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The Subjection of Islamic Women

By Christina Hoff Sommers

The subjection of women in Muslim societies—especially in Arab nations and in Iran—is today very much in the public eye. Accounts of lashings, stonings, and honor killings are regularly in the news, and searing memoirs by Azar Nafisi and AEI’s Ayaan Hirsi Ali have become bestsellers. One might expect that by now American feminist groups would be organizing protests against such glaring injustices, joining forces with the valiant Muslim women who are working to change their societies. But this is not happening.

If you go to the websites of major women’s groups—such as the National Organization for Women, the Ms. Foundation for Women, and the National Council for Research on Women—or to women’s centers at our major colleges and universities, you will find them all caught up with entirely other issues, seldom mentioning women in Islam. During the 1980s, there were massive demonstrations on American campuses against racial apartheid in South Africa. Today, however, there is no remotely comparable movement on campuses against the gender apartheid prevalent in many parts of the world.

Contemporary American Feminism

It is not that American feminists are indifferent to the predicament of Muslim women. Nor do they completely ignore it. For a brief period before September 11, 2001, many women’s groups protested the brutalities of the Taliban. But they never organized a full-scale mobilization against gender oppression in the Muslim world. The condition of Muslim women may be the most pressing women’s issue of our age, but for many contemporary American feminists it is not a high priority. Why not?

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The reasons are rooted in the worldview of the women who shape the concerns and activities of contemporary American feminism. That worldview is—by tendency and sometimes emphatically—antagonistic toward the United States, agnostic about marriage and family, hostile toward traditional religion, and wary of femininity. The contrast with Islamic feminism could hardly be greater.

Writing in *The New Republic* in 1999, philosopher Martha Nussbaum noted with disapproval that “feminist theory pays relatively little attention to the struggles of women outside the United States.” Too many fashionable gender theorists, she said, have lost their dedication to the public good. Their “hip quietism . . . collaborates with evil.”

This was a frontal assault, and prominent academic feminists chastised Nussbaum in letters to the editor. Joan Scott of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton pointed out the dangers of Nussbaum’s “good versus evil scheme,” saying, “When Robespierre or the Ayatollahs or Ken Starr seek to impose their vision of the ‘good’ on the rest of society, reigns of terror follow and democratic politics are undermined.” Gayatri Spivak, a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, accused Nussbaum of “flag waving” and of being on a “civilizing mission.” None of the letter writers addressed Nussbaum’s core complaint: too few feminist theorists are showing concern for the millions of women

trapped in blatantly misogynist cultures outside the United States.

Multiculturalism vs. Feminism

One reason for this is that many feminists are tied up in knots by multiculturalism and find it very hard to pass judgment on non-Western cultures. They are far more comfortable finding fault with American society for minor inequities (for example, the exclusion of women from the Augusta National Golf Club and the “underrepresentation” of women on engineering faculties) than criticizing heinous practices beyond our shores. The occasional feminist scholar who takes the women’s movement to task for neglecting the plight of foreigners is ignored or ruled out of order.

Take psychology professor Phyllis Chesler. She has been a tireless and eloquent champion of women’s rights for more than four decades. Unlike her tongue-tied colleagues in the academy, she does not hesitate to speak out against Muslim mistreatment of women. In a recent book, *The Death of Feminism*, she attributes the feminist establishment’s unwillingness to take on Islamic sexism to its support of “an isolationist and America-blaming position.” She faults it for “embracing an anti-Americanism that is toxic, heartless, mindless and suicidal.” The sisterhood has rewarded her with excommunication. A 2006 profile in the *Village Voice* reports that, among academic feminists, “Chesler arouses the vitriol reserved for traitors.”

But Chesler is right. In the literature of women’s studies, the United States is routinely portrayed as if it were just as oppressive as any country in the developing world. Here is a typical example of what one finds in popular women’s studies textbooks (from *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, now in its fifth edition):

The word “terrorism” invokes images of furtive organizations. . . . But there is a different kind of terrorism, one that so pervades our culture that we have learned to live with it as though it were the natural order of things. Its target is females—of all ages, races, and classes. It is the common characteristic of rape, wife battery, incest, pornography, harassment. . . . I call it “sexual terrorism.”

The primary focus is on the “terror” at home. Katha Pollitt, a columnist at *The Nation*, talks of “the common thread of misogyny” connecting Christian Evangelicals to the Taliban:

It is important to remember just how barbarous and cruel the Taliban were. Yet it is also important not to use their example to obscure or deny the common thread of misogyny that connects them with Focus on the Family and the Christian Coalition.

In a similar vein, journalist Barbara Ehrenreich characterizes Christian evangelical movements as “Christian Wahhabism,” using the name of the sect that is the state religion of Saudi Arabia and the inspiration for Osama bin Laden. Eve Ensler, lionized author of *The Vagina Monologues*, makes the same point somewhat differently in her popular lecture “Afghanistan Is Everywhere”:

We all have different forms of enforced burqas. Every culture has it. Whether it’s an idea or a fascist tyranny of what women are supposed to look like—so that women go to the extremes of liposuction, anorexia and bulimia to achieve it—or whether it’s being covered in a burqa, we all have deep, profound, ongoing daily forms of oppression.

On the “Eve” of Feminism

On most American campuses there are small coteries of self-described “vagina warriors” looking for ways to expose and make much of the ravages of patriarchy. Feminists like Pollitt, Ehrenreich, and Ensler can cite several decades of women’s studies research supporting the charge that our culture is ruinous for women. Many scholars—including Camille Paglia, Daphne Patai, Noretta Koertge, Diana Furchtgott-Roth, Christine Rosen, and myself—have questioned the quality of the findings and warned that the studies are twisted and unreliable. But academic feminists rarely engage with such criticism. They dismiss it as “backlash.”

Soon after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Pollitt wrote the introduction to a book called *Nothing Sacred: Women Respond to Religious Fundamentalism and Terror*. It aimed to show that reactionary religious movements everywhere are targeting women. Says Pollitt:

In Bangladesh, Muslim fanatics throw acid in the faces of unveiled women; in Nigeria, newly established shariah courts condemn women to death by stoning for having sex outside of wedlock. . . . In the United States, Protestant evangelicals and fundamentalists have forged a powerful right-wing political

movement focused on banning abortion, stigmatizing homosexuality and limiting young people's access to accurate information about sex.

Pollitt casually places "limiting young people's access to accurate information about sex" and opposing abortion on the same plane as throwing acid in women's faces and stoning them to death. Her hostility to the United States renders her incapable of distinguishing between private American groups that stigmatize gays and foreign governments that hang them. She has embraced a feminist philosophy that collapses moral categories in ways that defy logic, common sense, and basic decency.

Enslar takes this line of reasoning to equally ludicrous lengths. In 2003 she gave a lecture at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University in which, like Pollitt, she claimed that women everywhere are oppressed and subordinate:

I think that the oppression of women is universal. I think we are bonded in every single place of the world. I think the conditions are *exactly* the same [her emphasis]. I think the nature of the oppression—whether it's acid burning in one country, or female genital mutilation in another, or gang rapes in the parking lots in high schools of the suburbs—it's the same idea. . . . The systematic global oppression of women is completely across the globe.

Though Enslar's perspective is warped, her courage and desire to help are commendable. She went to Afghanistan during the reign of the Taliban and smuggled out now-famous footage of a terrified woman in a burqa being executed at close range by a man with an AK-47. Enslar has firsthand knowledge of the unique horrors of Islamic gender fascism. But her "feminist theory" obliterates distinctions between what goes on in Afghanistan and what goes on in Beverly Hills:

I went from Beverly Hills where women were getting vaginal laser rejuvenation surgery—paying four thousand dollars to get their labias trimmed to make them symmetrical because they didn't like the imbalance. And I flew to Kenya where [women were

working to stop] the practice of female genital mutilation. And I said to myself, "What is wrong with this picture?"

A better question is: what is wrong with Enslar? These two surgical phenomena are completely different in both scale and purpose. The number of American women who undergo "vaginal labial rejuvenation" is minuscule. There were 793 such procedures in 2005,

according to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. By contrast, a World Health Organization 2000 fact sheet reports: "Today, the number of girls and women who have undergone female genital mutilation [FGM] is estimated at between 100 and 140 million. It is estimated that each year, a further 2 million girls are at risk of undergoing FGM."

The women who elect laser surgery, moreover, are voluntarily seeking relief from physical irregularities that cause them embarrassment or inhibit their sexual enjoyment. The practitioners of genital mutilation in countries such as Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia believe that removing sensitive parts of the anatomy is the best way to control young

women's sexual urges and ensure chastity. Genital cutting causes great pain and suffering and often permanently impairs a female's capacity for sexual pleasure. Thus, the intentions of the handful of American adults who choose labial surgery for themselves are exactly the opposite of those of the African parents and elders who insist on cutting the genitals of millions of girls.

Given her capacity for conceptual confusion, it is perhaps not surprising that Enslar cites "gang rape in a suburban high school parking lot" to show how women in America are menaced. Yes, that is an atrocity, but it happens rarely, and America's allegedly "misogynist" culture reacts to it with revulsion and severe punishments.

Intelligent Feminism

Happily, not all women's groups follow the lead of the Enslars, the Pollitts, and the women's studies theorists. The Feminist Majority Foundation (FMF) has been intelligently fighting the mistreatment of women in the Muslim world for several years. In 1997, in a heroic effort to expose the crimes of the Taliban, FMF president

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Eleanor Smeal, with the help of Mavis and Jay Leno, created a vital national campaign complete with rallies, petitions, and fundraisers. It was a good example of what can be achieved when a women's group seriously seeks to address the mistreatment of women outside the United States. The FMF, working with human rights groups, helped to persuade the United States and the United Nations to deny formal recognition to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. It helped convince the oil company UNOCAL not to build a pipeline across Afghanistan, and it brought the oppression of women living under radical Islamic law into clear relief for all the world to see.

But Smeal and her organization soon found themselves attacked by the same monitors of rectitude who disparaged Martha Nussbaum. Ann Russo, director of women's and gender studies at Chicago's DePaul University (writing in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*), accused the FMF of practicing a kind of "imperial feminism":

The FMF's campaign narrative is one of colonialist protection rather than of solidarity. . . . [It] capitalizes on the images of prominent white Western women, like Mavis Leno, Eleanor Smeal and other women politicians and celebrity figures, who construct themselves as "free" and "liberated" and thus in the best position to "save" Afghan women.

Today, the FMF continues to support Muslim women around the world, but the effort has lost much of its momentum. Most of the foundation's current work is directed against what it perceives as injustices suffered by women in America.

Backward Feminism?

On February 20, 2007, a Pakistani women's rights activist and provincial minister for social welfare, Zilla Huma Usman, was shot to death by a Muslim fanatic for not wearing a veil. And he had a second reason for killing her: she had encouraged girls in her community to take part in outdoor sports.

The plight of women like Usman does not figure in the National Organization for Women's (NOW) "Six Priority Items," although Global Feminism is one of the nineteen subjects it designates as "Other Important Issues." NOW hardly mentions Muslim women, except in the context of the demand that the U.S. military

withdraw from Iraq. So what sort of issue does the flagship feminist organization consider important?

NOW just launched a 2007 "Love Your Body" calendar as part of its ongoing initiative of the same name. The calendar warns of an increase in eating disorders and includes a photograph celebrating the shape of pears. There is also an image of the Statue of Liberty with the caption, "Give me your curves, your wrinkles, your natural beauty yearning to breathe free." The calendar bears these inspiring words: "None of us is free until we are all free."

To breathe free, college women are encouraged to organize "Love Your Body" evenings. NOW suggests they host "indulgence" parties: "Invite friends over and encourage them to wear whatever makes them feel good—sweat suits, flip flops, pajamas—and serve delicious, decadent foods or silly snacks without the guilt. Urge everyone to come prepared to talk about their feelings and experiences."

This is pathetic. To be sure, serious eating disorders afflict a small percentage of women. But much larger numbers suffer because poor eating habits and inactivity render them overweight, even obese. NOW should not be encouraging college girls to indulge themselves in ways detrimental to their well-being, nor should it be using the language of human rights in discussing the weight problems of American women.

The inability to make simple distinctions shows up everywhere in contemporary feminist thinking. *The Penguin Atlas of Women in the World*, edited by geographer Joni Seager, is a staple in women's studies classes in universities. It was named Reference Book of the Year by the American Library Association and has received other awards. Seager, formerly a professor of women's studies and chair of geography at the University of Vermont, is now dean of environmental studies at York University in Toronto. Her atlas, a series of color-coded maps and charts, documents the status of women, highlighting the countries where women are most at risk for poverty, illiteracy, and oppression.

One map shows how women are kept "in their place" by restrictions on their mobility, dress, and behavior. Somehow the United States comes out looking as bad in this respect as Uganda. Both countries are shaded dark yellow to signify extremely high levels of restriction. Seager explains that in parts of Uganda, a man can claim an unmarried woman for his wife by raping her. The United States gets the same rating because, Seager says, "state legislators enacted 301 anti-abortion measures between 1995

and 2001.” Never mind that the Ugandan practice is barbaric, while the activism surrounding abortion in the United States is a sign of a contentious and free democracy working out its disagreements. Besides which, Seager’s categories obscure the fact that in Uganda, abortion is illegal and “unsafe abortion is the leading cause of maternal mortality” (so states a 2005 report by the Guttmacher Institute), while American abortion law, even after the recent adoption of state regulations, is generally considered among the most liberal of any nation.

On another map the United States gets the same rating for domestic violence as Pakistan. Seager reports that in the United States, “22–35 percent of women who seek emergency medical assistance at hospitals are there for reasons of domestic violence.” Wrong. She apparently misread a Justice Department study showing that 22–35 percent of women who go to hospitals because of violent attacks are there for reasons of domestic violence. When this correction is made, the figure for domestic-violence victims in emergency rooms drops to a fraction of 1 percent. Why would Seager so uncritically seize on a dubious statistic? Like many academic feminists, she is eager to show that American women live under an intimidating system of “patriarchal authority” that is comparable to those found in many less-developed countries. Never mind that this is wildly false.

Hard-line feminists such as Seager, Pollitt, Ensler, the university gender theorists, and the NOW activists represent the views of only a tiny fraction of American women. Even among women who identify themselves as feminists (about 25 percent), they are at the radical extreme. But in the academy and in most of the major women’s organizations, the extreme is the mean. The hard-liners set the tone and shape the discussion. This is a sad state of affairs. Muslim women could use moral, intellectual, and material support from the West to improve their situation. But only a rational, reality-based women’s movement would be capable of actually helping. Women who think that looking like a pear is an essential human right are not valuable allies.

A Solid Foundation

The good news is that Muslim women are not waiting around for Western feminists to rescue them. “Feminists in the West may fiddle while Muslim women are burning,” wrote Manhattan Institute scholar Kay Hymowitz in a prescient 2003 essay, “but in the Muslim world itself there is a burgeoning movement to address the miserable

predicament of the second sex.” The number of valiant and resourceful Muslim women who are devoting themselves to the cause of greater freedom grows each and every day.

They have a heritage to build on. There have been organized women’s movements in Iran, Lebanon, and Egypt for more than a century, and many women in Turkey, Morocco, and Tunisia already enjoy almost Western levels of freedom. But as radical Islam tightens its grip in places like Iran and rural Pakistan, and as it increasingly threatens Muslim women everywhere, even some devoutly religious women are quietly organizing to resist. Mehrangiz Kar, an Iranian human rights lawyer and researcher at Harvard Law School, predicts that “a feminist explosion is well on its way.”

Islamic feminists believe that women’s rights are compatible with Islam rightly understood. One of their central projects is progressive religious reform. Through careful translation and interpretation of the Koran and other sacred texts, these scholars challenge interpretations that have been used to justify sexist customs. They point out that forced veiling, arranged marriages, and genital cutting are rooted in tribal paganism and are nowhere enjoined by the Koran. Where the Koran explicitly permits a practice such as the physical chastisement of wives by husbands, the feminist exegetes try to show that, like slavery, the practice is anachronistic and incompatible with the true spirit of the faith. This kind of interpretation of scripture has been practiced by Jewish, Christian, and Islamic scholars for centuries. Now Islamic women want to play a part in it, and nothing in Islamic law, they believe, prohibits their doing so.

Helping Muslim Women Help Themselves

This past November more than a hundred Muslim lawyers, scholars, and activists from twenty-five countries gathered in New York City for the express purpose of supporting the modernization of Islamic jurisprudence and reviving the spirit of *ijtihad*, a once-vibrant Islamic tradition of independent thinking and reasoning about sacred texts. The organizing group, the Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity (WISE), plans to launch an international *shura*, a consultative council of Muslim women leaders who will advise religious and political leaders on women’s issues. They are also establishing a scholarship fund for the training of gifted female students to become Koranic scholars, or *muftia*. These women would be licensed to render *fatwas*, religious

judgments that, while nonbinding, drive custom and practice in Islamic societies.

The WISE participants were a “who’s who” of Muslim women lawyers, writers, and rights advocates. Perhaps the most affecting speaker was Mukhtar Mai. She is the Pakistani woman who, in 2002, was gang-raped by four men because of crimes allegedly committed by her brother. After the rape, which was sanctioned by an all-male village council, Mai was expected to preserve the “honor” of her family by killing herself. Instead, she and her family went to the police, even at the risk of being charged for the “crime” of being raped. A local imam, outraged by her treatment, denounced the attack in his Friday sermon. Reporters soon appeared, and Mukhtar’s case became a cause célèbre.

The conference participants varied widely in their politics and their relation to Islam. Unlike the present American feminist movement, which has no place for traditionally religious women, Islamic feminism is inclusive. Some of its proponents wear the veil; others oppose it. Some want egalitarian mosques; others do not mind traditional arrangements in which men and women are separated. Even a few non-Muslims were present. What unites them in feminism is their commitment to the universal dignity of women. They are all vehemently opposed to such practices as forced marriages, honor killings, genital cutting, child marriage, and wife beating. They are passionately dedicated to the educational, economic, legal, and political advancements of women.

Effective Feminism

The feminism that is quietly surging in the Muslim world is quite different from its contemporary counterpart in the United States. Islamic feminism is faith-based, family-centered, and well-disposed toward men. This is feminism in its classic and most effective form, as students of women’s emancipation know. American women won the vote in the early twentieth century through the combined forces of progressivism and conservatism. Radical thinkers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Victoria Woodhull, and Alice Paul played an indispensable role, but it was traditionalists like Frances Willard

(president of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union) and Carrie Chapman Catt (founder of the League of Women Voters) who brought the cause of women’s suffrage into the mainstream.

In particular, Frances Willard—today an almost forgotten figure—was beloved and immensely famous at the time of her death in 1898. She had a gift for reaching out to devoutly religious women and showing them how political equality was consistent with piety. This moved men, too. She was critical in turning the once-elite suffrage movement into a groundswell.

Today’s feminists have anathematized Willard because she held two conventional views they find intolerable: she regarded “womanliness” as a virtue and a source of strength, power, and beauty, not as a socially constructed domestic prison; and she advanced women’s rights within, not in opposition to, the framework of traditional religion. These two traits are precisely the ones that gave Willard mass appeal in her day and that make her philosophy relevant to women struggling for their rights inside highly traditional Islamic societies.

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Islamic “Family Feminism”

In Search of Islamic Feminism, a 1998 book by University of Texas Middle Eastern studies professor Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, offers a rare glimpse of Muslim women activists. In Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Turkey, and Iraq, Fernea kept encountering what she calls “family feminism.” Several of the women she interviewed reject what they see as divisiveness in today’s American feminism. As one Iraqi women’s advocate, Haifa Abdul Rahman, told her, “We see feminism in America as dividing women from men, separating women from the family. This is bad for everyone.” Fernea was not only struck by the family orientation of the women she encountered, she was also awed by their feminine graciousness. The Italian novelist and essayist Italo Calvino once made a list of requirements for a successful liberation movement. Almost as an afterthought, he added, “There must also be beauty.” There is beauty in Islamic feminism.

Islamic feminism has some celebrated adherents, among them the Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi,

the Iranian Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, and the Canadian journalist and human rights activist Irshad Manji. In her 2004 feminist manifesto, *The Trouble with Islam Today*, Manji writes, “We Muslims . . . are in crisis and we are dragging the rest of the world with us. If ever there was a moment for an Islamic reformation, it’s now.”

Manji is right. In particular, a feminist reformation could be as dangerous to the dreams of the jihadists as any military assault by the West. After all, the oppression of women is not an incidental feature of the societies that foster terrorism. It is a linchpin of the system of social control that the jihadists are fighting to impose worldwide. Women’s equality is as incompatible with radical Islam’s plan for domination and submission as it is with polygamy. Women freely moving about, expressing their opinions, and negotiating their relationships with men from a position of equal dignity rather than servitude are a moderating, civilizing force in any society. Female scholars voicing their opinions without inhibition would certainly puncture some cherished jihadist fantasies.

Is an Islamic feminist reformation a realistic hope? In the last speech of her life, in 1906, American feminist pioneer Susan B. Anthony famously told her audience, “Failure is impossible.” Anthony, however, was formed by and worked within a liberal democracy founded on the proposition that all men are created equal. Even when the American women’s movement was at its most controversial in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its exponents, with few exceptions, risked only ridicule or shunning. Today’s Muslim feminists face imprisonment, lashing, disfigurement, and murder. The leader of the radical wing of the nineteenth-century American women’s movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was a religious skeptic and harshly critical of sexism in the Bible. Her views were met by social antagonism and stern disapproval from more conservative feminists—all of it civil and peaceable. Stanton’s present-day counterpart, Somali-born Dutch author Ayaan Hirsi Ali, is a religious skeptic who is harshly critical of sexism in the Koran. Her views are met by violence and death threats from Muslim fanatics. She has to be escorted by bodyguards.

Securing Muslim Women’s Rights

Success is not certain. Yet there are many hopeful signs. Experience in Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey is encouraging. Groups like WISE are holding up a new image of female piety that does not require silence,

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powerlessness, and second-class citizenship. Individual women such as Pakistan’s Mai, Morocco’s Mernissi, Iran’s Ebadi, Canada’s Manji, and Holland’s Hirsi Ali are offering the world profiles in astonishing courage and grace. Their example may prove as infectious as it is inspiring. Radical Islam does indeed pose an extreme challenge to the cause of women’s rights, but these wise and brave women pose a devastating and unexpected challenge to radical Islam.

I asked Daisy Kahn, executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement and organizer of the WISE conference, how Americans can help. Her answer was simple: “Support us. Embrace our struggle.” That is already happening, though mostly outside feminist circles. There are scores of independent organizations—groups like Freedom House, Global Giving, the Independent Women’s Forum, Project Ijtihad, Equality Now, and the Initiative

for Inclusive Security—that have begun to work in effective ways to support Muslim women. Such groups, both liberal and conservative, may not identify themselves as feminist, but they embody the ideals and principles of the classical, humane feminism of Stanton, Anthony, and Willard.

Those “first wave” reformers made history. Their classical “equity” feminism was predominant in the United States long before the current band of activists and theorists transformed and debased it beyond recognition. Their understanding of equality was never at war with femininity, men, family, logic, or common sense. It is alive again in Islamic feminism.

The women who constitute the American feminist establishment today are destined to play little role in the battle for Muslim women’s rights. Preoccupied with their own imagined oppression, they can be of little help to others—especially family-centered Islamic feminists. The Pollitts and Enslers, the “vagina warriors”

and university gender theorists—these are women who cannot distinguish between free and unfree societies, between the Taliban and the Promise Keepers, between being forced to wear a veil and being socially pressured to be slender and fit. Their moral obtuseness leads many of them to regard helping Muslim women as “colonialist” or as part of a “hegemonic” “civilizing mission.” It disqualifies them as participants in this moral fight.

In reality, of course, it is the Islamic feminists themselves who are on a civilizing mission—one that is vital to their own welfare and to the welfare of an anxious world. A reviewer of Manji’s manifesto celebrating Islamic feminism aptly remarked, “This could be Osama bin Laden’s worst nightmare.” *Ipsa facto*, it should be our fondest dream. And if, along the way, Islamic feminism were to have a wholesome influence on American feminism, so much the better.