

## Islamic Feminism: Gender Equity by Deconstructing Tradition

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### Abstract

Modernity coupled with Industrial Revolution and raising secularism paved way for a new ensemble of social unity. Individualism that penetrated the core of modern society brought many changes to the application of many pre-modern values like justice, equality and liberty. From such passage from pre-modern to modern world we witness the birth of one of the most influential movements in modern world on the level of social dynamics; Feminism. Feminism started its treatment of women under the banner of secular feminism but soon it died out because of Muslim society's civilizational context, which was unlike Christianity. Secular feminism feed a catalyst to the contemporary Muslim woman thinkers who later on came up with the more intellectual and academic approach to secular feminism called; Islamic Feminism. Islamic Feminism maidenly raised the question on masculine interpretations of Sacred Text. Inclusion of feminine voice in reinterpretation of the Holy Scripture rendered the underlined meanings of gender which launched a potent discourse on gender equity within the Islamic framework in traditional society. The purpose of this paper is to present the contribution of Islamic Feminism in the exploration of lost reality of Islamic egalitarian society by conducting content analysis.

Keywords: *Sacred Text, Reinterpretation, Islamic Feminism, Egalitarianism, Tradition, Modernity.*

### 1. Introduction

The intellectual creed of Europe after Renaissance was looking at a very alien world which was left to them static and unmoved since ancient times. It was a time of new beginning. The canvas of human existence was finally within the reach and the brush was, no doubt, eager to paint anew. Such opportunity brought to man by Renaissance to enact its dream of humanism was something that history seldom finds a record about. Like a blind opening his eyes, cured, on a world for the first time, the European intellectual creed sets out to lay the foundation of Modernism. The Enlightenment project was realized in many social variations and thematic momentums and among such momentums is the grand discourse of Feminism. Originated from European horizons to, first, accommodate the demands and, second, to provide structural unity to the voice of woman. Started from political canvas and reinvented to penetrate in social, economic and philosophical discourses. It moved from the demand of equality to emancipation

and finally into a complete liberation from gender definitions. From earlier social reformists like Jeremy Bentham to Post-Modernist feminists like Julia Kristeva we have the inception and conception of Feminism.

It is now the time that we can intercept the transition between feminism in Islamic feminism in the Muslim world. It is noted that in some countries Islamic feminism rose to counter the threat of secular Feminism while in other Muslim countries it just evolved into Islamic feminism but mainly Islamic Feminism owes its ideology to secular feminism. The distinct identity of every writer of Islamic feminism carries this identity of their locality; reaction to or evolution from secular feminism.

Islamic Feminism rose up to challenge, first, the Christian modality of Western secular feminism and, second, to devise how Muslim world could accommodate the demands of women in reference to Islam in the Modern epoch.

We should also take it into account that Islamic feminists clearly criticized Islamic tradition and not Islam itself. They contend the interpretation of Quran not the Quran itself. They criticize the interpretation of Islamic society under the prophet not the society itself. They, mainly, base their case that Islam is open to demands of Feminism but the Islamic tradition, which is a victim of sexism of interpreters, is rich with sexist ideologies and subsequently turned into a more patriarchal denomination. This Islamic tradition comprises of interpretation of Quran by men, the status and interpretation of the sayings of the Holy Prophet and the role of Islamic jurisprudence which was strictly a male dominion. Islamic feminist writers, like Fatima Mernissi, Margot Badran, Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas, Asra Q. Nomani, Amina Wadud, and Ziba Mir-Hosseini collectively, believe that religious text is open for interpretation but women, all through the history, were never given a chance to interpret the holy text and so were subject to male interpretation which was largely discriminating. For them a true discourse of Feminism in Islam would require a view of women on holy text so that it could be cleansed of male sexism which was the norm of civilization all through the ages.

## 2. Research Methodology

In this paper we are going to study the birth of Islamic Feminism within the frames of Muslim world and importantly contribution of Islamic tradition in the making of woman stature from the platform of Islam. For this purpose, thematic and content analysis is conducted on the following books of Islamic feminists:

Leila Ahmed's book i) *Women and gender in Islam: Roots of a modern debate*, Asma Barlas's book ii) *Believing women in Islam: Unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an*, Fatima Mernissi's book iii) *Hidden from history: Forgotten queens of Islam*, iv) *Beyond the veil: Male-Female dynamics in modern muslim society*, v) *Women's rebellion & Islamic memory*, vi) *The veil And the male elite: A feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam*, Ziba Mir-Hosseini's book vii) *Islam and gender: The religious debate in contemporary era*, Asra Q. Nomani's book viii) *Standing alone in Mecca: An American women's struggle for the soul of Islam*, Amina Wadud's book ix) *Qur'an and woman: Rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*, x) *Inside the Gender Jihad: women's Reform in Islam*.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1 Fatima Mernissi

Fatima Mernissi does not only focus on the traditional development of Islamic civilization but also connected to the sayings of the Holy Prophet and Qur'anic interpretations. She dissects sexual, mental, financial, political and social conceptions that the Islamic tradition upheld in her themes and we will treat it such to understand her thematic structure.

In her book '*Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*' she begins to evaluate the socio-religious importance of veiled woman in Islamic tradition. Women, in modern society, can finally let go of the veil but men makes it not easy for them and continue to struggle against the women who want to enjoy a freedom of choice over their own body.

She criticizes fundamentalism and its modern reincarnation heavily in Arab world as seen here:

“I think that one of the major trends affecting women is the wave of fundamentalist conservatism” (Mernissi, 1987, p. viii).

She questions the legitimacy of tradition's persistence hindering the way for more fruitful present:

“The return to the past, the return to tradition that men are demanding, is a means of putting things “back in order”. An order that no longer satisfies everybody, especially not the women who have never accepted it” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 24).

She traces out the historical background and foundation of the discrimination that permeated into Islamic tradition. For this she analyzes the role of Abu-Hurayra and how he

tussled with Hazrat Aisha who challenged him on many misogynist and discriminating sayings of the Holy Prophet. Hazrat Aisha believed that Abu-Hurayra recounted false or, in some cases, misleading sayings of the Holy Prophet. She shows us how they fought on these grounds here:

“It is not surprising that Abu Hurayra attacked ‘A’isha in return for that. She might be “The Mother of the Believers” and “The Lover of the Lover of God,” but she contradicted him too often. One day he lost patience and defended himself against an attack by ‘A’isha. When she said to him, “Abu Hurayra, you relate Hadith that you never heard,” he replied sharply, “O Mother, all I did was collect Hadith, while you were too busy with kohl and your mirror” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 72).

In the beginning of her book *Women’s Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, she outlines the magical character of women which coincide with the mystic discourse. They were cut off from God and his Word and were subjected to mere cultural norms born from religion. They were close to the Saints and communicated all their religious potential through their intermediary. She comments on such thinking this way;

“I never ask for anything. When I want something I’ll ask God directly, but not the saint—he’s a human being like I am” (Mernissi, 1996, p. 23).

She thinks that the possibility of women’s exclusion from political domain lies within the premises which are needed for one to become a caliph. When the most sacred and political position within Islamic hierarchy is denied to women then the doors to more marginalization opens up. She connects the political stature of woman with her history of discrimination:

“The secret of the exclusion of women lies in the criteria of eligibility to be a caliph” (Mernissi, 1994, p. 31).

### 3.2 *Leila Ahmed*

Leila Ahmed’s thematic discourses, mainly put forward in her book *Woman and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* outlines a comparison how Islam in the time of Holy Prophet and Islam after that, in the form of religious tradition, differ in the treatment of woman. Her work contrasted both of them to inquire how this subjugation of women came into being in Islamic tradition when it holds no ground in Islam itself.

The Greek society renowned for her treatment of women as sub-species came under strict criticism by almost each of western feminist’s writers and as the Islamic tradition owed many of its scholarly discourses to the Greek society it was natural that Islamic feminists would

outline its influence on Islamic tradition in respect to women. She gives us the ancient Greek perspective here:

“According to Aristotle, the purpose of marriage and the function of woman was to provide heirs” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 28).

The prevailing Islamic tradition, all through the history, is rich with gender discrimination. Islamic institutions departed from its Islamic crux and handled women as being a minority under the rule of more social majority of men. She comments on this presenting the findings from the book *‘The Jews of Islam’* by Bernard Lewis in these lines:

“In establishment Islamic thought, women, like minorities, are defined as different from and, in their legal rights, lesser than, Muslim men. Unlike non-Muslim men, who might join the master class by converting, women’s differentness and inferiority within this system are immutable” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 7).

This genuine tradition of women’s own history finds no voice elsewhere in Islamic tradition and finally when they were accounted that too was from alien elements from the Islamic tradition. Leila Ahmed shows this here:

“All the Arabic source material I refer to was written by men, and none of it was written with the object of describing women or their lives; although such works as the biographical dictionary of the learned women of his age by the Cairene al-Sakhawi (1428-97) did aim at least to note their teachers and their scholarly achievements, as well as note such information as who they married. There are no works written by women from this period or these societies (Ahmed, 1992, p. 104).

### 3.3 Asra Q. Nomani

Asra Q. Nomani does provide us with a genuine critique on Islamic tradition in her book *‘Standing Alone in Mecca: An American Woman’s Struggle for the Soul of Islam’*, she also gives us a more social account of life of a woman in a country like America where democracy safeguards basic human freedom. The second reason is that she gives us more personal accounts of her life than dealing with a public objectivity.

It is noteworthy that she organized the first woman-led congregational prayer in 2005 in America which seems to have never happened before in Islamic tradition.

She argued;

“Some men don’t want to relinquish the power and control it has taken them centuries to accumulate. Some men think it is their God-given right to express this power and

control over women. But the prophet gave women rights that men deny them today, and it is our Islamic duty to reclaim those rights so that we can be stronger citizens of the world” (Nomani, 2005, p. 271).

Further she added:

“Men set rules and laws that defined women’s reproductive rights, women’s sexual rights, and, in a way that had proven deadly just the year before, women’s right to free movement. To me, these restrictions not only defied internationally accepted standards for simple human rights and decency but also violated important tenets and traditions established at the time of the prophet Muhammad. So many rules are imposed upon us in puritanical societies as absolute laws of God when they are simply controls instituted by men” (Nomani, 2005, p. 75).

### 3.4 *Amina Wadud*

Amina Wadud challenges the position of orthodox Islamic tradition on numerous gender related social and religious constructs and seek their authenticity in Quran itself.

Being an Islamic feminist is already controversial in Islamic societies and on top of that she gave a sermon before the Friday prayer in Africa in 1995 which made her more controversial. When Asra Q. Nomani arranged for the first woman-led Friday prayer in America, it was Amina Wadud who led that prayer and sparked controversy in the whole Muslim world.

Aside from that we will be going to find her thematic structure in her book *‘Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective’* (1999) where she provides us material for her methodology to interpret Quran.

Amina Wadud begins the presentation of her methodology and criticism on existing methodologies on interpretation of Quran concerning the errors resulted from the subjectivity of the interpreters. Sometimes this subjectivity is necessary for cultural adherence and sometimes it just adhere the religion to culture itself. She comments:

“However, what concerns me most about ‘traditional’ *tafsir* is that they were exclusively written by males. This means that men and men’s experiences were included and women and women’s experiences were either excluded or interpreted through the male vision, perspective, desire, or needs of woman” (p. 2).

Most of the time Quran continues its genderless approach which shows that for God every human being is equally a human being as any other and biological or social discrimination is irrelevant unless it is made relevant. She concludes:

“For the most part, the Qur’anic consideration of woman on earth centers on her relationship to the group, i.e. as a member of a social system. However, it is also important to understand how the Qur’an focuses on woman as an individual because the Qur’an treats the individual, whether male or female, in exact the same manner: that is, whatever the Qur’an says about the relationship between Allah and the individual is not in gender terms. With regard to spirituality there are no rights of woman distinct from rights of man” (p. 34).

In her book *‘Inside the Gender Jihad: women’s Reform in Islam’* she proposes to restructure society as in more temporal variation of modernity according to the permanent pillars of Islam. This is shown here:

“The aim is not to deconstruct Islam, but to radically *reconstruct* the tradition from within; in particular, to incorporate on-going human intellectual developments, with a specific integration of *gender* as a category of thought (Wadud, 2007, p. 112).

### 3.5 Asma Barlas

Asma Barlas investigates the origins of such patriarchal tendencies and the subsequent interpretation of Quran which appears mainly as anti-woman. She shows, in her book *‘Believing Woman in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an’* (2004), that how such interpretation of Quran is incomplete and discriminating towards women because the male interpreters endeavored into this scholastic work with their own cultural gender bias and so given woman a weak position in Islamic tradition.

The Islamic tradition, in its pursuit of interpretation of Quran, gradually distanced itself from Quran’s claim of equality. Such distancing could be read as a historical transformation of Quran’s universalism into more particularization. She puts light on such loss in the following passage:

“By the third/ninth century, even Qur’anic exegesis showed that the egalitarianism once associated with the Qur’an had lost its “subversive connotation.” (p. 83).

And from there on Islamic societies began the subjugation of women from active social dimension and reinstated the male superiority which she shows us here:

“The “tradition of historicizing women as active, full participants in the making of culture” would come to be replaced by a “memory in which women have no right to equality”. Indeed, over the centuries, women would be marginalized not only in memory but also in fact within states and religious communities” (p. 86).

### 3.6 Ziba Mir-Hosseini

Mir-Hosseini (2000) believes that there is no major conflict between Feminism and Islam and Feminism could serve as a gender perspective to approach the teaching of Islam. This would give way to more social, political and economic ideologies that would serve Muslim women while protecting them. Such freedom of interpretation is something alien to Islamic tradition but not to Islam which stands on strong egalitarian base. Shariah (Islamic Law) is more rooted in tradition than in Islam itself and in different cultural and social contexts it remained changeable but gradually such elasticity of Islamic law was gone from the laws that concern women. Her arguments can be seen in the following passage:

“Finally, I argue that Islam and feminism are not incompatible. Feminist readings of the shari’a are not only possible today but even inevitable when Islam is no longer an oppositional discourse in national politics but the official ideology. This is so because once the custodians of the shari’a are in power and able to legislate, they have to deal with the contradiction between their political agenda and their rhetoric: they must both uphold the family, restoring women to their “true and high” status in Islam, and at the same time retain the patriarchal mandates of shari’a legal rules. This tension has always been inherent in the practice of the shari’a, but when the shari’a becomes part of the apparatus of a modern nation state, its custodians may have to accommodate, even seek, novel interpretations. This opens room for change on a scale that has no precedent in Islamic history” (p. 7).

## 4. Conclusion

How tactfully enlightenment provided an outlet to the pressure of western woman whose liberation movement subsequently became the global voice in multiple endemic locations and Modernity’s contemporary tool of globalization facilitated the Feminism to take a step forward. After the formal inauguration of Islamic Feminism in Muslim geographies a fundamental impediment in its way of nourishment was tradition and the stern backlash of its proponents. Islamic feminists argued through their rigorous thematic literature and profound study of Primary Religious sources that Islamic Tradition is the base of gender discrimination and they devised a methodology to reread and reinterpret the sacred text and traced out the multiple realities and alternate truths. Their endeavor showcased the underlined meanings of God’s words to the Muslim traditional creed and showed how solo masculine interpretations, misogynic historical and political developments exclude the woman from mainstream Religious/Islamic discourse. Islamic feminists make clear distinction between Islam and Islamic tradition and criticize the Islamic tradition with their interpretation of Islam. Islamic



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feminists are striving for an egalitarian society which is the spirit of Quran and message of Prophet which is only possible by revisiting the tradition in respect of its treatment with woman throughout the fourteen centuries of human history.

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