

Fundamentalism and Women: Negotiating Sacred Terrain

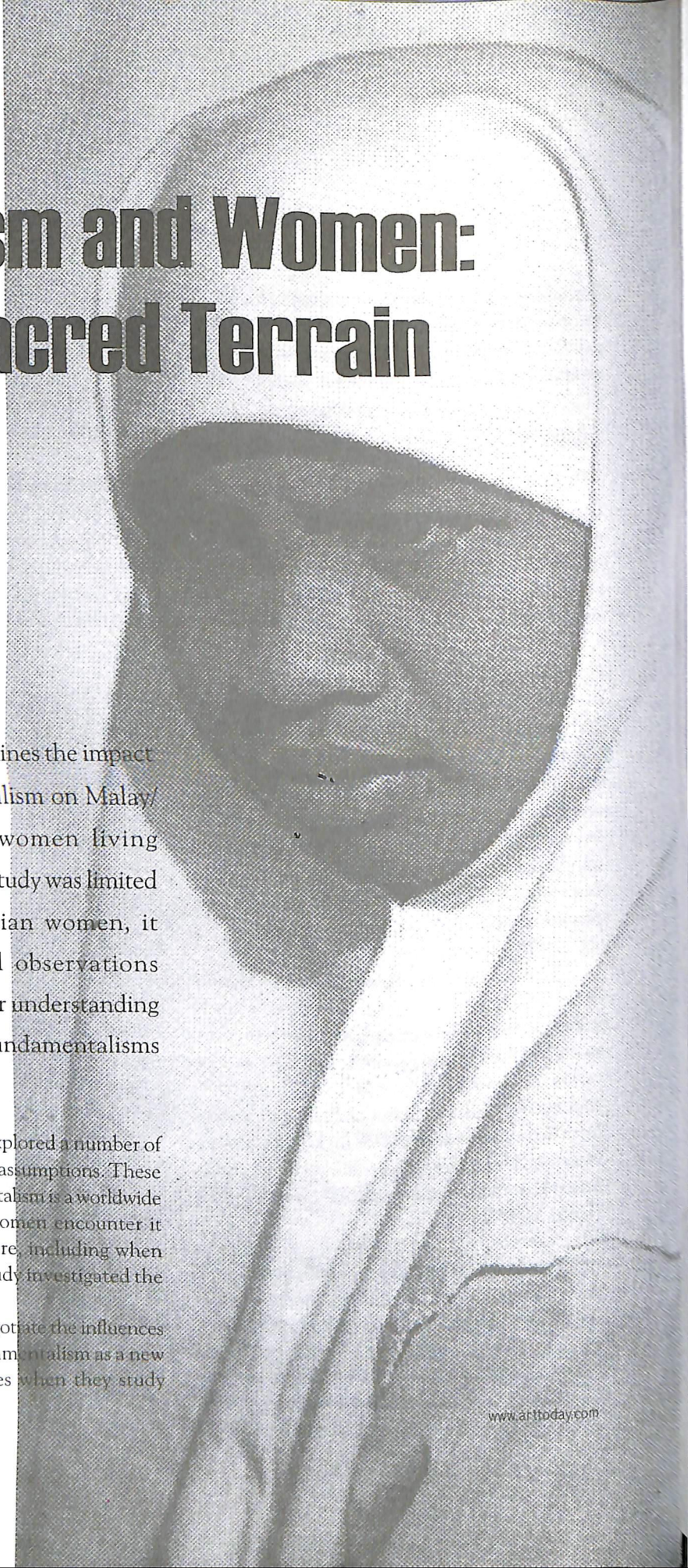
by Dr. Patricia A. Martinez

This short paper examines the impact of Islamic fundamentalism on Malay/Muslim Malaysian women living abroad. Although the study was limited to Islam and Malaysian women, it makes some general observations which may be useful for understanding or negotiating other fundamentalisms around the world.

This informal study explored a number of questions, based upon two assumptions. These are that religious fundamentalism is a worldwide phenomenon; and that women encounter it regardless of where they are, including when they study abroad. The study investigated the following:

- do Malaysian women negotiate the influences and forces of Islamic fundamentalism as a new phenomenon in their lives when they study abroad?

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'Fundamentalism'—any religious fundamentalism—is a fidelity, often rigid, to religious tradition, ideology, or sacred text and the literal interpretation of such text.

- ▶ or were these already present when they were still in Malaysia?
- ▶ how does studying abroad change, lessen or intensify the influences and forces of Islamic fundamentalism in their lives?
- ▶ are other factors which the women encounter abroad, such as racism, stronger issues to confront?

Terms of reference

I would like to offer some reflections on the definitive terms of this paper, 'fundamentalism' and 'women.'

FUNDAMENTALISM

The term 'fundamentalism' is problematic because it has evolved to mean only extremism and fanaticism. This is especially true when it is invoked with reference to Islam. Many of us who locate our work in postcolonial context have identified the continuing demonisation of Islam via fears and phobias of 'fundamentalism' (this is why some prefer to refer to fundamentalism as 'political Islam'). This is largely because the media in what constitutes the West depict this phenomenon as the spectre of religious fanaticism which gives rise to terrorism. This paper recognises this problem, and distinguishes against the negation and demonisation of Islam. It focuses instead on how the term has evolved with a specific meaning to denote trends, histories, and distinguishing features about some

religious movements in modern Islam. I use the term 'fundamentalism' also to enable me to interrogate and reflect on the ramifications of the phenomenon for women.

'Fundamentalism'—any religious fundamentalism—is a fidelity, often rigid, to religious tradition, ideology, or sacred text and the literal interpretation of such text. Numerous books have been written on Islamic fundamentalism, many of which agree on the following common traits:

- ▶ In a direct and self-conscious way, Islamic fundamentalism is a response to modernity. It is often couched as a rejection of modernity, or a rejection of the way modernity includes secularisation and individualism, which fragment a religiously bound community such as the *umma*.

What constitutes modernity is often subsumed under the epithet 'the West.' This is because the Euro-American West is the source of programme and models of economic progress and industrial development, as well as the universal indices used to measure 'developed,' 'developing,' 'underdeveloped' and so on.

Many Muslim nations have experienced a history of colonialism by the West. This, together with the perception of a continued hegemony via the globalisation of trade, communications, and Western language and culture, has resulted in 'modernity' being understood as tainted by these colonial and neo-colonial influences.

However much fundamentalists wish to reject or purge modernity, secularisation, or the influences of the West, it is not entirely possible. As such, in a selective adaptation to modernism, the private domain is singled out as the bastion of the incorruptible Islam.



Therefore the family, the domestic sphere and women are made to exemplify the ideals to which fundamentalists aspire.

- Most often, this entails privileging and even enforcing patriarchal interpretations of Islam on women, and controlling or even restricting their dress, behaviour and freedoms such as choosing to work outside the home. However, what was best for women in societies and cultures centuries ago, is not always entirely applicable in the vastly different context of today. Since Islam evolved in a specific culture in the Middle East, these rigid or literal applications of text and tradition can become problematic when applied to a culture that is not Arabic.

WOMEN

Obviously, there is no need to explain what is inferred by the gender category 'women.' My intention in reflecting on it as a term of reference in this paper is to point out some problems about the way the term is appropriated and used by women, especially activists and academics. (This is therefore also self-criticism!)

'Women' is used sometimes as a referent without any attendant explanation about WHICH women. For example, what are the multiple identities which disappear even when we use the term 'Muslim women' or 'Malaysian women;' for the women lumped together under these terms are not all the same. When we refer to 'women,' who do we mean in our mind (and individual world-view) that we presume is understood in precisely the same way by those who hear us or read us? Who is being left out?

Perhaps these are important considerations. Feminists and activists enable female empowerment by insisting upon the recognition of the different needs, issues, problems and agendas of women. In similar vein, we need to make the

effort to distinguish carefully which women we are either addressing or speaking or writing about. We need to clarify and nuance our own use of the term. This will make us self-conscious about our own power in speaking about women, because we are speaking FOR women. This leads to an awareness that other women, more women, need to be enabled to speak or write for themselves. More importantly, we will become self-conscious about the diversity of the women we represent in our work, and thus more sensitive to 'women' as a constituency.

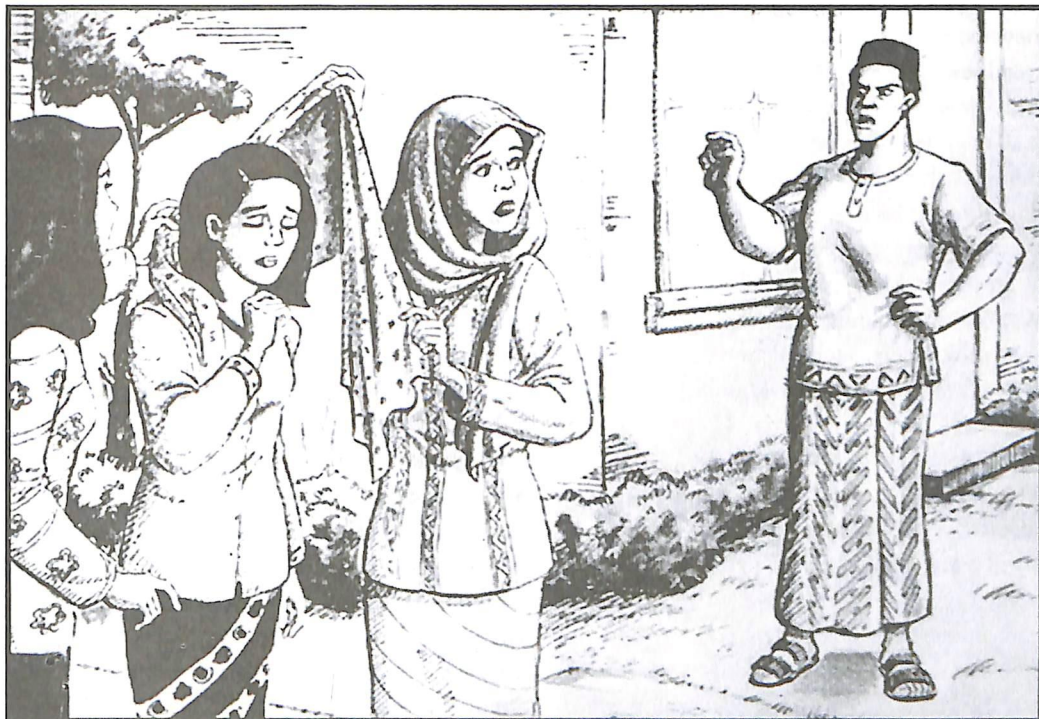
The study

This was a limited study conducted for the paper. As such, it is informal and is offered more as a springboard for reflection or for further work in this area.

Forty Malaysian women, all Muslims and all Malay, were interviewed. Their ages ranged between 19 and 25 years. All of them were students at American colleges and universities in a large city in the northeastern United States. They agreed to speak frankly if I would ensure their anonymity. All of them were on scholarships from the Malaysian federal government, state governments or Malaysian institutions. They were studying in a variety of disciplines and fields.

The respondents were asked to fill out a questionnaire, in which the terms used in the survey were defined for them. For example, Islamic fundamentalism was explained as I did in the previous section of this paper. The women then participated in a substantial debriefing session that I held in each of the universities and colleges they attended.

In response to the question whether Islamic fundamentalism was a new phenomenon encountered, 13 of the respondents said it was.



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Among the explanations offered were that they had never been restricted or disciplined as much by their religion previously, nor had their religiosity been questioned.

They identified the sources of these 'restrictions' and 'discipline' as peer pressure from other Malaysian students, both male and female. They also identified these sources as the associations they belonged to, such as Muslim groups which are present on most campuses, and which include Muslims from other parts of the world. All the respondents described restrictions as covering their hair by wearing the *tudong* (in arabic, the *hijab*); having to cover all of their body except the face, hands and feet; checking on whether they prayed five times a day; and the segregation of men and women at gatherings (for example, women sat on one side of the aisle at a talk on Islam, and men on the other).

Being disciplined was described as ranging from the monitoring of their dress and behaviour, to actually being 'told off' by their peers and made to feel ashamed that they were 'not any more Muslim.' In the close-knit Malaysian Muslim community, students rarely lived in university housing, but rented houses or apartments shared by at least four women. They related that Malaysian male students often lived close by or even next door, and that many of them were 'protectors' of the women, but also exerted a dominance on them. At the debriefing, some of the women indicated that they would try to ignore or resist some of these attempts.

Six of the respondents said that because of the influences and forces such as those described above, they had become more religious on their own after arrival in the U.S. However, they clarified that they did not feel 'restricted' or 'disciplined,' as it was acceptable to them. Two

of them pointed out that in comparison to what they had read about women in Afghanistan or even Iran, Malaysian Muslim women had a great deal of freedom. Fifteen of the respondents said that they felt no pressure whatsoever that changed their lives significantly as Muslim women. One of them pointed out that what was 'fundamentalism' for some, was unproblematic for others. Many in this group said that they were only maintaining normal practices of their family and peers, such as praying five times a day, wearing modest clothes and the *tudong*.

Six of the women said that from the definition of fundamentalism offered, they had experienced it already in Malaysia as policies, practices and laws that discriminate against women. Two of them pointed out that they were affected by the ruling that women who do not wear the *tudong* are fined in two states in Malaysia, and that men and women were constantly segregated. They said they did not resent wearing the *tudong* and had done so since puberty. What they resented was the fact that women's behaviour was being forced or legislated by men.

All the women agreed that Malaysia was becoming 'more Islamic' in terms of the growing Islamisation of policies, laws and public discourse. All the women said that at various times they have been reminded that they must be good examples of Islam, or of being Malay. Responses to the question about how studying abroad intensified or lessened the influence and forces of Islamic fundamentalism in their lives were reflected in their answer to the previous question. In the debriefing that followed at one university, four of the women indicated that they were aware of other forms of fundamentalism, such as Christian fundamentalism in the U.S. but were not affected by it. A lively discussion ensued.

What constitutes being restricted or disciplined by religiosity is for some an option that is freely chosen; for others it is a way of life in which they were raised.

In response to the question about whether they encountered other forces such as racism, 20 or half of the women agreed that they had experienced some form of racial discrimination which, according to three, was worse than the disciplining fundamentalist tendencies of their peers. The experiences ranged from feeling treated badly because they were different, to the use of racial epithets. Of those who experienced racism, most agreed that it made them withdraw into their ethnic community.

One of the darker-skinned women seemed indignant that she was asked if she was from the Indian subcontinent. Interestingly, she employed a pejorative term for Malaysians of South Asian descent. Despite recognising racism perpetrated upon her, she was unconscious of her own racism.

Implications and Reflections

The study surfaced a fact that I wish to emphasise: that there are very complex configurations of 'fundamentalism' and 'women,' including the fact that what is deemed 'fundamentalism' is not really so. This was obvious from the variety of opinions and positions on whether and how Islamic fundamentalism affected the respondents as Muslim women.

While there was validation of the more common notions of Islamic fundamentalism as patriarchal and restrictive of women, it is

important to recognise also that among educated young women abroad who are exposed to a multitude of liberal influences, a significant number do not perceive 'restrictions' or 'discipline.' What constitutes being restricted or disciplined by religiosity is for some an option that is freely chosen; for others it is a way of life in which they were raised. There are different forms of religiosity, and women do not necessarily resist the most orthodox, especially if it is a context that is familiar. It is important to recognise also that for some young people, the global appeal of intellectual Islam offers the possibility of a wider world in which to live, even if there appear to be codes and restrictions to ensure conformity. For these, Islam offers wider opportunities through its capacity to offer inoculation against materialism and sin.

It is significant also to realise that women NEGOTIATE fundamentalist influences and forces. This became very apparent in the debriefing sessions. Although the broad range of comments cannot be quantified nor easily categorised, the respondents described diverse ways in which they conformed and yet not. They related how they resisted the attempts to discipline and restrict them, even though they were themselves forging an Islamic identity.

Some of them pointed out, for example, that the strict and constant segregation of men and women was not entirely compatible with Malay culture. They expressed being torn between fidelity to their practices as a family or group, and what was described for them as appropriately Islamic. Thus, an encounter with the influences and forces of fundamentalism enriched their sense of ethnic and cultural identity, which are also resources for women. It is significant that all the women reported being reminded that they had to be good examples of Islam, or of being Malay. This is very relevant in



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any analysis of how and why women, primarily, are disciplined and controlled. The reminders to be exemplary provide a clue as to why women first and most of all are restricted or disciplined by aspirations of fidelity to race or religion. The reason lies beyond the need to assert male domination: it is that women are the bearers of culture, they are the mothers who perpetuate ethnicity. As the primary caregivers of children, women transmit and instill moral values and religious identity. Looking at it from another perspective: women have considerable power. It is a power they can wield to raise and influence the next generation differently, rather than perpetuate paradigms of oppression.

This realisation is important. Some of the studies and reports of activists and academics (and some of us are both) treat women as if they were inert objects. For example, how many times have we seen and heard such phrases as 'the

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effects of globalisation on women,' 'questioning the effects of development on women,' etc.. In such paradigms, women are not at the center of the study, even if it is all about women. I suggest that when we write about women, we place them at the center, and write about them as actors (the word is gender-neutral now) and participants. It is perhaps more empowering for women when the study, report or project describes also how women NEGOTIATE all these various forces in their lives, rather than analyse only how these forces affect them.

Finally, I offer perspectives which may enable women to negotiate fundamentalism, especially to interrogate it as an overwhelmingly powerful unified category. I suggest that it is important to recognise that 'fundamentalism' includes:

1. being selective about its sources

Often, the phrases "in Islam" and "Islam says" to announce what women must do, are severely restricting for women. This is because to then confront, critique or repudiate seems an outright rejection of Islam. However, fundamentalists speak not just authoritatively, but also SELECTIVELY. Grand pronouncements which seem to define Islam are actually about which aspects of religious tradition, what ideologies,

and whose world-views are privileged, and even the literal interpretation of the Qur'an.

This is a powerful argument with which to confront authoritative pronouncements and assumptions. For Islam as a religion has evolved a huge discourse and corpus of texts (referred to as *fiqh*) on the *shari'a* (law) alone. There is a similarly rich and diverse scholarly tradition—referred to as *tafsir*—for the interpretation of the Qur'an. These vast resources include those which are enabling of women, for the Prophet of Islam set out to provide a more just, more ethical, more noble society than there was in the 7th century C.E. in the Arabian peninsula. Early Islam was empowering for women. There is much in the vast scholarly traditions of Islam which continue to be such a resource. The knowledge that there are differences of interpretation and application of sacred text and of tradition can be useful for women. They can insist that still other interpretations exist—those which enable gender equity for example—and should be considered.

2. the existence of many fundamentalisms

Fundamentalist movements in different countries are never exactly the same. Often this applies even within the same nation. Therefore a close study of their ideals and sources of legitimacy will provide an indication of their fissures and contestations. This is useful for a sense that one is not dealing with a powerful monolith, but that holding onto power is a process of continual maintenance. Thus, the power that one confronts is sometimes shaky and not always overwhelming; it has to ACCOMMODATE as part of the process of maintaining power.

3. it is not a total rejection of modernity

On the contrary, fundamentalist movements are thoroughly modern movements although they claim legitimacy from an ideal

past. Bruce Lawrence refers to them as “anti-modern moderns” (1995, xiv). By this he means that fundamentalists have enjoyed a measure of success precisely because they have come to terms with the modern world, even while opposing it. They are moderns because they accept the instrumental benefits of modernity: they talk by telephone, drive cars, fly in airplanes—but at the same time, oppose the ideological norms of the high-tech era. Therefore edicts about rejecting modernity or raging against ‘the West’ should be perceived as the rejection of ASPECTS of modernity and ‘the West.’ This insight is relevant because women who fight for their rights are often negated as ‘tools of the West’ or as ‘blind slaves to (Western) feminism,’ for example.

4. fundamentalism is a two-way exchange: it influences and is influenced

It is a mistake to perceive women only as receptors or objects of fundamentalism. Inasmuch as fundamentalism needs, appropriates and wields authority, fundamentalists do not exist in a vacuum. They are influenced, albeit in varying degrees, by what is said or written about them. They do have to liaise and negotiate, not just confront, the rest of the world.

Therefore, it is important not to perceive power as a dichotomy between the powerful and the powerless, or to perceive power as an unshakeable monolith. Power is sometimes barely held on to. It is present everywhere; even small, subtle protests and acts of resistance have impact.

Thus, women do negotiate even sacred terrain. ♪

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