

Liberalism Unveiled: FEMEN- Muslim Women Debate and the Question of Freedom

Fulden İbrahimhakkiođlu*
Middle East Technical University

Abstract

In 2013, Ukraine-based feminist group FEMEN staged several protests around Europe in support of Amina Tyler, a Tunisian FEMEN activist receiving death threats for posting nude photographs of her online with social messages written on her body. Following these protests, a group of women who call themselves Muslim Women against FEMEN released an open letter criticizing the discourse FEMEN used in these protests, which they found to be white colonialist and Islamophobic. In this paper, the author examines the discursive strategies put forth by the two sides of the debate, suggesting that undergirding both is a shared framework of liberalism. Exploring the shortcomings of liberalism as drawn on by both positions, the author attempts to rethink what "freedom" might mean for international feminist alliances across differences.

Keywords: *FEMEN, liberalism, Islamic feminism, decolonial feminism, transnational feminism.*

* Assist.Prof. Fulden İbrahimhakkiođlu, Middle East Technical University, Faculty of Arts & Sciences, Department of Philosophy, Ankara-Turkey. E-mail: fulden@metu.edu.tr. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8991-7872.

Peçesiz Liberalizm: FEMEN-Müslüman Kadınlar Tartışması ve Özgürlük Meselesi

Fulden İbrahimhakkiođlu
Orta Dođu Teknik Üniversitesi

Öz

2013 yılında Tunus'lu FEMEN aktivisti Amina Tyler sosyal medyada çıplak bedenine yazdığı sosyal mesajlar içeren fotoğraflarını paylaşması ile birlikte ölüm tehditleri almaya başladı. Buna karşılık olarak, Ukrayna çıkışlı feminist topluluk FEMEN, Avrupa'nın muhtelif yerlerinde eylemler düzenledi. Bu eylemlerin ardından kendilerine FEMEN Karşısı Müslüman Kadınlar adını veren bir grup FEMEN'in kullandığı söylemleri eleştiren ve beyaz sömürgeci ve İslamofobik olarak adlandıran bir açık mektup yayımladı. Bu yazı, tartışmanın iki tarafını oluşturan söylemsel stratejileri inceleyerek, bunları temellendiren ortak çerçevenin liberalizm olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Bu sayede iki cephenin de kendini dayandırmış olduğu liberalizm çerçevesinin kısıtlılıklarına değinerek, farklılıklar üzerinden inşa edilen uluslararası feminist ittifaklar için özgürlük kavramının ne anlamlara gelebileceđi yeniden düşünmeye açılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: FEMEN, liberalizm, İslami feminizm, kolonicilik karşıtı feminizm, ulusötesi feminizm.

Introduction

In April 2013, following the protests that the Ukrainian feminist group FEMEN staged where they called for a “topless jihad” in order to support Amina Tyler, a Tunisian FEMEN activist who had been receiving death threats for posting provocative images of herself on the Internet, a group of Muslim-identified women mostly based in Europe who call themselves “Muslim women against FEMEN” published an open letter. In their letter, Muslim women against FEMEN are critical of FEMEN’s approach to Islam, and characterize it as a “neocolonial” project. The following is an exploration of the shortcomings of the ideological framework that grounds the discursive formations on both sides of this debate. This shared framework, I suggest, is liberalism. In line with anti-colonialist feminist scholarship that analyzes the troubles western liberalism poses for women’s movements around the globe (Abu-Lughod 2015, Agathangelou 2007, Alexander 2006, Mohanty 2003), in the following I focus on this debate in an effort to map out possibilities for transnational feminist alliances and rethinking the question of freedom beyond the confines of white feminism. While this debate may be rather dated at the point in which I pen this essay, the failures of the liberal framework to encompass feminist interests, which I map out here, continue to hold importance in the face of a growing need for international feminist alliances in the current political context of the refugee crisis and the unprecedented number of families and individuals fleeing Muslim majority states to seek asylum in the western world. The debate between FEMEN and Muslim Women against FEMEN is still relevant in that white feminism continues to be co-opted to victimize Muslim women and demonize Muslim men. The statements released by Muslim Women against FEMEN demonstrate Muslim women pushing back and speaking for themselves against white women who feel entitled to speak for them. I suggest that such encounters could potentially bear fruitful results so long as they provide the occasion to speak together and to one another and serve to establish international alliances across differences.

I must note that my analysis does not seek to provide a defense for one position over the other, but rather attempts to offer an exploration of the assumptions that ground each position. What I find to be particularly striking about this debate is the way in which both sides rely on a liberal framework, a framework that does not rise to the surface but remains invisible as it upholds both positions. This debate is exemplary, I think, of how pervasive liberalism has become in that it is taken for granted without explicitly being registered. That is to say, there is a sense in which the language of liberalism passes as “the” universal political discourse without any reference to the historical context or origin, thereby having been established as self-evident. In the context of this debate, liberalism serves as an invisible background against which everything else appears in the political field. The danger that this “ever present-yet-invisible” liberal framework poses is that foreclosure of the possibility to entertain thoughts, concepts or experiences that cannot be represented through it. It is quite possible that these thoughts, concepts or experiences may prove

important in establishing intercultural communication and for the future of transnational feminism. In other words, the danger, as I see it, is not so much in what the framework embodies, but instead in what it leaves out. It is not that “the subaltern” cannot speak -to borrow from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; but rather that her speech is rendered intelligible only in the dominant language of liberalism, which has historically been established against the backdrop of white colonialism. This essay offers, therefore, not only a critique of FEMEN’s stance - whose shortcomings has been profusely explored in the literature (See: Gheno 2015, Eilaraas 2014, & O’Keefe 2014), but also a critique of the pervasiveness and the monopoly of the liberal framework in the process of rendering political claims intelligible and legitimate. I argue that such monopoly risks not doing justice to claims that fall outside the epistemological realm demarcated by liberal politics. While this framework arguably provides a common ground to adjudicate claims over rights and liberties, insofar as it operates as a force of legitimization, it requires the work of translation for the sake of intelligibility, which forecloses the possibility of registering experiences that fall outside of its realm. The liberal framework, in other words, risks epistemic violence. In the following, I draw from the discourse used by FEMEN as well as Muslim Women against FEMEN in order to demonstrate these shortcomings and to call feminists to find other common grounds for alliances across differences that would not involve this kind of an epistemic violence.

FEMEN and Muslim Women against FEMEN: Liberal Interlocutors

In March of 2013, 19-year-old Tunisian FEMEN activist Amina Tyler posted images of herself on the Internet with the words, “My body belongs to me, it is not the source of anyone’s honor” written on her bare chest. Shortly thereafter the head of Tunisia’s Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice called for her to be stoned to death. She began receiving death threats. It was rumored that she had gone missing and was committed to a psychiatric facility by her family to ensure her safety, but a lawyer representing Tyler’s family later denied these claims. Tyler states in a conversation on Skype with other FEMEN members that she was drugged, abducted, and beaten by her family and was subjected to a virginity examination by her grandmother. Her family’s lawyer states that the family was only being protective and looking out for Amina’s best interests. After spending almost two months in hiding, on May 19, 2013 it was reported that Tyler was found and arrested, and may be charged for conducting, what is classified as, “provocative acts.”

As a response, FEMEN, the feminist group infamous for their topless protests, declared April 4 International “topless jihad” Day and staged protests in Sweden, Italy, Ukraine, Belgium, and France against the patriarchal oppression that women in Islamic countries are subjected to, of which Tyler’s story is symptomatic. The protests took place in front of major mosques and Tunisian embassies. They held signs that called for freedom to women. Some of the slogans from these protests read: “Free Amina,” “Freedom is not a disease”

(Brussels Mosque), “Bare Breast against Islamism” (Tunisian Consulate in Milan), “No Masters No Slaves,” “Naked Freedom” (Berlin’s oldest mosque), “No Sharia,” “Freedom for Women,” “No Islamism” (Tunisian embassy in Paris). They also had slogans written on their bare chests, such as, “Freedom for All Women” (Tunisian Embassy, Stockholm), “Arab Women Against Islamism,” (Great Mosque of Paris), “Don’t Fear Freedom” (Berlin’s oldest mosque). The photographs from the protests display the police violence against the protestors, as well as some hostility from the civilians (Taylor 2013).

Only a few days after these protests, FEMEN was bombarded with messages from a group of Muslim women who accused them of being racists, colonialists, anti-feminists, and imperialists. A group of Muslim women based in Birmingham, England wrote in their open letter to FEMEN: “We understand that it’s really hard for a lot of you white colonial ‘feminists’ to believe, but- SHOCKER! - Muslim women and women of colour can come with their own autonomy, and fight back as well! And speak out for themselves! Who knew?” Muslim women from different parts of the world began posting images of themselves with the slogans: “Nudity does not liberate me and I DO NOT need saving,” “Islam is my freedom,” “Hijab is my right,” “I am a strong Muslim woman, do I look like I need imperialists to free me from oppression?” “Islam is my liberation, my source of empowerment, my equality. So we won’t be need any of that ‘white-non-Muslim-women-saving-Muslim-women-from-Muslim-men’crap” “Oppressed? Ha hahaha” “Just because I choose to cover my head doesn’t mean I’m oppressed” and (my favorite), “Forgot to be oppressed, too busy being awesome” (The Stream, 2013).

These women responded to FEMEN’s call for them to get naked by calling FEMEN to put on some clothes. FEMEN activist Inna Shevchenko explains FEMEN’s choice to hold topless protests by writing:

Away from the woman, her body was the target of ugly patriarchal exploitation. Total control over the woman’s body is the main tool of her oppression; female sex-step is the key to her freedom. Female nudity which is free from the patriarchal system becomes the symbol of women’s liberation. Nudity as a weapon is one of new ways for feminism to transform. We are naked because we are feminists (Shevchenko 2013c).

FEMEN has been criticized extensively for their choice of “nudity as a weapon” which many feminists understand to be linked to the objectification of women. Muslim women against FEMEN, however, interpret FEMEN’s call for “topless jihad” rather differently. In her criticism of FEMEN, Sofia Ahmed writes: “The hyper-sexualisation of FEMEN’s campaign and the insistence on Muslim women to strip naked as a gesture of emancipation is a tell-tale symptom of Orientalist fantasies” (Ahmed 2013). Thus, Ahmed argues that in calling women to go naked, FEMEN not only feeds into a masculinist imaginary, but also an orientalist/imperialist one.

In response, FEMEN activist Shevchenko not only denies these accusations, but also expresses suspicion with regards to the motivation of this letter by

Muslim women against FEMEN. She contends that this letter does not reflect the authentic will of Muslim women, nor was it written from a feminist perspective.

“So, sisters,” she writes, “(I prefer to talk to women anyway, even knowing that behind them are bearded men with knives). You say to us that you are against FEMEN, but we are here for you and for all of us, as women are the modern slaves and it’s never a question of colour of skin” (Shevchenko 2013a). She continues: “You claim that we bring you our idea from our part of the world and you don’t need it. The idea of freedom doesn’t have anything to do with nationality or colour of skin. There are no set of human rights for Europeans and other for Arabs or Americans, it’s universal. And we are going to keep fighting for all of us, for our right for freedom” (Shevchenko 2013a). Elsewhere she allegedly says: “They [Muslim women] write on their posters that they don’t need liberation but in their eyes it’s written ‘help me’” (Nelson 2013).

Shevchenko’s condescending, presumptuous response led to an outrage, as it would be expected. I would like to take a step back here to explore the assumptions grounding both positions as well as the significance of this disagreement for how transnational feminist politics can or should proceed. What is striking to me is not only that both FEMEN and Muslim women embrace the same term “freedom” despite the disparity between their usage, but also that their usage of the term converge in that they both make use of liberal conceptions of freedom. Here are two competing claims for freedom, both of which are grounded in the history of liberalism. Further, liberalism that grounds both of these claims remains unspoken. It is the epistemichorizon, as it were, that renders these claims intelligible while itself remaining invisible. That is to say, this disagreement is made possible only through a prior agreement, a point of convergence in liberalism, which itself, strangely enough, is taken for granted in that it does not rise to the surface. Let me try to unpack this claim.

These two competing conceptions of freedom both of which are grounded in liberalism could be formulated as *freedom from oppression* and *freedom of choice* (whereas FEMEN defends the former, Muslim women appeal to the latter). These two formulations, of course, are not incompatible, at least not by themselves. Let us first consider FEMEN’s claim for freedom for all women, which they understand negatively, as *freedom from oppression*. FEMEN activist Shevchenko, in her response to Muslim women against FEMEN, assertively defends this negative freedom by suggesting that it is universal². The claim for universality here is contingent on not only the erasure of the history of this particular notion of freedom, but also its detachment from any particular context. In other words, Shevchenko universalizes freedom of this kind precisely by dehistoricizing it. This neutral universal term could be applicable anywhere, anytime, and to any group, according to her. Interestingly, this universalization itself is not particularly problematized by Muslim women who claimed that they were not oppressed and did not claim instead that freedom as freedom from oppression did not apply to them, for instance (so they did not claim a failure in the dehistoricizing/universalizing logic with regards to freedom as freedom from

oppression). I would, however, like to take a moment to question the legitimacy of this move and historicize this conception of freedom, which both sides mistakenly take to be ahistorical.

It will be useful at this point to take up Isaiah Berlin's well-known distinction between negative and positive freedom. Freedom that FEMEN defends seems to me to fall into the former category for the most part, insofar as they explain their practice of freedom as fighting against oppression. Shevchenko writes in her response to Muslim women that FEMEN are not Islamophobes, they are only fighting against those "who are constantly oppressing women, covering them, disrespecting them, raping them, beating them whether they are religious or not" (2013a). Of course, what is omitted here is the precarious position that religious minorities who reside in Europe already hold and how FEMEN's protests might affect - and is already considered to be a part of - the policies around secularism, which, as we know, are already biased against religious minorities in practice (Asad 2003, Mahmood 2011). Be that as it may, at least two objections could be raised to the way in which I frame FEMEN's conception of freedom as a liberal notion. First, one may suggest that negative conceptions of freedom are not peculiar to liberalism, as they can be observed in a wide variety of political struggles that are distinct from liberalism. I do not mean to say, of course, that all the movements that use this negative conception of freedom are to be considered under the banner of liberalism, which would be a rather ridiculous claim to make. Freedom is conceptualized negatively in many feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist/anti-colonialist, Marxist/communist/socialist struggles or any combination of these that are liberatory but not necessarily "liberal" in any classical (or contemporary) sense. It would be absurd for one to try to make the case that all of these movements are movements that sprouted out of liberalism. What I am interested in instead is the extent to which FEMEN inherits from liberalism. Saba Mahmood notes that this negative conceptualization of freedom is identified with the thought of Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Hobbes, and many discussions that are about the "proper role of state intervention within the private life of individuals" (Mahmood 2011: 11) are linked to this liberal conceptualization of freedom. Thus, the matter is not one of categorizing FEMEN as a liberal movement, but instead one of historicizing their conception of freedom, which they take to be ahistorical. Moreover, the extent to which FEMEN inherits from liberalism becomes more apparent when we consider how they conceptualize notions bound up with, but other than freedom. For instance, Shevchenko in her response to Muslim women alludes to the classical public/private distinction with regards to religion: "Often, I dream about a world with religions that are only in your houses or churches and don't appear in other places" (2013a). *Other places*, here, refer to public spaces that must be purely secular, uncontaminated by religion, as religion (which they see as inherently oppressive) belongs to the private sphere (that is, if it belongs at all). That raises the question, if women are oppressed under Islam, why push it aside to maintain it in the private sphere and sustain the oppression?

Putting this questionable formulation aside, one can also object to my reading by proposing that I have a reductive reading of FEMEN's project of freedom which is not only about negative freedom but also involves a positive project. I do not really have a response for such criticism, as I have not come across anything that indicates a positive project of freedom in my engagement with FEMEN (and in fact I contacted them with this question but have not received a response). It is not clear whether they provide an answer to the question "what are you going to do with your freedom," thus failing to offer a sketch of some of the positive commitments one may have in the absence of oppression. I have to say that I find this conception of freedom rather shortsighted.

Muslim women respond to FEMEN not only by alluding to a different set of values, such as dignity, modesty, and so on (such as when they say "FEMEN get dressed, my dignity is in my hijab" in response to FEMEN's call for topless jihad), but also by employing the very language of freedom that FEMEN use. This shared language expresses the disagreement between FEMEN and Muslim women, but the very expression of disagreement takes place precisely at a junction where the claims of both sides are grounded in a liberal framework. Thus, going back to Berlin's distinction between negative and positive freedom, if FEMEN proposes a negative conception of freedom rooted in the liberal tradition, Muslim women in response offer a positive liberal conception of freedom whose affiliation with liberalism is even more apparent, if not stronger. Suspecting a parallel between FEMEN's call to Muslim women for going topless and colonial projects of forced unveiling, Muslim women respond by saying that veiling is their right, their means of self-expression, their choice, and that Islam is their liberation, their freedom, and their "source of empowerment." (Of course, Shevchenko not only dismisses the authenticity of these claims by suggesting that it is their husbands, fathers, brothers talking through them, and not an expression of their true will; which would entail a desire to break free of what Shevchenko and many others construe as an oppressive condition, but also labels Muslim women's response as a position of cultural relativism, which she finds ridiculous given there are only one set of universal human values.) But these assumptions aside, it is striking that the language Muslim women use while making these claims is not the language of tradition that they want to defend: they do not say, for instance, "this is tradition and you have to respect that" or even that "veiling is a requirement, and I have to fulfill that." They say: "This is my choice." It is instead the very language of liberalism, the language of freedom as individual choice and autonomy that they employ³. It is for this reason, Shevchenko misses the mark when she writes: "We are at war... A war between two eras. A war between a mentality that belongs to Middle Ages and a 21st Century mentality. A war between civilization and backwardness, between freedom and oppression, war between democracy and dictatorship" (2013b). Muslim women's stance, far from representing a defense of oppression, dictatorship, or backwardness, is a liberal one, and marks a contemporary struggle that takes place within (and not outside of) the discourse of western liberalism. They make no recourse to history, tradition, or even community, but

instead to individual choice and autonomy. “Liberalism’s unique contribution,” Saba Mahmood writes, “is to link the notion of self-realization with individual autonomy, wherein the process of realizing oneself is equated with the ability to realize the desires of one’s ‘true will’” (Mahmood 2011: 11). That is precisely the formulation that Muslim women offer in their response as they take up freedom as self-mastery or self-government, as a refusal to submit to FEMEN’s white colonialism and Islamophobia. It should also be noted that the language of “true will” is also the language Shevchenko uses when she doubts the sincerity of Muslim women against FEMEN, thereby taking for granted this understanding that she in fact inherits from liberalism.

Even though the language Muslim women use is clearly a liberal one, none of the commentators surprisingly noted that. At a time when Islam and Muslim identities are by and large suspect, it is quite striking the amount of support that Muslim women against FEMEN have been getting from all over the world, feminists, non-feminists, and anti-feminists alike. Their popularity is contingent on the extent to which their claims got uptake in public discourse internationally. That is an indicator, above all else, of how intelligible their claims are, and this intelligibility, I suggest, is rooted in the prevalence of the liberal framework. The terms provided by this framework enjoy a special status whereby they are accepted as unobjectionably true, but not only that, the framework itself and its limits enjoy the privilege of remaining invisible. As Muslim women against FEMEN receive more and more public recognition, their uncritical reliance on the framework of liberalism overshadows a deeper problem, namely, the all-pervasiveness and the unproblematized status of the framework itself as well as the positions that it fails to represent. I do not mean to say that Muslim women ought not to make liberal claims, far from it. I am instead concerned with the instances of unrepresentability and the cost of framing one’s political project in this way. It is a problem for feminism when the all-pervasiveness of the framework renders certain projects illegitimate, meaningless, or undeserving of attention from the get-go, thereby establishing an epistemic hegemony that requires every claim to be translated into the terms already available within the framework⁴.

Freedom and Relational Identities

Lastly, I would like to explore briefly the implications of this discussion for future trajectories of transnational feminism and the feminist project of freedom. The debate between FEMEN and Muslim women against FEMEN reveals an important problem. As FEMEN insist that their negative conception of freedom is universal because ahistorical (thus erasing its history), and as Muslim women embrace a liberal conception of freedom (i.e. freedom as individual choice and autonomy) without referencing liberal tradition, the ways in which these particular conceptions of freedom are embedded in specific histories are left out of the conversation. This omission leads to an impasse: both conceptions are employed as natural, self-evident, and beyond history, and this status

granted to them obscures the need to think freedom differently. And we do need to think freedom differently, because the ways in which freedom is conceptualized in this debate prove incomplete in that they fall short of providing impetus for a promising project of freedom for transnational feminist projects. Under the illusion of an ahistorical universalism, FEMEN not only fail to address the important question of what to do with freedom, and therefore fail to offer a positive project for feminism, but they also refuse to listen to Muslim women, doubting their sincerity and seeking to silence their voice. On the other hand, freedom as taken up by Muslim women against FEMEN, although a positive notion, is not readily translatable to a transnational feminist project due to its heavy emphasis on individual choice. In her response to FEMEN, Sofia Ahmed writes:

I am not dismissing the fact that there are problems in the Muslim world. However history has shown that the West has directly (through slavery, colonialism and neocolonialism) and indirectly (through the propping up of misogynistic and oppressive regimes such as Saudi Arabia) done far more damage to Muslim women than Muslim men have. That is why I vehemently oppose FEMEN's universal imposition of the neocolonial agenda. If FEMEN really want to help Muslim women they should address the fact that for far too long now, Muslim women have been marginalised, bombed, raped, killed, and enslaved by men from the western world. They should work within their own countries to try and subvert future wars against Muslim countries and help break down barriers. Or perhaps they should stick to trying to liberate women in the west (Ahmed 2013).

Ahmed here draws attention to the critical impact of colonialism on other power relations in the Middle East, and calls for an intersectional approach. In the absence of contextualization, there is a danger of reifying religion as distinct from its shifting practices and its relation to other political formations. There is also a history of western self-affirmation through the image of the oppressed Muslim women, whereby sexism in the west is concealed. For these reasons, it is essential that we decolonize feminism. Yet in suggesting that feminists should “stick to trying to liberate women in the west,” Ahmed is not exactly calling for decolonial feminist solidarity. It is hard to imagine, if at all possible, any international solidarity between feminist struggles if we were to accept her suggestion. Pushed to its limits, this anti-colonialist critique becomes anti-feminist, as it were, by positing a false dichotomy between projects of anti-colonialism and transnational feminism. Yet this split presupposed here between the interests of what may be called (secular) “western” feminism and something like “Islamic feminism” seems to be an overstatement. The very availability of the liberal framework as a means for expression of both of these positions suggests a complexity, a site of “cross-fertilization” to borrow from Yeşim Arat (2015), which Ahmed cannot account for in her response to FEMEN

wherein she presupposes the (Orientalist) split between East and West. The legitimacy granted to the position of Muslim women against FEMEN through this framework as evident from the international support they are getting, the very fact that their claims are intelligible to the “western” audience (as well as the fact that these women reside in the west) is in itself an important factor that complicates this suggested split. I find that there is a lot of transaction taking place, a give-and-take of different terms that renders unlikely, if not impossible, a split between these two “worlds.”

Moreover, there is a sense in which Muslim women against FEMEN claim an identity and a political trajectory in relation to the identity and the political trajectory claimed by FEMEN, even if that relation is mostly an opposition. And FEMEN, as well, claim their “western, progressive feminist” identity in relation to Muslim women, real or imagined. Thus these projects seem bound up together from the start, one way or another, insofar as they are not closed off from one another, but on the contrary, shaped in relation to each other. This relational becoming is a place to start, as it marks the importance of keeping this conversation open-ended and ongoing. It makes clear that these groups do not stand alone on their own, but that their stances, positions, identities (and their freedom - whatever that may be) are bound up with one another. As Nilüfer Göle notes in the context of Turkey, the Muslim woman’s identity is only shaped in relation to Muslim men, secular women, and secular men. In this case, FEMEN redefines and reshapes itself through its repudiation of Islam (working against the background of a white secular middle class feminist history), and Muslim women against FEMEN reclaim their Muslim identity in critical response to FEMEN. This “epistemic friction,” to borrow from José Medina (2012), provides the opportunity for a critical dialogue that can play a role in establishing transnational alliances between feminists.

Conclusion: International Alliances, Future Horizons

In conclusion, this debate shows that we are at a moment in history where political discussions are permeated by liberalism. Further, it demonstrates that liberalism, in its rich, multifaceted history, is capable of upholding positions that are opposed to one another while itself remaining invisible. What this invisibility overshadows is the under representability of positions that fall outside of the liberal framework. I have also argued that the two conceptions of freedom - one negative, the other positive, and both liberal- prove inadequate in accounting for a positive project of freedom for transnational feminism. While FEMEN wants to erase difference and historical specificity (and paradoxically upholds a binary of progress and backwardness that maps onto the binary of secular-Western and religious-Eastern), Muslim

Women against FEMEN seem to be in danger of glorifying difference for its own sake and foreclosing the possibility of international solidarity. However, the very availability of the framework of liberalism to render their claims intelligible suggests otherwise. In opposing one another, they are already situated in a conversation, already in a deeper agreement that is prior to the opposition, and they already take a position in relation to another, claiming identities with regards to each other. This conversation, then, far from marking the end of the possibility of forming an international alliance, possibly marks its beginning. And this relational becoming is a place to start for the articulation and the installation of a positive project of freedom for transnational feminism.

Notes

- ¹ Although I was unable to retrieve the original source for this quote.
- ² She states: “The idea of freedom doesn’t have anything to do with nationality or colour of skin. There are no set of human rights for Europeans and other for Arabs or Americans, it’s universal” (Shevchenko 2013a).
- ³ Nilüfer Göle also makes a similar point in her work on contemporary veiling practices in Turkey and their divergence from traditional veiling practices through a kind of politicization. See: Göle 1999.
- ⁴ An example I have in mind is Saba Mahmood’s study with women within the mosque movement in Egypt. Mahmood notes the difficulty of making sense of the practices that these women undertake for feminism that is deeply rooted in a liberal/secular framework in the West. When these practices have no analogue in this framework, there emerges a need to undertake the laborious process of cultural translation and rethink the language of liberal secularism. This is not only an epistemological project, but also an ethical one. The very availability of the language of liberalism is tied to a value system - not only universally accessible, it is also the kind of political language that is considered to be the most useful or valuable, for closing the possibility of the emergence of another language irreducible to liberalism. The question, then, is what is lost when Muslim women enter the language of liberalism, and embrace its values as applicable to their situation? What is lost in translation; what remains unrepresentable? What are some gaps, silences, and pauses that emerge? These questions attain importance especially given that this group of Muslim women critical of FEMEN is mostly comprised of educated, middle-class women who live in Europe, raising the issue of the status of “other” Muslim women: What happens to the unrepresentability of the claims of lower-class urban women or rural women who identify as Muslim? Does providing the means to bring them to the table so that they enter into this discussion solve the issue? (See: Spivak 1988).

References

- Abu-Lughod L. (2015). *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Agathangelou A. (2007). *The Global Political Economy of Sex: Desire, Violence, and Insecurity in Mediterranean Nation-States*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ahmed S. (2013). *Muslimah Pride: We Reject Femen’s Islamophobic and Neo-Colonialist Crusade to Save Us*, The Huffington Post, 10 April 2013. URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/sofia-ahmed/muslim-women-against-femen_b_3044015.html.

- Alexander M.J. (2006). *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Arat Y. (2005). *Rethinking Islam and Liberal Democracy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Asad T. (2003). *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Berlin I. (1969). *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Göle N. (1999). *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Eilaraas K. (2014). Sex(t)ing Revolution, Femen-izing the Public Square: Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, Nude Protest, and Transnational Feminist Body Politics. *Signs*, 4(1):40-52.
- Gheno M. (2015). The FEMENist Connection: Ruptures and Agency in FEMEN France. *Multilingual Discourses*, 2(1-2): 62-90.
- Mahmood S. (2011). *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Medina J. (2012). *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. Oxford University Press.
- Mohanty C.T. (2003). *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Nelson S. (2013). Inna Shevchenko Responds To Muslim Women Against Femen's Open Letter In Wake Of Amina Tyler Topless Jihad. The Huffington Post, 8 April 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/04/08/inna-shevchenko-muslim-women-femens-open-letter-amina-tyler-topless-ihad_n_3035439.html.
- O'Keefe T. (2014). My body is my manifesto! Slut Walk, FEMEN, and Femmenist Protest. *Feminist Review*, 107:1-19.
- Shevchenko I. (2013a). Topless in the Country of Hijab? The Huffington Post, 8 April 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/inna-shevchenko/femen-topless-in-the-country-of-hijab_b_3034211.html.
- Shevchenko I. (2013b). Freedomphobes. The Huffington Post, 20 March 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/inna-shevchenko/femen-feminism_b_2910150.html.
- Shevchenko I. (2013c). Sextremism: The New Way for Feminism to Be! The Huffington Post, 7 February 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/inna-shevchenko/sextremism-the-new-way-for-feminism_b_2634064.html.Ne

Spivak G. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Nelson C. & Grossberg L. (Eds.), Champaign: University of Illinois Press: 271-316.

Taylor A. (2013). Femen Stages a 'Topless Jihad'. *The Atlantic* (4 April 2013). <http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2013/04/femen-stages-a-topless-jihad/100487/>The Stream(2013). Al Jazeera. <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201304050033-0022659>.