Do Muslim Women Need Freedom? Traditionalist Feminisms and Transnational Politics

Serene J. Khader

Brooklyn College

*P*ost–September 11 cultural discourses present the fate of Muslim women as tied to the fate of civilization itself. Muslim women are oppressed by a barbaric, medieval religion, and "Islamland" represents a sort of final frontier in humanity's struggle for freedom from the bonds of the past.[1] A large body of scholarship on Muslim women (Alexander 2006; Gurel 2009; Mahmood 2005; Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002; Maira 2009; Razakh 2008, Volpp 2011) argues that this framing has made it easy to translate feminist sentiments into support for imperialist projects — ranging from war to the marginalization of Muslim populations in the West.[2] Feminisms that are easily co-opted into such projects often place a high value on secularism and antitraditionalism. As Sherene Razakh puts it, "the secular/religious divide . . . functions as a color line, marking the difference between the modern, enlightened West, and people of color, notably Muslims" (2008, 148). If religious

1. Abu-Lughod (2013) coins this term to poke fun at the way North Americans homogenize Muslims.
2. Transnational feminists argue that putative feminist sentiment was one reason for Western popular support of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. They do not claim that "saving" Muslim women was ever the U.S. government's primary objective. For a discussion of the subtle ways feminists and the George W. Bush administration became strange bedfellows after September 11, see Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002.

traditions both mark the absence of modernity and cause women's oppression, feminism appears to authorize the destruction of "other" traditions.

Yet feminists cannot refuse to criticize religious or traditional dictates. Feminism requires a moral critique of, and a political response to, sexist oppression. People often see women's inferiority as part of their religious or cultural inheritance. This suggests a tension between feminism and opposition to imperialism. On its face, anti-imperialist skepticism about secularism and antitraditionalism seems to require suspending moral judgment about women's oppression. Adding to this worry, many anti-imperialist feminist texts suggest that the solution is to abandon normative judgment as such. Some anti-imperialist feminists caution that moral judgments are inextricable from imperialist notions of "progressive and backward, superior and inferior, higher and lower" (Mahmood 2005, 198) and that what we need is "universalism without normativity" (Abu-Lughod 2013).[3] This article develops a way out of the dilemma that pits feminist normative critique against tradition, suggesting that a critique of women's oppression is compatible with a much greater degree of respect for traditional and religious beliefs than is often supposed.

I argue that feminism and traditionalism are not necessarily at odds with one another. The belief that they are arises from a mistaken sense that the inheritedness of practices determines their oppressiveness to women. The mistaken view that externally dictated practices are inherently objectionable stems from a value that I call "Enlightenment freedom." I show that, although both liberal and anti-imperialist feminist theorists connect feminism to Enlightenment freedom, the link is conceptually unnecessary. I propose that feminism is opposition to sexist oppression and that the oppressiveness of practices stems from their having certain objectionable *effects* — irrespective of their perceived origin. The upshot of my analysis is a feminism that is more compatible with opposition to imperialism. The traditions of "others" no longer seem fundamentally at odds with feminism, and feminism turns out to be compatible with some worldviews that take certain inherited dictates to be unquestionable. I draw on the moral epistemologies of Islamic feminists to demonstrate

---

3. See Bangstad 2011 for an argument that Mahmood's position slides into moral relativism. Abu-Lughod and Mahmood express normative commitments to anti-imperialism and feminism, so it is unclear whether their critiques of normativity are consistent with the rest of their arguments. Razakh is a notable exception among the anti-imperialist scholars of Muslim women in the care she takes to demonstrate that her position remains normative.

that opposition to sexist oppression grounded in traditionalist worldviews is possible.

My argument unfolds as follows: First, I explain what Enlightenment freedom — the value grounding antitraditionalism and secularism — *is*, why it has been seen as promoting imperialism, and why it appears necessary for feminism. Second, I show how the idea that traditions are inherently patriarchal, surprisingly shared by many liberal and transnational feminists, motivates the view that feminism requires Enlightenment freedom. In the next section, I consider an alternative view that traditions are only problematic to the extent that they prevent individuals from questioning their social roles. I contend that this alternative view retains vestiges of Enlightenment freedom and is unnecessarily hostile to what I call "metaphysically traditionalist" worldviews, that is, worldviews that hold some inherited dictates to be beyond question. Finally, I argue that concerns about imperialist antitraditionalism are better addressed by an understanding of feminism as opposition to sexist oppression. I show how the moral epistemologies of some Islamic feminist movements demonstrate the possibility of feminisms grounded in traditionalist or nonsecular worldviews and discuss the implications for Western feminist approaches toward "other" women.

Three notes about the scope of my argument are in order before I continue. First, I use the terms "religious" and "traditional" relatively interchangeably. I do so not because the terms are interchangeable in all contexts but because a single shared feature makes them problematic for feminists who enjoin "other" women to come into modernity. This shared feature is the perception of inherited external dictatedness. In other words, traditional and religious practices are both problematic for many feminists because they gain their authority from a communally recognized source that is antecedent to and outside any individual agent. Second, I focus on Muslim women not because my argument applies exclusively to them but rather because the scholarship on them is an important site of feminist theoretical conversations about the relationship between secularism and imperialism. My ultimate argument that it is possible to be a traditionalist and a feminist can be logically extended to apply to those who subscribe to other worldviews that place a high value on traditional adherence. Third, by "secularism," I mean the idea that human beings should not structure their lives according to the demands of religion. Secularism as it concerns the relationship between religious institutions and the state is outside the scope of my analysis.

ENLIGHTENMENT FREEDOM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Value for liberation from tradition appears to some liberal feminists as women's only hope and to some transnational feminists as the cause of imperialism. Liberal feminist public intellectual Ayaan Hirsi Ali, in her vaunted memoir *Infidel*, describes her literal and metaphorical journey from Africa and the Middle East to Europe. She describes having been a victim of female genital mutilation, having worn the hijab, and having developed sympathies for conservative Islam during a youth spent in Kenya, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia. She describes having moved to the Netherlands, where she read voraciously and became an author and politician. She also wrote the film *Submission*, after which she received death threats and saw her collaborator Theo Van Gogh violently murdered. Her life's lesson is, in her words, that "it is possible to free oneself from one's faith, to examine it critically, and to understand the way in which faith itself is at the root of oppression" (Hirsi Ali 2007, 350). Not only is faith itself oppressive, but clinging to faith is Muslims' way of miring themselves in prehistory. "I moved from the world of faith to the world of reason … We in the West would be wrong to prolong the pain of that transition unnecessarily, by elevating cultures full of bigotry and hatred toward women to the stature of respectable alternative ways of life" (348).

French philosopher and public intellectual Elisabeth Badinter advocates banning headscarves in public schools in strikingly similar terms. In a pamphlet cowritten with Régis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, Elizabeth De Fontenay, and Catherine Kintzler, she writes,

> To tolerate the Islamic veil is not to accept a free being (in the form of a young girl); it is to open the door to those who decided, once and for all, to try to bend her to their wills. Instead of offering her a space of freedom, you send her the message that there is no difference between the school and her father's house. … It is no longer the equality of the sexes, or free decision making — that is the law of France … [You want] a school in which each student is always reminded of her parents, riveted to her roots — a school of social predestination. (Badinter et al. 1989; translation mine)

Badinter refers to a number of different justifications in the passage, but the last sentence is particularly noteworthy. "Being riveted to [one's] roots" is presented as incompatible with freedom, so much so that it is equivalent to being bent to another's will. What (liberal) education is supposed to

offer is the ability to question veiling (which Badinter casts as oppressive[4] largely *because it is traditional*[5]). The central worry seems to be that traditions — embodied here in the homes of "others" — are hotbeds of patriarchy. The only way to protect "other" women from patriarchy is to reduce the power of their roots over them.

Hirsi Ali and Badinter both suggest that adherence to a faith or a tradition is incompatible with two other values: feminism and freedom. More precisely, they argue that traditions promote women's subordination by making a certain type of freedom unavailable. Both seem to define freedom as something that simply cannot be possessed by a person who adheres to a tradition or a faith. For Hirsi Ali, a free person is one who recognizes that "faith itself is the source of oppression"; for Badinter, even being "reminded" of one's tradition by seeing others follow it constitutes a "riveting." Hirsi Ali and Badinter use the term "freedom" in a loose, nontechnical way. If we wish to map their concerns onto the language of contemporary political philosophy, we can see them as advancing a variant of positive freedom or autonomy. Positive notions of freedom allow that impediments to freedom can exist within the self. Some positive concepts of freedom posit a collective self and thus allow that the self-regarding desires of individuals undermine the freedom of the collective self (Berlin 1969), Hirsi Ali's and Badinter's variant limits the boundaries of the self to the individual psyche. For Hirsi Ali and Badinter, an individual agent's desire to follow tradition prevents her from executing and excavating her true will. Traditional practices that surround the agent are dangerous to the extent that these processes implant barriers to freedom in the minds of individual agents.

Because part of what human communities do is engage in shared practices that dictate and shape modes of belief and behavior, Hirsi Ali's and Badinter's conception of freedom will strike many as implausible. It is thus worth asking why they subscribe to it. The answer, I believe, is their submerged descriptive assumption that only "others" have traditions. Homi Bhabha (1999) ironically calls the idea that Western cultures are not cultures "liberalism's sacred cow." The idea lurks in Badinter's description of what is wrong with veiling in public schools; it is difficult to imagine her suggesting that encountering girls with

---

4. My criticism of Badinter does not require a stance about the oppressiveness of veiling. My point is ultimately that whether veiling (or any other practice) is oppressive does not depend on whether it is traditional — and that this is what Badinter misunderstands.

5. The girls around whom the hijab controversy began came from families that discouraged veiling, but they themselves saw veiling as externally dictated (Scott 2010).

uncovered heads in school, or encountering French cheese in the school cafeteria for that matter, would "rivet" white French teens to their roots. Indeed, Badinter argues elsewhere that (white) teenagers dying their hair blue are rejecting tradition but hijab wearers are not (quoted in Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002, 352). In Hirsi Ali's stronger iteration of the assumption that only "others" have traditions, the traditions of "others" are synonymous with patriarchy. The move is almost metonymic — the part stands for the whole. Non-Western cultures are defined by their "bigotry and hatred towards women."

For purposes of analytical clarity, I give the value that Hirsi Ali and Badinter are describing a name: "Enlightenment freedom." Enlightenment freedom is a form of positive freedom according to which the acceptance of traditional dictates constitutes an impediment to self-realization. This value is conceptually distinct from the belief that only "others" have traditions. However, the value is likely to be unappealing to those who see the inheriting of external dictates as an inescapable part of all human socialization. I name the value "Enlightenment freedom" partly to make clear that it is not the only possible conception of freedom or one to which all, or even most, liberals subscribe. I will return to this point in the section on "Moderating the Feminist Relationship to Tradition," but Hirsi Ali's and Badinter's understanding of freedom, though widespread in popular culture, is idiosyncratic in contemporary political philosophy.

A second reason I name it "Enlightenment freedom" is to make clear that it borrows from, even if it is not identical to, the ideas of some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European thinkers who saw tradition as quelling human freedom. Immanuel Kant's "What Is Enlightenment?" draws on some of the very same intuitions that seem to motivate Hirsi Ali and Badinter — even if, as I will argue in the next section, Kant stigmatizes traditional adherence far less promiscuously than they do.[6] In this essay, Kant takes religious authorities who demand unthinking adherence as the enemies of freedom par excellence. Traditional authorities demand obedience and discourage independent thought as a way of maintaining power. To be free, then, is to refuse to obey simply because one has been told to obey; it is to excavate one's own will and reasons rather than act according to reasons given from

---

6. Though Kant shares with Hirsi Ali and Badinter a sense that being thought for by others is incompatible with freedom, he does not pit traditional adherence against freedom quite as starkly. Kant leaves open the possibility of following a tradition for one's own reasons, where Ali and Badinter suggest that following a tradition just is the failure to possess reasons of one's own.

outside (Kant 2010). Offering a different justification for a similar idea, John Stuart Mill argued that traditions stifle the expression of human individuality: "Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing" (2002, 64). Third, the term "Enlightenment freedom" highlights the fact that many of its exponents, such as Hirsi Ali, support the teleological view that contemporary Western culture represents the epitome of human progress.

The same value that Hirsi Ali and Badinter see as grounding feminism is seen by transnational feminists as causing imperialism. Transnational feminists suggest that vocabularies of freedom and liberation have allowed concern for women to become a pretext for what they see as imperialist acts — ranging from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Abu-Lughod 2002, 2013; Alexander 2006; Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002; Razakh 2008), to the denial of civil liberties to Muslims living in the West (Maira 2009; Razakh 2008), to the rendering of public institutions inaccessible to Muslims (Mahmood and Hirschkind 2002; Razakh 2008; Scott 2010; Volpp 2011), to the desire to eradicate Muslim women's movements (Mahmood 2005). Although they do not explicitly define words such as "freedom," "free will," and "liberal imaginary," their descriptions of the negative consequences of overvaluing freedom suggest that they have Enlightenment freedom, or something like it, in mind.

Saba Mahmood offers the most extended treatment of the view that value for freedom encourages Western imperialism toward Muslims. Her argument begins from observations about a Salafist women's movement in Cairo, through which women transmit religious teachings to other women. The salient feature of the *da'wa* movement, for Mahmood, is the idea that traditions and "pious practices [are] scaffolding" (2005, 148). Taking very seriously the meaning of Islam as "submission,"[7] these women take divine dictates to be beyond question. Debates within the movement are always over the content of what is dictated, not whether what is dictated is worth doing. The ineffability of divine commands means that the significance of religious practices can often only be understood *after* one has made habits from them; attempting to rationally weigh their costs and benefits before engaging in them is not

---

7. I thank Bat Ami Bar-On for pointing out to me that Mahmood's women are trying to avoid a performative contradiction.

only impious, it is fruitless and prevents the practices from doing their work. For example, Nama, a da'wa participant, describes having felt hypocritical when she started veiling because she did not feel "shyness" in her heart. However, according to her, "you must first wear the veil because it is God's command, and then, with time, your inside learns to feel shy without a veil, and if you take it off, your entire being feels uncomfortable about it" (157). Mahmood argues that this emphasis on unquestioning adherence to tradition is what makes Western feminists unable to respect the da'wa movement. She seems to understand freedom to be incompatible with the belief that traditional dictates are worth following, and even more incompatible with the incorporation of traditional dictates into the self.

Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) also sees value for freedom as promoting Western imperialism toward Muslims. She argues that the rhetoric surrounding the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq presented Afghan women as lacking any underlying attachment to their religion or cultural traditions. Afghan women were longing to "throw off" their burqas, waiting for Westerners to liberate them from the shackles of religion. According to Abu-Lughod, this notion of freedom, in addition to promoting imperialism, cannot accept that "humans are social beings, always raised in certain social and historical contexts, and belonging to particular communities that shape their desires and understandings of the world" (2002, 787). This critique of freedom implies an understanding of freedom as incompatible with acceptance of external dictates. For Abu-Lughod, those who value freedom embrace a questionable social ontology. They deny the fact that all of us inherit values and practices and thus cannot understand the damage that can be wrought by destroying traditions.

Abu-Lughod and Mahmood worry that value for freedom breeds a certain type of moral insensitivity. This type of insensitivity makes it difficult to perceive the harms to "others" that can come from destroying their traditions. As Mahmood puts it, the idea that all women desire freedom conceals "the responsibility that [she as a feminist] incur[s] for the destruction of life forms" (2005, 198). For Mahmood, value for freedom encourages moral insensitivity through two mechanisms. First, if desire for freedom is naturalized, it may seem that all women are yearning to be free of their traditions — that the destruction of tradition is something that they want. To use an image from Uma Narayan, value for freedom from tradition may create the view that women who adhere to traditional dictates are "prisoners of patriarchy" — chafing at traditions

and longing for their elimination. This concern motivates Abu-Lughod's comments about the American misapprehension that Afghan women were waiting to throw off their burqas. Second, insensitivity to the harms of cultural destruction may manifest as the view that, whether women *want* freedom from their traditions or not, they would be better off if their traditions were destroyed. Mahmood expresses this concern when she suggests that feminists would want the da'wa women to learn to see their traditions as preventing genuine will formation. Abu-Lughod's and Mahmood's criticisms would not stick against all conceptions of freedom, but they do apply to Enlightenment freedom.

TRADITIONS AS INHERENTLY PATRIARCHAL: WHY FEMINISM SEEMS TO NEED ENLIGHTENMENT FREEDOM

If valuing Enlightenment freedom justifies promiscuous destruction of "other" lifeworlds, an anti-imperialist feminism must find its grounding in another value. But extricating Enlightenment freedom from feminism is easier said than done. A single fact about the world threatens the possibility of a feminism not founded in Enlightenment freedom: people often see women's subjugation as traditionally dictated. Is it possible to take an affirmative or neutral stance toward traditional adherence without becoming an apologist for patriarchy? Transnational feminists have often attempted to answer this question by reminding us that what are called "traditions" are political products — often of colonial marginalization (Abu-Lughod 2002; Jaggar 2005; Narayan 1997; Nzegwu 2006; Phillips 2009; Volpp 2011). For instance, Narayan argues that *sati* (widow immolation) only achieved the status of cultural practice in India through the British colonial fascination. But this type of answer does not vitiate the feminist need to criticize traditions. Although it is certainly true that imperialism has deepened existing and created new patriarchal practices, it is certainly not their only source. Even if it were, it might not matter — because many people *believe* that their traditions demand the subordination of women. It is unclear that there is an authenticity criterion that allows sorting "true" from false traditions. A view or practice can gain the status of a traditional or religious dictate merely from being widely perceived as such — regardless of whether this perception is based on a selective or distorted history.

Enlightenment liberal feminists are thus responding to a genuine problem when they cling to Enlightenment freedom. As Sindre

Bangstad (2011, 42–43) points out in a critique of Mahmood, feminism has to be a normative doctrine in order to be anything at all; feminism is literally meaningless if it is compatible with all dictates and practices. Hirsi Ali and Badinter see straightforward rejection of relativism as an advantage of their view; if "imperialism" is a bullet feminists just have to bite, so be it. Some transnational feminists have inadvertently buttressed this type of Enlightenment liberal self-satisfaction by expressing skepticism toward the idea of normativity itself. For instance, although they claim to eschew moral relativism and political passivity, Abu-Lughod and Mahmood also claim, somewhat contradictorily, that normative judgment is indistinguishable from imperialism.[8] We thus seem to face a choice: embrace Enlightenment freedom and criticize sexism or embrace sexism and criticize Enlightenment freedom. It is difficult to formulate an anti-imperialist response to this dilemma, but luckily, it is a false dilemma. It arises out of a questionable assumption that transnational and liberal feminists share: the assumption that traditions are defined by patriarchality.

Perhaps the most famous defense of the view that feminism requires a critique of traditions is Susan Moller Okin's essay "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" (1999). Okin argues that policies designed to preserve cultures can undermine gender justice. Although Okin's initial argument restricted itself to questions about toleration of the patriarchal practices of (mostly immigrant) minority cultures within liberal states, her response to her critics defends the general idea that the subjugation of women is wrong — regardless of who practices it. She argues against the idea that "others'" support for patriarchal gender roles *justifies* those roles. I believe this normative claim is correct, but her descriptive claims are problematic in ways that are relevant to our discussion of how the opposition between feminism and tradition gets produced. Okin has a particular view of the source of patriarchal oppression. For her, all cultures have patriarchal pasts — but "other" cultures are closer to those origins.[9]

The idea that the *origins* of Western culture are patriarchal and that "other" cultures remain so suggests a particular understanding of the

---

8. Although I do not believe this is her intent, M. Jacqui Alexander's (2006) discussion of Afghan women also contains language that is easily read as repudiating normative argument. She aligns universalism with imperialism and indicts the Feminist Majority for "latent universalism within relativism."

9. Many of Okin's critics understand Okin to hold that Western cultures are not patriarchal. However, Okin's stance is better understood as ranking Western and non-Western cultures in terms of degree of patriarchy. She is not even entirely consistent on this point, as she mentions parenthetically that some non-Western cultures have worked to eradicate patriarchy.

relationship between tradition and patriarchy. Patriarchy belongs to a past shared by Western and non-Western cultures; it is just a past in which "other" cultures remain more stuck and out of which Western cultures have progressed. Okin is quite explicit on this point. "Most cultures are patriarchal, then, and many (though not all) of the cultural minorities that claim group rights are more patriarchal than the surrounding culture" (1999, 17). "While virtually all of the world's cultures have distinctly patriarchal pasts — some, mostly but by no means exclusively, Western liberal cultures — have departed further than others" (16).

The logical coherence of Okin's view rests on the idea that *what makes the past the past* is its patriarchality. If her understanding of the past were merely temporal, the idea of Western culture as further removed from the past would be unintelligible — all cultures in 1999 would be situated similarly with regard to pastness. Because traditions typically gain their authority from their extension into the past, what makes something a tradition for Okin seems to be, at least partly, its association with patriarchy. Okin argues that a central *purpose* of traditions is to control women (1999, 13) and cites no examples of traditional practices that are not sexist. She consistently describes existing sexist practices in the West as vestigial and attempts to mitigate them as openings into the future — rather than, say, developments of nonpatriarchal elements within cultures.

This nexus of associations between the past, patriarchality, and tradition does not occur at the level of explicit argument in Okin and is not logically necessary for her defense of moral universalism. Yet the idea that traditions are almost by definition patriarchal helps us make sense of Okin's more imperialist statements. In a sentence that seems to embody exactly the insensitivity to traditional destruction Abu-Lughod and Mahmood worry about, Okin remarks that women may not have an interest in preservation of patriarchal cultures and sometimes women "*might* be better off if the cultures they were born into were either became extinct" (1999, 22). In the same sentence, she argues that it is preferable to reform rather than extinguish traditions, but the glibness of the remark has struck many transnational feminist commentators. Okin's very framing of the debate primarily in terms of whether cultures ought to be preserved suggests the attribution of a strong patriarchal valence to tradition.

One might expect transnational feminist scholars of Islam to reject this characterization of tradition, but Mahmood accepts it. As a result, rather than disputing the idea that traditions are patriarchal, she ends up skeptical about whether patriarchy is really bad. As we have already seen,

Mahmood's ethnography emphasizes the fact that Egyptian revivalist women see submission to traditional, conventional, and/or divine dictates as the path to self-actualization. Beginning from the assumption that respect for the da'wa movement is a good thing, Mahmood argues that Western feminists cannot respect the da'wa women *because they are feminists*.[10] But this conclusion is somewhat bizarre. To see why, we need a clearer picture of the traditional dictates to which the da'wa movement prescribes unquestioning deference. Among these traditional dictates are that women's capacity to arouse men is so strong as to justify a prohibition on mixed-gender worship (Mahmood 2005, 65), that women should refrain from divorcing even immoral husbands (69), that women should either not interact with unknown men at all or severely limit their interaction with them (107), that women should submit to their husbands' authority (177), and that unmarried women should not protest scorn they receive from others (172–73). Also among these dictates are the ideas that women's education is necessary and worth pursuing (101), that there is a higher moral court of appeal than the commands of one's husband (180), and that weeping, covering one's head, and prostrating oneself during prayer help one become closer to God (147). According to Mahmood, the reason feminists have difficulty respecting women who submit to these dictates is that they are indebted to "an imaginary of freedom." Interestingly, Mahmood uses the terms "feminism" and "liberalism" (and also, occasionally, the words "secularism" and "individualism") nearly interchangeably. This is curious but coherent because she sees feminism as requiring the view that women need *liberation from* oppressive traditions and norms.[11] What she calls "liberalism" and feminism are so conceptually intertwined that Mahmood suggests that feminists who question value for freedom must become skeptical of feminism itself.[12]

But Mahmood's conclusion comes too quickly. Note that there is a key difference between the two sets of dictates I described in the previous paragraph — the former subordinate women, whereas the latter do not.

---

10. The inability to accept women who do not value freedom from sexist oppression stems, according to Mahmood, "from the dual character of feminism as analytical and politically prescriptive project….freedom is normative to feminism as it is to liberalism" (2005, 10).

11. Feminism requires a questionable liberal value that goes by various names in the book — ranging from "the concept of individual autonomy" to "agency as the ability to realize one's interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles" (Mahmood 2005, 11). See also the quotation in note 10.

12. Mahmood (2005, 191) ends the book by saying that, if feminist solidarity continues to exist at all, it must involve relinquishing certainty about what feminism opposes.

Once we recognize this, a logical puzzle emerges. How, if Mahmood mentions features of the da'wa movement that are not sexist, does Mahmood arrive at the claim that feminism is incompatible with traditional adherence altogether — that feminism requires the view that traditions, and not just sexist ones, are impediments? The answer, I believe, is by making the same move that Okin makes — building patriarchality into her definition of tradition. This comes out most clearly in Mahmood's indictment of the work of Janice Boddy (1989), whom Mahmood sets up as the paradigm of objectionable Western feminist scholarship. Mahmood writes about Boddy, "When women's actions seem to reinscribe what appear to be 'instruments of their own oppression,' social analysts can point to moments of disruption of, and articulation of points of opposition to, male authority ... Agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles, individual or collective" (2005, 8).

Yet Boddy's explicit argument does not stigmatize custom or tradition quite as promiscuously as Mahmood suggests. Boddy describes the healing and spiritual practices of the centuries-old, women-dominated *zar* cult in Sudan. Boddy's explicit claim is that the zar cult is an arena in which women can assert their value against the background of a sexist dominant ideology. Does this really amount to the view that feminism means value for the rejection of "custom" and "tradition"? Only if opposition to sexism requires flouting, or stepping outside of, tradition. But Boddy seems to show the exact opposite — that some traditions are feminist vehicles, even if they are restricted to certain spaces. After all, the practices of the zar cult are *themselves traditions*. In another example, Mahmood argues that feminists will have difficulty understanding the behavior of a woman named Abir, who tries to get her husband to allow her to develop her personal relationship with God by exhorting him to become a better Muslim. Mahmood argues that feminists will struggle to handle the fact that Abir's exhortation relies on the "perfection" of a religious tradition and occurs within "Islamic norms" (2005, 79). Mahmood fails to make clear whether the problem here is that the tradition subjugates Abir or that it is a tradition at all.

Mahmood concludes from her inquiry that we should perhaps give up on feminism if we want to oppose imperialism. Okin concludes from hers that if we must be called "imperialists," so be it. But for the purposes of our discussion of Enlightenment freedom, what they agree about is more important than what they disagree about. They both

attribute an inherently patriarchal valence to tradition and, because of this, see the perception of tradition as an impediment, especially when its dictates are internalized (or Enlightenment freedom, in other words) as necessary for feminism.

MODERATING THE FEMINIST RELATIONSHIP TO TRADITION: REFLEXIVE ROLE DISTANCE

We need a normative grounding for feminism that does not attribute a negative valence to traditional dictates *because they are traditional*. Liberal rehabilitations of communitarianism show promise in developing such a grounding. Partly in response to communitarians, contemporary liberal theorists develop conceptions of freedom that acknowledge that inherited beliefs and practices can add meaning and value to human lives.[13] However, the existence of patriarchal inherited practices has made the tension between communitarianism and feminism more difficult to resolve than that between communitarianism and liberalism.[14]

   Liberals who accept communitarianism's social ontology have argued that there is inherent value not in *rejecting* traditions but in being able to ask *whether one wants to* reject them. Like Hirsi Ali and Badinter, these contemporary liberals are inspired by Kant's argument that tradition can interfere with the living of a life by one's own reasons. However, rather than taking traditional adherence as definitionally hostile to the having of one's own reasons, as proponents of Enlightenment freedom do, these contemporary liberals claim that only certain subjective relationships to tradition are incompatible with freedom.[15] One can have one's own reasons for adhering to tradition just in case one is able to raise questions about the extent to which one identifies with them. Will Kymlicka, a major exponent of this contemporary liberal view, argues that, although traditions can be important to individuals' flourishing and development of self-respect, individuals need the ability to reflectively evaluate their relationship to traditions. As he puts it, "people can stand back and assess

13. Late twentieth-century liberalism includes a variety of conceptions of freedom and autonomy that make autonomy compatible with adherence to tradition. Rawls's *Political Liberalism* (1996) is the most famous example. See also feminist rehabilitations of the value of autonomy by Friedman 2003, Khader 2016, and Meyers 1987.

14. See Barclay 2000 for a discussion of the tension between the feminist desire to acknowledge social construction and the feminist desire to oppose patriarchy.

15. Kant and contemporary liberals generally disagree on criteria for what would make a view genuinely one's own, however, with Kant requiring autonomous action to be consistent with the dictates of reason.

moral values and traditional ways of life and should be given, not only the liberal right to do so, but also the social conditions which enhance this capacity" (1996, 72). Kymlicka sets high standards for what constitutes the attainment of this capacity: "no end or goal should be exempt from possible re-examination" (1991, 52).

Kymlicka's view seems at first blush to preserve the critique of traditions allowed by Enlightenment freedom without accepting its implausible social ontology. Like Hirsi Ali and Badinter, Kymlicka thinks it is important for individuals to be able to question traditional dictates. Unlike Hirsi Ali and Badinter, however, he does not suppose that being *uninfluenced by* traditions is possible. For adherents of Enlightenment freedom, traditions prevent the agent from developing her own views about how to act merely by offering guidance that originates outside the agent. For Kymlicka, in contrast, traditions have to do more than just be traditions to discourage autonomy. They must discourage or prevent individuals from being able to reflectively evaluate traditional dictates. It may thus seem that he allows a grounding for feminism that is not fundamentally hostile to traditional adherence.

Yet even if Kymlicka's view renders some traditional adherence objectionable, it is far from clear that the forms of traditional adherence that his conception of autonomy renders objectionable tracks *feminist* intuitions. For instance, Kymlicka's view suggests that traditional adherence is unfree in any case in which the agent cannot, or refuses to, raise the question of whether she wants to identify with a particular tradition. Kymlicka's view renders unfree, for instance, the case of a person in a society that values filial duty who is incapable of asking whether she could identify as anything but the child of her parents and the case of a person who cannot countenance the question of whether her religiously forged dietary preferences are appropriate.[16] We may (or may not) find such views objectionable for a variety of reasons, but it is not obvious that such reasons would be *feminist*.

If the value of reflexive distance is going to sort patriarchal traditions from nonpatriarchal ones, we need to say more about the *types* of traditions from which people need reflective distance. Seyla Benhabib, another rehabilitator of communitarianism, suggests a potential feminist addendum to Kymlicka's view. Although Benhabib agrees that we need the capacity for reflective distance from all traditional dictates, she also

---

16. For a more extended discussion of the implications of Kymlicka's insistence that autonomy requires each of an agent's commitments to be subject to scrutiny, see Christman 1991.

identifies a more specific problem for feminists: communitarians need to "distinguish their emphasis on constitutive communities from an endorsement of social conformism, authoritarianism, and, from the standpoint of women, patriarchalism." She thus suggests that it is particularly important to develop a capacity to criticize social *roles,* or to ask whether I am separable from what F. H. Bradley refers to as "my station and its duties" (Benhabib 1992, 74). According to a view like the one Benhabib describes in this passage, the subset of traditions that are problematic for feminists are those that make it impossible to question one's inherited social role. This resonates heavily with Okin's more moderate comments in "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" Women need to be able to question "our place within our culture," especially "to the extent that our culture is patriarchal" (Okin 1999, 22).

Can this reflexive role distance view move us beyond the dilemma that pits feminism against anti-imperialist critiques of secularism and antitraditionalism? Recall that the anti-imperialist feminists whose concerns I am trying to accommodate hold that feminists promote imperialism through their inability to apprehend the harms of traditional destruction. Benhabib's view very clearly rejects the idea that the destruction of traditions always benefits women. Instead, what needs to be eradicated are specific traditional forms and dictates — those that prevent people from asking whether they want to identify with traditions, and, more specifically, whether they want to accept their traditionally defined roles. Hirsi Ali and Badinter are committed to a much stronger view — one that sees that women benefit even by the eradication of traditions that allow the questioning of social roles; even a chosen "faith" belongs to Hirsi Ali's "world of faith," and merely being "reminded" that some members of one's religion want women to cover their hair is, for Badinter, an objectionable "riveting to one's roots." Benhabib's view offers a principled reason to reject such views — being exposed to, or being expected to follow, traditions is not itself harmful.

However, when we look closely at the worldviews that transnational feminists are interested in protecting, it is unclear whether Benhabib's view is sufficiently accommodating. Up to this point, I have focused on the extent to which theorists such as Abu-Lughod and Mahmood defend worldviews that find meaning in practices that are inherited and externally dictated. But when we look closely at some of the putatively Islamic practices they want to defend, we notice that many of them have a feature beyond being seen as externally dictated. They appear to their practitioners as worth doing *because* they are externally dictated. In many

of these cases, questioning the inherited external dictate would prevent the dictate from having its intended effect on the agent. To distinguish them from worldviews that merely value traditional adherence, let us call worldviews to which one cannot adhere unless one begins from unquestioning acceptance of certain dictates *metaphysically traditionalist.* For an example of metaphysical traditionalism, recall that Mahmood's da'wa women believe that one can only understand the meaning of certain dictates by engaging in them. One becomes modest *through* veiling. Asking whether one wants to veil, or whether female modesty is the right end, is inconsistent with veiling for the *right* reason. Veiling for the right reason means beginning from trust of the divine will and desire to surrender to it, so evaluating the practice without identifying with it is impossible. Religious worldviews are not the only metaphysically traditionalist worldviews, but they are particularly good candidates because divine will is easy to understand as something one is not in a position to assess one's relationship to. Religion is seen by many to require faith precisely because reflection cannot provide reasons for adherence or nonadherence.

Benhabib's reflexive role distance is incompatible with respect for metaphysically traditionalist worldviews, or at least worldviews that are metaphysically traditionalist with regard to social roles. Consider Mahmood's example of a woman who is socially ostracized because she is unmarried. A woman named Nadia counsels her that the virtue of *sabr,* bearing hardship correctly, means that she should not try to persuade others that her marital status is irrelevant to her social value. For Nadia, the reason one must accept suffering rather than question unjust social conventions is that "divine causality ... cannot be deciphered by human intelligence" (Mahmood 2005, 172–73). In other words, in cases of disidentification with what are seen as religiously dictated roles, the agent is supposed to work harder to identify with social roles. Whereas Benhabib would argue that it is important for the woman to be able to decide whether she identifies with a doctrine that attributes lesser status to unmarried women, the da'wa women's worldview says that this is a type of hubris that gets in the way of leading a pious life.

I believe Mahmood is wrong that feminists should respect this particular metaphysically traditionalist view. The idea that unmarried women should believe they are damaged goods or do not deserve social benefits is simply incompatible with feminism. But Mahmood may still be pointing out something important — that *some* metaphysically traditionalist

worldviews are worthy of respect. Further, it is not obvious that the metaphysically traditionalist ostracism of unmarried women is antifeminist *because it discourages reflexive role distance*. Let us consider another example of a view that is metaphysically traditionalist about a social role — a view that cannot be embraced together with reflexive role distance. Islamic feminists have devoted significant energy to discussing the type of love between husbands and wives dictated by the Qur'an. For instance, Asma Barlas (2002, 162) argues that part of the Islamically dictated role of a husband is repudiating sexual violence . It is not difficult to imagine such a conception of husbandhood being plugged into a metaphysically traditionalist view similar to the da'wa women's. A man may believe that it is not up to him to ask whether he wants to believe sexual violence is wrong, or whether he wants to believe the verses of the Qur'an that stipulate it are true. Such a man lacks Benhabib's reflexive role distance, but it is far from clear that his views are antifeminist.

If I am correct that such a man's views are compatible with feminism, two related points come to light. The first is that the reflexive role distance view does not pick out the feature of traditionalist views and practices that determines whether they are objectionable *to feminists*. On the reflexive role distance view, the content of roles is irrelevant; what matters is a person's ability to raise the question of whether the roles are worth fulfilling. Like a feminism founded in Enlightenment freedom, a feminism founded in reflexive role distance identifies the *external dictatedness* of practices or views as the problem; indeed, reflexive role distance may be seen as just a weak variant of Enlightenment freedom. The difference between Enlightenment freedom and reflexive role distance is just the stringency of the requirements for objectionable dictatedness. Second, the possibility of the externally dictated and inherited feminist view suggests that the *perceived source* of a view or practice is not what determines its compatibility with feminism. Assuming that patriarchality is a defining feature of traditions, á la Okin and Mahmood, prevents us from apprehending this fact. I now turn to developing a view that does not locate feminist moral concern in the inheritedness of practices — one that calls feminists to object to practices on the basis of their *effects*. My alternative view allows feminist respect for some metaphysically traditionalist worldviews and thus does a better job than reflexive role distance at responding to anti-imperialist concerns. It refuses to suggest that secular or antitraditionalist worldviews are the only ones hospitable to feminism.

FROM INHERITED SOURCES TO OPPRESSIVE EFFECTS: MAKING CONCEPTUAL SPACE FOR TRADITIONALIST FEMINISMS

Up to this point, I have relied on our intuitions to determine which practices are objectionable to feminists. However, to see why feminists should worry more about the effects of dictates and practices than their sources, we need an explicit definition of feminism. The early work of bell hooks offers what I hope is a noncontroversial definition: feminism is opposition to sexist oppression.[17] According to Marilyn Frye's (1983) now-classic essay, oppression is a system of barriers that subordinates one group to another. An oppressive practice must have three features: its objects must be targeted on the basis of social group membership, and it must be part of a system or network of forces that work together to produce similar effects, and subordination of the targeted group must be one of these effects. So, for example, the expectation that North American women wear high heels is oppressive because it applies only to women, it is one of many expectations that tie women's access to social benefits to their sexual availability to men, and the overall function of this system is to subject women to sexual violence, reduce their ability to participate as equals in public life, and so on. Of course, this example presupposes that freedom from violence and participation in public life are goods to which people deserve access as a matter of justice. To find out whether sexist oppression is happening in any case, we need to know which goods are important. It is out of the scope of this article to create a complete list, but my ultimate position does not depend on generating one. What is important for my position is that Enlightenment freedom need not be seen as one of the goods to which human beings are entitled as a matter of justice. If it is possible to imagine gender-just social conditions under which human beings are not encouraged to abandon tradition and/or stand back and criticize whether every single inherited belief, we do not hold that Enlightenment freedom is necessary for feminism. However, it is worth stating explicitly that denying the universal value of Enlightenment freedom does not mean denying the universal value of other goods we refer to as "freedoms,"

---

17. More recently, hooks has also offered a definition of feminism as the struggle against all oppressions. I employ her old definition, not to deny the fact of intersectionality but rather because of the aims of this particular article. The problem this article focuses on stems from the possibility of two anti-oppression aims as conflicting — the end of imperialist domination and the end of sexism. Keeping the forms of oppression analytically distinct helps us see the problem, even if the two forms of oppression are often deeply intertwined with one another in practice.

such as freedom of speech or expression. There is good reason to believe that the latter two freedoms are universally valuable and that societies that disproportionately deny them to women are oppressive.[18]

On Frye's definition of oppression, practices with any perceived origin can be oppressive. We know that inherited dictates and practices can have oppressive effects. However, we can identify oppressive expectations whose force does not stem from historical or religious inheritance. Consider the expectation that North American women shape their genitalia to simulate those in pornography — an expectation that is both patently oppressive and relatively new. More important for our concern about whether feminism requires destroying traditions because they are traditions is whether views that are perceived as externally dictated can be non-oppressive or anti-oppressive. Contemporary Muslim feminisms suggest that the answer to this question is yes. Navigating the relationship to tradition has been a key concern of Muslim women's movements. Many Muslim women organize in contexts in which there is great instrumental value to framing arguments against patriarchal oppression in religious terms. The incentives to frame feminist arguments in "Islamic" terms are varied and context dependent but are often put in place by some combination of the following: (a) historical or current Western cultural and/or political domination, (b) the widespread belief that acting in accordance with religious dictates is morally obligatory, (c) the presence of religious dictates within existing legal frameworks, and (d) the association of secular feminisms with the upper classes. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that all women advocating feminisms within Islamic terms do so for purely instrumental reasons; many of them would offer first-personal reasons that have to do with deeply held religious conviction (Moghadam 2002).

The feminist reading of the role of husbands in the previous section is one example of an Islamic feminist interpretation of tradition. To further illustrate the compatibility of feminism with metaphysically traditionalist worldviews, we can look at contemporary Islamic feminisms. Although there is no agreed-upon use of the term "Islamic feminist," I use it here in Margot Badran's sense, to mean a feminism "that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an" (2009, 242). It is important to note that not all Muslim feminists are Islamic feminists; many are either overtly secular or ground their opposition to patriarchy

---

18. The human rights regime suggests a growing international consensus on the idea that both civil liberties and basic material necessities are universally valuable.

in a variety of sources. Additionally, some Muslim feminists adopt Islamic feminist argumentative strategies without necessarily committing themselves to the idea that the Qur'an is the only or primary source of moral truth. For instance, the Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité (2005) places doctrinal arguments against sexist practices such as child marriage and the expectation of obedience from wives alongside human rights and sociological arguments.

Islamic feminists who see the Qur'an as the ultimate moral truth share a metaphysically traditionalist worldview, type of worldview that is incompatible with Enlightenment freedom. Their methodological point of departure supposes that living consistently with Islam is worth doing. They interpret gender equality as Islamically dictated. Such movements do not only exist; we have evidence that they have participated in reducing women's oppression. For example, Islamic feminist agitation in Iran was instrumental in bringing about reforms such as the right of unmarried women to study abroad, the right of women to claim wages for housework in divorce proceedings, and legal protections for working mothers (Moghadam 2002). Although Iran was historically a site of flourishing Islamic feminist activity, movements that ground opposition to sexism in religious dictates also organize in countries with more secular histories. Some Egyptian feminists use religious argumentation to argue that women should be able to serve as *muftis*; Turkish Islamist feminists claim that Islamist politicians have failed in their own purported goals by failing to improve women's status (Badran 2001); Moroccan *mourchidates*, though they work within an interpretive school that is not completely gender egalitarian, work to expand women's understandings of their rights in Islam (Eddouada 2009); and Indonesian feminists oppose polygamy and support increases in the marriage age on theological grounds (Robinson 2006). For many feminists employing Islamic feminist argumentative strategies, there is no contradiction between what is divinely dictated and what reduces women's oppression. Those who believe the Qur'an accepts sexist oppression, Islamic feminists usually respond, are misinterpreting the Qur'an. Enlightenment liberal feminists might argue that the fact that such "misinterpretations" are in circulation at all is evidence that tradition is oppressive. But this misses the point of the Islamic feminist moral epistemology. Islamic feminists are not inventing new traditions; they see themselves as returning to the true meaning of their inheritance. Further, Islamic feminists see the authority to reinterpret the Qur'an as issuing from *within* Muslim traditions (Moghadam 2002, 1144). The

right to *ijtehad,* or independent reasoning about religious texts, was historically well established in Islamic jurisprudence.

I do not focus on Islamic feminism to suggest that it is the only legitimate approach for Muslim women to take to feminism. Muslim women face different contexts, have different priorities, and hold different metaphysical commitments.[19] Instead, I focus on Islamic feminism because it suggests that the range of worldviews in which feminism can be grounded is much larger than those who value Enlightenment freedom may imagine. Islamic feminisms demonstrate the possibility of worldviews that are simultaneously feminist and grounded in submission to follow inherited external dictates.[20] But if my oppressive effects view is going to be more helpful than reflexive role distance in respecting traditionalist worldviews, we need to know whether it is possible to oppose sexist oppression from worldviews that are *metaphysically* traditionalist — that hold that some traditional dictates to be beyond question. Mahmood's da'wa women are clearly not feminists, but is it possible to reject sexist oppression from a worldview like theirs, one that values unquestioning submission to certain inherited dictates? Some Islamic feminists are traditionalists who overtly reject the metaphysical version of traditionalism. For instance, Mohsen Sa'idzadeh states in an interview with Ziba Mir-Hosseini that he opposes "unquestioning obedience" and that "humans have the capacity to understand the reasons for God's commands" (Mir-Hosseini 1999, 256).

However, some Islamic feminists insist that it is in principle unacceptable for believers to question the truth of the Qur'an. For instance, Amina Wadud writes in her early work, "As believers in the faith and tradition of Islam, we cannot rewrite the Qur'an … As an historical record of the word of Allah revealed to Mohammed, those words are unchangeable" (2006, 204).[21] To understand how Wadud allows for a metaphysically traditionalist feminism, it is helpful to unpack a couple components of her view. First, her understanding of the word "believer" is metaphysically traditionalist; to wonder whether the Qur'an

19. Critics of the term "Islamic feminism" argue that it entrenches the power of sexist Islamist governments by refusing to contest their fundamentally patriarchal terms (Moghadam 2002; Mojab 2001). These arguments, true as they may be, speak more to the strategic problems facing feminists organizing in certain Islamist contexts than the logical possibility of opposition to sexist oppression on Islamic grounds.

20. Feminisms in other religions also demonstrate this possibility. Consider the fact that the Seneca Falls Convention in the United States accused men of having "usurped the prerogative of Jehovah."

21. Wadud rejects the term "Islamic feminist" but meets the criteria for Islamic feminism laid out by Badran and other scholars.

is worth submitting to is to demonstrate a lack of faith. The identity of believer precedes and restricts the types of questions one is allowed to ask. Where Sa'idzadeh suggests it would be possible to come to a reason to accept divine dictates without antecedent faith, Wadud suggests no such thing. Second, Wadud's argument that the believer has no right to question the validity of the Qur'an *grounds rather than undermines* her opposition to sexist oppression. Those who believe that Islam is fundamentally patriarchal are not only misinterpreting the Qur'an; they are guilty of instrumentalizing divine dictates in their human power struggles. Third, as Wadud writes elsewhere, attempts to combat oppression without faith are especially likely to be confused because of their reliance on human reason, which is fallible. "I chose the literary tradition of Qur'anic exegesis … to sustain my faith by equipping me with the tools to determine how the master's house has been constructed, without limiting the sacred potential to human tools" (Wadud 2006, 81).

Wadud's underlying stance toward tradition is strikingly similar to that of Mahmood's da'wa women. This is especially clear when we return to the story of Mahmood's Abir (2005, 174–77). Abir is married to a "Westernized" man who drinks and expects her to entertain male houseguests. To prevent her religiosity from impeding his lifestyle, he tells her that she is flouting her Islamic wifely duties by focusing more on the women's mosque movement than on him. Her response is to exhort him to be a better Muslim who wants her to continue her religious involvement, often praying loudly in front of him for the fate of his soul. The parallels between Wadud's relationship to tradition and Abir's are triple. First, Abir and Wadud both assume that Islam's dictates are worth following; they exhort others to change their behavior under the assumption that they share this view with those they are attempting to change. Second, Abir and Wadud both see religious dictates as offering a normative standard according to which to judge human behavior. It is because of their religiosity that they are able to find fault with behavior they find objectionable. Third, they suggest that the behavior they find objectionable is objectionable precisely because those who engage in it have failed to successfully submit to the divine will.

The contrast between Wadud and Abir makes clear that a person's acceptance of sexism does not directly track her attitudes toward tradition. What makes Wadud a feminist and Abir not, I contend, is the type of social relations each of them takes to be divinely dictated. In other words, it is the *content of their tradition* (as they understand it)

rather than their *attitudes toward it*. Feminism is a stance about the normatively acceptable effects of practices rather than their perceived origins, and once this becomes clear, traditionalist feminisms are no longer a contradiction in terms. Once we recognize this, we can begin to formulate a feminism that responds to the concerns about imperialism with which this article began. The worry was that Western feminists would endorse wanton destruction of all "other" traditions, especially traditions that demand unquestioning adherence to certain dictates. We can now see that the inability to perceive harms of destroying traditionalist worldviews arises from concerns contingently related to feminism. Enlightenment liberal feminists can no longer coherently argue that indiscriminate traditional destruction is merely "collateral damage," necessary for women's liberation.

CONCLUSION: TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM WITHOUT ENLIGHTENMENT FREEDOM

Feminism does not warrant as much hostility to traditions as defenders of Enlightenment freedom think it does. Feminism does not require the view that traditions are patriarchal (as Okin and Mahmood inadvertently suggest) or the belief that people must question all inherited external dictates (as Kymlicka and Benhabib do). Feminism does require reshaping a subset of traditional dictates and practices — but because of their sexist effects, not their perceived source. Feminism is thus compatible with worldviews that place a high value on acting on inherited external dictates, including some that are metaphysically traditionalist.

Enlightenment liberal feminists must acknowledge that their reasons for wanting to *spread* Enlightenment freedom do not originate in feminism alone.[22] Linda Zerilli (2009, 303–4) invites us to model cross-cultural feminist politics as an act of *translation* rather than *exportation*. In the words of Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité, "universality does not in any way signify Western monopoly" on the concept of gender justice (1993, 10). Feminist concerns militate against sexist oppression, but not in favor of exporting any specific understanding of where human beings should find meaning. Given both concerns about the effectiveness of making

---

22. There may be feminist reasons to spread freedoms besides Enlightenment freedom. For instance, it is likely that upending sexism requires freedom of expression and the right to vote — but these are conceptually distinct from Enlightenment freedom.

change in neo/postcolonial contexts and unfamiliar moral vocabularies and the history of cultural domination, Western feminists need to recognize that being attentive to the harms of traditional destruction is not the same thing as abandoning feminism. This does not mean that those who value Enlightenment freedom need to abandon it, but it does mean they need to stop seeing it, and the worldview that houses it, as the only value or worldview that can ground feminism. Feminism, though it requires a stance about sexist oppression, does not require a stance about the appropriate human orientation to tradition. Feminism can be thought of as what Rawls (1996) would have called a "freestanding" doctrine — capable of being defended from within a variety of different understandings of the ultimate ends of human life. As Badran puts a similar point, feminism can be a "plant that grows only in its own soil" (2009, 243).

Abu-Lughod (2002, 788) encapsulates her objection to "saving" Muslim women by noting that it involves, not just saving them *from* something, but saving them *to* something. For her, the attitude of saving demands rescuing someone from one (inferior, traditional, religious) lifeworld and transporting them to a (superior, modern, secular) one. My point in this article has been that feminist normative judgment does not require the view Abu-Lughod associates with saving — the view that there is a single correct feminist endpoint (typified by the trappings of Western "modernity") at which all societies must arrive. In a world characterized by imperialist domination, the demand that "others" abandon their entire worldviews and adopt those of Westerners cannot be presumed innocent. Sweeping judgments about the sexist valences of the traditions of "others" end up aligning feminism with cultural domination, economic exploitation, and imperialism. Feminists need to criticize sexist oppression without trading in a discourse about destroying and replacing lifeworlds, or bringing "others" out of the bonds of tradition into the light. Mahmood rightly ends her book with a wish for a feminist "vision of coexistence that does not require making the lifeworlds of others extinct or provisional" (2005, 199). Detaching feminism from Enlightenment freedom makes it possible to oppose sexist oppression without surrendering that hope.

Serene J. Khader is Jay Newman Chair and Associate Professor of Philosophy at Brooklyn College, and Associate Professor of Women's Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center: sjkhader@brooklyn.cuny.edu

REFERENCES

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" *American Anthropologist* 104 (3): 783–90.

——. 2013. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Alexander, M. Jacqui. 2006. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Badinter, Elisabeth, Régis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, Elisabeth De Fontenay, and Catherine Kintzler. 1989. "Profs, ne capitulons pas!" *Le Nouvel Observateur*, November 2.

Badran, Margot. 2001. "Locating Feminisms: The Collapse of Religious and Secular Feminisms in the Mashriq." *Agenda* 50: 41–57.

——. 2009. *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. London: Oneworld.

Bangstad, Sindre. 2011. "Saba Mahmood and Anthropological Feminism after Virtue." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28 (3): 28–54.

Barclay, Linda. 2000. "Autonomy and the Social Self." In *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, edited by Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar. New York: Oxford University Press, 52–71.

Barlas, Asma. 2002. *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Benhabib, Seyla. 1992. *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. New York, Routledge.

Berlin, Isaiah. 1969. "Two Concepts of Liberty." In *Four Essays on Liberty*, by Isaiah Berlin. London: Oxford University Press, 118–72.

Bhabha, Homi K. 1999. "Liberalism's Sacred Cow." In *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, eds. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 79–84.

Boddy, Janice. 1989. *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zar Cult in Northern Sudan*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Christman, John. 1991. "Autonomy and Personal History." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21 (1): 1–24.

Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité. 1993. *One Hundred Steps: One Hundred Provisions for an Egalitarian Codification of Family and Personal Status Laws in the Maghreb*. Rabat: Collectif 95 Maghreb Egalité.

——. 2005. *Guide to Equality in the Family in the Maghreb*. Bethesda, MD: Women's Learning Partnership for Development and Rights.

Eddouada, Souad. 2009. "Morocco's Mourchidates and Contradictions." ResetDOC, April 17. http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000001323 (accessed July 5, 2016).

Friedman, Marilyn. 2003. *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*. New York: Clarendon Press.

Frye, Marilyn. 1983. "Oppression." In *The Politics of Reality*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1–16.

Gurel, Perin. 2009. "Transnational Feminism, Islam, and the Other Woman: How to Teach." *The Radical Teacher* 86: 66–70.

Hirsi Ali, Ayaan. 2007. *Infidel*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Jaggar, Alison M. 2005. "Saving Amina: Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue." *Ethics and International Affairs* 19 (3): 55–75.

Kant, Immanuel. 2010. *An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'* New York: Penguin.

Khader, Serene J. 2016. "Beyond Autonomy Fetishism: Affiliation with Autonomy in Women's Empowerment." *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 7 (1): 125–39.

Kymlicka, Will. 1991. *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
———. 1996. *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Mahmood, Saba, and Charles Hirschkind. 2002. "Feminism, The Taliban and the Politics of Counterinsurgency." *Anthropological Quarterly* 25 (2): 339–54.
Maira, Sunaina. 2009. "'Good' and 'Bad' Muslim Citizens: Feminists, Terrorists, and U.S. Orientalisms." *Feminist Studies* 35 (3): 631–56.
Meyers, Diana Tietjens. 1987. Personal Autonomy and the Paradox of Feminine Socialization. *Journal of Philosophy* 84 (11): 619–28.
Mill, John Stuart. 2002. *The Basic Writings of John Stuart Mill: On Liberty, The Subjection of Women, and Utilitarianism*. New York: Modern Library.
Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. 1999. *Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Moghadam, Valentine M. 2002. "Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents." *Signs* 27 (4): 1135–71.
Mojab, Shahrzad. 2001. "Theorizing the Politics of 'Islamic Feminism.'" *Feminist Review* 69 (1): 124–46.
Narayan, Uma. 1997. *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*. New York: Routledge.
Nzegwu, Nkiru. 2006. *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
Okin, Susan Moller. 1999. "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" In *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*, eds. Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 9–24.
Phillips, Anne. 2009. *Multiculturalism without Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Rawls, John. 1996. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Razakh, Sherene. 2008. *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Robinson, Kathryn. 2006. "Islamic Influences on Indonesian Feminism." *Social Analysis* 50 (1): 171–77.
Scott, Joan Wallach. 2010. *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Volpp, Leti. 2011. "Framing Cultural Difference: Immigrant Women and Discourses of Tradition." *Differences* 22 (1): 91–110.
Wadud, Amina. 2006. *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. London: Oneworld.
Zerilli, Linda M. G. 2009. "Toward a Feminist Theory of Judgment." *Signs* 34 (2): 295–317.