

Islamic Feminism: An Appraisal

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the various aspects of 'Islamic Feminism'. The term is a new origin in the field of Feminism. The concept carries a very wide variation in terms of person and countries, for instance, the Islamic countries like Turkey, Iran and Egypt are having very liberal point of view about women. On the other hand, some Muslim countries at the same time transmit extremely rigid approach towards women. Though the Islamic Feminism is a new thought but it is conditioned by Hadith and Quran at length. Islamic feminists are reinterpreting Islamic sources in order to achieve equal rights for women within an Islamic framework. They have challenged traditional interpretation of scripture and received notions of interpretive authority, both in Muslim majority societies as well as in the diasporic Islamic world. With their new interpretation they have contributed to the transformation of the legal, political and social rights of Muslim women.

Keywords: *Islamic Feminism, Quran, Hadith, Shariat, Muslim women*

The very term of 'Feminism' again and again the idea of women rights and freedom comes at surface. Further it takes a move towards the equality with man. But this scenario is altogether different in Islamic Feminism. The concept of 'Islamic feminism' is of recent origins, used for the first time in 1990s in the growing Western literature on 'Women and Islam'. Response was diverse ranging from advocacy of women's emancipation to its outright rejection. Islam was visibly present in much of the early confrontation between feminism and the religious and secular forces that reacted to the challenge. In this conflict, the Quran, the Sharia (Islamic law) and Hadiths were all used by contending forces, ranging from secular modernists to the religious guardians of patriarchy.

From the very beginning, the debate was centred on the compatibility of the idea of women's emancipation with the principles of Islam. One tendency emphasised that Islam was compatible with demands for equality between men and women. For instance, reinterpreting the Quran, some early women reformists in Egypt claimed that the seclusion, segregation and veiling imposed on urban women were not sanctioned by Islam. Similar positions were also formulated in many other Islamic countries. Others argued that the demand for gender equality was Western and anti-Islamic.

The first woman to offer a detailed reinterpretation of the texts in favour of the women's rights was probably Nazira Zain al-Din. She was born in Lebanon in 1905 and her father was a scholar of Islamic jurisprudence. Her first book 'Unveiling and Veiling: Lectures and Views on the Liberation of the Women and Social Renewal in the Arab World' was an indictment of patriarchal oppression, which she declared to

be against the principles of Islam. She said that the veil is an insult to men and women. When the book was published in 1928, men of religion announced their stand against Zain al-Din and started distributing pamphlets against her. Nazira's second book 'The Young Women and the Shaikhs' (Al-Fatahwa al-Shuyukh), published in 1929 was a response to the conservatives especially to Shaikh Mustafa al-Ghalaini's 'Islam, the Spirit of Civilization' (Al-Islam Ruh al-Madanniyya). The Shaikh had accused her of sectarian and colonial persuasions, and alleged that her book had been written by Christian missionaries.

Some of the newly established states, such as Turkey and Iran appropriated the feminist movement by dissolving independent organizations and their press, and granting women certain rights. The term Islamic feminism is used more specifically to refer to activism of a relatively small number of Iranian women who seek the amelioration of the Islamized gender relations, mainly through lobbying for legal reform within the framework of the Islamic republic. However it is difficult to define Islamic feminism. Margot Badran defines that:

“It is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. Islamic feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism is both highly contested and firmly embraced.”

On the other hand Shahidian has argued that 'Islamic feminism' is an oxymoron, a contradiction in term:

“If by feminism is meant easing patriarchal pressures on women, making patriarchy less appalling, 'Islamic feminism' is certainly a feminist trend. But if feminism is a movement to abolish patriarchy, to protect human being from being prisoners to fixed identities, to contribute towards a society in which individuals can fashion their lives free from economic, political, social and cultural constraints, then Islamic feminism proves considerably inadequate. I define feminism in these latter terms and for that reason, I consider 'Islamic feminism' an oxymoron.”

In reality, in most of the advanced Islamic states such as Iran, Turkey or South Arabia Islamic feminism advocates that women should be given legitimate rights to protect themselves but not to the extent that they can raise their voice against male domain. However, to understand Islamic feminism properly one has to analyse some of the Islamic religious books in which these women rights are discussed in detail, without which all the explanations of this stream of feminism would be incomplete in itself.

Islamic feminists are reinterpreting Islamic sources in order to achieve equal rights for women within an Islamic framework. They have challenged traditional interpretation of scripture and received notions of interpretive authority, both in Muslim majority societies as well as in the diasporic Islamic world. With their new interpretation they have contributed to the transformation of the legal, political and social rights of Muslim women. There are however also limitations to the feminist interpretation of scripture and their potential to deliver gender equality.

First of all, status of Muslim women is to be viewed in reference to the Quran. With the advent of Islam, the position of women was radically redefined. It prohibited the practice of 'female infanticide' and restored the birth of women. The Prophet asserted the right of a female child to be treated on an equal footing with her

brother. There are few Hadiths in which he encouraged Muslims to be gentle and caring to their daughters: “if a daughter is born to a man and brings up her affectionately, shows her respect and treats her in same manner as treats his son, the Lord will reward him with paradise.” Hence, Islam elevated the status of women being as worthy of human dignity as were men. The Quran refers, “Allah created you from a single soul, and from the same soul created his mate”. It also says O mankind; we created you all from a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other not that ye may despise each other. They are wives, your garments and you (husbands) are theirs. Women have rights to what is responsible, over their husbands' rights over them. In terms of moral responsibility, both men and women are equally accountable for their actions e.g. the Quran decrees that the same punishment has to be applied on the thieving men as well as the thieving women.

If any of your women are guilty of fornication, take the evidence of four witnesses from amongst you against them, and if they testify, then confine them to houses until death comes to them or Allah ordains a way of release for them. On other hand, Sura 4, Verse 16 tells, “If two males among you commit lewdness, punish them both and then if they repent and amend, leave them aside; for Allah is acceptor of repentance most merciful.”

All it means, if man does something unethical he can be forgiven or can be given religious asylum. But woman is quite far from such favour for herself. If she is accused for some wrong doing then her own statement or the statement of her favoured fellows is no more acceptable but to prove her innocence four persons who are an opposite party to her have to favour her argument, otherwise she would lose any chance to save herself. According to Quran man is allowed to have many wives at the same time, means his salacious behaviour is acceptable and woman's sexual behaviour is completely restrained. Even if her character is slightly suspicious then again she has to face extreme consequences.

Men are protectors and maintainers over women. By reason of superiority over one another Allah has given this privilege. However, a Muslim woman is at liberty to buy, sell, mortgage, lease, borrow or lend, signs a contracts and legal documents. The right of men is a portion of what they earn and for women is a portion of what they earn. Marriage in Islam is a union between two consenting adults. Its aims are to perpetuate human life and achieve spiritual and emotional harmony. The Quran refers, “And of his signs is that he created you from dust and beholds: you became men and multiplied throughout the earth. And of his signs is that He gave you wives from among yourselves that you might live in tranquillity with them, and put love and kindness in your hearts. According to the prophet, “A widow or divorcee is not to be married before her consent is sought” and no virgin girl is to marry without first consulting her and her approval is her keeping silent.

Related to the right to education, both the Quran and Sharia advocate the rights of women and men equally to seek knowledge. The Quran encourages Muslims (irrespective of their sex) to read, think, contemplate and learn from the signs of Allah in nature: Are the wise and the ignorant equal? Truly, none will take heed but men of understanding. Allah will raise to high ranks those that have faith and knowledge among you.

The Quran has allotted a sphere for the women in the inheritance of her parents' property. Her share is guaranteed by law and it is completely hers. The Quran asserts, "Men shall have a share in what their parents and kinsmen leave; and women shall have a share in what their parents and kinsmen leave; whether it be little or more, it is legally theirs." However, it has been stated although Islam has firmly established and secured forever the legal right of inheritance, woman's share is by no means fair and equal to that of the brother, who is allowed to take twice as much as the share of the sister.

The Quran states that Allah direct you as regard you and as regard your children's (inheritance): to the male, a portion equal to that of two females; if there are only daughters more than two, they will get two third in the heritage; and if only daughter is a heir she should be given a half share. And in that inheritance which your wives leave, your share would be half if they leave a child, you get one fourth share out of that which remains after the fulfilment of legacies and the payment of debts they may leave incurred. And your wives shall get one fourth share out of what you leave; provided you have no child; but if you leave a child, your wives shall get an eighth share in distribution out of what remains after the fulfilment of legacies you had made and payment of debt you had to pay.

Polygamy is also permitted in Islam. The verse read as follow: 'if you fear that you cannot treat orphan with fairness, then you may marry such women as seen good to you; two, three or four of them. But if you fear that you cannot do justice, one only of those you possess. This will make it easier for you to avoid injustice.

Quran gives men and women equal rights to solve their marital problem. Quran refers: "And if you fear that because of strained relations between husband and wife opposition or rift is widening, then set up an arbitrator from her family; if these two wish settlement, Allah shall bring harmony between those two because Allah only has full knowledge and acquainted with all thing". (The Quran, 4: 35).

Quran also gives them (husband and wife) equal right to be separated from each other or dissolve their marriage. It further refers that "and then if (reconciliation has failed) they got separated, then Allah will provide in abundance to everyone and shield against dependency to one another; and Allah is all sufficient, all wise". The Quran exhorts the man to be considerate and kind to his former wife. Here the Quran says, "Do not expel them (wives) from their houses or let them go away unless they commit a proven immorality. Such are the bound set by Allah; he that transgresses Allah's bounds wrongs his own soul."

With the establishment of Islamic states the role of women in the political affairs of the new society gained momentum. Right from the beginning, women like men, gave support and allegiance to the political system which was set up under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad. This was done through the so called "baya'. Baya is an important political institution by which the nation or the Umma grants or ensures legitimacy for the political system. In addition to 'baya' women also participated in 'Shura'(mutual conservation) which is one of the foundations of the Islamic political system.

However the Quran chapter 4, Verse 34 reads thus; "Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because they spend their wealth to maintain them." This has virtually closed the door to women's

advancement to higher positions. Two Hadith are of particular importance in this issue. The prophet is reported to have said 'O Women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of dwellers of hell fire were you (women). They asked why it is so, O Allah's messenger. He replied, you curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you. A cautious, sensible man could be led astray by some of you. The women asked, O Allah's messenger! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion? He said, is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man? They replied in the affirmative. He said, this is the deficiency in her intelligence. Is it not true that a woman can neither pray nor have fast during her menses? The women replied in affirmative. He said, this is the deficiency in her religion.

The second Hadith which is reported in Bukhari and reads as thus: "Abu Bakr said when Allah's messenger was informed that the Persians had crowned the daughter of Kisra (Khosrau) as ruled by lady will never be successful". These Hadiths are used by opponents of women's rights in politics, to prove their point in saying that women cannot be trusted with handling public matters.

After making the review of religious literature of Islam it is quite sure that it favours male dominance and patriarchal system. But simultaneously it also gives reflection that this religion is not favouring women's exploitation. It has presumed somewhere the male domain in society and thus instructed male to provide some equal rights to women. But at so many spheres (e.g. property inheritance, two witnesses for man and four for woman) woman is really subordinate to man, which strengthens the view that woman is treated secondary in Islamic world. If someone analyses feminism as an ideology that interrogates patriarchal format and talks about women empowerment then it is quite confirmed that there is no existing Islamic feminism. But when someone talks about some of fundamental rights and some ease from exploitation then this phrase 'feminism' is having some existence in Islamic world.

To understand Islamic feminism properly it is essential to compare and contrast its features with Western feminism. Islamic feminism is very difficult to explain in terms of Western feminism because a mutual incompatibility exists between the two. No Islamic feminist movement can relate to Western feminism because of the way feminists formed their groups. Western feminism is grounded in Western values and their ideology and values entirely differ from those of Islam and Arab traditions. Many problems exist because of resistance of cultural conversion. Historically, feminism started in the West particularly in France. Though the term originated in the West, Egypt was the primary pioneer of feminism. Contrary to popular belief Egypt was the one of the first countries to demonstrate feminist thinking. There is a lot of literature that can document the varied and diverse movement among feminists, but the West believes they own the concept of feminism. Although, it is true that Islamic feminism is a recent concept and as for modern day Islamic feminism, women have had a strong active presence only since 1990s Islamic reawakening in the Arab and Islamic countries.

Feminism is a concept that is unique to each culture or geographic location. In order to get a clear picture of the various attitudes of Muslim communities one has to look at predominantly Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. In each

of these countries primary religion is Islam, but each country has its different national language and different attitudes toward the status of women. Saudi Arabia and Iran actually established the Koran as their constitution, while Turkey does not and tends to be the most liberal towards women. Saudi Arabia has the tightest restrictions on women. For instance, women cannot drive nor can they be educated in fields such as engineering and law. They are only allowed to teach and provide medical care to other women. In a report from Amnesty International, it is stated that despite an encouraging emerging debate on women's rights in Saudi Arabia, women still face extreme form of discrimination.

Iran has also adopted the Koran as the basis of its constitution. Iranians, however, believe that existence is a “unified and interrelated divine system”. Men and women complement each other and should have equal status. The differences defined in the laws of Islam for men and women are based on the roles they play and the responsibilities each assume. They believe that the law of Islam give special privilege to women because of their physical characteristics and their role in creation. If they were to see women as equal in all aspects of life, it would violate some of their natural rights. So it is best for a woman to participate in development with consideration of their physical and spiritual needs. They believe the Islamic dress (Hijab) actually protects women from abuse and cruelty. Iran emphasizes the positive interpretation of the Koran and says that it should not be regarded as negatively as Westerners try to portray many Muslim communities.

Muslim women in Turkey are most liberated because they enjoy a professional life that is not only impressive compared to other Islamic countries, but even for the European nations. In November 2002, the Turkish parliament reformed family law, by abolishing the law of men being head of the household and allows women to make decision concerning children. The law established community property in marriages and raised the legal age of marriage for girls from fifteen to eighteen. The Turks abolished the law of polygamy in 1925 and laws were amended to give women equal rights of divorce and inheritance. Under Islamic law, women were not granted these rights. Turkey is a positive example of an Islamic community that treats women well.

Although religion was an enemy for the Western feminist movement, Muslim women tend to embrace Islam and believe religion is a guiding source for their movement. The legal rights of Western women sought in the 18th century were incompatible with the Islamic religion because Muslim women were granted those same rights in the 7th century. Women are portrayed as negative beings in Christianity whereas there is not a negative depiction of women in Koran. But the interpretations of the Koran are different in some societies and there are at least two schools of feminist thought throughout the Arab world.

The apologetic view, claims that Islam has liberated women and that Muslim women have more rights than Western women. Another branch of this school contends that male jurists are responsible for the harsh conditions of Muslim women who interpreted the Koran in a conservative and misogynist way. Then there is the feminist movement that tries to reinterpret Islamic texts from a female point of view. Western feminists believe that discrimination against women is imbedded in the religion of Islam. In reality, it has been interpretations and history that has created

the situations these Muslim women activists are trying to change. The prophet Muhammad determined the inequality of women and passed it as god's commandments and recorded them in Koran. In the Koran it is written that men are 'one degree' above women in rank, and that men are guardian to women. At the same time, in the Quran, women's religious status is as high as that of men. It states:

Lo! Men who surrender unto Allah and women who surrender, men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who obey, and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth, and men who preserve and patient men patient women and the humble men and humble women, and the charitable men and the charitable women, and the fasting men and the fasting women, and men who guard their chastity and women who guard their chastity and men who remember Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a mighty reward (The Quran).

This verse explains that women can attain every good quality to which men can have access and posits that in the Koran women have the same spiritual level as men. But in another verse of the Koran, it is stated, "men are maintainers of women as Allah has made to excel others and as they spend out of their wealth on women". On that verse Islamic feminists say that Quran gives man a slight edge over woman. It is not due to any inherent weakness of the female sex, but because of the social context.

Besides, Muslim feminists criticize Western feminists for their view that Muslim women are oppressed because they are veiled and less career oriented as compared to Western women. Muslim feminists treat this veil as a guard and feel that a mother (housewife) is no less than a career woman. One American Muslim woman states, "when non Muslim Americans meet Muslim women, they tend to feel sorry for them. 'Your husband makes you wear that? They don't understand its personal choice'. A Muslim woman in return says, "Oppression is not the scarf; oppression is wearing the Western fashion, which turns women into objects to be coveted by men".

It is true that in some countries Muslim women are weak, passive and oppressed but this is also true that women have many political and social rights in various Muslim countries. A few examples are Bangladesh, Pakistan and Turkey. In reality, the important fact about this conflict is that women's issues are important for all cultures because they address the needs of the family and have an impact on society in general. Western feminists need to recognize other form of feminism and not try to impose their beliefs on other cultures. The goals of Western feminists are not compatible with Islamic feminists and should not be forced upon Muslim women.

The structure of family is also one of the reasons behind the differing social status of Islamic and Western women. Muslim women have a negative view as regards to Western family structure. They believe that Western societies have moved away from bonding and instead have smaller alternative family style. Those styles are opposite to the traditions and customs found among Islamic societies. Islamic societies normally have an 'extended family' rather than a nuclear family. They also believe that the family as a whole should participate in preserving and contracting marriages. Another tradition that is arranged marriage has a negative

impact on female liberation and is against individual freedom. Muslim women on the other hand believe that arranged marriages have distinct advantages for the individual and the society as a whole.

Western society belittles traditional female roles such as child-rearing and reverence to those positions identified with males such as providing financial support. This concept is a major hurdle for Muslim women because they believe that both types of roles are necessary when coupled with religion and the division of labour which is a great benefit for all members of society. Islamic tradition maintains that women's rights are equal to man but they are different rights. In Islamic societies it is necessary to maintain the individual rights and complement one another rather than competing for same positions in society.

Western society also tends to criticise the concept of polygamy found in Islam and believes that Islam uses polygamy to subjugate women of Islam. Although it is true that Islam allows men to have more than one wife as written in the Koran, polygamy is not a common practice for all Muslims. Muslims resort to polygamy only in exceptional circumstances. For instance, it was earlier started and promoted to support war widows and their daughters so that they could be treated equally. Polygamy is not widespread phenomenon among Muslims. Therefore, the women of Islam would not support Western feminists' ideas of eliminating this practice.

Islamic feminists think that when the US promoted Taliban there was no anxiety for Muslim women then. But after 9/11 Muslim women are seen as victims everywhere. The US did not try to intervene with human rights of Muslim women until it was attacked. Besides, the Taliban's war on women is a prime example of how the Koran is misinterpreted to oppress women, e.g. Koran states, "men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore, the righteous women are devotedly obedient".

This verse is the basis of Western feminists' argument against Islam. One Islamic feminist (Rifat Hassan) believes that the interpretation of the verse is wrong because of the way differences in understanding the context. She cites the errors in the verse by stating, "where the Koran says that 'men are protectors and maintainers of women', it means that men are supposed to take care of the women when women are preoccupied with duties where they cannot take care of themselves, such as child rearing and child birth".

Islamic feminists have been trying to engage with Islamic values and teachings rather than trying to reject the religion as such as Western feminist have done. One of the reasons is that when feminist groups attempt to ignore religion and pursue a Western based view of feminism, they have failed because Islam does not provide secular positions when discussing feminism. If Western feminists continue to deny or try to eradicate Islam then any attempt at an Islamic feminist movement will fail. They need to understand that the women of Islam are not oppressed in all Muslim societies. All religions have positive aspects as well as negative ones.

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