

Global rise of Islamic feminism and its status

Shafaque Hyder*

Aligarh Muslim University, India.

ABSTRACT

The Islamic religious sciences with modern interpretative knowledge are majorly influenced by the matter of gender equality. Muslim women scholars from various countries are working towards the production of alternative religious knowledge that takes gender equality and justice into account and broadly termed as Islamic Feminism. This article provides a gist of feminist theories and their movements, contribution towards a paradigm shift of thoughts/beliefs and the role these activists in generating awareness among the masses especially women. It stresses over the implications by the expansion of boundaries over its content orientation where Islamophobia and globalization are causing a hindrance in the development of the Islamic feminism. There are many drawbacks and loopholes of these movements. This study examines the development of a new feminist discourse among Islamic women all over the world and the challenges it poses in the Muslim society. The development of feminist discourse is dependent on region wide political, social and religious conditions. The leaders deprive women of rights provided to them by Qur'an and the Hadeeth. Based on the qualitative paradigm and semi-structured study, it is revealed that the Feminist Islamic "dialect" addresses various authoritarian structures- (1) State institutions, (2) Muslim patriarchal religious politicization that entrench patriarchal control. There is an alliance between State officials, patriarchal and religious establishment gatekeepers, such as Islamic Movement clerics, Sharia court judges. Despite much opposition, women voiced their opinion in demand of their legal Rights and against any form of oppression. To their success, many new changes, advancements and reforms came into existence.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, Gender inequality, women's rights, Qur'an, Musawah, Arab Spring

1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic feminism works on the framework of equity amongst the genders in private as well as public spheres keeping Qur'an its principal text and its exegesis as main methodology. There has been many misinterpretations regarding the status of Islamic women, their rights and duties.

Hence women till date are exploited on grounds of many societal norms. Since the 19th century, both men and women have demanded answers from the Legal Authorities regarding the effect of Sharia (Islamic Laws) on women's issues like education, seclusion, polygyny and concubinage. In an attempt to reform these wills of the

society, muslim women scholars like Amina Wadud [1] and Asma Barlas [2] opposed polygyny and pointed out the origin of the Islamic theory of polygyny in Surah An-Nisa. They believed that this verse of the Qur'an was not meant to utilize polygyny to oppress women, but to ensure that they were taken care of. Raden Adjeng Kartini [3] and Nawab Faizunnesa [4-5] from Bangladesh started advocating for legal changes and establishing schools for girls. Um Yasmin states that Muslim feminist are not responsible to rectify the religion of Islam instead their task is further gender equality within a secular society [6]. In addition she also states that Muslim feminists have altered their views in which Islam can be scrutinized in order to propagate equality between men and women corresponding to their faith. Islam does not deliberately ignore violence against any women. Fatema Mernissi sabotages the fact that the epitome of Muslim woman being characterized as 'silent and obedient' has nothing to do with the message of Islam [7]. She proposes that conservative Muslim men manipulated the interpretations of the religious texts i.e. the Qur'an and the Hadeeth to preserve the patriarchal system of the society and to prevent women from sexual liberation by enforcing strict veiling and limiting their Rights [8].

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Etymology:

In Arabic the process of interpretation of Qur'an is referred as "tafsir". The records of the Prophet Mohammad SAW also known as al-hadeeth was transmitted by his contemporary women companions. Taking this aspect of history into account, technically women had equal rights in

interpretation of the Holy text. In contrary to which the pre-modern era is largely characterized by male dominance in the interpretations of Islam. According to Shemeem Burney Abbas, many hadeeths were evolved and fabricated after the death of Prophet Mohammad SAW for gaining fame and an upper hand in a fierce strive of power [9]. Therefore those misinterpretations are not only used to side line women from political competition but also to benefit men to subordinate roles or to limit them to the boundaries. Margherita Picchi states that the disempowerment of women in interpreting Islam resulted in commentaries mandating gender roles claiming superiority of men over women [10]. Islamic feminist intellectuals began questioning this gender biases and started to study and interpret the Qur'an from a feminist perspective. This criticism of gender partiality in classic interpretations resulted in the origin of the Feminist Hermeneutic method for the interpretation of the Qur'an.

Margot Badran, explains that Islamic feminism derives its understanding and authorization from the Qur'an and seeks rights and justice for men and women in the aggregate of their existence [11]. She further explains that the extremist Islamists have polluted the image of Islam by misinterpretations and oppression of women, in the non-Islamic world where the receptors perceives Islam. Fatima Seedat proposed that the convergence of both Islamic and feminism creates more clashes and paves way for the 'extremists' to misinterpret the Qur'an according to their political needs [12]. She believes that instead of creating a new sect i.e. the Islamic feminism should highlight and

express that has and still exists in the verses of the Holy Qur'an. Islam has since time immemorial condemned the oppression against anyone irrespective of gender, religion, age and all such aspects of the society. Therefore, instead of labeling ourselves differently, we should try to portray the true essence of Islam and its teachings and try to restore everyone's rights that are granted by Islam but denied by society.

3. History and Context of its Development:

Islamic feminism became increasingly perceptible in the 1990s and continued to spread in the new century. Even if Islamic feminism is a recent phenomenon, Islam and feminism can be associated dating back since 1890s. During this time, Egypt was an important pioneering site for Islamic feminism in the Muslim world where feminist consciousness developed among many women due to their encounters with modernity [13]. Many men and women became aware of the teachings of Islam and tied to break the linkage of Islam with oppressive practices imposed by the society in the name of religion. This paved way for a few changes in women's lives, therefore people from other religions joined the movement demanding equal rights for all Egyptians, be they Muslim or Christian in a free and independent nation [14].

Although it is a fact that Islam provides economic rights to women regarding ownership and control of wealth, but these were not brought into practical practices. It is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an that women can inherit (usually half of the share of a man of equivalent connection to the subject), which was denied by many Muslim societies. The Mahr and the dowry

were practiced whose sole ownership resides in the bride but usually is retained illegally by the family. Moreover, Islam does not approve of the concept of joint property because that is, in most cases, unjustly used by the husband as those properties belong to him.

There are many factors such as political, economic, and social that determined women's economic participation in the 18th century. Muslim women in the Ottoman Empire were governed by the Sharia on topics addressed by the secular law including crime, politics, and economics [15]. Muslim women in particular bought and sold property, inherited and bequeathed wealth, established endowments hubous (waqfs), borrowed and lent money, and at times served as holders of fiefdom given to Ottoman Cavalry and the lower nobility also known as the Timars [16]. Waqfs during the Ottoman period were commonly used as institutions for public improvement and included establishments such as schools, libraries, mosques, and public kitchens [17]. These kitchens typically served the poor and other underprivileged demographics, such as orphans and the widowed. Many Ottoman women were among the selfless founders of waqfs [18], with the existence of their allotments being pivotal in their communities' economic life. Women in the Ottoman Empire could inherit property from their deceased parents or husbands. The estates made it quite clear that at least in as far as the court was concerned, the Islamic law of inheritance was applied exactly in accordance with the letter of the law [19]. Another way in which women held economic power was through property ownership. The kadi records in the Ottoman city

of Bursa found that one-third of women with estates also owned their own home [20]. Besides for owning homes in their own names, women also commonly sold or leased their property. In urban areas, women owned or rented shops, sometimes even owning artisanal workshops; urban women often owned plots just outside the city like vineyards and mills.

The 19th century is marked by the onset of the modern Islamic feminist movements. The Iranian poet Tahirih was the first modern woman to undertake Qur'anic exegesis. She became an important member of the Bab-i-Faith during which she completely condemned polygyny, the wearing of veil and all other restraints put upon women. Egyptian jurist Qasim Amin, in his pioneering book 'Women's liberation' (المرأة، تحرير) confronted many practices that prevailed in the society at that time, in his works, such as polygyny, the purdah i.e. the segregation of the sexes, and the veil. He considered them to be un-Islamic [21]. Many women started voicing the concerns of their rights in newspapers, journals, magazines etc. as in the Women's press since 1892.

From the beginning of the 20th century, women became more aware of their rights due to education and a shift in the political, social, and economic paradigms of many countries in the Arab world. Education for women especially in the university during 1930s was a very big step taken by the feminists. Ahmad Elewa and Laury Silvers claim that in past 150 years many scholarly interpretations have been developed to forbid various social wrongs and misconducts that prevailed in the Muslim world. The female genital mutilations, equalize family codes, equal participatory opportunities for women in

mosque and in administrative as well as judicial offices, and religious institutions, and clergy [22]. Many books were written during this era that advocated the rights of women and explicated the evils of the society. Biographies of the women in Islam i.e. the mother, the wives, and the daughters of Prophet Muhammad SAW were written in order to portray the status of women granted by the religion.

Many political movements took place in the Arab world and therefore many reforms came into existence like Lebanese women won the right to vote in 1952 [23]. Tunisia granted women equal rights as men, outlawed polygamy, allowed inter religion marriages, and provided equal inheritance as men [24]. Feminism in Egypt, although started out with informal network of activism after the denial of equal rights in 1922, eventually resulted in women gaining the right to vote in 1956 [25].

With all this victory, there were occurrences of setbacks for many activists such as Palestinian women in Lebanese camps held meetings at night and often slept away from home which led many people accuse them of infidelity, immorality and sexualized them. Numerous NGOs, international and local organizations came into the forefront of helping women establish their identity and status in this male dominant world.

4. Contribution of Islamic Feminism on Contemporary Issues:

Human rights law declares that both men and women should be considered as equals without contemplating women as lesser individuals. Fourth world conference on women was organized by the United Nations Development

Program (UNDP) in September 1995 demanding rights in an Islamic context [26]. It was attended by all Muslim states (except Saudi Arabia), which exhibited the diverse cultures of the Islamic world. Many representatives demanded liberality within the guidelines of Islam and right to vote with an appeal to end the discrimination by the government [27].

They also confronted the Muslim world for being silent on the issues oppressing women and pointed out the economic freedom, and social independence granted to women by Islam. They highlighted the importance of democracy in providing a breeding ground for liberty, freedom, and prosperity within substructure of religion and Sharia. They demanded that women's issues must be looked into in order for a country to progress and for the society to be cleared off its evils. The year 2004 marked the passage of Bill in the Moroccan Parliament declaring marriage as a peer collaboration between spouses, which provided equal responsibilities of the family to both of them [28]. It also provided women the right to divorce, which resulted in ripples throughout the Muslim world.

A global movement called Musawah (مساواة) 'equality' in Arabic began to advocate the case that women can demand justice and equality from within the framework of Islam. Twelve female activists from various countries headed it. The movement's guiding principle was formulated by those women and was conventionally launched in 2009 at a meeting in Kuala Lumpur. Two hundred and fifty Muslim activists, policy makers, scholars and legal practitioners from forty-seven nations participated in the convention. Musawah works

on belief that Islam does not propagate biasness towards men. Instead it is the patriarchy within Muslim countries that resulted in the biased and male oriented interpretations of the Islamic texts [29]. Musawah, therefore empowers women to stand up against all the norms of the society that damages their status in their respective nations.

Sisters in Islam (SIS) was founded by Zainah Anwar in 1988 which was one of the most important politico-religious association in Malaysia [30]. She claimed that many Muslim women spend their entire lives believing that Islam justifies oppression of wives on hands of their husbands. For years, she visited many rural areas to convey the message to women that Islam does not condone oppression in any aspect. This awakened many women who were suffering in the form of polygamy, abandonment, beatings, all in the name of religion.

Many women participated in political struggles in which they faced gender-based discrimination such as harassment, and sexual attacks. Despite so much, they continued to protest without being deterred. Amidst these protests, many women chose to remain completely veiled, asserting their Muslim identity along with demanding for democracy. Thus proving the fact that feminism and Islam can coexist.

Organizations like Sisters in Islam (SIS) and the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), have done considerable works in creating an awareness among the people for the improvement of the status of women. An anthropologist from Iran Ziba, Mir

Husseini stated that secular feminism has completed its chronicled part but it has got nothing more or new to provide [31]. Although women are advancing and progressing in the same direction but one should respect and value the diversity of point of views and approaches of different activists and should support the others by providing a platform for everyone to voice their opinions in order to leave an impactful result. Sisters in Islam also addresses social matters such as polygamy, child marriage, moral policing, and violence and limitations (حدود) against women.

5. Contributions of Islamic Feminist Discourses in Revolutionary Movements since the Onset of the 2011 Arab Spring:

On the account of the Arab Spring, the women's struggle for equality, change, and power without discrimination continued to prevail. In June 2012, the protest against a law that advocated the dropping of rape charges if the culprit married his victim. In August 2012, six thousand Tunisian women lead a march to demand equality for women. King Khalid Foundation in Saudi Arabia campaigned demanding legislation against domestic abuse, which eventually became a law in September. In October 2012, the women who protested against the government were detained. They protested against this tyranny and were eventually released on the orders of the President Omar al-Bashir.

Before the advent of the Arab Spring, the ideologies of the Arab feminists showed a significant progress as it espoused with post-colonial theories and gender roles. It emulated over both Islamic and Western discourses and

attempted to provide an alternative analysis of various socio-individual interactions, especially regarding the rights of women in the society. It declared the patriarchy in every aspect of society in the Middle East caused a major hindrance in the revival of the stature of women. In the foresaid context, many feminist writers such as Fatima Mernissi from Morocco, Leila Ahmad and Saba Mahmoud from Egypt and the Tunisian author Raja Bensalama justified their premise. The writings of these feminist researches contributed in bringing about a massive change in the status of women in the society [32-35]. They combined Western modernist thought with post-colonial and post-modern critical theory in their writings to give birth to a new and revolutionized ideology to attract the masses.

Yemeni women played a significant role in political transition after the dethronement of Ali Abdullah Saleh from his Presidential authority in 2012. This elevated the status of women to such an extent that they started to attend many conferences to voice their opinions. Women occupied upto 30% of the seats at The National Dialogue Conference, which was held in Sana'a, Yemen from March 18, 2013 to January 24, 2014 [36]. In this conference they put forth their demand for women's reservation of seats to about 30% in all the branches of the government be it legislative, judicial or executive. This resulted in the increase in political representation of women even in countries where patriarchy prevailed in every spheres. In Libya the General National Congress (GNC) was occupied by 33 out of 200 seats by women and in Tunisia women had won 49 out of 217 seats. This marked the beginning of the revolutionized

phase of equality in history. In 2013, when President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak was ousted, the constitution was amended and any sort of discrimination based on gender was considered as illegal and unlawful. Women continued to protest against all the ill wills of Bashar al-Assad's regime but despite the integral role that women have played in Syrian Civil Society, the federation of Syria remained a male-dominant association. Apparently, Syrian National Coalition (SNC) has persistently failed to bring any women to peace talks with foreign states.

There is a long road ahead for women to achieve full social, political, and economic rights in almost the whole of the world. They still need to voice their opinions, demand their rights and challenge patriarchy either by electing more female candidates to political office, utilizing press to spread their message or taking to the streets to protest and demand change.

6. Responses to Islamic Feminism:

This aspect of women's liberation gathered various kinds of responses from people of different perspectives. Some welcome it wholeheartedly while others viewed it with considerable suspicion. Those who support the endeavors ascend from what can be called 'Islam Only' position. They believe that Islam is the only framework through which a society can thrive; be it Islamic or Western world. Islam is sufficient to provide gender justice and no other resources are required for this, as it clearly disapproves of oppression of any kind and in any sphere of life. People supporting this ideology completely reject secular feminist construct [37]. They adhere to the belief that Islamic base is crucial for crafting any sort of

feminist practice in order to involve masses into it and to deliver its message to the majority of the people. In short, they are of a viewpoint that people can either be a feminist or believe in Islam.

When women started to read and interpret Islamic texts, they gained knowledge about the true essence of messages Islam conveys through its principles and teachings and were able to pose a staunch challenge to the religious patriarchy. Many secular feminists who support their Islamic sister's work are of the opinion that the forces of defiance and amendment, from wherever they are emerging, are formed around incremental, practical, day-to-day issues that cannot be clearly differentiated on secular or theocratic basis. Valentine Moghadam, an Iranian feminist scholar emphasizes the importance of writings and public proclamation of Islamic feminists and draws attention to the fact that women's press and the activists associated with it play an important role in broadening the meandering universe and expanding literacy and gender consciousness among their readers [38].

On the other hand, many people, including the traditional religious leaders and many secular feminists viewed Islamic feminism with suspicion and distrust. The secular feminists like Haideh Moghissi states that women's rights can only emerge from secular, cross-cultural, and universal premises that should be completely unaffected by socio-religious context of a society [39]. They thought that the Islamic feminism is causing a hindrance in the emergence and development of secular feminism where women's rights are demanded in the international language, which can be conveyed

to the masses. They also believe that Islamic feminism has many flaws and loopholes in it [40]. Therefore, the proponents of Islamic feminism will eventually have to choose between religion and feminism, as their goals are circumscribed and compromised. Moghissi further explains that the term 'Islamic feminism' when implied in true sense means the refusal to subordinate one's life to the male-centered aspects of the society, in spite of biological differences between the two genders. According to her, those who demands equality within the framework of sharia and the Qur'an will have to compromise and will need to redefine either of them because sharia does provide equity to both the sexes. But simultaneously declares men as superiors in many aspects as explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, Surah al-Nisa "الرجال للنساء على قوامون" (men are the protectors of women) for their biological strength. Even this ayah is misinterpreted as we can infer from pondering over the whole of ayah. Whereas many people, including the traditional religious leaders and many secular feminists viewed the Islamic feminism with suspicion and distrust.

7. The Development of Conversations between Islamic and Secular Feminism:

We generally assume that feminism is a congruous political, cultural and philosophical movement throughout the world. Instead it is multi-dimensional and multifarious movement that comprises of multitude of interdisciplinary and intersectional trends and traditions. To rephrase it, feminism is not a colossal and consistent organization, and not all the feminists think alike. There are various types of feminisms and therefore multifaceted nature of feminist thoughts makes it somewhat elusive and

difficult to pin down. There is a dire need to go down to the etymology of the terms 'secular' and 'religious' as their meanings and declension changed over time. The Arabic coinage for the term 'secularism' was 'علمانية' deriving from the word world meaning 'عالم' in Arabic. Generally secular was used in relation to the nation or nationalism and was implied as inclusive of all religions. Simultaneously, it also referred to the disjuncture of the institution of the state and that of religion. In the Middle East, the term secular was usually associated with modernity, and often with the West while 'religious' was believed to be 'traditional' and 'backward'.

Secular feminism came into existence as early as in the 20th century in several Muslim countries. It demanded women's rights and equality in a composite dialogue intertwining of nationalist, Islamic modernist, and humanitarian debates and further included human rights and democracy arguments in the set principles of their ideology. Whereas Islamic feminism appeared in the late 20th century and propagated the idea of gender equality and gender justice from the Qur'an and hadeeth as their sources. Secular feminism has exceedingly used Islamic feminist arguments to convince Muslim women to demand rights provided to them by Islam but denied by patriarchal society and even in areas where Islam was given as a pretext for withholding rights. Islamic as well as secular feminism have fought many battles together, which produced successful victories. In Morocco, women activists demanded a reform in the Muslim Family Law (الشفعة في الأحوال المدونة) combining both Islamic and secular feminism. They received a great deal of success as the

patriarchal model of the Law was eventually replaced with the egalitarian one.

Many aspects of modern and Islamic feminism have evolved over the last three decades to evaluate the status of women in Muslim societies. Islamic feminism is generally viewed as incongruent by the western world while secular feminism is considered as problematic and over-modern in Islamic states. Western feminism is considered an encumbrance of western cultural values in contrast to Islamic cultural values. Taking into account both kinds of feminisms like many western-educated Muslim feminists who lived outside their home countries got involved and influenced by the feminism of their adopted country. They had a paradigm shift of their ideology to human rights discourse and secularism. A group of feminists embraced Islamic feminism and emphasized on the reinterpretation of the Qur'an, the Hadeeth, and Shariah in Islamic states. Most of the feminists who were of the foresaid opinion came from secular-left intellectual backgrounds such as Tohidi 1991 and Najmabadi 1993 [41-42]. They were of the point of view that Qur'an does guarantee equal rights to women therefore; their notion was based on the proper interpretation of the Qur'an.

8. Limitations of Islamic Feminism:

Every facet of the society has its positives and negatives; it is the case with Islamic feminism. Although it has brought about a revolution in the society, many feminists have even crossed the boundaries of sharia and that of the commandments of the Qur'an in their demands [43]. There are many issues in which the feminists tried to connect politics and religion in

such a manner that de-sanctified relations between the two genders and de-traditionalized Islam. Some of such issues are 'the dress code', 'the hijab', 'the veil' 'equality in the mosque', and 'equality in leading prayer' [44-45].

Islam dictates both men and women to dress modestly; this concept is called hijab and has become a controversial issue among the feminists. Many activists deny the Islamic rulings regarding the covering of the body. A sufi group debated that Islam did not made traditional Islamic clothing mandatory, hence allowing the women to wear other clothes like jeans. In France Islamic feminists Fadela Amara and Hedi Mhenni supported the bans of hijab as they consider the veil as a symbol of subjugation of women [46]. Women in France, Algeria, and Tunisia supported their claims and protested against the wearing of veil. While on the other hand many women saw 'veil' as a power statement of pride in religion, femininity, sexual identity, and a source of empowerment of women from a sexual difference of that of a man [47].

The Qur'an explicitly states that both men and women should be dressed like cloak (جلباب) and shawl (خمر) which do not cover the face, hands or feet. Considering this many feminists believe that wearing of hijab is contextualized by culture. Therefore the modern Muslim feminists claim that ultimately it is all about women's personal choice to wear a veil or not and no other person or even religion has the right to threaten them. New styles of veiling emerged when the younger generations observed the veil and the hijab and simultaneously looked up to modern fashion models as their role models. Therefore, fashion

industries took the matter in their hands and out came numerous kinds of modern and pseudo-Islamic hijabs.

Until 1994, the majority of the mosques had separate areas for women to pray. Islamic feminists began protesting against this segregation and demanded women to be allowed to pray beside men as in Mecca. The contemporary authorities filed complaints against them and those feminists such as Asra Nomani, Fatima Thompson, and few others were held of charges.

According to all the currently existing schools of Islam, a woman cannot be an Imaam and lead a mixed gender congregational prayer. Many medieval Islamic scholars such as Mohammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (838-923), Abu Thawr (764-854), Ismail ibn Yahya al-Muzani (791-878), and Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240) considered the practice as permissible for the optional (Nafil) prayers and not mandatory one (fard). Majority of the scholars did not accept their views and this infuriated the feminists such as Umm Salama, Ahmad Elawa, and Amina Wadud as they claimed that there is a lack of explicit evidence from the Qur'an and the Hadeeth to counter their argument [48-49].

9. CONCLUSION

This study argues intellectual paradigms that inform women's struggle for equality in different periods of time. Women were subjugated, oppressed, and exploited, in the name of religion. Therefore, many feminist activists voiced their demand for equality both the genders, upliftment of women in their status in the society. The rights granted by Islam but denied by society, all within the framework of

Islam i.e. the Qur'an and the Hadeeth. We can positively say that feminism has had a great impact on the discourse on gender justice in Muslim societies. Many non-governmental or anti-government movements came to the forefront for the cause. This movement gathered much response from the public especially the women. They were not only supported by one section of society but also opposed and criticized by other. Although Islamic feminist activists have come a long way, but still there is a huge pile of issues to be dealt with.

10. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

NA

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