Thinking feminism cross-culturally

-The tension between culture and gender equality-

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One day after the Golden Globes took place with its visitors wearing all black, the BBC published an article which asked if now, Bollywood would follow Hollywood in that big step taken towards gender equality. The reaction of Bollywood-star Kalki Koechlin showed of the misconstruction of global feminism by the BBC: “it would just become a shocking headline”, “If you get touched in a bus, you don’t even think about it anymore” (BBC, 2018). The act of sexual abuse is a crime independent of place and time, the approach to fight it is not.
“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

- (Art 1, Universal declaration of Human Rights)

**Introduction**

Globalization entails an increase in cultural plurality that will confront Europe in the near future. Rising economies like India bring merely aspects of culture on the global stage which seem to contradict the norms of the European community. India is a country in which many women face the attack of their dignity in every sphere of life. Unpunished rapes, domestic violence, less chances for education and the patronization in essential decisions are just a few examples. The idea of women being subordinated by men is widespread and rooted in cultural beliefs and traditions. The question is, how should one take a position when women’s rights are systematically violated in the name of culture? How should the tension between the tolerance of cultural plurality and the universal demand for gender equality be balanced? And what are the political conditions when aiming at the global gender equality?

The first part of the essay will explore the tensions between culture and gender equality. I will explain the ‘clash of norms’ by using the reasoning of Susan Okin’s argumentation for the contradicting nature of multiculturalism and feminism within a nation state. To illustrate that thought, I will look at the example of the private law in India. The second part will examine the approach in dealing with that tension. By elaborating on Martha Nussbaum’s understanding of cross-cultural feminism and retelling the story of my example in India, I will show that culture and feminism need to be seen as in interaction with each other. The third part will discuss the political implications of cross-cultural feminism and the role Europe should take in times of globalization. Confuting Thierry Baudet’s opinion of the need for borders, I will argue for the unique opportunity globalization offers for global feminism.

Feminism in all its forms is a broad term for a range of political movements and ideologies. In that essay I will use the term feminism as interchangeable with the claim for gender equality. I define gender equality as each person’s liberty of a fair choice in fundamental matters independent of gender. The term of culture, I understand as a certain ‘way of living’ described by Okin (1999). The essay turned out to highly correlate culture and religion. However, one should not forget, that ‘western’ societies like the Netherlands or Germany in which religion is less essential in terms of cultural identity, practice a certain general ‘way of living’ as well. For example, the beauty standards applied to women are just as well a
cultural influence on patterns of behaviour of the individuals. The term of cross-cultural feminism I use as the question for gender equality in different cultural contexts. It entails the universal standard of gender equality, by leaving enough space for different cultural interpretations of the same.

Clarification of the starting position: Gender equality as a universal norm

This essay is written from a European perspective and is based on the assumption that the norm of gender equality should be universal. In my working process I talked to people who told me that a woman not having the same rights as men can be compared to a dog not having the same rights as a human being. I could not and I do not want to understand that perspective. I strongly believe that the Art. 1 of the Human Rights declaration clearly points out the equality in rights independent of one’s sex. However, I am talking about cross cultural feminism, which essentially requires the sensible consideration of cultural diversity and plurality. To solve the problem of making universal claims and avoiding cultural imperialism at the same time, this essay is based upon the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s defence of universal values:

   It is one thing to say that we need local knowledge to understand the problems women face, or to direct our attention to some aspects of human life that middle-class people tend to take for granted. It is quite another matter to claim that certain very general values, such as the dignity of the person, the integrity of the body, basic political rights and liberties, basic economic opportunities, and so forth, are not appropriate norms to be used in assessing women’s lives in developing countries. (p.41, 2000)

Just after having accepted the universal value of gender equality as minimal consensus, it was possible for me to elaborate on the questions that cultural plurality pose in fighting for them. I can only talk about differences, by being able to compare them to some universal standard. As the Indian feminist Uma Narayan (1997) argues, the universal standard of feminism is not a “westernized” concept to attack “non-western culture”. It has its justification from united calls by international women's meetings such as those in Vienna and Beijing, and the feminist histories of nations all over the globe (Nussbaum 2000, Uma Narayan 1997).
Part I

The tension between Culture and Gender equality

The American author and liberal feminist Susan Moller Okin (1999) makes the provocative statement that most cultures are structured in a way that men are superior over women and therefore conflict with the concept of feminism.

A culture is a set of values, norms, and beliefs which aim to connect and combine the sum of individuals to a structured and somehow functioning society. One essential part to it, is the allocation of roles and responsibilities within that society. A structure of roles results in an order and therefore a hierarchy. The Gender is in most cultures one of the most essential categorizations and will influence ones’ position in that hierarchy. The understanding of ‘gender’ is determined and its implications for ones’ behaviour is controlled through the belonging to a certain culture. There is no doubt that the understanding of gender stands in a relationship to its cultural context. Clearly, the demand for gender equality can conflict with a hierarchical order and therefore the culture itself.

In her publication “Is multiculturalism bad for women?” Okin (1999) firstly introduced the conflicting nature of culture with gender equality. She looks at more patriarchal minority cultures in the surrounding of less patriarchal majority cultures, namely the US and Europe. She formulates two pre-assumptions. First, the subordination of women by men is part of the order in almost every society. And second, those with more power (i.e. men) tend to determine that order and are generally in the decision-making position, which is why these orders are likely to constitute themselves (Okin, 1999).¹

As a result, Okin (1999) states that the liberal demand for tolerance and protection of cultural minorities (in form of e.g. group rights) that defines multiculturalism, overlooks the in-group dynamics of the same culture, and supports the patriarchal and oppressive nature towards women.

Furthermore, Okin discusses the problem of the invisibility of the gender discrimination and its character of taking place in the private sphere (1998). According to her argumentation, the fact that culture mainly takes place in the context of the family, is making it difficult to fight and sometimes even detect the gender inequality. As Okin (1999) describes the manifested problem: “The more a culture requires or

¹ For further argumentation, see Okin (1999)
expects of women in the domestic sphere, the less opportunity they have of achieving equality with men in either sphere” (p. 13).

To visualize her point, I would like to give an example from my school time. At my primary-school there was a debate about the exemption for girls from the swimming lessons, because their parents did not want to let her daughters be half naked in front of their male classmates due to religious beliefs. A clear example in which multiculturalism and feminism are opposing each other. But the dilemma expanded. The school refused the claim which resulted in one girl being excused every single time from the swimming lessons by her parents. From that point on, there was no official discrimination anymore and the denied group right was internalized within the family. The example furthermore reveals the domestic structures and provides an insight in the cultural norms of the family.

Out of Okin’s argumentation, I conclude that no cultural relativism should be used when it comes to women’s protection and rights. There is a danger of confusing the toleration of diversity with relativizing cultural practices which harm women (Nussbaum, 2000, p.49). Blind tolerance of cultural plurality opposes feminism.

The tension in practice: example of India

In order to understand how that tension takes place in a bigger scale I would like to apply Okin’s argumentation to India with its ‘private rights’ for various minority groups. India deals with a huge plurality, which is best answered by a high flexibility and freedom of everybody to live the preferred culture. In his lecture, Professor Kanungo (2018) clearly pointed out that the fascination of India lays in the mainly peaceful coexistence of diverse cultures. But what we see in India are the terrible conditions under which the Muslim women in the North among others have been suffering.²

India is constitutional democracy, with its constitution being really “women friendly” (Nussbaum, 2000, p.24). It includes the right of non-discrimination on the basis of sex, as well as the right to the equal protection of the laws (Nussbaum, 2000, p.25). It can be concluded that - in theory - women and men are treated as equals. However, Nussbaum (2000) describes the position of women as “second-class citizens in reality” (p.4). One reason to that is the lack of a uniform code of civil law. In 1937, the British

² It is important to note, that the minorities are internally diverse as well and the situation of women differ by community.
governors introduced next to other minority laws, the Muslim personal Law (Sharia) with the aim to live up to the need for cultural freedom (Vatuk, 2008). The Sharia concerns the aspects of Muslim social life such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and family relations in India. It includes the non-interference of the state in matters of personal dispute (Roychowdhury, 2017). The interpretation of Muslim personal law is of paternalistic nature towards women in several communities (Nussbaum, 2000). It denies them equality in terms of property rights, associative liberties, and employment (Chaudhary, 2015). Nussbaum (2000) argues “that is unacceptable under the universal norms of equality and liberty that the (Indian) state would like to defend” (p.52).

A look in the in-group dynamics as proposed by Okin (1999) shows, that it is not just that the Sharia subordinates women, but furthermore the women have no fair choice to change their inferior position. Nussbaum (2000) describes the phenomenon of the “simulacrum of choice” (p.53). According to her argumentation, India’s women struggle with problems of a weak law enforcement, high costs and a general lack of knowledge about their rights. A Muslim women from the rural area of the Indian North, will likely be raised up with low chances of gaining literacy and in poor economic conditions. She will grew into the culture she is part of and perceive daily oppression as standard (Nussbaum, 2000). Nussbaum (2000) explains: “These circumstances affect the inner lives of people, not just their external options: what they hope for, what they love, what they fear, as well as what they are able to do” (p. 31). In addition, changing the legal system in which one is embedded is difficult and goes most likely hand in hand with the exclusion one’s cultural community (Nussbaum, 2000). All that does not mean, that every Indian Muslim woman consciously or unconsciously suffers under the hierarchical structures of her culture. But if she is not given the chance to have a fair choice about the conditions she is living in, it clearly contradicts with the idea of feminism.

The peaceful coexistence of different cultures is a fair reason for personal laws in India. However, the example clearly shows the problematic consequences for feminism by giving multiculturalism supremacy. There is no possibility of legally protecting women which get harmed by certain practices, nor do the women themselves have fair chances to bridle injustice without losing their complete base of existence.
Part II

Dealing with that tension: Cross-cultural feminism

When being faced with the violation of the norm of gender equality by some sort of cultural practices, one can take different positions. The first one fits to Okin’s argumentation: the active fighting or non-acceptance of gender inequality. The tolerance for cultural plurality would be subordinated under a universal version of feminism. The second one would be tolerance of that practice and therefore the acquiescence of the oppression of women. In that sense, the value of tolerance towards cultural plurality is trumping the value of gender equality, and cultural relativism is used to justify women’s oppression. Inspired by a paper of the scholar Oonagh Reitman (2005), I argue that neither of the two positions should be preferred as such. But rather there is the necessity to see multiculturalism and feminism in interaction.

Going back to the missed swimming lessons example in my primary school, and how the parents resolved that issue, it is clear that the conflict resolution led to a very unsatisfying outcome. It also shows the difficulty to deal with the tensions in practice. The parents’ claim for the tolerance towards their religion was rejected and they had to find another way to deal with that. Next to the feeling of discomfort that girl must have had by explaining herself, she did not learn to swim. In the end we have a lose-lose situation in which the intended “protection” of the concerned girl as well as the tolerance of cultural differences failed.

The example shows that the pure neglect of group rights to protect gender equality, can result in worsening the situation. The cultural norms are often deeply rooted, especially when it comes to religious beliefs. The overruling of cultural practices can be criticized as Eurocentric imperialistic tendencies and as ignorant towards other factors like religion, race, social status and economic conditions defining identity (Volpp, 2001). Even worse, the official discourse is pushed in the private sphere (that problematic was discussed before). However, the decision of deciding in favour of the group right would not be an option either, such as the approving the exemption of the swimming lessons which may even incentivize other families of the same religious community. My point is that opposing the concepts of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘feminism’ by deciding for one of the two through
legislation will manifest the conflict. Neither the justification of gender inequality by culture nor the justification of cultural intolerance by the norm of gender equality are defensible approaches of action. An alternative would have been to sit together with the girl and her parents and jointly think about a solution, a special swimming suit.

Conceptualizing culture as dynamic constructs and in constant change and adaption (Nussbaum, 2000), enables the modification towards gender equality. As the Indian feminist Narayan (1997) stated “I find it impossible to describe ‘our traditional way of life’ without seeing change as a constitutive element, affecting transformations that become ‘invisible’ in their taken-for-grantedness.”. For instance in August 2017, the Indian Supreme Court deemed the practice of triple talaq (instant divorce) as unconstitutional (Human Rights Watch 2017).

To sum up, the tension of culture and gender equality can be best answered by integrating cultural interests in a flexible understanding of feminism i.e. cross cultural feminism. Or to formulate it in Nussbaum’s (2000) words: “(there is the need for a) feminist practice of philosophy that is strongly universalist, committed to cross-cultural norms of justice, equality, and rights, and at the same time sensitive to local particularity, and to the many ways in which circumstances shape not only options but also beliefs and preferences” (p.7).

Recalling the example of India

In the first part, I ended up saying that in several communities Muslim women in North India are oppressed by their culture and they have few chances of escaping the hierarchical structures. The opposing nature of feminism and culture gets visible in the ‘private rights’ and the intractability of that opposition is supported by the lacking empowerment of the women. Seeking for an approach to deal with the tension, I concluded the need of an interaction between culture and feminism. Looking at the Muslim women in India, we see feminist bottom-up movements which take the historical, cultural and economic components into consideration. The ‘Islamic feminism’ is an example of a compromise between feminism and Muslim culture and the example of the NGO “women’s voice” shows of how empowerment can look like.

The idea of the ‘Islamic feminism’ is to justify the equality demands by a new and women-friendly interpretation of the Qur’an. It had its origin in the Iran and Egypt and criticizes that the religious corpus was always interpreted and translated by males, and is therefore biased. The mission of the ‘Islamic
feminism is to “challeng[e] conventional histories and canonical texts (...) pointing to the openness of the Qur’an and Sunna to ijtihad (...) look (...) at the context in which the Qur’an was revealed (...) [and] apply(...) this understanding to the present so as to question the ways in which Islamic knowledge has been produced” (Vatuk, 2007, p.2). This idea can be found in the All-India Muslim Women’s Personal Law Board (AIMWPLB), with the aim of ‘changing MPL from within’ (Vatuk, 2007, p.3). Also NGOs like Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) argue that “religion is intrinsic to the identities of the majority of Muslim women, it therefore must inform their vision and strategies as well as their articulation of a collective identity” (Kirmani, 2011, p.16).

Education is seen as the key for enabling gender equality. I discussed the problem of Indian Muslim women who do not can read or having a lack of knowledge about their rights. Therefore feminism starts in the provision of tools to enable them to oppose oppression. The NGO “women’s voice” (AeN) is one of the largest and best established women’s organizations in India. They focus mainly on the empowerment of working-class women from the rural area. They offer literacy classes and education to increase self-confidence and improve the economic conditions and independency (Vatuk, 2007).

The example of India shows that feminism can take on several forms which are tailored to the specific needs of a multiplicity of identities. Gender equality by means of legal claims, within the religious context or focusing on women’s education... In order to deal with the tension of culture and gender equality, there is the need for cultural contextualization and a flexible understanding of feminism. Feminism is about changing the mind-set of people and their understanding of societal order, for that reason feminism must call for people where they stand and live.

Part III

Political conditions for a successful cross-cultural feminism

In his dissertation ‘The significance of borders’ the Dutch politician Tierry Baudet (2012) used Okin’s argumentation of the tension between multiculturalism and feminism to support his hypothesis of the need for national borders. From the perspective of a cross-cultural feminists, people thinking like Baudet that the “own” culture needs to be protected at all costs are exactly the problem why feminism does
clash with culture. In order to gain gender equality cross-culturally, we should not talk about national identity, but debate universal values which unite us across cultures.

Thierry Baudet (2012) stated that the multiculturalism does not necessarily lead to more individual rights. He criticizes multiculturalism as pointing out differences instead of creating unity which leads to a loss of national cohesion and identity. I do accept his concerns of the loss of common core values within a nation state. In line with his argumentation as I already pointed out, blind multiculturalism is indeed contradicting feminism. However, in my opinion, there is a pitfall in the conclusion he is drawing therefrom. He infers the need for borders from the dilemma of multiculturalism. According to Baudet (2012): “The significance of borders lies in their ability to define jurisdictions, and to separate one political community from another. In doing so, borders enable the formation and protection of a national loyalty as well as the exercise of sovereignty” (p.240).

That conclusion might be true in Baudet’s concerns, worrying about an “identity loss”. I am personally more perturbed with the situation of women all over the globe and I believe in a feminism of solidarity. From that perspective, we have an urgent need to define a universal standard in the question of gender equality. Cross-cultural feminism requires an “overlapping consensus” to be able to assess if “the cultural values in question are among the ones worth preserving, or possibly part of what is killing the bird“(Nussbaum, 2000, p.50). The globalization offers a unique opportunity for feminism.

In 2016, the UN decided about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Initiated by the European Union is the SDG 5: Gender equality. Furthermore the intensification of information flows, the internet and an increase in human interaction enhance protests and feminist movements as in India for example. India is famous for its critical thinking population and a strong and free presence of the media (Dreze & Sen, 2013). That facilitates inspiration sources and the comparison to other countries and cultures to detect injustice.

This process is hindered by people like Baudet. As long as we are worried about the restriction of our personal culture or national identity, we hold on to the dilemma of culture and feminism. Closing the borders to avoid confrontation, instead of integrating our part of culture within these universal values is

3 Ironically, the very same person, who stated about a year ago: „Ik weet wel dat vrouwen het over het algemeen minder excelleren in een heleboel beroepen en minder ambitie hebben. (I do know that women are generally less ambitious and do less well in a lot of professions.)” (Baudet, 2017), is making use of feministic criticism of cultures suppressing women in his dissertation.
irresponsible in the matter of global gender equality. Neglecting the opportunity of introducing universal standards harms cross-cultural feminism.

Politically speaking, the European Union has a great role in representing our understanding of gender equality in the global community. In that concern, the European Union must stop to show inconsistency in their holding of values, by subordinating them under economic interests. As we silently profit from gender inequality in other countries, we can hardly defend our position of promoting our values (Björkdahl et al., 2015).

I do not speak from a complete homogenization of culture, but I believe that we need to create a minimal consensus in certain questions. Like the swimming suit in my primary school, cross cultural feminism will always entail compromises.

As Martha Nussbaum (2000) states: “in a time of rapid globalization, when non-moral interests are bringing us together across national boundaries, we have an especially urgent need to reflect about the moral norms that can (...) unite us (...)” (p.32).

**Conclusion**

Returning to the questions I asked in the introduction, I will now summarize the essay and draft out the results.

My first question asked: How should one take a position when women’s rights are systematically violated in the name of culture? I elaborated on the tension between multiculturalism and feminism described by Okin (1999,1998) and illustrated the idea along the example of the North Indian Muslim women. From that part, I can conclude that there is a tension between the norm of multiculturalism and the norm of gender equality. It is naive to pretend that someone can be tolerant towards every culture and at the same time be a universal feminist.

My second question asked for the balance between tolerance of cultural plurality and universal demand for gender equality. Using Martha Nussbaum’s argumentation (2000), I reasoned why - in practice-, gender equality should not be seen as a contradiction to tolerance of cultural plurality. Violation of
one norm justified by protecting the other results in potential lose-lose situations. In case of conflicts, feminism needs to embrace cultural diversity. By telling the stories of two Muslim feminist movements in North India, I showed how a flexible feminism can look like in its cultural context.

The last question concerned the political conditions needed when reaching for global gender equality. I described how globalization intensifies the potential of conflicts between feminism and culture. By criticising Baudet’s opinion of the need for borders, I pointed out the great chance globalization offers for global gender equality. Cross-cultural feminism requires an overlapping consensus. Open information flows and open borders empower finding minimal standards. Furthermore, I briefly touched the European Union’s position in that process. If we believe in the validity of our European norm of gender equality, confrontation becomes the key pass that onto a global scale. We need to display our perception of gender equality in order to support and inspire feminists all over the world.

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