Transnational feminism was once conceived as the solidarity of sisters, united in the task of confronting global patriarchy in its various local forms. During more recent times, this conception has attracted and received severe criticism. Particularly postcolonial feminists have questioned both the assumption of a unitary, quasi-organic worldwide gender order, and the notion of global sisterhood. Furthermore, they have successfully suggested to shift the attention towards differences and power between women, towards occidentalist biases in transnational feminist scholarship and practice, and towards the othering of sexism as well as the long tradition of instrumentalizing the task of women’s liberation for colonial, imperial, and nationalist ends. These suggestions have led to important redirections in the field of feminist scholarship—both of the transnational and of the methodologically national kind.

While I find these shifts highly important, in my paper I nevertheless want to problematize one of their effects: namely, what I see as critical Western feminism’s tendency to refrain from critical engagements with cultural and religious contexts that are different from its own in order to not reproduce the othering of sexism that is rightly problematizes. Taking Pakistani feminist debates on the agency of women in the religious right as a starting point, I will discuss some of the implications of this reluctance, and try to sketch out what an attendance to it might mean with regard to the theorizing and practice of feminist solidarity.

This paper springs from my being puzzled. It is an attempt to make sense of experiences I had in the course of two academic stays at Quaid-i-Azam University, a public sector university in Islamabad, Pakistan; the first of these stays was in 2013, the second covered the fall term of 2015. At Quaid-i-Azam University, I was affiliated with the Center of Excellence in Gender Studies, which runs one of the major Gender Studies MA programs in the country. During the first of my stays, I gave a number of lectures, one of these on intersectionality, which at that time had just reached the mainstream of Gender Studies in Germany; something I am generally very much in favor of. But what happened after this lecture was that Farzana Bari, the director of the Center, a UK-trained sociologist, socialist feminist, as well as strong political activist and public intellectual, claimed that for her feminist activism in Pakistan, the intersectional turn in Western Gender Studies and gender politics tended to have negative effects. She argued that due to the problematization of global patriarchy and sisterhood that intersectional thought had brought about, it had become more and more difficult for her to find transnational support for her political campaigns and action.

At some point during my second stay, when I was teaching a course on feminist theories in the Gender Studies program, Dr. Farzana and I were talking about the hijab, the Muslim women’s headscarf, which is not at all mandatory to wear in Pakistan, and which among the female gender studies enrollees is worn mostly by first semester students who come from conservative regions or families. “Of course the headscarf is a clear sign of women’s subordination,” Dr. Farzana said. And I thought that in an almost worrisome way she sounded like the German journalist and renowned radical feminist Alice Schwarzer, who
uses the exact same claim to argue that Islam was generally bad for women and hence bad for Germany – a claim that both for its generality and for its compatibility with racist thought and politics seems highly problematic to me (Kerner, 2009: 364-371). Nevertheless, Farzana Bari is by far the only Pakistani feminist who holds the sketched out view on the hijab (see, e.g. Zia, 2013a). One has to know that Pakistan, at least compared to Germany, is a highly gender-segregated society; that in its darkest episode with regard to gender politics, the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq from 1977-1988, the women-discriminatory laws that the government introduced were coded as ‘Islamic’ (Fleschenberg, 2010, Saigol, 2016); and that the politicization of Islam by right-wing political forces is an ongoing practice. To avoid misunderstandings: this neither means that Islam should be reduced to right-wing positions, nor that Pakistan’s gender order should be described as influenced by religious factors alone. Nevertheless, the Pakistani religious right has been, and continues to be, a political force that does not foster gender equality, and Islamic rhetoric has an infamous history of being used to legitimate the restriction of women’s rights in that country. But even today, gender-segregation and gender disparities are striking in Pakistan: particularly in the public sphere.¹

I was puzzled by my experiences with my colleague because they challenged my intersectional feminist convictions – first, that intersectional feminism is always both analytically and politically better than pre-intersectional feminism, since the latter has for

¹ One example of such differences are gender-differentiated dress-codes in this very fashion-and thus attire-conscious society. At least in the urban centers, men are generally free to wear either Western clothes or the more traditional shalwar-kameez (a suit that combines a long shirt and wide pants) without provoking any attention, while Pakistani women in Western clothes are hardly to be seen – at least not outside the realm of upscale coffee shops frequented by affluent locals and Western expats alike. It would easily be considered as being indecent. Another example concerns rules applied to university students. During my second visit, the “girl’s hostel”, the female students dorm at Quaid-i-Azam University, had a 9 pm curfew. When I asked a group of male students – those who are free to go out at night – how they would react if such a curfew would be put on the boy’s hostel, as well, the answer was clear: “We would break the door. We don’t want to be locked in.”
the most part been a feminism of the more privileged of women with regard to issues like “race” and ethnicity, religion, class, or sexuality; and second, that sweeping, one-dimensional analyses of the way in which culture, religion, politics and gender interrelate are generally to be problematized – since they come with the danger of overlooking the complexity most of such constellations are shaped by.

I furthermore sensed that what at first sight might seem as a natural solution to my puzzlement, namely cultural or rather: contextual relativism, which would stress the differences between gender orders in Pakistan and in places like Western European countries and argue that critical analyses of such distinct gender orders shall look different, as well, would be too simple. Why? Because the first issue of my puzzlement, the unintended effects of the intersectionality discourse on the prospects for transnational feminist solidarity, is trans-contextual in nature, and hence can impossibly be resolved by using different standards for different contexts. In this, it differs from the second issue, namely the double question of how critical analyses of the interplay of culture, religion, gender and politics should look like and what a good feminist response to such constellations might entail. I hold that these questions can indeed only be answered in a context-specific way. But this for the most part applies to the empirical aspect of such answers, and not necessarily also to the normative aspects – those that in cultural relativism approaches are usually also relativized. In other words: Any scholarly and political analysis should clearly be attentive to the specific features of the context it refers to. But that does not mean that the measures used for evaluating those features must necessarily stem from the respective contexts, as well – for two reasons. First of all, within most contexts, there is a plurality of such measures competing with each other. This obviously holds true for assessments of the interplay of culture, religion, politics and gender in Pakistan, which is the
topic of heated debates – among scholars, among activists, and among scholar-activists, some of whom identify as feminists, some of whom would never do so. Additionally – and this is the second reason – normative cultural relativism often takes the shape of normative down-grading with regard to others; this is for instance the case when we assume that “our” standards of freedom, equality, democracy or the like were not necessarily shared by all, and hence should not be applied to contexts different from our own. I find such normative down-grading with regard to others generally problematic – since as we know from the history of European colonialism and of Western imperialism, it serves as a superb discursive instrument to legitimize inequality, exclusion and exploitation (see Kerner, 2016).

So if contextual relativism does not offer a solution to my puzzlement, other ways of finding a solution, or at least of thinking through the problems that puzzled me, must be found. And this is precisely what I attempt to do in the time I have left to speak. I will do so by approaching the matter from its other side, from what we might consider its source – and to this end, proceed in five steps.

First, I will remind us of the idea of global feminism, as well as of the postcolonial critique of this concept.

Second, I will address what Farzana Bari sees as an effect of the intersectionality discourse, namely a tendency of current critical feminist activism in the West to restrain itself from transnational engagement.

Third, I will discuss some of the critical feminist theorizing that corresponds to the restraint just mentioned, and argue why I don’t consider it intersectional enough.

Fourth, I will address the reluctance of current critical feminist theorizing to criticize contexts that in terms of culture and religion are different from its own.
This will be followed by a brief conclusion.

Before I start off, I would like to mention that this is very much work in progress – the first attempt at bringing something to paper that has been roaming around in my head for a while in a rather unstructured way. So it is very possible that much more work has to go into elaborating these thoughts and to do something about its several loose ends.

1. Global feminism and its critique

The concept of global feminism is closely connected to another concept: the one of global sisterhood, which was popularized by US scholar and activist Robin Morgan in her book *Sisterhood is global* (Morgan, 1984). Published in 1984, and hence before the internet, offering easy access to all kinds of information about all sorts of things all over the world was up, this compendium of over 800 pages offers 68 country chapters – from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe – on the situation of women. For each country it gives information on demographics, on government and the political situation, on the economy (with information on female labor marked participation, women’s wages etc.), on the legal situation with regard to marriage, divorce, family, welfare, contraception, abortion, illegitimacy, homosexuality, incest, sexual harassment, rape, battery, traditional/cultural practices, and crisis centers, on “herstory” (women’s history), and on mythography; followed by an article, in some cases also fiction or poetry, by a local feminist activist on the respective country’s women’s situation and women’s movement.

According to Morgan, her book is informed by local feminist struggles, which it attempts at linking up with each other; based on the premise that women were the “oppressed majority—of almost all national populations, and of the entire human species” (Morgan 3).
The long introduction to the book, in which Morgan tries to do the groundwork for a “planetarian feminism”, in terms of methodology follows a comparative approach. But Morgan shows much more interest in identifying common patterns among the different countries than differences. Global sisterhood she describes as a “cross-cultural, cross-age-group, cross-occupation/class, cross-racial, cross-sexual-preference, and cross-ideological assemblage of women’s voices” (ibid.). She holds that restrictions of reproductive rights, the sexual division of labor, gender pay gaps, rape, domestic violence, pornography and prostitution are problems that women are faced with around the globe – and on this ground identifies (or, for that matter, constructs) a world-wide gender asymmetry with common patterns, but local variations. Against this backdrop, global feminism to her is a global, internally plural network of similar feminist struggles that attempt a “complete social, political, economic, cultural, technological, sexual, and emotional transformation of human society” (ibid. 28). It therefore is a form of transnational feminist solidarity that transcends difference and focuses on common problems and goals. With regard to political strategies she suggests a multi-faceted approach that comprises interventions on the respective national levels, in the UN system, as well as autonomous social movements.

In the years since its publication, Morgan’s work – and the concept of global sisterhood – was severely criticized: namely for making power differences and hierarchies between and among women invisible, since the sisterhood metaphor implies all women were sitting in the same boat on a rough sea of patriarchy and sexism. And in fact Morgan painstakingly identifies differences and power between men and women, but not also between different world regions. Furthermore, she does not focus on the historical processes that brought local and national gender regimes into being – processes that in many cases have much to do with colonialism and imperialism, and thus with global interconnections instead of only
with local traditions (examples are catholic gender and sexuality norms in Latin America, homophobia in Uganda fostered by evangelical churches, the codification of Sharia law in colonial India – which included the territory of what today is Pakistan – by the British, or feminized poverty induced by structural adjustment policies in many parts of the world).

According to postcolonial critic Chandra Mohanty, Morgan creates the image of women as a homogenous group with common experiences of oppression, a common perspective and common goals; alternatively, Mohanty suggests to conceptualize transnational feminist cooperation as a coalition, which means as never organic, but rather as a collaboration out of necessity, with compromises and potential conflicts (Mohanty, 2003: 106-136).

2. Feminist Provincialism: Critical Western feminism after the critique of global sisterhood

Mohanty has not been the only prolific scholar who has severely criticized notions of global feminist solidarity that have been defined in the West/global North, and that have been fashioned according to feminist concerns stemming from those contexts. Several other authors have produced similar critiques, particularly since Western-style global feminism has been institutionalized in the realm of development politics, namely in strategies of WID and GAD (Kerner, 1999, Marchand and Parpart, 1995, Saunders, 2003). These critiques imply that regardless of how well intended these notions and strategies of solidarity might be, often, they would come across as a form of imperialism. Taking this critique seriously, critical feminists in the West have to a large part turned away from attempts at global sisterhood – for obviously good reasons. Nevertheless, the mode of their doing so might have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. This can be said since what Farzana Bari has problematized a few years ago, and which is mirrored in further experiences and accounts (e.g. Mayer, 2015), is the fact that they often turned away from North-South solidarity, and thus from caring for
global gender justice, altogether – assuming that such engagement would *necessarily* imply an imperial gesture. I suggest to call this stance feminist provincialism – and I find it problematic not only for the practical reasons Farzana Bari has pointed to, but also for a normative reason: given that we live in a highly interconnected world, a world in which much of what we all deal with at least partially roots in global history and politics, solidarity should at least in principle never end at national or other contingent borders.

But if feminist provincialism, or politics of supposedly clean hands don’t qualify as a good solution, how may such a good solution look like? Whom should critical Western feminists show solidarity with, and how? And how may we deal with the complex interplay of factual differences and various layers and modes of power – of global hierarchies established by the history of colonialism and imperialism, of unequally distributed rights, means, and privileges, of the subtle and the not-so-subtle power effects cooperation efforts across such factual differences usually come with, and of the power effects – some would say: the epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) – that discourse concerning these issues cannot always escape producing? I don’t claim to have good answers to these difficult questions, even though I wish I did. So all I can do at this point is a modest attempt at arguing why what I perceive as the current common-sense critical Western feminism answer is not enough, or rather: over-doing it; and that we should therefore strive to find better answers.

3. Politics of clean hands, or: Limits of critical Western feminist theorizing

While the activist reaction to the critique of global sisterhood has often been provincialism, the decision to turn the attention to the problems apparent on one’s own immediate turf, the academic reactions, or rather: elaborations included highly important analyses and critiques of all kinds of relations between feminism and imperialism. The critical attention
towards differences and power between women has led to studies on occidentalist biases in transnational feminist scholarship and practice, on the Othering of sexism as well as on the long tradition of instrumentalizing the task of womens’ liberation for colonial, imperial, and nationalist ends – what Gaby Dietze pointedly calls “ethnosexism” (Dietze, 2017: 291ff). I find this work highly important; in fact, the larger part of my own writing in the field of feminist theory and gender studies is an effort to contribute to precisely this strand of analysis and thought. Nevertheless, I’d like to argue that something has gone amiss on this track. This something is a critical attention to factual differences between gender orders in different contexts, and a problematization of sexism and patriarchy in contexts different from one’s own. Positively responding to the highly important intersectional insight that all women are not the same, and by no way sisters, but rather separated by numerous forms of difference and power, critical Western feminist theorizing (inspired by postcolonial thought) has importantly started to assess and to problematize the racist, nationalist and imperial sedimentations within feminism, as well as the racist, nationalist and imperial uses and abuses of feminist rhetoric. What it has lost sight of – and what I think it should look at as well (but clearly not in place of, like in pre-intersectional analyses), is constellations of striking gender inequality that keep persisting and being restructured in all sorts of contexts throughout the world, as well as privileges (of individual freedom in a very broad sense) that spring from being located in a liberal welfare-state in which movements engaged in gender equality have been relatively successful. Or, to be more precise, possible implications of such privileges, like a moral obligation, or maybe just the readiness, to support those who happen to find themselves in a less fortunate situation and fight for positive change.

I claim that critical Western feminist theorizing positively responding to the critique of global sisterhood is often not intersectional enough because – to say it very bluntly – it is focusing
on the racism, nationalism and imperialism problems within and around gender and feminism exclusively, and, while pursuing this clearly important task, forgets, shies away from, or runs out of time and energy to focus on, the varieties of sexism that shape our world, that are produced and reproduced by numerous local, national as well as transnational factors, and that from a feminist standpoint should in any case be fought. In fact, focusing on sexism elsewhere, in contexts different from one’s own, has not only become rather uncool, but also morally suspicious – since it runs the risk of being imperial. The desire to not running this risk has led to some kind of semi-intersectionality.

Let me illustrate. In a very illuminating article entitled “Expanding the Combat Zone” that came out in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, feminist Peace and Conflict Studies scholar Claudia Brunner traces the history of the instrumentalization of gender politics for colonial and imperial ends (and hence in international politics), or, in her own words, of “gendered and sexualized epistemic violence” from British colonialism in South Asia to the present (Brunner, 2016: 371). Using Gayatri Spivak’s famous formulation that in their colonial beginning, such politics followed the logic of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1988), Brunner distinguishes four variations of this logic that have evolved in later times. Next to “patriarchal genderism”, her name for the original variety already described by Spivak, these are what she calls “embedded feminism” (white women saving brown women from brown men), “transnational sexism” (white and brown women saving brown women from brown men), “homonationalism” (white queers saving brown queers from brown men) as well as “queer imperialism” (brown queers saving brown queers from brown men) (ibid. 380). What I find highly interesting with regard to this list, and what Brunner in her article convincingly elaborates on, herself, is that while those saving and to be saved differ, those perceived as the danger – namely brown men – are always the same.
However, there is one aspect that seriously troubles (I may also say: puzzles) me with regard to this account: which is its sweeping-ness, its one-dimensionality, its tendency to interpret everything happening on the transnational terrain of gender politics as an element of the same logic. This becomes particularly clear with regard to what Brunner calls “transnational sexism”. She borrows this term from Robin Lee Riley to denounce how anti-Islamic/Muslim genderism and feminism are used to legitimize US-led military interventions (cf. ibid. 376) – something that I agree must be criticized. But she continues explaining how women of color – examples are Waris Dirie and Ayan Hirsi Ali –, or rather their feminist critique of culture and religion, are being appropriated by, and integrated into, “liberal feminist attitudes and practices”, which are mentioned in the same breath, and hence are almost equated, with “occidentalist discourse” and a “new racism” which is “about empire building and therefore in need of people of color as tokens or iconic figures in order to silence dissent” (ibid. 377, 376). Later in her text, Brunner stresses that epistemic violence was not only a practice of Othering, but also one of “Selving” (ibid. 382) – by which she refers to “imperial power maintenance” by reproducing a shiny European/western identity (ibid. 384). Again, I find this analysis highly important – nevertheless, I would like to ask what it leaves out, and what its unintended effects may be. And it seems to me that this effect is a silencing of feminist critiques of culture and religion articulated by women of color. In Brunner’s account, these critiques are not discussed as contributions to a transnational fight against the various forms of sexism, but exclusively referred to as token positions in the service of occidentalist acts of epistemic violence. In a roundtable discussion on feminist engagements with the so-called “war on terror” which was published in the journal *Critical Studies on Terrorism* in 2013, UK-

2 For another example for this tendency to deal – or rather not deal – with the content of the writing of liberal feminists of color, see Mendel/Neuhold (2015: 43); for a critique of the tendency, substantialized by a discussion of Joan Scott’s writing on the French ban on the headscarf, see Abbas (2014: 47).
based international studies scholar Nicola Pratt has ennobled such silencing by characterizing it as an appropriate tool to critically engage with precisely those logics that Brunner criticizes. “From the position of academia in the European and North American metropoles,” Pratt writes, “perhaps the only way to avoid becoming complicit in racialising discourses and co-opted in the pursuit of the ‘war on terror’, is to be strategically silent about ‘women’s rights’ per se and, instead, adopt a feminism that resists processes of militarisation and neo-liberalisation that dehumanize and dispossess people” (Pratt, 2013: 330). I would say that Pratt sacrifices women’s rights and a feminism that is truly intersectional, since it does not lose sight of any of the sections that constitute it, on the altar of a politics of clean hands. Afiya Shehrbano Zia, a feminist scholar-activist from Pakistan, has problematized the effects of Pratt’s stand on the prospects for feminist struggles in conflict zones, and it might be no coincidence that her problematization resembles Farzana Bari’s critique of the effects of the intersectionality discourse that I mentioned at the beginning. The suggestion that feminists don’t prioritize gender, to Zia would mean “that patriarchal politics must be prioritized, especially in times of conflict” (Zia, 2013c: 333) – which to her, given years of feminist resistance to “this same demand of silence by religious/conservative nationalists who accuse us of washing our dirty laundry in front of western eyes” (ibid. 332) is simply nonsensical. Furthermore, Zia takes issue with the tokenism/racialising discourse argument – claiming that this argument presumed that feminists in and from conflict zones were “complicit in imperialist wars/violence”, and asking whether that wasn’t a form of racialising itself – “as if brown women do not know themselves or blindly follow the dictates of white feminist agendas” (ibid.). The voices of non-Western secular feminists, who are critical of religion and culture instead of embracing
either the one or the other, are not exactly popular in the realm of current postcolonialism inspired critical Western feminist theorizing, it seems. Which brings me to the fourth part.

4. The desire for difference, and the complexities of intersectional feminism

Sadia Abbas, an English literature scholar based in the US, has suggested that lately, the figure that is desired in Western liberal discourse is not so much the heroic author, like Salman Rushdie – or, I would like to add, like Waris Dirie and Ayan Hirsi Ali – but rather the “pious Muslim woman” (Abbas, 2014: 5). In the aftermath of Saba Mahmood’s influential ethnographic study Politics of Piety (Mahmood, 2005), in which Mahmood sets out to counter the occidentalist (including liberal Western feminist) tendency to victimize Muslim women by tracing the agency of conservative Islamic women activists in Kairo, this figure of the pious Muslim woman is attributed agency to – which turns her into the figure of the “agential Muslim woman”. I find it interesting that when Brunner refers to this figure, she associates it with secular Muslim feminists (cf. Brunner, 2016: 377). Abbas, by contrast – like, by the way, Zia (2013b) – associates it with what we might characterize as actors who are among secular Muslim feminists’ political opponents: women who instead of fighting for equal gender rights, find solace and fulfillment in consensual self-subordination (Abbas, 2014: 85). Furthermore, Abbas convincingly argues that the figure of the pious Muslim woman and the figure of the female Muslim victim serve as opposite, but in an uncanny way also complementary political legitimation figures: “So if Laura Bush (...) could offer the vision of female suffering under (say) the Taliban as a justification for war, the anti-imperialists can, if they choose, cite Islamist women who loathe the burdens of modernity,” she writes (ibid. 85). To her, this leads to a problematic homogenization of Islam, as well as to the great heterogeneity of women in Islamic societies and contexts, who unsurprisingly hold all kinds
of positions, from secular to ultra-religious, and combine those positions with all sorts of practices (ibid. 55). Furthermore, to Abbas both figures lead to a problematic dichotomization of the Muslim world on the one hand, and the West on the other hand – in this dichotomization the Muslim woman becomes once again the Other of the West (ibid. 88). To Abbas, this doesn’t only reproduce orientalist discourse, particularly when the anti-imperialists drawing to such reasoning are critical Western ones (ibid. 48f.). It also serves to make sexism invisible. “White men may be trying to save brown women from brown men,” Abbas writes; “but brown men may indeed oppress brown women, and brown women (elite and otherwise) may also collude in sustaining structures of misogyny” (ibid. 71). If the second half of this sentence is to be taken as seriously as the first one, the recognition of the agential pious Other is definitely not enough.

5. Conclusion

Feminism and the gender equality discourse are being instrumentalized for right-wing projects like racism, nationalism, and imperialism; and such kinds of instrumentalization must be criticized. But religion and culture are being instrumentalized for right-wing projects as well; and gender relations, namely the defense of unequal ones, usually play a pivotal role in this endeavor. Intersectional feminism – and this is my basic point – should neither ignore this, nor be strategically silent about it, nor shy away from addressing it; and I hold that in our interconnected world, this applies irrespective of location. What is negatively affected by something bad is not automatically good. So as intersectional feminists we should indeed continue to study, denounce and fight all kinds and manifestations of gendered racism, nationalism and imperialism – but we shouldn’t assume that what is the target of such wrongs is automatically good for women, transgender people and queers. All constellations
and conjunctures that are bad for women, transgender people, and queers merit to be studied, denounced and fought as well. Not because they were local variations of the same grand logic of global sexism, or because they were merely cultural, or religious. On the contrary: precisely because things are much more complicated than this.

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