**The Cold War of Women and Islam. Notes on Yoseph Massad’s *Islam in Liberalism*.**

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Joseph Massad’s new book *Islam in Liberalism* is a welcome and timely intervention into one of the most pressing questions of our times: why does Islam occupy such a central inimical place within Western politics and ideology? Massad answers this question with a straightforward thesis: ‘Islam’ as such does not exist. What has come to be called ‘Islam’ as a supposedly homogenous cultural entity in reality has been fabricated by Western liberalism as its symbolic Other. In other words, Islam is the alter-ego of the Euro-American liberal order and ‘identity’, represented as fundamentally different precisely in order to transform it into a symbolic place onto which Western liberalism can project its antinomies and failures.

This thesis becomes particularly clear and convincing in the second and lengthiest chapter of the book, which is entitled “Women in/and ‘Islam’: The Rescue Mission of Western Liberal Feminism”. Alone constituting almost one third of the whole book, here Massad explores how Western liberalism in general and Western liberal feminism in particular have successfully depicted sexism and violence against women almost as the exclusive domain of Islam as the Other. Massad presents this main line of argument through a remarkable mode of conjunctural analysis. For this reason, in this review, I want to concentrate on this long chapter, highlighting what I consider to be its most insightful arguments but also offering a critique of those instances in which I believe Massad could have developed his important claims further.

To begin with, Massad asks how and why has Islam been increasingly associated with unequal gender relations and violent practices against women – a kind of mantra that has become particularly widespread after 9/11 and the beginning of the ‘war on terror’. Instead of providing a clear-cut and thus simplistic argument, he proposes to analyze this phenomenon as the result of a complex social, economic, political, historical conjuncture in which well orchestrated semantic manipulations, imperialist gambits and victories (Western liberalism over “actually existing socialism”) as well as co-optations of liberal feminist concerns are all amalgamated (wittingly and unwittingly) to produce a powerful representation: that of Islam as an undemocratic entity in which Muslims are victims to be rescued.As in the rest of the book, in the chapter “Women in/and Islam” Massad takes us through a detailed genealogical reconstruction that shows how old ideas and well-ingrained stereotypes about Muslim women’s lives have been re-mobilized in new political landscapes. As he rightly reminds us, the Western idea that Muslim women are slaves in a world of male (Muslim) masters is in fact not a novel one. From Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, up to Susan Moller Okin’s “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?”, the European and American liberal (and feminist) intelligentsia’s encounter with Islam and the East has been one marked by trenchant comments on the inferior status of women. In both Britain and the United States, the discourse on Muslim and non-white/non-Western women’s hardships and lack of rights, Massad maintains, stemmed directly from entanglements between the white women’s movement and the Christian missionary movement. As Massad puts it: “The status of Oriental women would be the reference against which white women would and could measure their advanced status in Christian society, further entrenching the already existing understanding of the liberatory basis of Western Christian society as opposed to the repressive basis of Oriental societies” (pp. 116-7).

Interestingly, in this context Massad also informs us of the rather less known fact that the West’s previous alter Ego during the cold war (i.e., the Soviet Union) also upheld the idea that Muslim and ‘Oriental’ women occupied a lesser status in the hierarchy of gender orders. In a speech from 1924, Trotsky predicted that women in the East had a greater role to play as compared to the situation in Europe because they were “incomparably more fettered, crushed and befuddled by prejudices than is the Eastern man” (quoted in Massad, p. 120). The Soviet Department for Work among Women (*Zhenotdel*) initiated liberation campaigns for Muslim women in Central Asia, while the Second International Conference of Communist Women in 1921 welcomed those Central Asian women who took off their veil as a sign of their improved consciousness.

As Massad notes, “Soviet Socialism’s understanding of the Woman Question, unlike its position on other forms of justice, seemed to meet liberal feminism when it came to Muslim women” (p. 120). The Eastern Woman Question thus, he argues, was always an instance and project of the more general Eastern and Western question.

Such an instance, however, according to Massad, has acquired particular salience since the late 1980s and the establishment of the neoliberal new world order. Massad’s central and important thesis is that the victory of the West and neoliberal capitalism over Soviet Socialism has produced a series of intertwined consequences: on the one hand, human rights as non-economic but purely individual rights have increasingly been used by Western actors (including NGOs) to impose their agenda and values in the Global South. As Massad puts it, “the discourse (and organized campaigns) of human rights has more of a symptomatic relationship to neoliberal global capitalism: it broaches moments of critique; it attempts to inoculate against neoliberalism’s worst excesses; sometimes it pretends to offer something almost like a counter-public, yet it continues to operate insistently outside the economic sphere, the most important of neoliberalism’s theaters of operations” (p. 133).

On the other hand, Massad seemingly suggests that Islam has replaced the Soviet Union as the global enemy and the cry against women’s oppression has replaced that old cry against lack of freedom in the USSR. In order to articulate these points, Massad carefully reconstructs the genealogy of the insertion of women’s rights against violence as human rights by looking at the place the issue occupies in some key UN sponsored events: the World Congresses on Women that took place between 1975 and 1995, the Convention on the Elimination on all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and the UNDP report on Arab Human Development (AHDR) from 2006. In the early 1990s, Massad maintains, the issue of violence against women as a human rights violation becomes established as a top UN priority. Gendered violence is in fact treated as that allegedly universal female *lingua franca* which should allow women from different nationalities, cultures and classes to work on a common agenda. Yet, as Massad well identifies, it became evident from the outset how gendered violence was treated as a ‘cultural problem’ in the Global South and an ‘individual’ problem in the Global North, as well as how the conflict between culture and human rights was one uphold only in the case of the former, but not in the case of the latter. As he argues, “The general approach then, as now, remains for states to reconcile ‘conflicts’ between rights and ‘culture’, eliding the fact that the conflict was principally between a new Euro-American and European ‘culture’ that the state must bestow rights domestically and the role it demanded of the United Nations that it impose this recently invented US ‘culture’ internationally” (p. 128).

After 9/11 and the US’s resort to women rights as human rights in the bombing of Afghanistan, the instrumentalisation of issues of gender equality in anti-Islam campaigns in particular became embarrassingly evident, but nonetheless not less dangerous. Indeed, while confirming anti-racist feminists, various leftists and anti-war activists in their arguments and convictions about the hypocrisy of Western liberals, the resort to women rights to justify imperialist wars was perceived by Western populations at large as some kind of legitimate endeavor (at least judging from regulars polls conducted in EU countries in which large samples of people associate Islam with the oppression of women). Many feminists have denounced such an instrumentalisation and harshly criticized Western liberal feminists’ ‘missionary’ vocations when it comes to Muslim women as relics of imperialist feminism during colonialism. And yet, Massad finds that some feminists (among whom he lists Lila Abu-Lughod) have nonetheless tried to present Western liberal feminists’ mistakes as well-intentioned; that is, as fundamentally motivated by the good aim of helping suffering Muslim women. Here Massad’s counter-arguments become particularly convincing. Rebuking the attempts to present western liberal feminist missionary tendencies as “well-meaning concerns”, he asks: why do we regard western liberal feminists who want to rescue Muslim women as “well-meaning”, but we do not ask why Muslim women do not try to rescue Western women from their own patriarchal orders? Is it because Muslim women are not capable of solidarity? Or rather, is this asymmetry embedded in the uneven power relations and paternalistic/imperialist ideology that informs missionary approaches, wittingly or unwittingly? “Questions of ‘well-meaning concerns’ and pleas for anti-culturalist vigilance turn out to be nothing short of misnomers at best and liberal imperialist dissimulations at worst” (p. 176).

Finally, Massad believes the study of gender and Islam by Western analysts is necessarily corrupted from the outset by three main pitfalls: ‘culturalism’, ‘comparatism’ and ‘assimilationism’.

Culturalism is the general approach informing studies and analyses on unequal gender relations amongst Muslim populations, which attributes such inequalities to inherently misogynist features within Muslims’ ‘culture’ (whereby culture and religion seem to coincide, at least when it comes to discussing Islam).

Comparatism is what Massad calls “the transgeographism of Western values (…) a process by which the West, or a fantastic version of it, is taken as a comparative reference point and the rest of the world is studied to identify how it converges with or diverges from it” (p. 207).

Assimilationism, finally, is the process by means of which Islamic cultures (or non-Western cultures in general insofar as they are seen as diverging from Western culture) are urged to dissolve and absorb Western values. Assimilationism presupposes both culturalism and comparatism insofar as assimilation only becomes a viable proposal from the moment in which Western analysts decry Islamic culture as comparatively inferior and unworthy.

So how can we engage in an analysis of gender and Islam that does not fall into these traps? For Massad, “there are no tricks as to how to study ‘gender’ in the Muslim world. If analysts attend to the social and economic factors, to the geographic and historical factors and actors, to culture as a dynamic entity that produces and is produced by social, economic, historic and geographic factors and actors, analysts, whether Asian or African or European or American, will be able to begin to understand and analyse social phenomena based on terms and methods that the local situation on hand itself determines, rather than script them apriori with research agendas that are connected to imperial policies, namely developmentalism and orientalist methodologies of culturalism, comparatism and assimilationism” (pp. 211-2).

Overall, Massad convincingly shows the liberal kernel within the pseudo-philogynist shell that has informed discussions on gender and Islam in Western circles in theNineteenth as well as lateTwentieth century up to the present. That is, Western analysts’ claim to be the bearers of universal values such as gender equality, and their individualistic/culturalist approach to the study of women’s conditions under Islam, are fundamentally liberal propositions, but have nonetheless been successfully presented as politically neutral perspectives. Importantly, as noted above, Massad treats the integration of women’s rights into the human rights agenda in the context of the war on the terror as *symptomatic* of the relationship that the human rights discourse more generally has with neoliberalism, whereby the former criticizes the latter for its negative consequences on people’s lives while failing to engage it on the economic terrain, which is “the most important of neoliberalism’s theaters of operations” (p. 133).

Albeit pointing to the contradiction in clear ways, it is here perhaps that Massad’s analysis should have been deepened. In other words, it would have been extremely important to explicate at greater length precisely of what the lack of economic engagement with neoliberalism by human rights’ organizations is a symptom. More specifically, it would have been important to address the following difficult questions: do human rights institutional stakeholders address violence against women under Islam as a ‘cultural’ problem, while simultaneously failing to address the forms of violence confronted by these same women that have been brought about by poverty and economically-motivated wars, because these stakeholders unconsciously share a form of Orientalist feminism? Or do they instead avoid the economic realm because human rights *per se* pertain only to the ‘higher’ realms of politics and culture? Is the economic realm thus ‘excluded’ from human rights’ agendas precisely because it constitutes the very basis of those ‘higher’ realms of politics and culture, to put it in Marx’s terms? In other words, is the discourse of human rights, and consequently, of women’s rights in the East and under Islam, a plea for political equality that only serves to divert attention from economic and social inequalities? Massad touches upon these questions, but does not answer them fully. Elsewhere, I have struggled myself with these issues and argued that much of the instrumentalisation of themes of gender equality by neoliberals and nationalist right-wing parties in Europe in anti-Islam/anti-immigration campaigns – or what I call ‘femonationalism’ (Farris 2012)[[1]](#endnote-1) – should be seen through political economic lenses. That is, I suggest that one of the reasons why these non-emancipatory forces offer to rescue Muslim and non-Western immigrant women in receiving contexts like Western Europe is linked to the key role these women play in the socially reproductive sector (cleaning, housekeeping, child and elderly care). Similarly, Hester Eisenstein in her path-breaking book *Feminism Seduced* (2010)[[2]](#endnote-2) attempts to decipher the exploitation of feminist themes by neoliberals and conservatives in their crusades against Muslims and migrants in terms of their capitalist interests: “Feminist inspired gender ideology is used to enforce the idea of western cultural superiority, and thus to facilitate the penetration of multinational corporations into the preindustrial areas of the world”.[[3]](#endnote-3) Eisenstein thus understands the deployment of mainstream feminism – in the sense of an individualist/liberal ideology – as a “solvent of traditional cultures”. That is, neoliberals brandish feminist ideas in the global South in order to destabilize previous gender orders, create possessive individualist subjects and thus make the penetration of capitalist production and consumption patterns easier to establish.[[4]](#endnote-4)

A political economic lens thus, I believe, is crucial to make full sense of the reasons why neoliberal capitalism as an economic as well as political hegemonic project exploits women rights in anti-Islam campaigns. Unlike a number of works that have focused upon these issues from mostly politicist perspectives, Massad’s book has the undoubted merit of pointing to the economic realm as the missing link in the chain of events explaining the sudden ‘treacherous sympathy”, to borrow Leila Ahmed’s words, that Westerners have shown towards Muslim women after 9/11.[[5]](#endnote-5) As Massad rightly acknowledges, the absence of economic considerations from human rights’ discourses symbolically bears witness to the crucial role the economy plays in these neo-imperialist rescuing narratives.

1. Farris, Sara R., 2012, “Femonationalism and the 'Regular' Army of Labor called Migrant Women”, *History of the Present*, 2(2), pp. 184-199 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor and Ideas to Exploit the World*. New York: Paradigm Publications, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced*, 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced*, 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See: https://en.qantara.de/content/feminism-colonialism-and-islamophobia-treacherous-sympathy-with-muslim-women [↑](#endnote-ref-5)