WHAT IS ISLAMIC FEMINISM? PROMOTING CULTURAL CHANGE AND GENDER EQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Islamic feminism is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam. It is a discourse of educated urban women, who re-read the Qur'an and early Islamic history in order to recover their religion from patriarchal interpretation and violent practices. This movement aims to highlight women's participation and rights as well as to give theological authority to the movement for women's rights in the Muslim world. However, some feminists in Muslim societies degrade Islamic teaching and borrow Western ideas to advance women's cause. This is due to wrong notions and interpretations of Islam-either from Western's or Muslim's perceptive. Islamic feminists have made various attempts to revive a woman-friendly Islam and their effort received both feedbacks; highly welcomed and viewed with considerable suspicion. To certain extent, it was easier for authorities in Muslim societies to push aside feminist questions earlier on by labeling feminism as alien, Western, corrupt and anti-Islam. However knowledgeable enquires by Islamic feminists have made it impossible to dismiss the issues raised by them any longer. The discourse on Islamic feminism has generated a language that is able to reach young women. Through the discourse, many young women able to challenge norms-culturally ingrained within the family and society by arguing that these norms have nothing to do with Islam but focusing more on tradition. Their insistence on following what is 'Islamic" rather than familial or cultural can potentially allow them to recover their right.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, gender equality, patriarchal interpretation, women's right

INTRODUCTION: FEMINISM AND ISLAMIC FEMINISM

Feminism is a form of collective movements that aim to define, establish and defend the equal political, economic and social rights as well as equal opportunities for women. The major concern of these collective movements is in dealing specifically with the problem women face in overcoming social barriers. Apart from this issue, feminism is also concerned in liberation of both men and women from traditional cultural roles (Kolmar and Bartowski, 2005). Feminist theory is developed from these feminist movements and it aims to understand the nature of gender inequality. It examines women's social roles and lived experience.

The history of feminism is divided into three phases which are known as waves. The first waves mainly focussing on women's suffrage movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century where the main concern is with women's right to vote. The second wave refers to a period of feminist activity in the early 1960s until the late 1980s. This period focuses on the liberation of women and their fight to gain legal and social equality. The third wave represents the continuation and the reaction on the failure of the second-wave feminist movements (Kolmar and Bartowski, 2005).

The rise of Feminism is not only affected the western world but the Islamic countries as well. In the early 1990s, a group of expatriate Iranian feminist coined the term "Islamic Feminism". This group of women put their ideas and concerns in a magazine called *Zannan* (Women) thus raising debate and discussion around questions such as:

> Is Islam compatible with feminism?
> Can there be such thing as a feminism that is framed in Islamic discourses?
>
> (Afshar, 1996)

In Iran, the discourse of Islamic feminism was accompanied by movements to challenge discriminatory Islamic family laws. Islamic feminism is a discourse of educated urban women who re-read the Quran and early Islamic history to recuperate their religion from patriarchal interpretation and practices. They are challenging patriarchal norms, which are culturally ingrained within the family and society, by arguing that those norms have nothing to do with Islam but only related with tradition (Afshari, 1994).

Along with the institution of Islamic practices, certain social practices were imposed on women in the name of Islam were not prescribed by the religion, such as the practice of segregation and seclusion. These features characterized the life of the middle and upper classes in Middle Eastern cities, which did not want and need women to work outside of home. The way Islam is understood and applied in daily life indicates how patriarchy uses the religion to dominate women (Badran, 1999).

INTRODUCTION: ORIGINS OF PATRIARCHAL NORMS

Many Muslims have adopted the Judeo-Christian ethic in viewing women as the source of human tragedy because of her alleged biblical role as the temptress who seduced Adam into disobedience to his Lord. By tempting him to eat the forbidden fruit, she was not only defying Allah, but also was responsible towards humankind's expulsion from Paradise, thus instigating all temporal human suffering. Those misogynists, who support this Biblical myth, search from the archives of pseudo-Islamic literature such as false and weak hadiths in order to support their views (Yusuf al-Qaradawi, 2006).

This Old Testament myth is a widely circulated belief in the Islamic community despite the fact that Allah in the Qur'an stresses that it was Adam who was solely responsible for his mistake. In 20:116 it is stated:

> "And verily, We had made a covenant with Adam beforehand, but he forgot, and We found in him no determination to disobey".

Verse 20:122-123 continues:

> "In result, they both ate of the tree...thus did Adam disobey His Lord, and fell into error. But his Lord chose for him (From His Grace): He turned to him, and gave him guidance."

Based on the verses as stated above, it is strongly agreed that there is nothing in Islamic doctrine or in the Qur'an which holds women responsible for Adam's expulsion from paradise which later leads to the misery of humankind. However misogynistic interpretation by many Islamic "scholars" and "imams", resulting in misinterpretation of hadiths and spreading negativity and

that entire societies have mistreated their female members despite the fact that Islam has honored and empowered women in all aspects of life (Yusuf al-Qaradawi, 2006).

The woman in Islamic law is equal to her male counterpart because she is as liable for her actions as a male. Apart from that, not only her testimony is demanded and valid in court, her opinions are sought and acted upon.

Contrary to the pseudo hadith: "Consult women and do the opposite," the Prophet (SAW) consulted his wife, Um Salama on one of the most important issues to the Muslim community. Such references to the Prophet's positive attitudes toward women disprove one *hadith* falsely attributed to Ali bin Abi Talib: "The woman is all evil, and the greatest evil about her is that man cannot do without her."

The promotion of such negativity against women has led many "scholars" and "imams" to make the unsupported ruling about female speech. They claim that women should lower their voice to whispers or even silence except when she speaks to her husband, her guardian or other females. The female act of communication has been perceived as a source of temptation and allurement to the male.

The Qur'an, however, specifically mentions that those seeking information from the Prophet's wives were to address them from behind a screen (33:53). Since questions require an answer, the wives offered *fatwas* to those who asked and narrated hadiths to whomever wished to transmit them. Furthermore, women were accustomed to question the Prophet (SAW) while men were present. Neither were they embarrassed to have their voices heard nor did the Prophet prevent their inquiries. Even in the case of Omar when he was challenged by a woman during his *khutba* on the *minbar*, he did not deny or dismiss her. Rather, he admitted that she was right and he was wrong and said: "Everybody is more knowledgeable than Omar."

Another Qur'anic example of a woman speaking publicly is that the daughter of the Shaykh mentioned in the Qur'an in 28:23. Furthermore, the Qur'an narrates the conversation between Sulayman and the Queen of Sheba as well as between her and her subjects. All of these examples support the *fatwa* that women are allowed to voice their opinion publicly, unless it was unanimously rejected by Islamic doctrine (Yusuf al-Qaradawi, 2006).

Thus, the only prohibition is the female talking softly and in a manner of flirting that is meant to excite and tempt the male. This is expressed in the Qur'an as which Allah mentions in 33:32:

> "O wives of the Prophet, you are not like anyone among women. If you fear Allah, then do not be soft in speech [to men], lest he in whose heart is disease should covet, but speak with appropriate speech".

The prohibited is alluring speech which entices those whose hearts are already weaken with desires. Thus, not all conversation with women is prohibited for Allah mentions the verse: "...but speak with appropriate speech." (33:32)

Finding excuses to silence women is just one of the injustices certain scholars and imams attempt to inflict upon women. They point to such hadiths as narrated by Bukhari about the Prophet

which says: "I have not left a greater harm to men than women." They assume that the harm implies that women are an evil curse to be endured just as one must endure poverty, famine, disease, death and fear. These "scholars" ignore the fact that man is tested more by his blessings than by his tragedies as mentioned in the Qur'an:

"And We test you with evil and with good as trial." (21:35).

ISLAMIC FEMINISM: CHALLENGING PATRIARCHAL NORMS

The ethical project of Islamic feminism shares the central ideals and values of Islam itself-of justice, equal opportunity, equity, compassion, and tolerance. By opening up the question of who has the authority to interpret scripture, and by challenging the power of traditional interpretive communities and the producers of religious knowledge, Islamic feminists are at the forefront of the contemporary reformist movement. Writers such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas are conferring upon themselves the authority to challenge the monopoly of traditional interpreters of the Qur'an, whilst scholars such as Fatima Mernissi are engaged in contesting received notions of Hadith literature. All such scholars are engaged in revisiting Islamic sources and actively furthering what has been succinctly termed the "democratization of *ijtihad*" (Moghadam, 2003).

Working within Islamic jurisprudence, this entails the use of an interpretive methodology, *ijtihad* (to strive for) to dynamically re-interpret foundation Qur'anic principles in order to bring about equal rights of women (Moghadam, 2003).

Feminists look to the time of Islam's origin and assert that women, who had played a significant role as the creators of oral texts, became invisible after the inception of Islam, both as originators and interpreters of such texts. Scriptural literature was then produced by men who incorporated their own restrictive assumptions and understanding of gender relations. Legal texts were also created in this way and a masculine bent was emblazoned into the legal literature of that time, resulting in the damaging of the egalitarian philosophy of Islam (Valentine M, 2003). Thus, the feminist project is based squarely upon an Islamic framework within which an ethically correct gender paradigm and resulting legal rights for women may be configured.

Feminists argue that the problems faced by women are generally the result of misguided male interpretations of the misguided male interpretations of the principles of Islam, as opposed to the actual religious edicts. Consequently, they believe that a women-centred re-reading of Islam's holy sources can become a powerful source of gender justice.

In keeping with this, in the recent years, Islamic feminists have turned to the religious texts and traditions to read them critically, reinterpret them from a woman-friendly position and displace the traditional, well-entrenched misogynist understandings that have long held sway. Their attempts have ranged from looking at the *asbab al nuzool* (reasons for the revelation of a particular verse or chapter of the Qur'an), to contextualising *hadiths* (the collection of reported teachings, deeds and saying of the Prophet) and highlighting the woman-friendly aspects of the religion in order to challenge the patriarchal interpretations that the clergy favour (Wadud, 1999).

Ijtihad is central to the Islamic feminist project, as it allows for the intellectual re-interpretation of the holy sources so that their spirit is retained but the concrete manifestation can be

transformed in accordance with the present needs. An example of this exercise is Islamic thinker Abdul Karim Soroush's thesis that distinguishes between the "essential" and "accidental" elements of Islam. The former are the foundation of elements; which without them, Islam is not Islam. These elements are enduring and unchanging beliefs. The latter elements are socially and historically contingent and, therefore, subject to change. The present environment is very different from Arabia of the seventh century, especially with regard to relations between men and women, can be legitimately transformed (Wadud, 1999).

For instance, Islamic feminists argue that the verse in the Qur'an that gives primacy to men does so explicitly by stating that men are the maintainers of women. While this was true of an earlier era-where motherhood was a woman's inevitable role and that made her a dependent- today, where not only do women have greater control over their reproductive choices but are also often self-reliant, this understanding can definitely change (Wadud, 1999)

Another strategy pursued by renowned Arab women writers like Fatima Mernissi (Morocco) and Assia Djebar (Algeria), among others, is to recover a lost history where women are included. They have studied the lives of women in the formative years of Islamic history and argue that predominantly male narrative traditions have rendered women invisible, whereas during the Prophet's time, women were both visible and active members of the community. They could walk into a mosque and address their questions and concerns directly to the Prophet. This indicates the women unmediated access to authority.

Fatima Mernissi states that the message of Islam was one of radical equality and hence, quite unpalatable to the privileged male elite that was reluctantly willing to accept changes in public domain but was fiercely insistent on the private domain remaining untouched by any change. This was why the ideals fell apart after the Prophet's death. By drawing upon and "authentic" Islam, feminist argue against women's marginalisation from social, religious and community matters in the present (Wadud, 1999).

Islamic feminism also focuses on recovering and enforcing the undisputed rights that women can lay claim to within the structure of Islam but that have become obscure because of cultural norms or honour and shame. For instance, *nikah* (marriage) is a contract between two consenting parties with both sides entitled to lay down certain conditions which, after mutual agreement, would be binding upon them. The rights of women to lay down conditions regarding polygamy, custody of children in the event of divorce and other important matters can give them a significant degree of control over their lives.

Unfortunately, due to cultural norms, it is often considered shameful for a prospective bride to talk openly about the issues that could impact her marital future. Similarly, feminists state that women who stay in an abusive marriage-considering it a divine decree and an obligation to serve and obey the husband- can benefit from a better understanding and enforcement of existing rights in Islam, rendered insignificant by patriarchy (Wadud, 1999).

All these various attempts made by the Islamic feminists to resurrect a woman-friendly Islam have been welcomed and viewed with considerable suspicion. Those who support the activities come from two camps. The first camp consists of what can be called the "Islam Only" position

that claims Islam is the only possible framework within which a feminist impulse, true to the traditions and societal norms of non-Western Muslim societies, can develop and thrive. Exhorting a return to authentic Islam, proponents of this position claim that no other resources are required or even desirable to achieve gender justice. The secular Western feminist construct is seen as alien, inapplicable and wholly rejected (Wadud, 1999).

The other strong supporters of Islamic feminism include secular-oriented feminism who considers Islamic feminism to be a valuable addition to the repertoire needed to the grapple with entrenched patriarchy. They believe that an Islamic base is crucial for crafting a feminist practice that will have an appeal for the masses. They stress that engaging with Islam is not a matter of choice but one of necessity and that re-interpretative exercise is important. Simply invoking ideas of universal human rights and upholding the advances made by women in the West would have no resonance for the Muslim woman and, thus, these would be discredited as alien and elitist (Roald, 1998).

Apart from these two camps of support, Islamic feminists are viewed with considerable suspicion not just by sections of traditional religious establishment but also by many secular-oriented feminists. While traditional religious establishment finds the interference of the authorised discourse on Islam as illegitimate and misguided enterprise, for secular feminists, such as Haideh Moghissi, women's rights can only stem from secular, cross-cultural and universal premises that should not be undermined by the specific socio-religious context of society (Roald, 1998).

Supporters of this position deem the Islamic feminist project, at best, inadequate and suspect; and flawed and dangerous at its worst. In the first case, it is believed that well-meaning Islamic feminists are going to come to the realisation of the inadequacy and limitedness of their approach and will then have to grapple with the question of what is primary for them in Islamic feminism: Islam or feminism? Which one has to be fitted within the frame of the other? They maintain that the activities and goals of Islamic feminism are circumscribed and compromised (Roald, 1998).

Haideh Moghissi draws attention to exactly what is meant by Islam and feminism when the term Islamic feminism is employed. In the broadest sense, feminism is the refusal to subordinate one's life to the male-centred dictates of religious and non-religious institutions. She claims that feminism's core idea is that the biological difference between men and women should not be translated into and unequal variation in women's and men's experience. Biology should not lead to differences in legal status and the privileging of one over the other. If Islamic means a reliance on the Qur'an and the *shariah,* she argues, then one has to grapple with the problem of reconciling Qur'anic injunctions regarding women, which stress on gender-differentiated roles and obligation. Moghissi further adds that it is possible for a Muslim feminist to demand equal rights for women and have Islam as a personal faith, but for this she would have to leave the framework of the *shariah* behind (Roald, 1998).

CONCLUSION
Keeping aside all arguments in favour of or against the concept, what cannot be denied is that Islamic feminism has impacted the discourse on gender justice in Muslim societies in several ways. While it was easier for authorities in Muslim societies to brush aside feminist questions earlier by labelling feminism as alien, Western, anti-Islam and corrupt, knowledgeable questions

by Islamic feminists have made it impossible to dismiss these questions anymore. These questions have gained legitimacy and widespread visibility. This is an important step towards challenging patriarchy. At the same time, it has led to an engagement with women's concerns, which is very different from the earlier attitude that Islam resolved all these questions in the seventh century and nothing more is required. Sections of the traditional religious establishment is responding to this important shift in consciousness by accepting that present concerns need to be looked at in innovative and contemporary ways.

Across the globe, Islamic feminists have been able to bargain with religious and state authorities and wrest legal reforms to improve the situation of women. From raising the minimum age of marriage for women and instituting woman-friendly marriage and divorce laws, to securing women's right to study and pursue profession, Islamic feminists have played a major role. The discourse on Islamic feminism has generated a language that many young women are able to draw upon while challenging patriarchal norms -culturally entrenched within the family and society-by arguing that they have nothing to do with Islam and everything to do with tradition. Their insistence on following what is Islamic rather than familial or cultural can potentially enable them to recover long obfuscated rights.

Feminisms of all varieties are an ongoing exercise in challenging and destroying, in a painstaking and incremental way, the gender injustice entrenched in all societies in different ways. Just as we do not question whether secular feminism can advance gender justice, assuming that the journey with all its vicissitudes is one well worth undertaking even though the ultimate goal may nowhere be in sight, similarly when it comes to Islamic feminism the question is not whether it can ultimately achieve gender justice, but whether its present strategies of challenging patriarchy are successful.

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