



## Feminism and Islam : a review of the feminist claims rooted in Islamic philosophy

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### Abstract

Islamic feminism is considered by many as an oxymoron. This being mainly because, usually, people generalise that feminist ideas cannot be juxtaposed with Islamic philosophy as the two are bi-polar concepts. In this paper an attempt has been made to reconcile the two by providing theoretical illustrations and substantiations. The Islamic philosophy retains in itself feminist claims and orientations which are aimed at protecting and elevating the social standing of the women within the family and the society at large. Ironically enough however womenfolk world over have been deprived of basic privileges on apparently 'Islamic' grounds which are of course contrived to create conducive circumstances for specific classes of the Muslim male elite. The bottom line is that the status quo within the religion has been created in such a way that it favours the male elite, leaving the woman subjugated. But this approach is not acceptable as equality is one of the founding principles of Islam. Thus, this paper explores the feminist orientations inherent in the religion itself which, quite contrary to popular belief, forms a substantial basis for the growth of a school of feminism rooted in Islam itself.

**Keywords:** feminism, muslim, women, islamic, gender, egalitarianism

### 1. Introduction

Within the diverse worlds of Islam, gender issues have been indigenously engaged with, argued about, harmonized, problematized, synthesized negotiated and re-negotiated in varying ways throughout history. In this era there are Muslim men and women who find Islam to be source of human well-being and profound social egalitarianism. There are however, Muslim women in many parts of the world who experience oppression and marginalization in the name of Islam. There are, however, also Muslim leaders who contest sexism and resist the masculinist bias of inherited traditions, many of whom relentlessly strive on the path of gender justice in Islam. Gender justice for that matter can be found rooted in the, Muslim holy book and scriptures, from which many Muslim women make claims of a feminism emerging out of the religion, which they term as Islamic feminism.

However, Islamic feminism is considered by many as an oxymoron. This being mainly because

usually people generalise that feminist ideas cannot be juxtaposed with Islamic philosophy as the two are bi-polar concepts. But this approach needs re-orientation. In fact many Muslim women and Islamic thinkers have posed the Qu'ran to be the basis for their feminist claims. Feminism has many a time been dismissed as a western school of thought by many. But Feminism or feminist ideas cannot be a transparent claim by any society or civilization. To do so would be to sideline all the indigenous struggles by various women from wide classes, countries and continents who have fought their battles and made their way to equality. But having said so, feminism is often stereotyped as a Western world view, exclusive to the survival and struggles of western women.

Such categorization or restriction of feminism culturally or sometimes geographically is extremely disillusioning. Especially when feminism is regarded as an isolated concept or ideology, not in any way related to the religion of Islam; because Islam

apparently is oppressive of women. The truth in this matter can be found only in an intellectual and unbiased reading and analysis of the Muslim Holy book, which is the core or the source of the religion.

## 2. Islam vs misogynist claims

What needs clarification here is that Islam is not a misogynistic religion and the philosophy of the religion itself supports and speaks for women's rights. The assumption that both Islam and women belong to different planes is not correct. This statement is contrary to the self-definitions of many Muslim feminists who see their feminism as organically emerging out of their faith commitment and whose contestations of gender justice is more than simply the result of a post colonial power struggle.

Islam is quite frequently portrayed as irrationally androcentric and hence misogynistic. For one example, the decontextualized western media images of veiled women serve to depict Islam in general and Islamic fundamentalism in particular as the enemy of Muslim women and cover over complex relations of power that define and delimit Muslim women's agency. But concerns about women and about gender equality are one of the central claims of the Islamic philosophy. Among the most revolutionary elements in the works of Islamic feminism is the view that feminist commitment is integral to Islam and responsive to the core Qur'anic call to justice. The primary incentives for some feminist Muslim scholarship is the reality that there is dissonance between the ideals of Islam which are premised on an ontology of radical human equality and the fact that in varying social contexts Muslim women experience injustice in the name of the religion.

There is a significant group of Muslim scholars whose feminist work appears to be permeated with strong spiritual and religious bases. American feminist scholar, Elizabeth Fernea also demonstrates the point of feminist concerns being present in the Qur'an when she interviewed Muslim women from various parts of the world:

*"Islamic belief is also the stated basis of most behaviour I felt to be a feminist...in Egypt, Kuwait, Turkey and the U.S., Islamic women begin with the assumption that the possibility for equality already exists in the Qur'an itself. The problem as they see it is malpractice, or misunderstanding of the sacred text. For these Muslim women the first goal of a feminist movement is to re-understand and evaluate the sacred text and for the women to be involved in the process, which historically has been reserved for men."*

Therefore what surfaces, is the fact that Islam in itself is not gender biased; it is not an oppressive and exploitative religion and hence not 'medieval' or 'misogynistic' as often labelled to be. That is, it is not Islam per se, that oppresses women but rather the continuity of patriarchal values within nationalist and religious ideologies that limit the women's agency. This problem if analyzed emerges broadly due to two reasons. Firstly as Fatima Mernissi highlights the overarching role of the Muslim male elite; also one of the core reasons for the manifestation of Islamic feminism; and secondly due to the misinterpretation of the sacred texts particularly the Qur'an.

Mernissi in her work – 'The Veil and The Male Elite' (1987) has made it quite clear, that from the ancient times itself there have been efforts to sustain the status quo between men and women; and this effort has primarily been on the part of the male elite. Mernissi uses the example of the Hadith to elaborate. Now, the Hadith are considered sacred because they are sayings and way of life that the Prophet (PBUH) preached. People consider the Hadith sacred enough to follow it unquestioningly and why not, because the Prophet (PBUH) followed that way of life. Now Mernissi elaborates that when the Prophet (PBUH) began advocating equal rights for the women folk of his time, the male masses were not quite happy about that; of course the discontent was not explicit but they did not want the balance of power to be upset in the favour of the women. Bringing in Shulamith Firestone into the context here, she had argued in her work "The Dialectic of Sex" about "Power Psychology" which exists between men and women, which again essentially springs from the distinction of what she calls 'sex class' which again eventually leads to economic classes in society. We here are however concerned with the concept of power psychology only. The male elite at the time of the Prophet did not want the power psychology to break so they, as Mernissi states, paid the disciples of the Prophet (PBUH) to manipulate his sayings in favour of women, and turn them against the women, or in subtler terms to 'de-favour' them or 'subjectify them to a lower ascribed status in Islamic contexts'. Now, what happens if the Hadith stated verses which infer an inferior status to the women folk? Of Course it is legalized in the name of the Hadith. That is basically the name of the Prophet (PBUH) was used to further keep the women in a subjected state and not let them come up as the principles of Islam had intended them to. So we see that this ironical subjugation of the Muslim womenfolk

is not a thing which came in with the practices of fundamentalist groups like the Taliban but can be traced to patriarchy and prejudice of the male elite classes of the ancient times.

The Prophet of Islam was a revolutionary human being. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) challenged the society of his time by trying to establish an integral relationship between sexuality and spirituality. Islam has always evaluated sexuality positively.

The critical re-evaluation of sex and sexuality grows out of the feminist re-evaluation of gender and the constraints that gender imposed on women. As feminists scholars critique the assumed superiority of patriarchal masculinities, space is opened for deeper introspection about sex – not (only) in the light of gender but also in the light of sexuality. The success of any project to free sexual practices from the constraints of patriarchy depends ultimately on the success of freeing women (and eventually men too) from the patriarchal structures of power.

From the above, we infer that issues relating to gender, women and sexuality have been central to most Islamic discourses and thus from this it follows that women have been a core focus of the religion and its philosophy. Once when questioned by a very young Ai'sha, the youngest of the Prophet's wives, about the equality of women in relation to men the Prophet (PBUH) had replied a while later that Allah speaks of the two sexes in terms of total equality, as believers, that is, as members of the community. God identifies those who are a part of His kingdom, those who have a right to his "vast reward". And it is not sex that determines who earns His grace; it is faith and desire to serve and obey Him.

In the pre-Islamic era women had no assured right to inheritance, which in any case was a matter between men — the men of the husband's clan or her own relations. Islam on its advent affirmed the idea of the individual as a subject, a free will always present in the world, a sovereign consciousness that cannot disappear as long as the person lives. This idea which came with the advent of the religion gave women the right to inherit. This was an epic change, because in the pagan era that is in the pre-Islamic times, women were inherited, let alone the right to inherit. Women were treated as property who were inherited by men. Any man could claim the widow of a dead man, including his son, by covering her with a piece of cloth that the taker offered. Such a gesture was enough to make the woman, the said man's property. But Islam was the first religion which gave women the right to

inherit and restored the basic claims of individualism to the women, thus treating them as proper human beings rather than as property.

Despite such revolutionary guidelines which Islam ushered in, men continued to try to suppress the egalitarian dimension of Islam. This change in the status of women brought in by the new religion was not acceptable to them. The earlier prevalent pagan exploitation was favoured instead of gender equality. In order to evaluate the depth of the contemporary Muslims' amnesia which sees equality of the sexes as an alien phenomenon, we must return to Medina, to its narrow streets where the debate on equality of the sexes raged and where the men were obliged to discuss it, but refused to accept it although Allah and His Prophet demanded it. As today the men professed Islam, but openly rejected it when it supported equality between the sexes.

### 3. Conclusion

Thus, it would be absolutely fine to deduce the fact that feminism finds place within the Islamic philosophy and within Islam — as issues and concerns about the female had arisen at the time of the Prophet himself. Hence, when sceptical eyes rise to question the coming together of Islam and feminism or women concerns, it is not acceptable as that section is not aware of the basic assumptions and founding principles of the religion.

In fact, the feminist dimension of Islam is/was sufficient for the Muslim women to devise or develop feminist schools of their own; feminist schools rooted in Islamic understanding of women, their lives and their claims. And this as a matter of fact is what Badran states had actually happened when a handful of religious women (referred to as *mutadayyinat*, a neologism that appeared in the 1980s) in the middle east had initiated a new kind of a feminist movement by posing their own questions and concerns about women and Islam and were looking to the Qur'an for answers.

Actually, while talking about Islamic feminism one would agree with Margot Badran (2011) when she says that the 'Feminisms' of the Muslim women are feminisms of their own. They are not, as often branded to be 'Western'; that is they are not derivative. The Islamic religious texts have always been a source of original knowledge, knowledge which is otherwise manipulated, or misinterpreted to stage-manage the image of Islam. Badran talks about two kinds of feminisms in the context of Islam and Muslims – Islamic feminism and secular feminism. The former

being grounded on the basis of Islam. Thus, Islamic feminism burst on the global scene as a new discourse or interpretation of Islam and gender grounded in *ijtihad* or independent intellectual investigation of the Qur'an and other religious texts. That is Islamic feminists have through their own *ijtihad* made compelling arguments that the patriarchal model of the family does not conform to the Qur'anic principles of human equality and gender justice. Islamic feminist promote gender equality along a more fluid public-private continuum, promoting an egalitarian model for both the family and society. They also insist upon gender equality within the religious part of the public sphere.

Thus, what one can gather from the understanding of Islam and feminism, is that Islam does reconcile in itself ideas about gender justice and human egalitarianism and that is exactly what Islamic

feminism is made of. The image of a 'gender-reactionary Islam' had to be replaced by a 'gender-sensitive Islamic discourse' and it was for such reasons that voices arose against baseless claims against women and their life, rights and privileges within the Islamic world. We can conclude with an idea shared by African American writer Amina Wadud. Wadud stresses that there is a difference between 'what Islam teaches' and 'what Muslims do'; thus drawing on this it becomes much easier to understand that though some Muslims may portray the religion as misogynistic and oppressive of women, this does not mean that Islam preaches that. Islamic philosophy in fact, has accorded such a high status to women that sometimes, some may not be able to comprehend it. Hence, the religion is definitively gender-centric, in a way that the womenfolk of the community feel honoured and respected.

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