Encounter with American Feminism: A Muslim Woman's View of Two Conferences

Leila Ahmed
feminism is inseparable from other movements for social justice, in America and elsewhere. However, they might disagree about the necessity of banning AID as a Convention exhibitor, or as a source of travel money that might bring Third World women to America to the NWSA or that might send NWSA representatives abroad. Ultimately, the Third World Caucus offered a resolution that suggested that AID involvement with NWSA violated that section of the NWSA Constitution that pledged the organization’s support of the well-being of Third World women. The resolution also asked NWSA to study AID and to suspend any link with it until that research was completed and discussed.

It was important that the Third World Caucus should play such a role. The actual number of Third World women at the Convention was small. Of the 796 people who handed in the demographic data cards, 23 said they were Black; 17 Hispanic; 15 Native American; 9 Asian. Yet the Third World was a strong, palpable force. The Delegate Assembly happily learned that a “woman of color” would be a Coordinator of the 1981 Convention, at the University of Connecticut at Storrs, and that central themes would be race, racism, and the contributions of Black women.

Less happily, the Convention still showed the entanglements of feminism and racism. During a workshop about the chances of “sisterhood” between Black and white women, one of about 20 formal sessions on Third World matters, a Black woman asked if white women were prepared to let Black women lead them. She was never fully, honestly answered. At the same place, a white woman called for a “humanistic feminism.” She said that “hu” was “hue,” and that we were all women of color. Her pun insensitively ignored the years of effort within feminism to acknowledge the reality of differences among women, the consequences of race and class and sexual preference. Calmly, with patient courtesy, a Black woman told her that she could not so hastily wipe out the centuries of history that had forged the Black woman’s collective experience. One evening, a play about Calamity Jane, who was a racist even according to the play’s author, proved a torment for many in the audience.

A fourth and final purpose of Bloomington was to offer women a place in which to cultivate common ground. An NWSA meeting initiates and deepens conversations, friendships, and romances. It lets a woman who might be thought to be impolitic, impolite, and freakish in her home community see human images similar to her own. She is no longer a solitary feminist or opponent of nuclear energy or lesbian. She has colleagues and peers. The Convention is both exhilarating and a profound relief.

Organized around the idea of change, the Convention participants displayed their own signs of change. The phrase “women of color” entered the language of many. The substitution of “wimmin” for “women” attracted some. Lesbians were a vigorous, vital group, but more men seemed to be wearing badges in Bloomington than in Lawrence, Kansas, and little boys lived in the dormitories and rode elevators that otherwise forbade men to be in them after 10 PM. One cannot have the comfort of illusions about the degree of change that NWSA has brought about in the world beyond its gatherings. We are still marginal, if illegitimately so, to many educational institutions and projects. We must still devour our dreams for sustenance. We still have our contradictions, unexamined actions, and bouts of pettiness. Yet we do educate. We do dream. Despite our frailties, we are energetic and alive. Bloomington was a part of the process of the creation of our history, even as other organizations, which may ignore or mock us, slouch toward obsolescence.

*Catharine R. Stimpson is Professor of English at Douglass College, Rutgers University.*

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*By Leila Ahmed*

April 1980. The Barnard Conference, “The Scholar and the Feminist”—my first direct as opposed to page-mediated encounter with American feminism. And then it came home to me: how simple the one-dimensional experience of reading; how easy, ordered, and amenable to order it makes things seem—coherent and amenable to coherence. Sitting in that hall, listening to papers that often clearly drew on the rhetorical strategies of an oral tradition, quite different from those in scholarly writing, even in that feminist scholarship self-consciously dismantling the rigidities of tradition; being aware of the responses of a highly—and diversely—responsive audience; straining to catch verbal short-cuts; sometimes clearly missing nuances that relied on a depth of American experience: all this makes it impossible to respond to the conference as a coherent event—not because it was incoherent, obviously, but precisely because there was such a sense of vitality, ferment, such a richness and general manifoldness to it—and a sense too of the manifoldness of feminist stances in America.

My own interest being Third World women, I attended the workshop on “Class and Race Issues in Women’s Studies.” Angela Jorge, treating the topic experientially, described experiences of the Black Hispanic community and related them to Puerto Rican culture, and Florence Howe then outlined relevant developments in women’s studies. Offered concurrently was “Perspectives on the Black and Hispanic Family,” and, another I was sorry to miss, “Defining the Erotic” from a lesbian perspective.

Of course it is only in the academy, formally, that the discussion of such topics, relations between women, the erotic between women, is new. Women have been
discussing such topics among themselves down through the ages, discussing them at least in that vast array of nonverbal ways that we have of “discussing” things (gestural language being only the most obvious). I have a particularly vivid sense of this because in the society in which I grew up—in Cairo—elaborate understandings, “statements” about how women related to women, were never made verbally but were signaled in an infinite number of ways: by silence sometimes, or by the kind of language with which we surround a subject. My sense too is that much of what was thus conveyed was oblivious to, disregarding of, even running counter to the dominant culture. Thus, it remained inarticulate, “hidden,” not dangerous.

Then the NWSA Second National Convention at Bloomington. Here too I headed for sessions on Third World women. “Teaching about African Women”: Brenda Berrian (University of Pittsburgh) showed that comparisons could be made between women in Africa and Third World women in America by looking at women in parallel situations—moving from rural to urban settings. Susan Rogers (University of Minnesota) shared outlines of her courses, notably “Comparative Study of Women: Women in Liberation Struggles, China, Cuba, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau.” In another session, “Women and Development: Third World,” Suresht R. Bald (University of California/Santa Cruz), not focusing on particular societies but aiming at a theoretical overview, analyzed consequences of political change for women in terms of a grid of variables (types of revolution, nature of struggle, ensuing economies, cultural matrices). Irene Thompson (University of Florida) spoke on women in China.

American interest in Third World women. Well, one thing had become clear to me, reading through women’s studies materials and attending the conferences: I wasn’t a Third World woman, or didn’t count—was invisible. “Third World women” I now came to understand, could mean one of three things: first, it could mean minority women in the United States; second, it could mean Puerto Rican or African women (but with an excluding notion of Africa, a funny-shaped shrunken continent—no Egypt, Morocco, Sudan); third, it could mean a Third World that had achieved visibility through revolution, as in China or Cuba.

The women who seem to be excluded by these definitions are the Muslim women of the Third World—these are most particularly the invisible ones. When we are seen, it is always as Other, although no culture is more directly continuous with the Judeo-Christian than the Islamic, no part of the world closer to the (older) Western world. We all know that Jerusalem is sacred to Christian, Jew, Muslim. But do we allow ourselves to become aware of the cultural implications of this? That if one could lay the blueprints of cultural ideologies one over the other—Christianity, Judaism, Islam—the lines would most often merge? Is it this submerged resemblance, I wonder, this mirroring back in different cultural idioms of all the inbuilt injustices to women institutionalized in their own societies, internalized in themselves, that makes it so necessary for us to be Other—makes difficult, such an uneasy thing, this looking at Islam?

One session at the NWSA Convention did focus on Islam; the room was packed. The session itself I found bizarre. “Islam and Feminism”: no dearth of topics to which a session with such a title might address itself—from the law-reforms relating to marital life that “conservative” Muslim feminists are fighting for, piecemeal, against entrenched resistance, to the stance of radical feminists who see Islamic ideology as fundamentally inimical to women, believe that no mere reform can be adequate, and see resolution only in radical social change and the rejection of that ideology. Expecting the panel to address topics within that spectrum, I was wholly nonplussed to find that the general thrust of the presentation was the mind-boggling assertion that Islam was a feminist religion.

The panelists were three Muslim women. The first began by pointing out that Muslim women had had rights (to own property) only recently gained by Western women—thus attempting to establish that the Muslim world hasn’t always been backward compared to the West. But from then on the claims made for Islam and what a generally nice “feminist” religion it was seemed to me to grow more and more absurd. Divorce, they said, had had to be bitterly fought for in the West; in Islam it has always been available. (Available for men, they should have said, since it deprives women of their children and can deprive them of shelter. Divorce is still bitterly fought for, for women—in those countries where Islam is not too implacable even to permit a fight.)

Panelists also said that in Islam women and men are equal. But women inherit half what men do; two women must testify for every one man; men can have four wives—the list of inequities is interminable. They said Islam was a feminist religion because it banned the murder of girl-infants and, in permitting four wives, it was actually being restrictive, previous custom allowing more. All this is standard Muslim apologetics that we Muslims grew up with. What’s always left out when we hear “how it improved the condition of women” is that it improved it in Arabia. How can I, how can any Egyptian with any notion of Egypt’s pre-Islamic history, regard as anything but, for women, constrictive and disastrous in terms of lost rights and freedoms, the coming of monotheisms, the conquest of Egypt by the Arabs, and its Islamicization? And yet all this is not to deny Islam’s vision of dignity, justice, and equality for all, though this vision has not been realized in the letter of its laws.

Two of the panelists were Arab diplomats’ wives: the Saudi Arabian Ambassador’s wife, and the Arab League Representative’s wife. They were simply doing their job—the work that is part of being a diplomat’s wife, making the claims and assertions one expects of public relations people/events (startling at the time only because the program had not announced who they were). But the third was a professional academic, from whom one might have expected more.

Some final thoughts. On how the larger society seems so oblivious of this movement within it: an attitude apparently endorsed, embodied in, the New York Public Library: it is impossible to obtain the Women’s Studies Newsletter VIII:3 (Summer 1980)
Concerns of Women's Studies Programs at the NWSA Convention:
A Graduate Student's Perspective

By King Ming Young

As a graduate student, I found the Convention an inspiring educational experience. The high level of energy with which participants arrived became more intense as the week went by. A sense of excitement and a spirit of mission permeated the atmosphere. People were eager to share their experiences in women's studies and to learn from others. Many left with a heightened realization of how much remains to be done at their institution. They also left with an increased commitment to bringing about the needed institutional and social changes.

One concern prevailed throughout the Convention: how can NWSA avoid becoming a predominantly white women's organization? If women's studies is to be a tool for social change, it must strive to incorporate democratic ideals into its process and structure. An organization which is not integrated in terms of race and class will only repeat the same forms of oppression which characterize male-dominated institutions and organizations. Judging by the small percentage of Third World women at the Convention, it is clear that the building of an organization which cuts across racial barriers remains an enormous, yet exciting, challenge. Some of the dialogues at the Convention reassured me that there is not another academic arena more committed to addressing the issues of sex, race, and class than women's studies. The plan to focus next year's Convention on race and racism reflects this commitment.

One can easily understand why an annual meeting of this kind is so important to so many women. It not only provides a support network, but it also reenergizes people, many of whom are overworked, underpaid, and receive little support from their own institutions. The mere opportunity for sharing similar concerns with other women is invaluable. As Elizabeth Janeway said at the opening session, "Sharing validates thought. Without sharing, you might feel you are an isolated freak."

The Convention program was structured in such a way as to balance the time for caucus and regional meetings, workshops, and entertainment or leisure. It was both a Convention where people met and exchanged ideas and a Convention where the business of NWSA was conducted through committees and through caucus and regional representatives at the Delegate Assembly. During the entire four and a half days, there was hardly a moment when one could not find something interesting to do. One could have spent an entire day browsing through the book exhibit, or viewing the films and filmstrips related to women's issues which were being shown continuously.

As a graduate student in educational administration, I was most interested in sessions on the development and administration of women's studies programs from an institutional perspective. Most of the participants at these sessions were coordinators of women's studies programs. A problem common to many programs is inadequate and unstable funding. Many coordinators are either not compensated for their work as coordinators or hired on unstable sources of funding with little institutional commitment to making their positions permanent. The lack of release time for teachers and coordinators engaged in developing women's studies courses or administering programs has been one important obstacle to the growth of women's studies on many campuses.

Another concern of program coordinators is how to gain academic respectability, legitimacy, and therefore autonomy, while remaining responsive to community needs. A women's studies program needs the