

Feminist Discourse and Islam: A Critique

Mohammad Kaosar Ahmed

(Corresponding Author)

Associate Professor, Department of English Language & Literature
International Islamic University Chittagong
147/i, Green Road, Dhaka - 1215, Bangladesh
E-mail: kaosarahmed@rocketmail.com

Sultana Jahan

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Northern University Bangladesh

(Received: 30-9-13 / Accepted: 6-10-13)

Abstract

There has been much misunderstanding, misinterpretation and mischief concerning feminism and Islam. Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all *insan* (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equity. This paper is an attempt to present the debates concerning its place in the Islamic discourse, and its various paradigms. I have tried to present the vexed questions that have emerged in various writings about Islamic Feminism, and the divergent responses given by eminent theoreticians. The aim of this paper is not to justify the paradigms of Islamic Feminism. I have just made a humble attempt to give a succinct overview of this new discourse that the contemporary Muslim Ummah is confronting.

Keywords: Feminism, Frontier, Islam, Hermeneutics.

Introduction:

For Muslim men and women and for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise, for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward. (Qur'an 33:35)

The concept "Islamic feminism" is of recent origins, used for the first time in the 1990s in the growing western literature on "women and Islam". However, Islamic intellectual encounters with feminism date back to the early twentieth century. Beginning with a historical sketch of Islamic responses to feminism, this article provides an outline of 'Islamic feminist' claims, and a critique of the theory.

A common feminist claim is that throughout history, women have always struggled to gain equality, respect, and the same rights as men. But the struggle was not an easy one because of

patriarchy, an ideology in which men are superior to women and have the right to rule women. This ideology has permeated the social structures of societies throughout the world and as a result, even in the new millennium, women are still struggling for rights that most men take for granted. The struggle was even more difficult for women of color because not only were they dealing with issues of sexism, but also racism. In order to fight patriarchy, feminism and feminist theory was born.

Feminism can be described as a philosophy in which women and their contributions are valued. It is based on social, political and economical equality for women. Feminists can be anyone in the population, men, women, girl or boys. It can also be described as a movement or a revolution that includes women and men who wish the world to be equal without boundaries. These boundaries or blockades are better known as discrimination and biases against gender, age, marital status and economic status. Everyone views the world with his or her own sense of gender and equality. Feminists view the world as being unequal. They wish to see the gender gap and the idea that men are superior to women decreased or even abolished. The term feminism was coined in France in the late 1880s by Hubertine Auclert, who used it in her journal, *La Citoyenne*, to criticize male predominance making claims for woman's rights and emancipation promised by the French Revolution (**Badran, 2011**). Since its initial appearance the term has been given many meanings and definitions, and it has been put to diverse uses and inspired many movements (**Offen, 1988**).

What is Islamic Feminism?

Islamic Feminism is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm. In reading *the Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, Muslim women bring their experience and questions as women. They point out that classical and also post-classical interpretation was based on men's experiences, male-centered questions, and the overall influence of the patriarchal societies in which they lived.

Margot Badran (2011) defines "Islamic feminism" stating that:

...a concise definition of Islamic feminism gleaned from the writings and work of Muslim protagonists as a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all *insan* (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life. It rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*) conceptualising a holistic *ummah* in which Quranic ideals are operative in all space.

This is an important distinction. "Islamic feminism" is not simply a feminism that is born from Muslim cultures, but one that engages Islamic theology through the text and canonical traditions. A distinctly "Islamic" feminism, at its core, draws on the Quranic concept of equality of all human beings, and insists on the application of this theology to everyday life. Islamic feminists are looking into the basic texts of Islam in context of real life situations for concrete ideas. Islamic feminists are using Islamic categories like the notion of *ijtihad*. The tools can be different like linguistic methodology or historiosizing. But the frame should be within Islam, not foreign. Islamic feminism is speaking for justice to women as Islam stands for. It's a tool to remind people what Islam is for women. The term Islamic feminism is an idea of awareness preaching that men and women have equal rights based on re-reading the *Quran*, re-examining the religious texts and telling people to practice it. Some people, who do this for the sake of women, don't call themselves Islamic feminists. Some have stereotypical

notions about feminism and others, however, believe that we need a term to develop a discourse and fight the cause.

The term 'Islamic Feminism' began to be visible in the 1990s in various global locations. Saudi Arabian scholar Mai Yamani used the term in her book *Feminism and Islam* in 1996 (Badran, 2011). Turkish scholars Yesmin Arat and Feride Acar in their articles, and Nilufer Gole in her book *The Forbidden Modern* used the term "Islamic Feminism" in the 1990s to describe a new feminist paradigm emerging in Turkey (Badran, 2011). Shamima Shaikh, a South African activist, used the term Islamic feminism in the 1990s. By mid-90s the term became known throughout the Muslim world.

The Rise of Islamophobia

One of the major allegations against first and second wave feminisms was their taking account only white, middle class and privileged perspectives of women. Though the mainstream feminism and feminist have tried to incorporate a lot of things to address those concerns, there are still huge gaps and concerns in terms of understand and making up for them. This is one of the main reasons, women of color, third world feminists, black feminists etc. doesn't recognize themselves with mainstream 'white' feminism. The issue is that mainstream feminism views everything from a single lens perspective. They view themselves to be white saviors who can move ahead and fix the situation of women around the world, even if it means lack of understanding and respect of others' culture, religion and identity.

The same trend has been witnessed by the rise of Islamophobia in West especially after the incident on September 11, 2001. Erroneously, white "Universalist" feminism tends to reproduce codes of oppression and Islamophobia when assuming the following fabricated images about Muslim women as the truth. First of all secular feminism assumes that Islam is the cause of the oppression of women, so the only way to salvation for females is the secularization their faith. Second, a continuing victimization of the "poor submissive Muslim" to which you have to save from submission to the barbarism of fanatical men, without an actual approach to Islamic thought, much less thinking of Muslim women, discarding prior level and the possibility of recognizing them as active persons able to explain themselves.

Third, a belief that is not possible for Muslim women to articulate a feminist discourse by themselves. This idea promoted by intellectuals such as Wassila Tamzali and repeated amongst many feminists who do nothing but deny the very existence of Islam, is nothing but a sweet trap of patriarchy to get some women to exclude others: deprive them of voice, the legitimate right to freedom of conscience, expression and ultimately usurping the right to be and existence.

Fourth, the idea that feminism doesn't have surnames. It is true that the ends must be shared and is even true because it is absolutely necessary to focus efforts toward a common goal. However, it is also essential to demonstrate the contexts from which the various feminisms are inserted into a larger work. Naming is to give existence and to give existence is to recognize. It is only fitting to name the work within a religious framework that attempts to deconstruct the patriarchal exegesis of the Qur'an which have been made in favor of Muslim women in particular and women in relation to spirituality in general.

The Debate

The term 'Islamic feminism' as well as its referent is subjects of controversy and disagreement and this debate has been done contextualizing Iran. Can there be such a thing as a feminism that is framed in Islamic terms? Is Islam compatible with feminism? Is it correct to describe as feminist or even as "Islamic feminist" those publishers, activists and scholars, including veiled women, whose work toward women's advancement and gender equality are

carried out within an Islamic discursive framework? And are those expatriate feminist scholars who report positively on “Islamic feminism” correct to promote the phenomenon? These are among the vexed questions that have emerged in various writings, and that been met by divergent responses (**Moghadam, 2002**).

Those involved in the debate on Islamic feminism form two opposing camps. On one side are those who explore the possibilities that exist within Islam concerning women’s interests. Chief among them are three feminist social scientists educated in Iran and the West, two of whom have deep roots in the Iranian left and the women’s movement. Afsaneh Najmabadi, educated in both the U.K. and the U.S., is a professor of women’s studies in New York; Nayereh Tohidi is a U.S.-trained professor of women’s studies in California; Ziba Mir-Hosseini is a Cambridge-educated social anthropologist based in London. In the 1970s and 1980s Tohidi and Najmabadi were active in the left-wing anti-Shah student movement and later in the anti-fundamentalist and feminist movements. Najmabadi is a founder of *Nimeye Digar*, a Persian-language feminist journal published in England. Tohidi has been to Iran several times in the 1990s, is in regular contact with women’s rights activists in Iran, and often publishes in the Iranian women’s press (**Moghadam, 2002**).

In the opposite camp are those who argue vehemently against the possibility that activists and scholars operating within an Islamic framework in Iran may be accurately described as “Islamic feminists”. Islamic feminists and their expatriate academic supporters, they argue, either consciously or unwittingly delegitimize secular trends and social forces. This camp maintains that the activities and goals of “Islamic feminism” are circumscribed and compromised; and they contend that there cannot be improvements in women’s status as long as the Islamic Republic is in place. This group similarly includes Western-educated feminist social scientists with deep roots in the left and in the women’s movement, including one man. Haideh Moghissi teaches women’s studies in Canada; Shahrzad Mojab holds a university administrative position in Canada; and Hammed Shahidian teaches sociology in the U.S. Shahidian is a prolific researcher whose writings have appeared in U.S. sociology journals; at least two have appeared in the women’s press in Iran. Interesting, despite their posturing as defenders of the secular left, Moghissi has written a book, and Shahidian an article, highly critical of the secular leftist organizations in Iran during the Revolution (**Moghadam, 2002**). In her SOAS talk, Najmabadi focused on the women’s magazine *Zanan* and the quarterly *Farzaneh*, both published in Tehran. *Zanan*, which was founded in 1992 by Shahla Sherkat, the former editor of the establishment women’s magazine *Zan-e Rouz*, had become by 1994 the major voice for reform in the status of women. In the magazine’s inaugural issue, Sherkat writes that “We believe that the key to the solution of women’s problems lies in four realms: religion, culture, law, and education. If the way is paved in these four principal domains then we can be hopeful of women’s development and society’s advancement” (**Moghadam, 2002**). Najmabadi described how articles in *Zanan* challenge orthodox Islamic teachings on the differential rights and responsibilities of women and men by claiming women’s right to equality. She explained that part of her enthusiasm for Islamic feminism, and especially for *Zanan*, lay in her belief that they have entered a common ground with secular feminists in their attempts to improve women’s legal status and social positions.

Writers in *Zanan*, well-versed in the Quran, have raised the issue of the right to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning, religious interpretation), and the right of women to reinterpret Islamic law. Writes Najmabadi: “At the center of *Zanan*’s revisionist approach is a radical decentering of the clergy from the domain of interpretation, and the placing of woman as interpreter and her needs as grounds for interpretation” (**Moghadam, 2002**). This challenges one of the foundational concepts of the Islamic Republic of Iran: deference to the rulership of the supreme jurist, or the *velayat-e faghih*. Another reason for Najmabadi’s celebration of Islamic feminism is her belief that it has opened up a new space for dialogue between Islamic women activists and reformers and secular feminists, thereby breaking down the old hostile divide between secular and religious thought.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini offers a similar analysis of the writings of *Zanan*. She has focused on new discourses on gender among Islamic theologians, the challenging of Islamic family laws by ordinary women, and the emergence of reform-minded Islamic feminists. Mir-Hosseini argues that an unpredicted outcome of the Islamic revolution in Iran has been to raise the nation's gender consciousness. "...[W]hatever concerns women – from their most private to their most public activities, from what they should wear and what they should study to whether and where they should work – are issues that have been openly debated and fought over by different factions, always in highly charged and emotional language" (Moghadam, 2002).

Nayereh Tohidi is well known in Iranian expatriate circles for her many Persian-language writings and lectures on politics and women, from her early days as a left activist to the present. Her articles in the 1980s tended to be very critical of the gender policies of Iran. During the 1990s, however, her writings shifted from an emphasis on the forms of gender oppression in Iran to the empowerment of Muslim women and the possibilities for reform within the Islamic system. She argues that women are able to renegotiate gender roles and codes, and find "a path of compromise and creative synthesis". She has explained how her visits to Iran during the 1990s, and in particular her interviews and observations, have compelled her to shift her focus from repression to resistance and empowerment. As she has recently pointed out, "secular feminists, democrats, and liberals have not been alone in contesting the state's ideology and politics on gender issues. Many proponents of Islam are playing an important role in the reformation of women's rights in an Islamic context" (Moghadam, 2002).

Tohidi opines that women in the Muslim world are fighting and strategizing against two sets of pressures, "one stemming from the internal patriarchal system and the other emitted by those forces seen as external, threatening people's national and cultural boundaries." She then proceeds to describe one of those strategies, "the recently growing phenomenon of 'Islamic feminism'." She describes this as a movement of women who "have maintained their religious beliefs while trying to promote egalitarian ethics of Islam by using the female-supportive verses of the Qur'an in their fight for women's rights, especially for women's access to education" (Moghadam, 2002). Echoing Mir-Hosseini, she notes that Islamic feminists undermine the clerical agenda both within and outside the Islamist framework in a number of ways:

by subtly circumventing the dictated rules (e.g., reappropriating the veil as a means to facilitate social presence rather than seclusion, or minimizing and diversifying the compulsory hijab and dress code into fashionable styles), engaging in a feminist *ijtehad*, emphasizing the egalitarian ethics of Islam, reinterpreting the Qur'an, and deconstructing Sharia-related rules in a women-friendly egalitarian fashion (e.g., in terms of birth control, personal status law, and family code to the extent of legalizing a demand for 'wages for housework' (Moghadam, 2002).

Tohidi warns that "secular feminists should differentiate between those Islamic women who are genuinely promoting women's rights and hence inclusionary in their politics from those who insist on fanatic or totalitarian Islam." And approvingly citing the feminist lawyer Mehrangiz Kar, she stresses that a "reformist or women-centered interpretation of religious laws should be considered not as an alternative to secular and democratic demands but as a component of more holistic social change." (Moghadam, 2002)

There is another side of the coin. Critics like Haideh Moghissi complain that "it has become fashionable to speak sympathetically and enthusiastically about the reformist activities of Muslim women, and to insist on their independence of thought. ... The message is that a new road has been opened up for women – Muslim and non-Muslim alike – to gain equal rights to men: a road based on feminist interpretations of Islamic sharia laws." Moghissi is critical of those "apologists of the Islamic government and uninformed observers" who attribute legal

changes in the Islamic Republic to “the enlightenment of conservative Islamists... .” At the same time, she does not claim that there have been no achievements by Islamic feminists in Iran. In fact, she refers to the opportunities afforded to Islamic women and to the accomplishments of the female political elite.

Moghissi claims that the term “Islamic feminist” has been used in “inaccurate” and “irresponsible” ways. Almost all Islamic and active women are designated Islamic feminist, she asserts, “even though their activities might not even fit the broadest definition of feminism” (**Moghadam, 2002**). Although she herself does not define feminism, Moghissi complains that the term encompasses members of the female political elite who believe in the Sharia and its prescribed gender rights and roles. The very term, she argues, and the emphasis on the achievements of those believing women who reinterpret the Quran, obscure the political, ideological, and religious differences among Iranian women and mask the valiant efforts of socialists, democrats, and feminists to work toward secularism. In her *Kankash* article, Moghissi singles out expatriate feminist authors, finds faults with their analyses, and brands them “neoconservatives”. In her book, she brands them “postmodernists” and “cultural relativists”. She writes: “Charmed by ‘difference’ and secure from the bitter fact of the fundamentalist regime, outsiders do them a disservice by clinging to the illusion of an Islamic path.”

Another critic Hamed Shahidian similarly argues that the politics of “Islamic feminism” is problematical, whether in Iran or elsewhere. The emphasis on the achievements of Islamic women, he writes, obscures the contributions of the Left and secularists in the face of continued Islamist repression in Iran. (Like Moghissi, however, Shahidian also has written sharp criticisms of the Left.) In one article he refers to a “deepening identity crisis” among secular Middle East feminists and approvingly quotes two Iranian left-wing feminists: “... some women have found the pull towards a full or partial reconciliation with Iranian-style fundamentalism stronger. A trend is now developing among some Iranian feminists ... to stand back and consider Islamic fundamentalism as opposed to stand up and fight against it” (**Moghadam, 2002**).

Shahidian is critical of attempts by Arab scholars such as Fatima Mernissi and Aziza Al-Hibri, and the Pakistan-born Rifat Hassan, to craft a feminist theology and reinterpretation of Islamic texts; these attempts are futile, he argues, given the strength of conservative, orthodox, traditional, and fundamentalist interpretations, laws, and institutions. He is especially critical of a growing trend in Middle East Women’s Studies wherein authors justify Muslim women’s veiling, domesticity, moral behavior, and adherence to Islamic precepts as signs of individual choice and identity. Even if we do not accept the notion of “false consciousness”, he asks, is it not incumbent upon scholars to situate and understand actors’ views and perceptions within the broader social, cultural, political, and economic context? This context is characterized by political repression, cultural conservatism, and the social control of women. Shahidian notes that Islamic feminists in Iran have been attentive to and influenced by Western feminism. But he is critical of them for not addressing sexual rights and veiling. Shahidian argues that Islamic feminism is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. While Shahidian has been especially critical of Tohidi, Shahrzad Mojab, like Moghissi, has focused on Najmabadi’s writings on Islamic feminism. In an article published in the Persian-language magazine *Arash*, Shahrzad Mojab criticizes Najmabadi for suggesting that *Zanan* is the new “democratic forum” and that it can help to feminize democracy. She disputes Najmabadi’s hopeful prognosis about the reinterpretation of Islamic texts and stresses that the ruling religious elite can dismiss, delegitimize, or prohibit radical or feminist reinterpretations (**Moghadam, 2002**). What Iran’s Islamic feminists have achieved is, at any rate, quite limited in content and consequence. Real change – real democratization – will come about outside of the religious framework, writes Mojab.

Major Islamic Feminist Paradigms

Despite the debate concerning Islamic feminist discourse, Muslim women have generated three major feminist paradigms which they have referred to as “Secular Feminism”, “Islamist Feminism” and “Muslim Feminism”.

Muslim feminism is not a new movement. In the beginning of the nineteenth century a few Islamic thinkers such as Sayyid Jamal-ad-Din Asadabadi (al-Afqani), Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Reza, and especially Qasim Amin and later “the Sister’s movement” in the Arabic countries tried to give a modern, liberal, reformist and feminist reinterpretation of Islam (Svensson, 1996). Theirs ideas never became dominating in any Islamic country. But during the 1980s and 1990s, a similar tendency to reinterpret Islam in a feminist context reappeared in several Islamic countries. Several secular feminist scholars (e.g., Fatima Merniss, Aziza Al-Hibri), who earlier criticized Islam, changed their position and tried to offer a feminist interpretation of Islam, making it quite difficult to place Muslim feminist into a “neat” category (Mernessi, 1993; Afshari, 1994)

Jan Hjärpe (1995), a Swedish scholar of theology separates Islamic feminism from Muslim feminism. He points out four feminist trends in Islamic countries: Atheist feminism, Secular feminism, Muslim feminism, Islamic feminism. According to Hjärpe Atheist feminism proposes that religion is anti-women. They believe that women’s movement cloud develop only by challenging the influence of religion in society. Secular feminism has a neutral view about religion. Secular feminists argue that the relationship between Islam and feminism depends first and foremost on whether liberal or patriarchal view of Islam is dominant in the society. They also hold that under a theocratic government or a religious movement woman’s emancipation is impossible. But they do not think that feminist movements necessarily have to attack religious beliefs.

Muslim feminism has liberal view of Islam and tries to adapt it to modern time. Muslims feminism argues that for a long time, our imagination about Islam was dominated by a patriarchal vision of Islam, but that this is not necessarily an authentic Islam. They argue that we should primarily focus on the teachings of the *Quran* because much shari’ah is a patriarchal reading of Islam.

However, we know that many *Quranic* verses (for example surah “Women”) legitimize gender inequality. Muslims feminists suggest that the *Quran* has two sorts of verses. One addresses the practical aspects of Muslim’s everyday life in the primitive Arabian society. Other verses concern morality and are normative. Unlike the former group of verses whose interpretation must change to reflect the present conditions of any society, the latter do not depend on time. But even in normative verses (especially in the surah “Women”) one can find patriarchal ideas. Muslim feminists’ answer is that if you believe that Good is just and the *Quran* is God’s word, it is not reasonable to consider that any verse could legitimize gender inequality. They argue that the *Quran* introduces many powerful female figures who played important roles in Islam and in the Prophet’s life, something that many of his successors did not favour (Svensson, 1996; Sajidzade, 1996). Muslim feminists point out that a liberal and feminist review of the *Quran* could contribute to the development of women’s emancipation in the Islamic country (Hassan, 1999).

Islamic feminism is clearly state feminism, or a part of fundamentalist and religious movement, and according to this trend, women’s identification with religious movements help Muslim women’s emancipation. For example, NESTA Ramazani, an Iranian scholar (1993), points out those women’s gathering in religious mourning, their presence in Friday prayers, and their participation in revolution and war eventually will lead to their emancipation. It is true that after the Islamic revolution in Iran, women have been more active in political and

social life. However, Islamic women are usually active in officially sanctioned arenas such as religious rituals and campaigns in support of the regime. In fact, women stand to lose the most after revolution in the Iran (**Darvishpour, 1993**).

As an ideology, policy, and social movement feminism generally have been connected to secularism. It is not surprising that many secular feminists found Islam to be a major opponent for the feminist movement. For example, Shahrzad Mojab and Haiddeh Moghissi, two Iranian feminists, belonging to the first type of feminist groups, argue that Islam is a challenge to feminism. Mojab argues that from an initial total rejection of Islam, feminism has moved towards a more sophisticated readjustment. She identifies five factors contributing to this development in feminism. First, a sizable modern middle-class of women has formed in the urban centers. The women are in professional occupations such as engineering, teaching, medicine, politics, business, etc. Second, women are elected as members of the parliament in at least a few Islamic countries. Third, the increasing participation of women in the expanding capitalist economy has contributed to further awareness of the inequalities between genders, both at work and at home. Fourth, knowledge about feminism and struggles in other countries is transmitted widely. Fifth, in many Islamic countries, women's organizations are active independent of the state. Under these conditions, Muslim leaders and ideologists must meet the challenge of the feminist movement. According to Mojab, Islamic feminism is not a serious challenge against patriarchy and it is still far from independence, secularism, and democracy. The Islamic feminist movement is more, a compromise with patriarchy than a realistic movement for the emancipation of women.

A problem with Mojab's argument is that she never asks herself if any theoretically feminist reinterpretation of Islam is possible. Another problem is that both Islamic feminists and atheists feminist have only an ideological approach to religion. One argues that without believing in religion, women's emancipation is impossible; the other proposes that it is only possible when you do not believe on religion. The question is, with these views, if any dialogue for women solidarity and equality between these groups is possible. Whatever might be a Muslim woman's standpoint, it must be within the boundary of *sharia* without which it cannot be labeled as Islamic.

A New Islamic Feminism

The new gender- sensitive, or what Badran called feminist hermeneutics renders compelling confirmation of gender equality in the Qur'an that was lost sight of as male interpreters constructed a corpus of *tafsir* promoting a doctrine of male superiority reflecting the mindset of the prevailing patriarchal cultures (**Badran, 2011**).

There is a movement underway in Qur'anic scholarship to engage in a new interpretation of the Qur'an. Throughout Islam's history, interpretation of the Qur'an has been traditionally the duty and responsibility of men. The problems with this are obvious. By not letting women have a say in interpretation, a major perspective is being silenced.

Some people are unaware of the importance and value Islam places upon women. Women who do not know this reality, as well as all people with insufficient knowledge of the Qur'an, try to protect their rights by working within their worldview, which follows the logic of unbelief. Social conditions around the world make this reality very obvious. For example, many women continue to be exposed to ill-treatment, violence, and unemployment, and need to be taken care of after their husbands have either divorced or abandoned them, or have died. The equality between men and women is also seen in the fact that Allah gives them equal rights in this world.

We made everything on Earth adornment for it so that we could test them to see whose actions are the best. (**Surat al-Kahf: 7**)

Every soul will taste death. We test you with both good and evil as a trial. And you will be returned to Us. (**Surat al-Anbiya': 35**)

Badran pointed out that feminist hermeneutics has taken three approaches:

1. Revisiting ayaat of the Qur'an to correct false stories in common circulation, such as the accounts of creation and of events in the Garden of Eden that have shored up claims of male superiority;
2. Citing ayaat that unequivocally enunciate the equality of women and men;
3. Deconstructing ayaat attentive to male and female differences that have been commonly interpreted in ways that justify male domination. (**Badran, 2011**)

As an example of a new interpretation of the Qur'an, we can look at sura (chapter) four, verse 34. While fundamentally equal, humans have been created biologically different in order to perpetuate the species. Only in particular contexts and circumstances will males and females assume different contingent roles and functions. Woman alone can give birth and nurse, and thus, in this particular circumstance, a husband is enjoined by the Qur'an to provide material support as indicated in 4:34, "Men are responsible for (qawwamun) women because God has given the one more than the other (bima faddala), and because they support them from their means." Wadud-Muhsin, Hassan, Al-Hibri, Naseef, etc. demonstrate that qawwamun conveys the notion of providing for and that the term is used prescriptively to indicate that men ought to provide for women in the context of child-bearing and rearing. It also does not necessarily mean that women cannot provide for themselves in that circumstance. The term qawwamun is not an unconditional statement of male authority and superiority over all women for all time, as traditional male interpreters have claimed. The women exegetes thus show how classical male interpretations have turned the specific and contingent into universals. I do not want to get into an exegetical battle here and now but rather to indicate Islamic feminist interpretative moves. Concerning the masculinist argument that men have authority over women, while deconstructing particular ayaat such as the above, the exegetes also draw attention to other ayaat affirming mutuality of responsibilities as in sura nine, verse 71 of the Qur'an which says that "The believers, male and female, are protectors of one another."

The Frontiers

Dr. Lois Lamy Faruqi is of the view that Islamic Feminism must recognize that the mainstream of the women's movement has viewed religion as one of the chief enemies of its progress and well-being; Muslim women view the teachings of Islam as their best friend and supporter. Faruqi further opines that the prescriptions that are found in the Qur'an and in the example of the Muhammad (pbuh) are regarded as the ideal to which contemporary women wish to return. As far as Muslim women are concerned, Faruqi averred, the source of any difficulties experienced today is not Islam and its traditions, but certain alien ideological intrusions on our societies, ignorance, and distortion of the true Islam, or exploitation by individuals within the society (**qtd in Ahmed, 2009**).

Kaosar Ahmed opines that if feminism seeks to "succeed in an Islamic environment; it must be one which does not work chauvinistically for women's interest alone" (**Ahmed, 2009**). Faruqi adds that

Islamic traditions would dictate that women's progress be achieved in tandem with the wider struggle to benefit all members of the society. The good of the group or totality is always more crucial than the good of any one sector of the society. In fact,

the society is seen as an organic whole in which the welfare of each member or organ is necessary for the health and well being of every other part. Disadvantageous circumstances of women therefore should always be countered in conjunction with attempt to alleviate those factors which adversely affect men and other segments of the society (qtd in Ahmed, 2009).

Finally, Faruqi avers that “Islam is an ideology which influences much more than the ritual life of a people” (qtd in Ahmed, 2009). It is equally affective of their social, political, economic, psychological, and aesthetic life. “Din,” which is usually regarded as an equivalent for the English term “religion,” is a concept which includes, in addition to those ideas and practices customarily associated in our minds with religion, a wide spectrum of practices and ideas which affect almost every aspect of the daily life of the Muslim individual. Islam and Islamic traditions therefore are seen today by many Muslims as the main source of cohesiveness for nurturing an identity and stability to confront intruding alien influences and the cooperation needed to solve their numerous contemporary problems. To fail to note this fact, or to fail to be fully appreciative of its importance for the average Muslim - whether male or female — would be, as Fruqi concludes, to commit any movement advocating improvement of women’s position in Islamic hands to certain failure. It is only through establishing that identity and stability that self—respect can be achieved and a healthier climate for both Muslim men and Muslim women will emerge (qtd in Ahmed, 2009).

Conclusion

Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse expressly articulated within an Islamic paradigm and behaviors and activisms inspired by it are enacted in Islam's name. Some of the Muslims talking about Islamic feminism were among the producers of the new discourse, or activists inspired by it. Other Muslims entered debates, and wrote about while standing outside the emergent ranks of Islamic feminists. Drawing from the history, and more contemporary observation, of Egypt with its pioneering feminist movement, we would like to stress that Muslim women's feminism has been a feminism within Islam, that is it has articulated itself within an Islamic framework. The distinction between secular and Muslim feminist discourse and Islamic feminist discourse is that the latter is a feminism that is articulated within a more exclusively Islamic paradigm. Whatever might be a Muslim woman’s standpoint, it must be within the boundary of *sharia* without which the discourse cannot be labeled as Islamic.

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