of women in the cosmos. The three notable

goddesses, Al-Lat, Mannat, and Al-Uzza, worshipped by the most powerful tribe of the era, the

Quraysh, hint at the curious glorification and subordination of women in 7th century Arabia. The

silence surrounding the *jahiliyaa* discourages scholars from digging into this era of history,

which is precisely the project of many Muslim feminists: to bring this history to light and ignite

discourse on the topic of phobic attitudes toward women and the harmful patriarchal elements

Mohammed was trying to resist. Muslim feminists undertake the exploration of Islamic history

as a fundamental step toward improving the lives of women, and have compelling insights into a past that is heavily guarded. This enables an insightful, nuanced approach to women's emancipation in the MENA region while discouraging further domination by Western powers.

The concern with secular arguments, held by Muslim feminists, resides in the lack of attention paid to the interpretative variation in the Islamic world and the historical nuances still unfolding in Islam's legacy. From the historical account provided by Mernissi and Ahmed, we see that the social imagination of pre-Islamic Arabic society linked the eternal feminine with power and death. Mohammed's project was to diminish the sensationalist, superstitious attitudes rampant during this time (including blood sacrifice) to address the problem of violence in society. The importance of engaging Middle Eastern history is critical—both for believers and secularists—since the misunderstanding of past gendered practices, and their repackaged continuity, can enlighten current problematic attitudes toward women as well as inform feminist projects. Secularists might gain from examining Islamic history, which reveals that culture does not operate as a singular force and the oppression of women in the MENA region is bound up in economic, political, and historical factors. This approach might be particularly useful considering the Euro-American global hegemony currently at work in the global community.

Feminism and Imperialism

The critics of Islamic feminism barely touch the multifaceted history of Islam, narrowly reduce complex topics, and advance harmful ideas about the MENA region and how "others" needs to be "saved" by the West. The image presented by the critics, as inattentive to historical accounts and global realities as it is, also resembles a skewed portrayal of the "Orient" connected to the use of violence and force in this region. The global predicament consists of a ruling order, and the ideas presented by feminist anti-theists reflects the interests of the ruling group: the third

world is still under the control of the "developed," world and has yet to gain autonomy.[11] How does secular insistence on the project of women's liberation contribute to this current power dynamic? Secular criticism is important and necessary, but considering the global power structure, and its violent ramifications, secular criticism needs to be undertaken carefully in order to avoid contributing to the global subordination of Muslims.

The viewpoint of secular feminists resembles imperialist projections through the positioning of Western systems as answers to social issues in developing nations. Anti-theist feminists argue that Islamic feminism is inept and therefore Western feminism must take its place, without thinking of how Western feminism was able to develop on its own terms without external domination. Is this unfettered, slow development perhaps necessary for the progression of such movements? How can women gain self-determination in the Middle East North Africa nations, when their societies are constantly dealing with external imposition in the realm of not only ideas but economic and political pressures as well? The notion of externally imported ideas being the best solution to women's struggles in the MENA region, as is claimed by the critics of Islamic feminism, suggests that "the source of the world's significant action…is in the West, whose representatives seem at liberty to visit their fantasies and philanthropies upon a mind-deadened Third World."[12] Said describes how arguments that reject native developments in favor of Western epistemologies form a "continuity of the ideological need to consolidate and justify domination in cultural terms."[13] When secular feminists treat government policies in theocratic states as representative of Islam, they, perhaps unknowingly, perpetuate Western supremacy and promote a mono-cultural global arrangement.

In a global community which is undergoing a dramatic flattening out of cultures, languages, and traditions, Islamic feminism provides a check against the totalizing forces of

Western hegemony while also resisting native orthodoxies. This image of Islam presented by critics of Islamic feminism, parallels imperialist projects by pushing for a replacement of indigenous conceptual systems with Western alternative. By rejecting the Muslim feminist project, secularists do not account for the historical and economic pressures influencing the lives of women in traditional societies. As illustrated by Anouar Majid, third world scholars prefer to reside in the West "out of the paradoxical necessity to overcome structural hardships at home and benefit from the very system that has marginalized their economies and transformed their nations into neocolonial, even undemocratic states."[14] Majid suggests that there are multiple structural issues at play in the debates on women's rights movements in Middle Eastern countries, but in focusing strictly on the cultural aspect of women's liberation movements, we overlook the influence of post-colonial issues in developing countries.

It is important to note that post-colonial critics do not suggest that the West is solely to blame for all third world problems, or that native misogynist attitudes aren't problematic, but rather that these movements are influenced by unique and interrelated cultural, imperial, and economic forces: most markedly, the global primacy of Euro-American interests. Liberatory struggles, considering global Western domination, should be cultivated through indigenous frameworks seeing as the entire global community is being subsumed into a monocultural, Western model. Because of the history and probable future of Euro-American global primacy, and how "wealth and power are still mostly concentrated in the hands of the same colonial powers"[15] which are currently dominating the world, any viable alternatives to the homogenization of the world should be retained in the realm of considerations. This is not to say that Western ideas cannot be a source of knowledge, or that third-world scholars should operate within an *exclusively* indigenous framework, but that any effective framework will likely be a

hybrid of both and address our current cross-cultural, global predicament with subtlety and nuance.

The entire global community is being pulled into the corporate-capitalist life-model, which requires the "emptying of cultures of their content"[16] and abrogation of alternative modes of ordering society. The critics of Islamic feminism ignore the very glaring problems of capitalism, environmental degradation, hyper-consumerism, racism and alienation within the Western social model. The anti-Islamic arguments presented by secularist feminists are rich with Fukuyamaist resonances; secularists treat Western capitalist modernity as the best mode of contouring societies. Perhaps in a more hybridized world, where cultures are no longer emptied of their content, [17] the issues facing developed and developing communities can find relief through an exchange of ideas, not merely a conversion of all the world into one Western model. Majid argues for an "indispensable polycentricity" within the global world, arguing that there are tremendous resources in ancient traditions which, when they are progressively purposed, as many of them are, enable a platform for solidarity against the harmful forces which threaten many of the world's communities. When traditional legacies are configured in a way that promotes women's liberation and social justice, intellectuals are in a better position to mobilize against the oppression of women and third world nations.

What is Secular?

Ali Mazrui suggests in his article "Islam and the End of History," that the notion of secularism as a total absence of faith is impossible, and potentially more harmful than having faith in an openly religious system.[18] Mazrui argues that the covert nature of 'secular' ideologies, which presume a special relationship to truth, makes secularism potentially more harmful than the old religions, on account of the insidiousness of a faithless ideal.[19] The critics of Islamic

feminism claim that only in secular societies are women truly free, allowed independence from the pressures of "traditional" societies. However, freedom has "yet to be determined in bourgeois societies,"[20] and the forces exerted by the Culture Industries are a noted impediment to the flourishing of women's lives in the West. The pretension to faithlessness in secular society seems contestable, considering the many rituals and gestures which are consonant with transcendentalism and practiced throughout the secular world. Most of these rituals revolve around the market and consumerism while still retaining traces of the old religions, particularly in the New Age cultural movements in recent times. In secular bourgeois societies, there is less self-identification based on culture and more on Culture Industries, where selfhood is often tied to possessing certain products. In this vein, can one say that the "secular" West is faithless? Mazrui points to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* and Max Weber's argument of the deified economy, around which much of the industrial West revolves, as a counterpoint to the faithlessness argument posited by secularists. Mazrui compares these beliefs and practices to those propagated by the old religions, suggesting that Western claims of secularism are false and self-congratulatory. Marx also hinted at the deification of the market in his *The Fetishism of The Commodity and its Secret,* where he mentions that commodities contain "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."[21] Marx describes how the "mystical character of the commodity" emerges from the abstract nature of capital and rules over the subject.[22] Is secularism possible when all communities are weaved within the global market, a market which leads us to base our very personhood on products? Women in the West are especially targeted by marketing specialists, and many women's products are often more costly, revealing a patriarchal dimension to consumer society as a salient barrier against women's flourishing. Cases such as these provoke

the question: how much more independent and free of ideology are women in Western "secular"

societies than women residing in traditional ones?

The rapture of consumerism is a known element of "secular" societies and yet the

wonder, zeal, and exuberance of commodity exchange is not commonly viewed having

"metaphysical subtleties." Many of the aspects of religious practices are still present in bourgeois

societies where Black Friday could be considered a religious holiday, with all the trappings (and

tramplings) of frenzied worship, except that instead of recognizable theological incentives, the

subject is lured by the mystique of commodities. In *Jihad vs. McWorld,* Benjamin Barber

discusses how transnational corporations, most of them based in the industrialized world, are

given generous reign with terrestrial resources and human populations.[23] The justification for the

pillaging of terrestrial resources, is sourced in the needs of the market which is further validated

in the suggestion that the market will resolve the destruction of the planet in due time. In a global

arrangement where destructive commercial activities are justified, it seems that only the market

is sacred.

Anti-theist feminists hold an ominous silence on the topic of economic proprietorship

between the first and third worlds, in which they appear to endorse some level of trickle-down

feminism: they argue against legal prejudices, which mostly touch the lives of middle and upper

class women, but neglect to discuss the impact of global capital, which troubles mostly poor

women. All four critics of Islamic feminism focus on legal and state oppression of women and

tie patriarchy with an imagined universal Islam. In maintaining such a narrow focus, Minoo

Moallem argues, scholars are condoning patriarchy's affinity for ordinance and juridical

hierarchy. Moallem remarks, "The current focus on equality discourse...emphasizes the status of

middle and upper class women who have access to the legal system, marginalizing those with no

access to the legal apparatus."[24] Perhaps if middle and upper class women gain legal victories, patriarchy will be ameliorated in the Middle East from the top down? Perhaps secular feminists are hoping that equality will trickle down to economically disadvantaged women? Perhaps by focusing exclusively on laws, secular feminists ignore the complexity of women's issues in the MENA region and highlight only the excesses of Islam, while no mention is made of the excesses of secularism and its progeny, capitalism? No mention is made by secular feminists on the exploitation of women in the third world, and how third world women are mistreated, indeed sacrificed, for the market. Barber argues that the exploitation of women workers is justified in the framework of free-enterprise, which is said to elevate all peoples, eventually. The resulting inequalities are tangible products of Enlightenment notions of "liberty," "private interest," and "laissez-faire" exchange, yet secular feminists are disinclined to draw this connection between Western capitalism and the lives of women in the Middle East. [25]

For decades, the third world has come to be a place where corporations can reap wealth and profit at the expense of local development, while continually damaging regional environments and people. Barber continually emphasizes the role of secular ideas in sustaining these economic arrangements, suggesting that we can no longer treat patriarchy as if it is rooted in culture alone; this only exacerbates "us vs. them" dichotomies and disguises other, sometimes more compelling, forces which threaten gender equality. [26] And as has been proven, women in developing countries tend to be at the shortest end of corporate dealings, which result in the "pauperization of the third world,"[27] the erosion of traditional legacies, and reinforcement of Western domination. Rejecting religion based on undoubtedly vile interpretations propagated by political and social opportunists does not qualify religion for extermination. Doing so would displace all the benefits of social systems that have been and do get used for solidarity and

resistance to oppression. Can traditionalism, namely religion, offer an alternative to the deified

consumer economy? The extent to which Western societies can be secular and women's

liberation can be guaranteed by it, is dubious and the value of some fully rationalized world is

also a matter of debate. In this way, the account given by secular feminists presupposes the

relationship between gender equality and secularism, in its presumed capacity of enabling gender

equality.

Islam and Global Capitalism

  Capitalism requires "cultures to be emptied of their content" to better facilitate

commodity exchange.[28] The movement of goods is more easily propagated if people ground their

identities on goods and services, not antiquated cultural traditions. Global capitalism has a

universalizing directive, requiring all people to exist within its structure and subscribe to its

specific values. How intriguing that Islamic fundamentalists, secularist feminists, and globalized

capitalism share this trait of universalizing—and are against hybridity. Fundamentalists,

depending on which type of Islam they practice, would have all peoples subsumed under one

ideology. Anti-theist feminists persistently argue that secular feminism must replace any and all

alternative gender-liberation approaches.

  What the opponents of Islamic feminism do not recognize, is the potential for culture to

be a tool of liberation, a check against the totalizing forces of capitalism. The absence of

tradition in a globalized, capitalist world is harmful to environments and communities in an

evident way, but could the absence of the sacred be impacting subjects in a way that, as Majid

describes, exacerbates an alienated sense of "ghostliness?" [29] Do ancient cultural traditions offer

any viable resources for the modern world in general, and women's liberation in particular? How

can feminism back the forces of women's liberation without falling into the realm of

essentialism, imperialism, and classism? The issue of women's liberation, Islam, and globalized

capitalism are linked to the current power structure between the first and third worlds; by

keeping religion in the realm of intellectual considerations, while encouraging the voices of

innovators within Muslim communities, we may retain a vibrancy of intellectual discourse and

resist the totalizing forces of 'secular' capitalism.

Modernity and Enchantment

Many themes in contemporary philosophy relate to ideas of alienation, disillusionment,

disembodiment and disenchantment. Does the presence of these themes imply a profound

anxiety in Western thought and life, visible not only in philosophical rhetoric but in fictional

expression as well? One representation of modern malaise is present in Max Weber's notion of

"the disenchantment of the world," an outcome that emerges from the rationalization of all

knowledge.[30] Disenchantment proceeds from long processes of rationalization and

intellectualization which in effect, produces a loss of meaning and value in life. In answer to this

issue, Weber suggests a re-awakening of spiritualism, a "release from the rationalism and

intellectualism of science is the fundamental premise of life in communion with the divine."[31] It

seems as if Weber is arguing that there needs to be space for faith and mystery, even if it is

invented, which ensures a sense of enchantment with life, a sense of charm. The German term

for disenchantment is *Entzauberung,* literally meaning "de-magification," for which Weber

recommends one possible solution: "positive religion."[32] By engaging in positive spirituality,

Weber suggests, we can restore meaning and value to life and address the pressing issue of

disenchantment.

The problem of disenchantment may be seen in the themes within fiction and rhetorical

expression, throughout Western thought. Fear of mystery seems to be, perhaps, related to Kant's

insistence of an objective reality and a "transcendental" knower; fear of a meaningless progression in time may be connected to Hegel's idea of a "logical", teleological movement through history. The tragic loss of self in Hegel's Master Slave dialectic, as well as Marx's notion of alienated labor, point to an anxiety in Western thought which is mirrored in Western narrative expression. In *The Invisible Man,* the unnamed protagonist ends up in a hole in the ground; unable to transcend social impediments, he recedes from the world and fills his lair with hundreds of bulbs of incandescent light. In *The Beautiful and Damned* Anthony Patch's story ends with his spirit broken, while his bank account is newly filled with a 30 million dollar inheritance. Carrie Madenda, in *Sister Carrie,* reaches fame and wealth, only to confront a deep and singular misery which she cannot explain. In each narrative, we see a curious mixture of plentitude and impoverishment, seemingly paralleling the modern spiritual predicament: we live in an age saturated with resources while being impoverished in spirit. Could this sense of malaise be related to the continual popularity of New Age cultural practices? New Agism with its paganist, agrarian nostalgia seems to provide a market answer to a modern tedium. An alarming number of novels end hauntingly, with protagonists trapped, unhappy and half-mad. Considering the problems of disillusionment seen throughout Western literature, and the distinct account of malaise presented by Weber, are we so abundant in resources as to squander spirituality as a source of nourishment? It is easy to point out the excesses of religion, but recognizing the remarkable propulsion it can provide requires further effort. How astonishing, for example, is the life of St Theresa of Avila—who even Simone Beauvoir mentions as an example of religion elevating women, "her self-confidence is inspired by her confidence in God."[33] For St Theresa to have lead an extraordinary life in the Middle Ages, when human flourishing was difficult for most people, especially women, suggests that spirituality and religion hold endless possibilities

for emancipation. Throughout *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nahesi Coats maintains a staunchly materialist attitude, yet checks his own conclusions when confronted by the life of Mable Jones. Jones is an African American woman who, as an adolescent integrates her high school and goes on to become a star student and medical doctor. The astounding achievements of Jones produces a sense of caution for Coates, who questions his materialist stance:

> As she talked of the church, I thought of your grandfather, the one you know, and how his first intellectual adventures were in the recitation of bible passages. I thought of your mother, who did the same. And I thought of my distance from an institution that has, so often, been the only support for our people. I often wonder if in that distance I've missed something, some cosmic notion of hope, some wisdom […] I wondered at this particular moment, because something beyond anything I have ever understood drove Mable Jones to an exceptional life. [34]

Religious spirituality can certainly provide momentum for many people, including women, and from the spiritual crisis that appears to be indicated by Western Philosophy and literature, it might be premature to jettison religion from the realm of intellectual considerations.

Conclusion

The critics of Islamic feminism conduct a comparative analysis of intellectual systems without accounting for historical interaction, political consolidation, or economic developments. They base their arguments on a patriarchy that is not only uniform and universal but is also detached from global economic realities. Islam is used as a definitive designation, referring to specific, often state sourced, interpretations. The history of Islam, however, reveals how the development of theology in the Muslim world has always had a pluralistic dimension, where each community partakes in its own interpretation and fuses local customs into Islamic practice.

Many scholars even argue that individual Muslims can, and should, create their own unique interpretation as part of an active, ongoing conversation with God.[35] In the present day, history also reveals how the disruption of native progresses enabled orthodox readings of cultural legacies, owing to Muslim societies struggling to reach modernity on their own terms while being reminded, at every moment, that modernity is inherently Western[36]. Anita Weiss argues that the issue of women's liberation is inextricably tied to not just cultural, but economic and political realities, a conclusion which urges caution when using terms like Islam in a shorthand manner. That is, without clarifying *whose* Islam is being criticized and admitting that the community is fractured and radically pluralistic. Orientalist scholarship, as Edward Said reveals, is the "intellectual handmaiden for the project of colonialism" and when scholars restrict the problem of women's liberation in the MENA region to cultural origins alone, they obscure the complications resulting from history, politics, and economics. [37]

Anti-theist feminists seem to ignore history when they represent women's liberation as being insulated as a purely cultural problem. They do not attend to the historical fact of centuries of external domination, during which time the development of occupied territories was halted and re-routed in a manner that suited and still suits, the West. The historical fact of the Western world physically occupying the MENA region, as proprietors, requires consideration and analysis to avoid any merging trajectories between feminism and imperialism.

The concern against the critics of Islamic feminism lies in their faith in, and optimism toward, the promises of secularism. They ignore the dubious character of a faithless ideal and espouse a Fukuyamaist notion of secularism when they treat secularism as if it is absolutely and utterly devoid of transcendental qualities. The critics ignore the link between secularism, its "unmistakable cultural origins"[38] and the neatly packaged notion of natural rights, free markets,

and private interest all contained within one ideological entity[39] which creates vast impediments against women's equality.

Another point of concern against the rejection of Islamic feminism is the connection of secularism to globalized, corporate capitalism, and how global capital poses a far more pressing threat to the growth and flourishing of women than any presumed cultural or civilizational clashes. Perhaps sourced in the global regime of capitalism, is the problem of disenchantment, which has awakened a sense of nervousness which has permeated Western thought and life in ways that indicate a truly powerful malaise. Participation in religious practice seems ever-present, whether it undertakes through a deified market or New Ageism. What might be beneficial is to direct this yearning for spirituality toward a feminist solidarity, and mobilize women in a way that is, as yet, unaccomplished.

Ultimately, the critics of Islamic feminism raise concerns that are crucial and worthy of examination, though they neglect any clear, sustained treatment of what is meant by the highly-charged words they use: words like "Islam", "secular" and "feminist" carry powerful resonances. The meaning attached to these words, as they are used by the critics, is partial, uneven and in need of elaboration since their usages highlight certain aspects of life in the MENA region while ignoring much that is significant. This matter of shorthand word usage calls forth the issue of "the master narrative," paralleling the critics' account of life in the MENA region with harmful stereotypes linked to violent interventions. The faith in secularism and the dismissal of global capital, when combined with the definitional shortcomings and imperialist projections laid out by critics of Islamic feminism, suggests that the critics' account is not exactly wrong but profoundly incomplete.

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5 Ahmed, Leyla. "Women and Gender in Islam." New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. In pages 41-63, the chapter titled "Women and the Rise of Islam, Ahmed argues that the advent of Islam did not simply improve or deteriorate the position of women—suggesting that the situation is far too complex to be rendered in such simple terms.

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