

FEMINISM IN ISLAM

IFFAT B. SIDDIQUI

A Research scholar, A Scholar from Shri JagdishPrasad Jhabarmal Tibrewala University, Rajasthan, India

ABSTRACT

Islamic Feminism is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam. It aims for the full equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender, in public and private life. Islamic feminists advocate women's right gender equality and social justice rounded in an Islamic framework. Although rooted in Islam the movement's pioneers have also utilized secular, Western, or otherwise non-Muslim feminist discourses, and have recognized the role of Islamic feminism as part of an integrated global feminist movement.

Advocates of the movement seek to highlight the deeply rooted teachings of equality in the religion and to encourage a questioning of the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching through the Qur'an (holy book), Hadith (sayings of Muhammad PBH) and Sharia(law) towards the creation of a more equal and just society.

There are substantial differences to be noted between the terms 'Islamic feminist' and 'Islamist'.

KEYWORDS: Islamic Feminism, Women in Islam, 'Islamic Feminist' and 'Islamist'

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Feminists

Islamic feminists ground their arguments in Islam and its teachings, thus Islamic feminism is defined by Islamic scholars as being more radical than secular feminism and as being anchored within the discourse of Islam with the Quran as its central text.

During recent times, the concept of Islamic feminism has grown further with Islamic groups looking to garner support from many aspects of society. In addition, educated Muslim women are striving to articulate their role in society.

Islamists

Islamists are advocates of Political Islam the notion that the Quran and hadith mandate acalipath, i.e. an Islamic government. Some Islamists advocate women's rights in the public sphere but do not challenge gender inequality in the personal, private sphere.

Education

In Islam education was women first priority though there were no formal schools in the 7th CE yet women were given private education at madrasas not only this there are clear examples from the life of prophet who did provide education to his daughters.

Besides this women from the very time of prophet women could even do business, this is seen from Prophet Mohammad's PBH first wife who was a widow as well as a business women.

Leave aside business, women could get all her rights even after her marriage she was a full-fledged partner in all house affairs she was even given equal rights in property in fact marriage in Islam is a contract base, if she feels the partner is not giving her proper rights it is her wish she can leave him, as per the contract there is no such restriction in marriage matters. It isn't that just a man can divorce a woman; in fact even a woman can seek divorce and get remarried. Only thing she has to abide some Islamic laws for getting remarried like performing 'Iddat' that is to stay indoors not to come out in front of unknown male person and in front of those with whom she can remarry.

I am going to speak on Feminism in Islam but before that I would like to brief up what is Islam and what do Muslims on the whole believe.

"What is Islam, and what do Muslims believe?"

Islam is a religious system begun in the seventh century by Muhammad PBU. Muslims follow the teachings of the Qur'an and strive to keep the Five Pillars.

The History of Islam

In the seventh century, Muhammad PBU claimed the angel Gabriel visited him. During these angelic visitations, which continued for about 23 years until Muhammad's death, the angel purportedly revealed to Muhammad PBU the words of Allah (the Arabic word for "God" used by Muslims). These dictated revelations composed the Qur'an, Islam's holy book. Islam means "submission," deriving from a root word that means "peace." The word Muslim means "one who submits to Allah"

The Doctrine of Islam

Muslims summarize their doctrine in six articles of faith:

- Belief in one Allah: Muslims believe Allah is one, eternal, creator, and sovereign.
- Belief in the angels
- Belief in the prophets: The prophets include the biblical prophets but end with Muhammad PBU as Allah's final prophet.
- Belief in the revelations of Allah: Muslims accept certain portions of the Bible, such as the Torah and the Gospels. They believe the Qur'an is the pre-existent, perfect word of Allah.
- Belief in the last Day of Judgment and the hereafter: Everyone will be resurrected for judgment into either paradise or hell.
- Belief in predestination: Muslims believe Allah has decreed everything that will happen. Muslims testify to Allah's sovereignty with their frequent phrase, inshallah, meaning, "if God wills."

The Five Pillars of Islam

These five tenets compose the framework of obedience for Muslims:

- The testimony of faith (shahada): "la ilahailallah. Muhammad rasul Allah." This means, "There is no deity but Allah. Muhammad PBU is the messenger of Allah." A person can convert to Islam by stating this creed. The shahada shows that a Muslim believes in Allah alone as deity and believes that Muhammad reveals Allah.
- Prayer (salat): Five ritual prayers must be performed every day.

- Giving (zakat): This almsgiving is a certain percentage given once a year.
- Fasting (sawm): Muslims fast during Ramadan in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. They must not eat or drink from dawn until sunset.
- Pilgrimage (hajj): If physically and financially possible, a Muslim must make the pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once. The hajj is performed in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar.

A Muslim's entrance into paradise hinges on obedience to these Five Pillars. Still, Allah may reject them. Even Muhammad PBU was not sure whether Allah would admit him to paradise (Surah 46:9; Hadith 5.266).

Women in Islam

At a time when the rest of the world, from Greece and Rome to India and China, considered women as no better than children or even slaves, with no rights whatsoever, Islam acknowledged women's equality with men in a great many respects. The Quran states:

"And among His signs is this: that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest and peace of mind in them, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Certainly, herein indeed are signs for people who reflect."
[Noble Quran 30:21]

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said:

"The most perfect in faith amongst believers is he who is best in manners and kindest to his wife." [Abu Dawud]

Muslims believe that Adam and Eve were created from the same soul. Both were equally guilty of their sin and fall from grace, and Allah forgave both. Many women in Islam have had high status; consider the fact that the first person to convert to Islam was Khadijah, the wife of Muhammad, whom he both loved and respected. His favorite wife after Khadijah's death, Ayshah, became renowned as a scholar and one of the greatest sources of Hadith literature. Many of the female Companions accomplished great deeds and achieved fame, and throughout Islamic history there have been famous and influential scholars and jurists.

We might also mention that while many in the West criticize Islam with regard to the treatment of women, in fact a number of Muslim countries have had women rulers and presidents. To name a few: Turkey; Bangladesh and Pakistan.

With regard to education, both women and men have the same rights and obligations. This is clear in Prophet Muhammad's saying:

"Seeking knowledge is mandatory for every believer." [Ibn Majah]

This implies men and women.

A woman is to be treated as God has endowed her, with rights, such as to be treated as an individual, with the right to own and dispose of her own property and earnings, enters into contract, even after marriage. She has the right to be educated and to work outside the home if she so chooses. She has the right to inherit from her father, mother, and husband. A very interesting point to note is that in Islam, unlike any other religion, a woman can be an imam, a leader of communal prayer, for a group of women.

A Muslim woman also has obligations. All the laws and regulations pertaining to prayer, fasting, charity, pilgrimage, doing good deeds, etc., apply to women, albeit with minor differences having mainly to do with female

physiology.

Before marriage, also a woman has the right to choose her husband. Islamic law is very strict regarding the necessity of having the woman's consent for marriage. The groom gives a marriage dowry to the bride for her own personal use. She can keep her own family name, rather than taking her husband's. As a wife, a woman has the right to be supported by her husband even if she is already rich. She also has the right to seek divorce and custody of young children. She does not return the dowry, except in a few unusual situations.

Despite the fact that in many places and times Muslim communities have not always adhered to all or even many of the foregoing in practice, the ideal has been there for 1,400 years, while virtually all other major civilizations did not begin to address these issues or change their negative attitudes until the 19th and 20th centuries, and there are still many contemporary civilizations which have yet to do so.

Feminism

Feminism is a multi-disciplinary approach to sex and gender equality understood through social theories and political activism. Historically, feminism has evolved from the critical examination of inequality between the sexes to a more nuanced focus on the social and performative constructions of gender and sexuality.

The agenda of our seminar is Feminism in social justice Discourse and practice, hence I would like to discuss this topic in the light of Islam or in other words I would say feminism in Islam. As such I have already read or stated the importance of women in Islam from the point of view Quran and Hadith yet I would like to give some more detailed facts or it would be better if I say Feminism in Islam

Islamic Feminism

It is a form of feminism concerned with the role of women in Islam. It aims for the full equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender, in public and private life. Islamic feminists advocate women's rights, gender equality, and social justice grounded in an Islamic framework. Although rooted in Islam, the movement's pioneers have also utilized secular, Western, or otherwise non-Muslim feminist discourses, and have recognized the role of Islamic feminism as part of an integrated global feminist movement. Advocates of the movement seek to highlight the deeply rooted teachings of equality in the religion and to encourage a questioning of the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching through the Qur'an (holy book), hadith (sayings of Muhammad PBU) and sharia (law) towards the creation of a more equal and just society.

The term has been heatedly debated and both feminists and Muslims have rejected it as two fundamentally incompatible ideas. Secular feminists reject it because they argue religion generally and Islam in particular is oppressive to women and many Muslim women reject it because they feel 'feminism' is a secular invention imposed on them from outside, from the West. Islamic feminism is indeed highly contested, but it has also been widely embraced by both activists and scholars.

As Margot Badran's article from 2002 states, what's in a name? What's behind a name? What is Islamic feminism? She has in a humble way attempted to address these questions in her article. Being a Muslim, I find myself fascinated and genuinely interested in the question of women and Islam. I do not under any circumstances start my engagement with the topic from a position which importance and rights secularism is the only route to women's empowerment. What interest text historically and presently and how Muslim women across the region frame their

arguments within Islam in their attempt to bring about law reform.

Islam has long played a central role in feminist debates, and has consistently been defined as being outside of the parameters set by Western mainstream feminism and thus as intrinsically patriarchal. This does not negate the fact, however, that to many women Islam forms a central aspect of their lives and their lived experiences. While religion itself is a highly contested term, there is little doubt that to many it provides a spiritual framework with which to view and experience the world. This spirituality serves as a counter-point in a world in which rationality is valued above all other systems of meaning—another expression of the meta-narrative of secularizing.

Islamic feminism constitutes a field that can be broadly defined as an attempt to exercise power over knowledge production and meaning making within Islam. This movement has flourished in several places, particularly Iran, Morocco, and the United States. Scholars within this field are attempting to dismantle misogynist interpretations of Islam through different interpretative methodologies. Fatima Mernissi in particular has been important in this process, as she has argued that many popular Hadith which have been used to support gender inequality in Islam are actually false. Importantly, she makes this argument using traditional Islamic methodology—the same methodology used by men who have consistently propagated these same Hadith.

Religious texts constitute the main battleground on which many of these debates take place, whereby these texts are constituted as either inherently patriarchal or are conceptualized as needing re-interpretation that would allow for feminist readings. The focus on patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith tend to center men as interpretative authorities and ignore movements that call for more inclusive or feminist readings of these texts. The argument is that religion is patriarchal regardless of interpretation, even though every act of understanding is an act of interpretation. Muslim women who write about feminism and Islam have raised questions about the monopoly on interpretation. Riffat Hassan says I quote

“Men have taken on the task of defining the ontological, theoretical, sociological and eschatological status of Muslim women.”

Riffat Hassan raises the important point that as long as women are defined as theologically inferior, the battle for sociological, political or economic rights will not go very far. For believers, the theological definition of human equality and the equality of men and women's souls is as important as other aspects of gender equality. Riffat Hassan argues that a return to the Qur'an would allow for the theological equality of Muslim men and women to emerge. Thus we see that even Islamic feminists use the religious texts as the grounds for their argument about patriarchy and Islam. Hence the Qur'an is post-patriarchal and thus a return to it would render Islam post-patriarchal, but only if this return is predicated on different interpretative practices. It is useful to note that this is not necessarily about women re-interpreting the texts, since women are just as capable of reproducing patriarchal interpretations as men. Rather it is a question of the approaches women and men use in interpretation. Many scholars who focus on feminism and Islam favour historicizing as a key approach in re-interpretation, as it contextualizes certain practices and thus renders them as inapplicable today.

There are two assumptions at play here. The first is that women are always passive, and in rare instances when they are not, they are resisting. Thus attempts to re-interpret religious texts will always fall into one of these narratives. This creates a binary view of action that is difficult to overcome. It situates women within two separate realms of action that go on to define any action taken by these women. In effect, if they are passive and accepting, they are oppressed;

whereas if they are resisting—although it is seen as a more ‘autonomous’ act—they are still responding or reacting to a specific audience and narrative. In other words, it is reactionary. Who are they resisting? Who are they proving a point to? It is simply another relation of power, whereby women constitute the system they are said to be resisting *by resisting it*.

The second assumption is that religion and religious texts are seen as the domains of men: thus in effect much of mainstream feminist discourse reifies the precise point many Islamic feminists are trying to disprove: that religious texts belong to men.

The last part of this talk, I will try to tackle the elephant in the room, which is the concept of feminism. In my opinion the history of feminist theory and practice has a long and diverse history. Yes, term itself was coined in the West, according to Margot Badran, more specifically in France in the 1880s by Hubertine Auclert, who introduced it in her journal, *La Citoyenne*, to criticize male domination and to make claims for women's rights and emancipation promised by the French Revolution. Since its first appearance the term has been given many meanings and definitions; it has been put to diverse uses and inspired many movements, also outside of the West. By the early 1920s it was in use in Egypt where it circulated in Arabic as *nisa'iyya*. “De facto feminist praxis” is produced in many locations both historically and presently and is articulated in local terms. Thus, “the meaning of feminism has changed over time and from places and is often disputed.” Feminist practices are “ratified by concrete experiences and change in any given place or time.” They may not identify as feminists, but they are aware of constraints placed upon women because of gender, they are rejecting such limitations placed on women, and they are working for more equitable gender roles.

To Conclude, I want to reiterate that the focus of my critique is on the decision on the part of many feminists to not engage with scholars who attempt to represent religion as more than simply inherently patriarchal. The Islamic feminist project can be seen as an important attempt to challenge knowledge production and meaning making within a confined space. Traditional male interpretations have dominated for centuries, thus managing to construct “Islamic ideals” that have delineated the borders of what Muslim femininity is. Simply the act of re-interpretation is a challenge to this, and constitutes an attempt to imagine and construct a different reality, which is already an exercise of power. As Voula Elina has said I quote

“A feminist critique of religion stresses the dismantling of religious legitimization for certain political and cultural practices; it critically analyses the power structures of religious communities; it reminds us that there is no Christianity or Islam but different forms and interpretations; and that the determinant role of religion in society should be questioned.”

I would suggest that a way out of these predicaments is by focusing less on essentialized notions of feminism and religion, and more on the lived realities of women who are religious. By centering experience, feminism can move away from the problematic of definition (which by extension is always a process of exclusion) and try to explore the option of multiple feminisms.

REFERENCES

1. Aquinas quoted by E.W. Fernea in her presentation on "Roles of Women in Islam: Past and Present", at the Ta'ziyeh Conference held at Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, on May 2, 1988.
2. Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as Prophet. Mahommed :Islam," in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, pp. 47-77.

3. Reference here is to The Qur'an, Surah 53: An-Najm: 42; the translation is by Muhammad Iqbal, The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, p. 57 (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf; 1971).
4. . For instance, see Surah 15: Al-Hijr: 85; Surah 16: An-Nahl: 3; Surah 44: Ad-Dukhan: 39; Surah 45: Al-Jathiyah: 22; Surah 46: Al-Ahqaf: 3.
5. www.islamicfeminism.org

