

Islamic Feminist Discourse: Origins and Development in the Muslim World*

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Abstract: *This paper traces the origins of the feminist discourse in the West and the different strands of this discourse so as to understand better the feminist debates and the root of Islamic feminist discourse within the feminist movements generally. It concludes that the concept of feminism, being a modern concept which has developed through different phases in the Western part of the world, like all isms in the modern world, the values it came to be associated with – especially in its radical form – is an antithesis of what Islam stands for and is thus not acceptable to many Muslims. However, Muslim scholars and many Muslim women have presented this ideology in an Islamic form and tried to use the same idea to fight for the emancipation of women while qualifying their feminism with Islam.*

Introduction

At present some Muslim women have formed movements in many Muslim countries to champion and protect their rights which they believe is being abused on a daily basis by some Muslim men contrary to the teachings of the Qur'an and hadith. These Muslim women believe that this situation is due primarily to the interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith patriarchally by Muslim men, thus, they have resorted to reinterpreting the Qur'an and hadith, especially on women issues, through a feminist perspective in order to show that it is the men who have wrongly interpreted the holy book and it is not the case that the holy book is biased against women and also to use this to fight for their God given rights as Muslim women who are equal in all respects with their male counterpart in the religion of Islam. This paper will trace the genesis of the feminist discourse in the West and the different strands of this discourse so as to understand better the feminist debates and the root of the Islamic feminist movements so that by so doing, we shall know how and where to place the Islamic feminist discourse within the feminist movements generally.

Origins of the Feminist Discourse in the West

Like all isms in the modern world, feminism is a brain child of the Enlightenment thought or humanism because its root could be traced to the Enlightenment period in the modern Western nations.

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In the Enlightenment period, as the philosophers – Enlightenment thinkers – were fighting for socio-political reforms at all fronts and severely criticizing the Church and the state with the aim of wresting themselves and the society free from all accepted traditions, authorities and religious dogmas, the women who organized the salons where these men meet to discuss their ideas were left out of the discourse of the time and they still continued to be viewed in the same way that they were viewed in the traditional society which the philosophers are against and seek to supplant. In fact, thinkers like Immanuel Kant explicitly states that women can and should ‘feel’ only and not ‘think’ like men, because their “philosophy is not to reason, but to sense” (Perry & et al., 2000).

Goodman (1998) pointed out that Rousseau on his part holds that “woman’s nature, different from that of man, suited her exclusively to the sphere of the household, where as wife and mother she achieved respect and a new dignity.” As for Antoine-Leonard Thomas, he holds that although women have contributed to society and civilization, but, he says, whatever accomplishments they have achieved is as a result of a different virtues and vices, strength and weakness.

Goodman (1998) identified two major views that shaped the way thinkers approached the gender relation issue or the woman question in the Enlightenment. While some adopt the Cartesian approach of Rene Descartes who posits that human identity rest in the mind and its ability to think or reason and not in the body as such; others accepted the Platonic view of complementarity of the sexes in the functioning of the society and both being equally incomplete without the other.

The Cartesian thinkers, who follow the Rene Descartes epistemological approach of questioning all received ideas and subjecting them to methodological doubt in order to build anew a sure and sound foundation for knowledge, applied the same method to the gender issue and the implication of this approach to the woman question are: “(1) reason is defined as common sense, as a capacity common to all human beings; and (2) reason operates independently of the body – the human being is constituted by reason alone” (as Descartes famously asserts “I think, therefore I am”). Therefore, based on this, they assert, it is irrelevant whether the body which thinks is that of a man or a woman since this has nothing to do with the thinking process and as such, man and woman are equal as their equality is grounded in their ability to think and the commonality of their reasoning faculty. Thus, it follows that, according to Francois Poulain, the historical subjugation and oppression of women was the result of the subjugation of reason to force and, as such, the triumph of reason over force in the new dispensation would mean the beginning of equality between the sexes.

The Neo-Platonist thinkers, who accepted the complementarity view of Plato, instead of focusing on the common ability of men and women to reason, on the other hand, point to the complementary roles of male and female in the society and their different contributions to the progress of civilization in the society and the historical process. Likewise, they gave equal value to these roles and contributions of men

and women without seeing one as being better than or above the other. However, they supported the assertion of Poulain concerning the oppression of women. In their opinion, the oppression of women was due to the application of brute force by men in the beginning, but with the passage of time, the civilizing force of women increased and this act as a counter weight to the male brutality. Therefore, they say, the triumph of reason over force will belie men's brutality and lead to a peaceful and harmonious co-existence between the sexes in a society in which no one will lord it over the other and in which each plays its own role based on its particular nature.

Nevertheless, the complementary opinion was widely accepted by many thinkers while the Cartesian opinion remains at the periphery because many of the philosophers and many women in the society still see their role as wife and mother to be very important and innate to the feminine nature.

But on another hand, some female voices, like that of Madame Louise d'Épinay, were against this depiction of the female sex as a non-thinking being by scholars such as Rousseau and Antoine-Leonard Thomas and the relegation of their role to the sphere of nature and family. However, their voices were drowned by that of the majority who are satisfied with the new found role of women as being complementary with men – a view which did not seek to overturn or threaten the “traditional relations between the sexes and the social, political, and cultural institutions that had been built on them.” It was not until Mary Wollstonecraft came across the work of Rousseau that she adequately defended the right of women to equal education and equal rights with men. In her work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft contended that if women are not given equal education and opportunity as their male counterpart, then the females will not be well prepared to become the companion of men and this may stall the progress of knowledge and virtue as she will not be conversant with the truth which is constant and as such must be common to all (Goodman, 1998). Mary Wollstonecraft thus came to be regarded as the first liberal feminist who fought for the rights of women for equal opportunities with their male counterpart.

In the Enlightenment, the issue that dominated the woman discourse was the rights of women in the society and in the marriage institution. Since the complementary view has gained ground in the thought of the philosophers, the discourse centres on according women the respect that they deserve as a different sex and as wife and mother whose roles in the society are equally important as that of the men. Therefore, in the different European nations, women were majorly fighting for recognition right as citizens and also discussing their right to economic independence from the men through social welfare program by the states which they believe should pay them salary for their mothering role and accord their roles in the society the same respect that is accorded to that of the male. However, the success that they were able to achieve differs from nation to nation just as the discourse and the challenges that they faced differ from nation to nation too. (Threlfall, 1996; Offen, 1998)

During this early period of feminism, especially in the nineteenth century, there are two major strands of feminist thought, i.e. relational feminism and individualist feminism. (Offen, 1998) While relational feminism does not care much about the individual rights of women because it considered the family to be the primary socio-political unit since it still view the notion of a community to be very important in the society; it, nonetheless, focuses on the emancipation of women in the complementary sense and in an interdependent relationship with their male counterpart and also emphasises “women’s distinctive nature and contributions to society as a sex, not only as mothers but also as beings with a capacity for motherliness, accommodation, for peace keeping, whether or not they bore children.”

Individualist feminism, on the other hand, emphasises the rights of the woman as an individual in the philosophical sense. It demands for women’s natural right to freedom from all social restraint and equal opportunity to personal development, self-determination and autonomy which it believes are essential for the growth and development of human potentials. This view tends to ignore and sidestep socio-political relationship of women to men, children and the society at large. And critics say this position implies women complete independence from their responsibilities to men and children and even complained that it is very hostile towards any relationships or responsibilities that may impinge on a woman’s personal freedom. (Offen, 1998)

It is observed that this first wave feminism is directed primarily at white middle class women and their agitation during this period is for educational, employment and social equality rights for women while recognising their difference as the other sex. This period is particularly noted for its agitation of “equality in difference” and the suffragette movement. (Woodlock, 2009; Offen, 1998)

After the second world-war, the feminist discourse changed significantly as the new feminist thought came to directly challenge the traditional notions concerning women in the society and the patriarchal social set-up that permeates most societies. The main objective of this new discourse is to supplant or overthrow the patriarchal society and replace it with an egalitarian one in which men and women are equal, in all sense of the word, and in which differences are eliminated as irrelevant to the women question. This can be seen as the coming to fore of the Cartesian thinkers’ position on women.

This feminist thought of the sixties onward, which permeates the United States and Europe, is not monolithic and it cuts across ideological boundaries depending on the thinker and his/her ideological position politically. This new phase usually called the second wave feminism, which has many strands of thought that are radical in nature, and they reject the second-fiddle role and nature ascribed to women generally. They also reject the complementary thought of seeing women as mothers and wives and the division of labour along sexual lines which places women in the home and family. They want to see women playing the same roles as their male counterparts and particularly seek to overthrow the

patriarchal societies in which men oppress women and put an end to all forms of oppression and division of the sexes by their physiological make up. (Threlfall, 1996)

Kausar (2005) identifies seven strands of feminist thoughts that dominated the feminist discourse in the second wave of feminism, which span through the sixties, seventies and eighties, and they are: Liberal Feminism, Socialist Feminism, Marxist Feminism, and Existentialist Feminism, Radical Feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism and Gender Feminism or Neo-Marxist Feminism. With the coming of second wave feminism into the feminist discourse, feminism takes a new course from what it used to be in the first wave and, according to Rachel Woodlock (2009), “it is from this period that we get the derogatory stereotype of a feminist as a ‘hairy arm pitted, butch, male-hating lesbian’.” In fact, she says, as a result of this new feminist discourses and the new turn that it took, the eighties become a period of serious backlash against feminism. (Woodlock, 2009; Hirsche and Keller, 1990) This period also saw a new twist in the feminist group as they become pitched against one another arising from the criticism of that same period and the fact that some feminist felt that this new second wave discourse does not represent them or all women in the world. (Bulbeck, 1998; Morgan, 2006) Thus this gave rise to the third wave of feminism to which we now turn (Woodlock, 2009).

Third wave feminism came to the fore around the nineties as women, who did not see the activism of the second wave of feminism as representing them but yet wanted to fight for gender equality and improve conditions for women at all levels of societies, start to voice their concerns too and the need for society not to view them from the stereotype of the second wave of feminism – which in the opinion of many has become derogatory and combatant and in fact does not represent the stand of most women (Woodlock, 2009; Sommers, 1994). This third wave feminism consists of women from the groups which have been down played and marginalized by first and second wave feminism, such as women in the third world nations whose experience and notion of equality differ from that of the white middle class women in Europe and America, indigenous women in the developed nations, black and colored women (non-white women) and women from non-Christian religions etc. (Woodlock, 2009; Bulbeck, 1998) For Woodlock (2009), it is within this third wave of feminism that Islamic feminism falls into, and this is what we are going to explore in further.

The Islamic Feminist Discourse in the Muslim World

Islam as a religion came as a revolution in the Arabian Peninsula against all forms of immoralities, exploitations and oppressions. One of the very first groups of people that the Islamic religion emancipated from oppression and cruelty in the hands of men and the society was the female sex who was so hated that once her birth is announced, the husband became unhappy and, in extreme cases, the new baby is killed or buried alive. (Maudoodi, 1983)

However, with the advent of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) put an end to all these discriminatory and oppressive practices by forbidding female infanticide, granting her the right of inheritance, protecting her honor, giving her the right to choose who to marry and in the advent of her husband's death, she has the right to reject her being inherited by any of his relatives and she can choose to marry outside his family whoever she wants to marry. (Haykal, 1976; Bashier, 1978) And to give weight to these revolutions in improving the status of women, they were all sanctioned by divine revelation (2: 228-237, 240-242; 4: 7, 11-14, 19, 176; 6: 151; 17: 31; 60: 12; etc) and they marked the first step in the emancipation of women in the new Islamic society.

However, in the pre-modern period, a remarkable woman who fought for the emancipation and rights of fellow women and is worth mentioning here is Nana Asma'u Fodio, the daughter of Shehu Usman Dan Fodio the jihadist who established the Sokoto caliphate in Nigeria, West Africa. She fought for the equality of men and women and eventually lost her life in the process as she was strangled to death in 1852. (Woodlock, 2009) Nonetheless, it needed to be said that even during this period, when the female voices had become silenced with few exceptions as given above, these women see themselves as advocates of the female rights within the Islamic religion and not as feminists in the many sense that the word is understood today.

As the Muslim world entered the modern period, however, the fight for the rights of the female Muslims takes a new turn as Muslim women, following the pattern of the modern Western world, start to get together and form associations and movements in order to ask for their rights from the society and particularly from their spouses, fathers, brothers and uncles. In 1899, the Egyptian jurist, Qasim Amin, who is considered as the father of Egyptian feminism, authored a book entitled *Women's Liberation (Tahrir al-Mar'a)* in which he compared the rights of the Egyptian – nay Muslim women – with that of the advanced world, specifically France, and called for a new orientation in the treatment of women in the Muslim society. He specifically condemned polygyny or polygamy, veiling and women's confinement and segregation as un-Islamic and contrary to the true spirit of the Islamic religion. (Kassim, 2007)

In Lebanon, Zaynab al-Fawwaz was putting forth feminist demands and arguments within the Islamic framework, values and norms. (Kassim, 2007) In fact, by 1928 another Lebanese woman Nazira Zayn al-Din has taken up the challenge by comparing the progress of the veiling women in the Muslim nations and their non-veiling counterparts in the advanced nations in her book entitled *Unveiling and Veiling*. She points out that these non-veiling women are progressive, educated and responsible compare to the veiling illiterates and non-progressive veiling Muslim woman who is kept under confinement and segregated in the society. (Kassim, 2007; Zayn al-Din, 1998a, 1998b)

But, as Ruth Roded (2008) observed, the coming together of Muslim women to form a movement can be said to start *pari passu* with the fight for independence from the colonial masters especially in

Egypt around 1919 when the Nationalist Movement was established as a political organization for women who are participating in the fight for independent from the British. Huda al-Sha‘arawi, an upper class politically active woman, was made the leader of this women nationalist movement and in the year 1923 she founded another women association known as Egyptian Feminist Union to cater for the rights of the Egyptian women. In the same year, Huda al-Sha‘arawi led a delegation of Egyptian women to a meeting of the International Union of Women in Rome and, upon her return from the meeting, she publically unveil signaling a new era in the fight for women’s right in the garb of feminism and feminist movements. (Roded, 2008) Later Duriya Shafiq came into the picture by founding another women’s organization in Egypt called Bint al-Nil (Daughters of the Nile) in 1948 which has a wider and broader goals that includes “combating female illiteracy and acquiring political rights for women.” (Roded, 2008) Like the Feminist Union of Huda al-Sha‘arawi before it, the organization was also dedicated to the nationalist struggle as it provides “paramilitary training for women to participate in the popular movement against the British.” (Roded, 2008)

Another modern Muslim feminist organization was that founded by Nawal Sa‘dawi called Arab Women Solidarity Association whose membership cut across Arab women living both in Muslim countries and abroad. Nawal Sa‘dawi (2007), who is both an activist and an author, says the founding of this association was necessary because “a group of free thinking Arab women became increasingly aware of and alarmed by the forms of subjugation suffered by Arab women and Arab peoples in general.” The goals and objectives of the association include: 1) making “women’s active participation in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the Arab” society a possibility and “a prerequisite for the exercise of democracy.” 2) The institution of social justice in the family and in the society at large. 3) The abolishment of all discriminations on the basis of sex. 4) To improve the work and general quality of life of the Arab women etc. (Sa‘dawi, 2007)

Apart from these feminist movements mentioned above, there are many other feminist women in different parts of the Arab and Muslim world who, on individual basis, champions the cause of the Muslim women and the protection of their rights as equal members of the society as their male counterparts. (Toubia, 1988; Sabbagh, 1996; Yamani, 1996; Cooke, 2001) However, as Bouthaina Sha‘aban (1996) observed, many of these women were only able to project their thought through writing in journals and papers and were thus writers and journalist at the same time because the “clear dividing line between a journalist and a writer in the West has always been blurred in the Arab world.”

From the 1980s onward, a major progress in the feminist discourse in Islam happens which witnesses a legion of writings by Muslim women writers, especially in the academics, who wants to improve on the gains of the Muslim feminist movement, and therefore took a step forward by insisting on doing a reinterpretation of some of the Qur’anic verses that have led to the oppression and downgrading

of the Muslim woman as second class human beings as a result of their interpretations from the patriarchal point of view by Muslim men exegetes. In this regard, many of these Muslim women scholars and writers such as Fatima Mernissi (1991, 1992, 1994), Amina Wadud (1999), Assia Djebar (1985, 1991, 1992, 1995; Cook, 2001), Asma Barlas (2004; Kassim, 2007), Riffat Hassan (1999; Wikipedia), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1996) etc. generally hold that it is not the Holy Book that is biased against women rather it is the case that Muslim men, being dominant in the exegesis of the Qur'an, view many of the verses that address women from a patriarchal perspective and thus misinterpret them or intentionally interpreted them in a way which suits their patriarchal society. Thus, since women have now come of age, there is a need to reinterpret these verses from a feminist perspective. Likewise the same thing goes to the Sunnah or hadith of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), especially those that have portrayed women as been incapable of governing the society and as inherently evil.

However, these Islamic feminists are not the only one fighting for the rights of women in the Muslim society in modern and post-modern time and their position is not the only position on this issue of Islamic feminism. In fact, if one is to use the “insider-outsider dichotomy” in feminist discourse, in another sense within the Islamic feminist discourse, all the above could be considered as the “Islamic outsider approach” – that is those who seek to change the system totally in order to conform to their point of view. But it should be noted that the change they envisage is not one that will lead to the abandonment of the Islamic religion, society and family as in the second wave feminism, hence our use of Islamic in qualifying the word outsider.

The “Islamic insider approach” accepts the status quo and continues to work as Islamists in order to help women regain their rights. One could mention the Egyptian Islamist Zaynab al-Ghazali as a role model for others in the modern and post-modern time. Zaynab al-Ghazali, as Miriam Cooke (2001: 83-106) rightly observed may not be accepted by many Islamic feminist as a feminist in their mode of definition of what feminism is all about. This is so because she advocates a strict adherence to the scriptural norms, Qur'an and hadith, as interpreted and understood over time. She preaches the following of the standard moral conduct for women, modesty in all things, being good wife and mother, and proper care of the home which she considered to be the sphere of the women according to tradition. But, Cooke (2001) points out, she nonetheless is an Islamic feminist because she has inspired many Muslim women and written on the rights of the Muslim woman as an insider or as an Islamist who prefers to stay within the confines of the accepted norms or tradition to claim the rights of women.

Many other women have followed the footstep of Zaynab al-Ghazali and they are making considerable impact both on their society and in the international circle. Their demands are not to re-read and re-interpret the holy text in a feminist perspective and neither have they rejected the hadith or any of the Islamic received heritages; rather they have accepted the age old norms and tradition of the Islamic

religion and through this are demanding their God given rights within this tradition and social set-up. (Haddad and Smith, 1996; Cooke, 2001)

The feminism discourse is not monolithic and its diversity shows the diversity of the understanding of the Islamic religion among the Muslim female folk. While some are contented with what they have and the age old traditional ways of the Muslim societies in which they live but recognized the fact that there are rights that they are entitled to and which they are fighting for within the system as it is. Others want a total overhaul of the age old traditional understanding of the holy text and the Muslim society. They want to challenge this understanding by reinterpreting and rereading the holy text through a feminist perspective which they believe will yield a new understanding which is quite and significantly different from the understanding that is known before now – especially concerning the status and rights of women in the religion of Islam.

However, it should be pointed out that added to this academic endeavor of reinterpretation, rereading and re-understanding the holy text, these women have gone further to project their thought by forming associations and networking through the internet in order to reach a larger segment of the female folks in their society. (Cooke, 2001) One of such associations is the Malaysian Sisters in Islam (SIS) to which we can further study.

Conclusion

The idea and concept of feminism is a modern one which starts during the enlightenment. While the fight of women like Mary Wollstonecraft was for the emancipation of women and the need to respect them as important members of the society and important partner in the family institution, this simply fight for respect and right to equality took many forms and dimensions after the first generation of these women who champion the cause of their fellow women.

The further development of the concept of female right culminates in feminism and the different strands that came to be associated with it – especially in the sixties – and which lead to people viewing it in negative light and as an aberration to the society, especially the family institution, as it even promotes things which could lead to the demise of the family unit as a whole.

However, turning to its Islamic form, it is apparent that the issue of the emancipation of women and the fight for women's right start long ago in the Islamic tradition from the time of the Prophet of Islam to be precise, but it was never called feminism or Islamic feminism as today's Muslim feminist advocates wants to be referred to – a term which many Muslims, like many others, see as negative and an aberration to the family institution.

It also brought to the fore that the concept of feminism, being a modern concept which has developed through different phases in the Western part of the world, like all isms in the modern world, the values it came to be associated with – especially in its radical form – is an antithesis of what Islam stands

for, and is thus not acceptable to many Muslims in the world today. Nonetheless, since Muslim scholars and many Muslim women have taken it upon themselves to present this ideology in an Islamic form and try to use the same idea to fight for the emancipation of women while qualifying their feminism with Islamic, and since this has become accepted as an inevitability in the academic circle, it becomes inevitable and in fact important to try to distinguish between those who want to continue claiming the rights of women within the Islamic tradition and those who want to reinterpret the tradition to suit their concept of woman's emancipation hence the resort to distinguishing these two groups as Islamic insiders and Islamic outsiders respectively.

The approach to fighting for the emancipation of women in Islam in the modern term of feminism has taken two dimensions, namely (1) the "Islamic outsiders," that is to say, those who are scholars and writers who have taken it upon themselves to write and research into the Islamic tradition with a view to reinterpreting this tradition from a feminist perspective and to correct what they feel are misinterpretation and misrepresentation of the tradition by the male folks who have dominated the field of exegesis in the Islamic religion. This group of Muslim women has also formed themselves into societies and association which render assistance to Muslim women and seeks to enlighten them on their rights and how to claim it, and (2) the "Islamic insiders," that is to say, those who are scholars and writers but have accepted the status quo and have decided to work within this status quo to fight for the emancipation of women without seeking to reinterpret the Islamic tradition. This second group is also involved in helping women to know their right and claim it within the accepted norms of the old-age Islamic tradition.

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