

## Feminisms and the Qur'anic Text

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### ABSTRACT

Are Feminism and Islam mutually exclusive terms? Actually, they are not. As the process of modernization spreads around the world, Muslim women have asked various unpopular questions concerning the interaction between Islam and Feminism. The result has been the construction of various feminist traditions within Islam. This essay seeks to examine the root causes behind various Islamic feminist reformers. The dawn of the nineteenth century marked the beginning of an epoch of worldwide social change that has continued to challenge the religious and social basis of all societies to this day. European colonial powers formed the political and economic ideological framework that was to encroach upon the Islamic world. The gradual emergence of the global economy and the political ascendancy of the West dictated a global trend that was not easy for non-Western nations to avoid. These changes have invariably been multidimensional in nature; from the emergence of territorial states in their current format to educational reforms. One of the areas to undergo a radical transformation is relation between the sexes, as women searched for their identity and place in the new world.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Islam, educational reforms, identity, women, feminist traditions, Islamic feminist reformers

### INTRODUCTION: FEMINISMS

Are feminism and Islam mutually incompatible terms? In fact, as modernization is infiltrating the world, Muslim women have come to pose various and divergent questions concerning the interchange and interplay between Islam and Feminism. The result was the creation of a new term: Islamic Feminism.

Concepts have a history and as it has been rightly noticed, practices around concepts also have a history. The term 'feminism' was coined in the 1880s by Hubertine Auclert, who introduced it in her journal, *La Citoyenne*, to criticize male dominance. She also made claims for women's rights and emancipation as promised by the French Revolution. Moreover, historian of feminism Karen Offen has indicated that since its first appearance, the term has been given many meanings and definitions; it has been used diversely, inspiring many movements. By the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the term made its appearance in England, and then in the 1910s in the United States. By the early 1920s, it was in use in Egypt where it promulgated in Arabic as '**nisa'iyya**'. Those various feminisms, however, agree upon fundamental basic assumptions and concepts:

*The basic view is that Western civilization is pervasively **patriarchal** (ruled by the father) – that is, it is male-centered and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, legal, and artistic. From the Hebrew Bible and Greek philosopher writings to the present, the female tends to be defined by negative reference to the male as the human norm, hence as an Other, or kind of non-man, by her lack of the*

*identifying male organ, of male powers, and of the male character traits that are presumed, in the patriarchal view, to have achieved the most important scientific and technical inventions and the major works of civilization and culture. Women themselves are taught in the process of being socialized, to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology (that is, the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority), and so are conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination (Abrams 89).*

Feminism is a reaction to patriarchy and consequently to prevalent ideologies. In effect, the power of patriarchy and feminists lies in an intricate interplay of resistances to each other, "When there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, *History* 95).

There is an interminable response of one force to another, then inducing a reaction. That is power moves back and forth from one to the other in a succession of reactions and counter-actions. Hence, feminism is a movement, a reaction, a theoretical perspective and a practice that criticizes social gender inequalities, which seeks to transform knowledge, and aims at women's empowerment. Women, and not religion, are at the center of that theory and practice. Two centuries of struggle lie behind this working up of a definition with its under scorings for the realization of women's cultural roles and achievements. Also, for the identification of women's social and political rights which are manifested in Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), the American Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), and Qasim Amin's ground-breaking books *Tahrir Al-Mar'ah* (1899) and *Al-Mar'ah Al-Jadida* (1900). Still further, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) is a multi-dimensional critique of the cultural identification of women 'as merely the negative object, or 'Other,' to man as the dominating 'Subject who is assumed to represent humanity in general' (Abrams 88). By 1969 in the United States Kate Millet's hard-hitting *Sexual Politics* was published in which she indicates that 'politics' means the workings that express and perpetuate the relations of power in a given society. She dissects Western social arrangements and institutions showing them as hidden ways of manipulating power so as to form and assert the ascendancy of men and the subordination of women.

Evidently, there are different 'feminisms' that are formulated in different places, and thus reproduced and articulated in various and distinctive terms. Writers of women's history which was taking form as a new field in 1960s and was flourishing during the 1970s and the 1980s, bore witness to a plethora of different feminisms that cropped up in various global locations.

The first and foremost principle would seem to be that many of the goals of feminism as conceived in Western society are not necessarily relevant or exportable across cultural boundaries. Feminism as a Western movement originated in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and had as one of its main goals the eradication of legal disabilities imposed upon women by English common law. Those legal rights which Western women sought in reform of English common law were already granted to Muslim women in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Such a struggle therefore holds little interest for the Muslim women. In addition, it would be useless to try to interest Muslim women in ideas or reforms that run in diametrical opposition to those traditions which form an important part of their cultural and religious heritage. In other words, if feminism is to succeed in an Islamic environment, it must be an indigenous form of feminism rather than one conceived and nurtured in an alien environment with different problems and different solutions and goals.

Obviously, the nineteenth century witnessed the commencement of a new age marked by worldwide social change that has continued to question the religious and social basis of all societies until the present (Ahmed). The colonial power constructed a political, economic, cultural and ideological framework that was to infiltrate the Islamic world. The gradual dawning of the global economy and the political supremacy of the West dictated a global trend that was not easy for non-Western nations to avoid. These changes have consistently been multidimensional in nature from the development of territorial states in their existing order to educational reforms. Undoubtedly, one of the areas to undergo a sweeping transformation is the relation between man and woman, as women searched for themselves and for an identity in the new world.

Feminism and Islam have an association dating back to the 1890s. At that time, Egypt, as a colonized country, was an important pioneering site of feminism in the Muslim world, where what would later be recognized as a 'feminist consciousness' arose in the context of encounters with modernity. Muslim women and men used Islamic reformist arguments (Sheikh Mohamed Abdou), to break the linkage of Islam with repressive practices imposed in the name of religion. This paved the way for changes in women's lives and in the relations between sexes. Soon feminism became enmeshed in the rising discourse of secular nationalism which called for equal rights of all Egyptians, be they Muslim or Christian, in a free and independent nation. In short, feminism and Islam were allies (Badran). While prevalent knowledge consider 'feminism' and 'Islam', as dissident terms, Fatima Mernissi maintains that throughout the history of Islam, one can find some women who have seized power in both political and military domains where their Western sisters were unable (Mernissi). Undeniably, throughout the Islamic world, there has been a growing awareness of feminism as a movement.

Significantly enough, in her groundbreaking book *Feminisms and Nationalism in the Third World* 1986, the Sri Lankan scholar Kumari Jayawardena undertook to document feminist movement that originated in different Middle Eastern and Asian countries, that were identified within local national liberation and religious reform movements including movements of religious reform. In point of fact, there exists a huge literature in many languages and cultures reporting some globally scattered feminisms, that are not of necessity 'Western': cultural feminism, Marxist feminism, legal feminism, liberal feminism, post-modern feminism, among others. Definitely Islamic feminism is one of many. It is a phenomenon that became widely conspicuous in the 1990s and persists to circulate following the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As to the origins of the term, the Iranian scholars, Afsaneh Najmabadeh and Ziba Mir-Hosseini expounded the development and employment of the term Islamic feminism in Iran by women writers in the Tehran women's journal *Zanan* that was founded in 1992 by Shehla Sherkat. Mai Yamani, in Saudi Arabia, used the term in 1996 in her book *Feminism and Islam*. Shamima Shaikh, the South African, used the term in her speeches and articles. Still, the African-American Muslim theologian, Amina Wadud made use of the term. Also, women belonging to the group 'Sisters in Islam' in Malaysia articulated the word. The American Margot Badran and the American theologian of Pakistani origin, Riffat Hassan made use of the term. These are some among many. Precisely, Islamic feminism is a global phenomenon. It transcends East and West, as it is the product of both. It is expounded in different places around the world by women inside their own countries, whether they be from countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities. Evidently, Islamic feminism is also stretching across the Muslim diasporas and convert communities in the New World. It is existing and spreading by Muslims in the far-flung corners of the global *umma*.

Noticeably, however, Muslim women tend to view the feminist movement with some apprehension. Although there are some features of the feminist cause with which Muslims would wish to join hands, other features would lead to disappointment and even opposition.

Islamic thought has been having an impact on different societies as a whole: East and West. Undeniably, there is an evident unreasonable fear towards Islamic thought within the Western world because of the latter's apprehensiveness from the influence of Muslim ideology upon the socio-political scene worldwide. This would definitely subvert the complex interplay of power and hegemony. According to the West, Islamic ideology is a power and hence a threat. In point of fact, there is an encounter here between two opposing forces: Islamic thought countering Western ideology. This ideological encounter is a confrontation of forces which interplay prompting a reaction, hence, validating Foucault's supposition that "when there is power there is resistance" (Foucault, *History* 93).

Western thought and Islam are resisting each other. Therefore, arises a movement like Islamic feminism which is "a form of resistance against forms of power" (Foucault, in Dreyfus and Rainbow 211). This form of resistance elaborates its ideologies and disciplining techniques to critique and counter dominant practices and ideologies that are decomposing, dismantling and dismembering Islamic discourse. Islamic conceptualization of women's roles is not properly articulated within Western thought, which undermines the latter's indigenous social and religious heritage. The 'woman question', hence, becomes a way to conceive Islam as being oppressive and backward. Obviously, Islamic feminism emerging in the United States is a reaction to the overwhelming power of Western thought.

Islam and Muslim women generally advocate the structuring of individual goals and interests to concur with the welfare of the larger group and its members. Instead of regarding the goals of the individual as an ultimate, Islam infuses in the adherent a sense of his or her place within the family, and of a responsibility to that group. This is not considered or experienced by Muslims as repression of the individual. Western feminism, therefore, would not be taken up by Muslim women as a goal to be pursued without regard for the relation of the female to the other members of her family. The Muslim woman regards her goals as necessitating a balance with, or even subordination to, those of the family group. Modern individualism runs against a deep Islamic commitment to social interdependence.

### THE TEXT AS A DISCOURSE OF EMPOWERMENT

Is there a relation between feminism and Islam? Feminism, when anchored in the discourse of Islam with the *Qur'an* as its central text, becomes a source of empowerment. The core of feminism is the individual and collective awareness that women have been and persist to be oppressed in different ways for different reasons. Feminism ventures to liberate women from this oppression aiming for a just society with better relations between women and men. Essentially, one of the basic concepts of Islam is the full equality of all Muslims, male and female alike, in both the public and private realms. Equality before God is stated very clearly:

*Surely male Muslims and female Muslims, and male believers and female believers, and devout males and devout females, and patient males and patient females, and submissive males and submissive females, male donators and female donators, and fasting males and fasting females, and females who preserve their private parts, and males who are mindful of Allah much and females who are much mindful of 'Allah-for them' Allah has prepared forgiveness and a magnificent reward (Qur'an: XXXIII, 35).*

In addressing the believers, the *Qur'an* often uses the expression 'believing men and women' to emphasize the equality of men and women in regard to their respective duties, rights, virtues

and merits. Regarding religious duties the *Qur'an* makes no distinction between men and women. Their obligations towards God and fellow men and women are similar, and therefore their position and status in the eyes of God are also similar:

*Whoever does righteousness, be it male or female, and he is a believer, then indeed We shall definitely give him to live a goodly life; and indeed We shall definitely recompense them their reward, according to the fairest of whatever they were doing (Qur'an: XVI, 97).*

Principally, if men and women have equal duties concerning prayers, the payment of charity to the poor (*zakat*), and in the urging of good, the prohibiting of evil; it is necessary that they should have equal chances in education. How can a woman raise her voice against rumors, economic policies or uphold beneficial economic reforms, incite good politics and reject corrupt politics, if she is not mentally and spiritually well equipped with righteous religion and worldly education. Besides, it is worth mentioning that Islam makes no discrimination between religious and secular duties. Islam dictates that all duties, whether they pertain to politics, economics or social well being in general, are religious duties, in no way conflicting with prayers, fasting and charity. Unequivocally, men and women are equal in all public spheres.

What we need to emphasize is that, in all societies women, have been considered as second-class citizens. No society treats men and women equally, but for some tribes in the Himalayas or in Africa. Clearly, religion sets forth the measures for society to follow. How any society applies and executes these guiding principles is the role of politics, economics, social behaviour, demographics and basically culture. Obviously, all of these factors judge religious interpretations, otherwise, how could we describe the different treatment of women at different historical epochs? It is important to note here that religious (*Qur'anic*) interpretations have been always produced by men, who in turn held the politico-judicial positions in their societies. This explains the negligence in underlining the capacities of notable women in early Islamic history who would be viewed as authentic role models to us in the present. Those role models would definitely be driving forces for contemporary Muslim women who would be boosted to make a shift from repression to resistance and empowerment. Hence, women will be able to renegotiate gender roles and codes and find a path of compromise and creative synthesis (Tohidi). At this point, it is important to mention briefly how women were treated generally in other civilizations.

Examining the status of the Indian woman, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* mentions that, in India subjection was a cardinal principle. The rule of inheritance was agnatic, that is descent traced through males to the exclusion of females. Moreover, in Hindu Scripture a good wife is a woman whose mind, speech and body are kept in subjection in this world, and in the next, the same abode with her husband. In his book *History of Civilization*, the historian E.A. Allen says that the "Athenian women were always minors to their father, to their brother, or to some of their male kin. The woman was obliged to submit to the wishes of her parents, to receive from them her husband and lord" (73). Moreover, a Roman wife was described by the same historian as: "... a babe, a minor, a ward, a person incapable of doing or acting upon anything" (93). Significantly, when debating the position of women in France in 1586 they came to the conclusion that women were created to serve men (Allen). In effect, it was not until 1938 that the laws were amended to allow women to deal in property and operate their own bank accounts. Furthermore, in England, the position of women began to improve a little by the end of the nineteenth century, with a series of Acts commencing with the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, amended in 1882 and 1887, as a result of which married women gained the right to own property. Actually, Victorian women were left behind in their houses or

mansions lamenting their position. So all civilizations, at the peak of their cultural affluency treated women as chattels without any individual rights.

Similarly, when Islam appeared in Arabia, women maintained a degrading status in society. They were treated as possessions. It was a sign of disgrace for a man to have a daughter and many buried their female baby-born alive:

*And when one of them is given the tidings of the birth of a female, his face lingers blackened and he is ever repressed with sorrow. He disappears from the sight of people because of the odious tidings given him, whether he shall retain it in degradation, or shove it in the dust. Verily, odious is the way they judge (Qur'an: XVI, 58-59).*

Assuredly, amidst the darkness which encompassed the whole world, God's divine revelation reverberated in the extensive desert of Arabia with an elevated and all-inclusive message to humanity at large:

*O you mankind, be pious to your Lord, Who created you of one self, and created from it its spouse, and from the two disseminated many men and women; and be pious to Allah about Whom you ask one another, and to the wombs; surely Allah has been Ever-Watchful over you (Qur'an: IV, 1).*

Undeniably, the *Qur'anic* verse heralds the principle of human equality, including sex equality refuting all inequalities due to race, nationality, caste, tribe or sex; simply because all humans emanate from one and the same source. Commenting on the above-mentioned *Qur'anic* verse, a Western scholar says:

*It is believed that there is no text, old or new, that deals with the humanity of the woman from all aspects with such amazing brevity, eloquence, depth and originality as this divine decree (Allen 97).*

In essence, the *Holy Qur'an* discerns no discrimination between women and men. Their duties towards God and humanity at large are similar, and consequently their status and predicament should be the same.

Certainly, Islamic traditions specify a differentiation of male and female roles and responsibilities in society. Feminism, as represented in Western society, has generally denied any such differentiation and has demanded a move toward a unisex society in order to achieve equal rights for women. 'Unisex society' is one in which a single set of roles and concerns are given preference and esteem by both sexes and are pursued by all members of the society regardless of sex and age differences. In the case of Western feminism, the preferred goals have been those traditionally fulfilled by the male members of society. The roles of providing financial support, of success in career, and of decision making have been given overwhelming respect and concern while those dealing with domestic matters, with child care, with social relationships, were devalued and even despised. Moreover, both men and women have been forced into a single mold which is perhaps more restrictive, rigid and coercive than that which formerly assigned men to one type of role and women to another. Islam instead maintains that both types of roles are equally deserving of pursuit and respect.

By all means, Islamic measures are liberating for women. These constitute a dynamic system that has offered much to women; even more than Western feminism. In fact, feminism when defined within the context of Islam and its teachings is identified as more radical than any of the other feminisms. Evidently, Islamic feminists could be regarded as revivalists who are returning to the source of Islam to retrieve a purified vision, long since lost in the mire of

worldly governments. It is a going back to the authentic roots of Islam at its inception. The first convert to Islam was Prophet Mohamed's (PBUH) wealthy wife Khadiga who is an exemplary of a financially independent business woman, as well as being a supportive wife (Ibn Sa'ad). Besides, we have Aisha, Prophet Mohamed's closest wife, ally and confidante. She is known as one of the most reliable interpreters of Islamic law. She was also an effective politician, a remarkable warrior and renowned intellect. Then, there is Fatima, the Prophet's most beloved daughter and Imam Ali's wife who is an idolized and idealized role model for her piety (Abbot). There is also Nafisa, a descendant of Ali, who is cited as such a great authority on *hadith* that Imam al-Shafi'i sat in her circle in Fustat when he was at the height of his fame. Such is the type of heritage to which women are increasingly turning for inspiration to excel (Roded). The rich complex tradition offers contemporary women a wide range of examples that inspire them intellectually, culturally and politically. This accentuates women's right to education and public participation on all levels, besides boosting women's sense of dignity and pride in being a Muslim. Therefore, Islamic feminists argue that they can gain by going back to the sources of Islam. They believe that Islamic orders and decrees bestow complementarity on women, as human beings, as partners to men and as mothers and daughters. They argue that Islam demands respect for women and offers them opportunities to be learned, educated. Meanwhile, providing an honoured space for them to become mothers, wives and house-makers:

*And women who have given birth, suckle their children two rounds completely, for the one who is willing to perfect the suckling. And it is for the man to whom children are the one to offer them provision and raiment with beneficence. No self is charged except to its capacity (Qur'an: II, 233).*

Islamic tradition stands clearly and unequivocally for the support of male-female equity. In the Qur'an, no difference whatever is made between the sexes to God, e.g. (El Ahzab XXXIII: 35; El Naml XVI: 97). It is only in relation to each other and society that difference is made, a difference of role or function. The rights and responsibilities of a woman are equal to those of a man, but they are not necessarily identical with them. Men and women should therefore be complementary to each other in a multi-function organization rather than competitive with each other in a uni-function society.

The equality demanded by Islam must, however, be seen in its larger context if it is to be understood properly. Since Muslims regard a differentiation in sexual roles to be natural and desirable in the majority of cases, the economic responsibilities of male and female members differ to provide a balance for the physical differences between men and women and for the greater responsibility which women carry in the reproductive and rearing activities so necessary to the well-being of the society. To maintain, therefore, that the men of the family are responsible for providing economically for the women or that women are not equally responsible, is not a dislocation or denial of sexual equity. It is instead a duty to be fulfilled by men as compensation for another responsibility which involves the special ability of women.

Likewise, the different inheritance rates for males and females, which is so often cited as an example of discrimination against women, must not be seen as an isolated prescription: "Allah enjoins you, concerning your children, to the male the like of the portion of two females" (Qur'an: IV: 11).

It is but one part of a comprehensive system in which women carry no legal responsibility to support other members of the family, but in which men are bound by law as well as custom to provide for all their female relatives. Unequivocally, the difference in male/female inheritance

rates is part of a whole system that is governed by definitive criteria that entails imperative measures.

Does this mean that Islamic traditions prescribe maintaining the status quo in the Islamic societies that exist today? No. It is reported in the Qur'an and from history that women not only expressed their opinions freely in the prophet's presence but also argued and participated in serious discussions with the Prophet himself and with other Muslim leaders of the time:

*Allah has already heard the saying of her that disputes with you concerning her spouse and complains to Allah; and Allah hears the two of you conversing together; surely Allah is Ever Hearing, Ever Beholding. (Qur'an: LVIII, 1)*

Moreover, the Qur'an reproached those who believed women to be inferior to men. Definitely, the Qur'an repeatedly gives expression to the need for treating men and women with equity:

*O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women against their will, neither pose problems for them, that you may go away with some part of what you have brought them, except when they come up with a demonstrably evident obscenity. And consort with them with beneficence; so in case you hate them, then it is possible you may hate something and Allah Sets it in much charity. (Qur'an: IV, 19)*

Therefore, if Muslim women experience discrimination in any place or time they do not and should not lay the blame on Islam, but on the un-Islamic nature of their societies and the failure of Muslims to fulfill its directives.

Certainly, properly learned and articulate Muslim women consider Western feminism as a defective example that they do not wish to follow. Not only do they repudiate Western feminism for being a manifestation of colonialism but they also look down upon the kinds of freedom offered to women in the West, that make them sex objects serving patriarchal capitalism at large. In effect, they are particularly disapproving of the inability of Western feminists to build and appropriate, specific and recognized space for marriage and motherhood (Afshar). They also did not succeed to make changes in the labour market to cater for women's needs and at the same time have wasted the recognitions once produced in marriage. Thus, Western feminists have made women into permanent second-class citizens, not a model that most women, in the West as elsewhere, choose to follow.

On the other hand, Islam demands respect for women offering them opportunities to be educated and be wholly independent. Definitely, Islam recognizes the importance of women's life-cycles as they have been given different roles and responsibilities at various phases of their lives, and at each and every stage they are honoured and respected for that which they perform. Islamic values grant women their rights, supporting women's participation in all domains, since Islam has made women equal to men.

### **FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS**

The diverse readings of Islam by traditionalists, modernists and secularists, based on claims and counter-claims derived from the *Qur'an* and *hadith*, present problems. Evidently, to try to comprehend the role of women in Islam from a non-Muslim perspective and forcing secular Western liberal principles into Islam, is also an exercise teeming with problems. Ahmed says that in Islam, as with other long-accepted and highly articulated religions, the questions of gender and the role of women are indispensable to its value-system and world view, in which the major changes are set in motion by thrusting factors operating in society at large (Ahmed).



The new gender sensitive, or what can be 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 beliefs and judgments of the dominant patriarchal cultures. There are many verses of the *Qur'an* that pronounce gender equality:

*O you mankind, surely We created you of a male and a female, and We have made you races and tribes that you may get mutually acquainted. Surely the most honourable among you in the Providence of Allah are the most pious; surely Allah is Ever Knowing, Ever-Cognizant. (Qur'an: XLIX, 13)*

Virtually, ontologically speaking all human beings are equal, what discriminates them is their righteousness in practising and implementing the fundamental *Qur'anic* principles and dicta. Notably, men and women are equal in the eyes of God and what invests either with privilege is their action.

Islamic Feminist hermeneutics distinguishes between the universal or timeless basic principles and the particular. As to the latter, certain practices were allowed in a limited and controlled manner as a way of diminishing behaviours dominant in the society into which the revelation came while encouraging believers and positioning them on the way to justice and equality in their human interactions. Islamic Feminist hermeneutics adopted three approaches: reviewing some *Qur'anic* verses to rectify stories in common circulation such as the accounts of creation and of the events in the Garden of Eden that have supported claims of male superiority:

*'And O Adam, dwell, you and your spouse, in the Garden and so eat of where you both decide; and do not draw near this tree, or then both of you would be of the unjust ones'. Then Satan whispered to them, both to display to them that which was overlaid from them of their shameful parts; and he said, 'Your Lord has in no way forbidden you from this tree except that you should become two angels, or become of the ones eternally abiding'. (Qur'an: VII, 19-20)*

There is no mentioning whatsoever that Eve is Adam's seducer to disobey God. On the contrary, the verses are very clear in meaning. In point of fact, in Sura XX verses 120-121, the citation lays all the blame on Adam that he is the prime perpetrator:

*Then Satan whispered to him. He said, 'O Adam, shall I indicate to you the tree of Eternity and a kingdom that does not decay?' So the two of them ate of it, and so their shameful parts became apparent to them, and they took to splicing upon themselves some of the leaves of the Garden. And Adam disobeyed his Lord, and so he became misguided'. (Qur'an: XX, 120-121)*

Secondly, citing verses that definitely articulate the equality of men and women. Thirdly, deconstructing other verses attentive to male and female differences that have been commonly interpreted in such a way to justify male domination. For example, verse 34 in sura 4:

*Men are the ever upright managers of the affairs of women because of what Allah has graced some of them over the others, and because of what they have expended of their riches. (IV, 34)*

While basically equal, humans have been created biologically different in order to perpetuate the species. Only in particular context 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 (*bema faddala*) and because they support them from their means

(Wadud). *Qawwamun* conveys the notion of providing for and the term is used prescriptively to indicate that men ought to provide for women in the context of child-bearing and nursing. 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 (Hassan). The women exegetes thus show how classical male interpretations have turned the specific and contingent into universals. Hence, seen from this perspective, the verse is indeed not about men's dominion over and guardianship of women but is about married women, who are called to fulfill their share of duties in the family. On the other hand, men voluntarily undertake to run the affairs of the family. This in no sense signifies that they are superior, but merely that they protect and maintain their wives. Evidently, each one whether male or female assumes a role which he or she has to accomplish. Concerning the masculinist argument that men have authority over women, while deconstructing particular verses such as the afore-mentioned, the exegetes also draw attention to other verses affirming mutuality of responsibilities:

*And the men believers and the women believers are patrons one of the other; they command beneficence and forbid maleficence, keep up the prayer, and bring the Zakat, and obey Allah and His Messenger; those are the people on whom Allah will soon have mercy; surely Allah is Ever-Mighty, Ever-Wise. (Qur'an: IX, 71)*

In point of fact, the divine nature of the *Qur'an* incorporates an evolutionary quality making it appropriate at every point in history. Positively, Islam stressed the essential and fundamental equality of men and women and their equal rights in all matters of vital concerns, but the *Qur'an* pronouncing gender equality, does not neglect the natural difference and specific powers and faculties of men and women with the fitness of men for some kinds of work and the fitness of women for some other types of work. The *Qur'an* regards men and women as complementing each other rather than competing. Plainly, the *Qur'an* first sets forth a general doctrine of sex equality and then qualifies and defines it with the assertion that this is not an undifferentiated equality but one involving special rights and duties both for men and women, within the framework of their particular responsibilities. Definitely, the doctrine of equality must be qualified with due regard to natural facts. Margaret Mead, says in her book *Male and Female*:

*But every adjustment that minimizes a difference in one sex, diminishes the possibility of complementing each other. To seal off the constructive activity of the female and the vigorous outgoing constructive activity of the male leads them both to the duller version of human life, in which each is denied the fullness of humanity that each might have had. We must protect and cherish both sexes through the crisis that are sometimes harder for one sex than for the other. (33)*

### IS THERE A NEED OF ISLAMIC FEMINISM?

Feminism as a concept and praxis has originated in the West, hence, regarded by post-colonial Muslim countries and Muslims in general as highly charged with colonialist strategies which in turn would discernibly subvert the indigenous social and religious Islamic tradition (*turath*). Accordingly, then, feminism, per se, would be viewed as a suspicious identity definition for Muslims. Evidently, as Mohanty argues, there are

*Various textual strategies used by particular writers that codify Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western. [Certain] analytic principles ... serve to distort Western feminist practices, and limit the possibility of coalitions among (usually White) Western feminists and working class and feminists of colour around the world. These limitations are evident in the construction of (implicitly consensual) priority of issues around which apparently all women are expected to organize. (Mohanty 52)*

Noticeably, Western feminist discourse functions as a meta-discourse in which the means and outcomes of women's oppression in different parts of the world becomes universalized, essentialized, homogenized and logicized. That is, western feminist discourse writes about the different forms of oppression that 'Other' women from different cultures are bearing. As a result, there is this need for this 'Other' to formulate its own feminism that surges from its own political and cultural context. The difference in culture does not necessitate a difference in geographical space. For instance, Islamic feminism arising in North America might touch upon vital issues that would accord with women in the Islamic world or even in the Third World in general. All of these share the fact that they are forms of resistance, formulated by people who represent the 'periphery' in their different societies. Hence, this becomes a strategy for a better form of survival for people of colour, immigrants or minorities in general along with post-colonial peoples. This kind of feminism is one, which manifests itself as being devoid of hegemonic characteristics peculiar of the meta-narratives. A post-modern understanding of feminisms is applicable here, since it supports this theoretical view "attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods and to that of different groups within societies and periods" (Fraser and Nicholson 34). Postmodern feminist theorizing is characterized by its non-essentialist aspect, thus, giving way to an acceptance of different interpretations.

In his *The Postmodern Condition* (1986) J.F. Lyotard renders his concept of postmodernity which eventually comes to serve all new theories. Lyotard's concept is an academic move from the hegemonizing Western meta-narratives which have been employed to interpret and define the different socio-political cultural ideologies and underlying theories. Such meta-narratives are no longer appropriate for the explication of twentieth century ideological and geographical changes, especially those related to less privileged peoples. According to Foucault this would be a denial to the legitimacy of all under privileged voices or to social, polyvocal, institutional and cultural specific truths (Foucault). This gives way to the creation of smaller narratives (some of which might be an off-shoot of a more comprehensive meta-theory), which eventually become the novel constructions of knowledge. In this context, Islamic feminism would be an instance of a smaller narrative critical of the West and a derivative of the meta-discourse of Islam.

This is a kind of a 'decentering of the West' (Sayyid 276), with its (postmodernity) detachment and dissociation from the universalizing Western discourses with their paraphernalia of ideological analysis and functioning. Islamic feminism becomes a deconstruction of the centralized master narratives of the Western culture. It is a breaking down of this binarism center/margin. Islamic feminism is one of the manifestations of the politics of the periphery, negating the centrality of the discourse of Westernization/ modernization. This decentralization is a sort of de-colonization. De-colonization in the context of a movement like Islamic feminism is a de-colonization of ideology, of course, of a dominating Western ideology that controls and presides over any 'other' form of thought. Therefore, de-colonization is one of the "... main impetuses behind post-modernity and the revelation of the West's particularity behind its universalist façade" (Sayyid 278).

If this decentralization of the West is regarded in Gramscian language then "... the hegemonic order that naturalized and sedimented a certain narrative structure has broken down, even though tremendously unequal power structures are still in place"(Sayyid 281). That is, in this process of the de-centering of the West, the postulation of the absence of other narrative structures of development and liberation becomes invalid. That is, Islamic feminism within its larger context of Western culture becomes a possibility "of decentering of the West ... a continuation and radicalization of the process of decolonization"(Sayyid 281).

Therefore, if the goals of Western feminism are not feasible for Muslim women, what form should a feminist movement take to ensure success? Above all, the movement must recognize that, whereas in the West, the mainstream of the woman's movement has viewed religion as one of the chief enemies of its progress and well-being, Muslim women view the teachings of *Al Qur'an* as their best friend and supporter. The prescriptions that are found in the *Qur'an* and in the example of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), are regarded as the ideal to which contemporary women wish to return. As far as Muslim women are concerned, the source of any difficulties experienced today is not Islam and its traditions, but certain ideological intrusions on our societies, ignorance and distortion of the true Islam, or exploitation by individuals within the society. It is a lack of an appreciation for this fact that caused much misunderstanding. Second, any feminism which is to succeed in an Islamic environment must be one which does not work prejudicially for women's interest alone. Islamic traditions would dictate that women's progress be achieved in association with the wider struggle to benefit all members of 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. Third, Islam is an ideology, which influences much more than the ritual life of a people. It is equally affective of their social, political, economic, psychological and aesthetic life. 'Deen', which is 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.

Islamic feminism accordingly transcends and destroys old binaries that have been related. These include polarities between 'religious' and 'secular'; East and West. Islamic feminist discourse does not reconfirm polarities. In reality, it closes gaps and demonstrates common concerns and goals, starting with the basic affirmation of gender equality and social justice. Allegations of a supposed clash between feminism (in Egypt for instance), may either be the product of lack of historical knowledge or, as in many cases, a politically motivated attempt to hinder broader solidarities among women. The pioneering feminists in Egypt and other Arab countries have always had space for religion. The founding Egyptian feminist discourse was anchored simultaneously in the discourse of Islamic reform and Islamic arguments in demanding women's rights to education, work and political rights. Still further, Islamic feminism advocates women's rights, gender equality and social justice using Islamic discourse as its paramount discourse.

Actually, the basic argument of Islamic feminism is that the *Qur'an* affirms the principle of equality of all human beings but that the practice of equality of women and men (and other subjugated people) has been embedded, hindered and subverted by patriarchal ideology and practice. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), consolidated in its classical form in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, was itself heavily saturated with the patriarchal thinking and behaviours of the day. It is this patriarchally-inflected jurisprudence that has informed the various contemporary formalities of the *Shari'a*. Thus, a priority of Islamic feminism is to go straight to Islam's fundamental and central holy text, the *Qur'an*, in an effort to recuperate its egalitarian message. The basic methodologies of this Islamic feminism are the classic Islamic methodologies of *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious resources), and *tafsir* (interpretation of the *Qur'an*), used along with these methodologies are the tools and methods of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology etc.

In approaching the *Qur'an*, women bring to their readings their own experiences and questions as women. They point out that classical, and also much of post-classical interpretation was based on men's experiences, male centered questions, and the whole influence of the patriarchal societies in which they lived.

### CONCLUSION

Islamic feminists profess that Islamic feminism serves people in their individual lives and it can also be a force in improving state and society. As far as Muslim women in Western communities and in Muslim minority communities are concerned, second generation Muslim women are often caught between the practices and norms of the original home cultures of parents who migrated from Middle Eastern or South Asian countries, and the ways of life in their new countries. Islamic feminism helps these women untangle patriarchy and religion, giving them Islamic ways of understanding gender equality, societal opportunity, and their own potential.

On the other hand, Islamic feminist discourse is equally relevant in predominantly Muslim countries. It constitutes a different statement of the view of the people and their understanding of and attachment to their religion and culture, by attempting a strong and Islamic articulation of gender equality.

Precisely, Islamic feminism on the whole is more radical than any other form of feminism. Discernibly, it insists on full equality of women and men across the public and private spheres. On the other hand, feminists accepted the idea of equality in the public sphere and the notion of complementarianism in the private sphere. Islamic feminists argue that women may be heads of state, heads of congregational prayer, judges and *muftis*. In some Muslim countries, Muslim women function as judges, some as prime ministers, and one is a head of state. Thus, Islamic feminism stands to benefit us all, Muslims of both sexes, as well as non-Muslims living side by side with Muslims everywhere (Badran). By all means, it bridges minds and shatters barriers.

In essence, Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse expressly articulated within an Islamic paradigm; and behaviours and activism inspired by it are enacted in the name of Islam. Other Muslims, as scholars, writers, journalists and public intellectuals commented on Islamic feminism, entered debates and wrote about while standing outside the emergent ranks of Islamic feminists. It seems important to focus on the content of Islamic feminism, on its goals, and not get trapped and entangled with distracting issues about who has the right to think, analyse and to speak. Definitely, Islamic feminism is for all.

Drawing from the history and more contemporary observation of Egypt with its pioneering feminist movement, it is noted that Muslim women's feminism has been a feminism within an Islamic framework – though not within that framework alone, since this feminism has also articulated itself within nationalist, humanitarian and democratic discourses (Badran). Indeed, feminist controversies take place within an evolving and developing social community so that “in every group, in every place, at every time the meaning of ‘feminism’ is worked out in the course of being and doing” (Rupp and Taylor 93).

Feminists claim that, if feminism has always been disputed; if feminists should be defined by their actions rather than by a strict ideology; and if feminist strategies and politics are shaped by particular historical, political, and cultural contexts, then it would be valid to identify Islamic feminism as one feminism among many other feminisms. However, it is more appropriate to elaborate on the question ‘feminism and Islam’ and not ‘Islamic feminism’, since

Islam is not only an 'ideology' but it is an all-encompassing system that embraces all and every aspect of human life within the universe. On the other hand, Western feminism, Latin American feminism, African feminism, Japanese feminism, social feminism, Marxist feminism, radical and post modern feminisms are part of the feminist tradition because they are regional and cultural manifestations of the feminists tradition at large, off-shooting from the evolving political philosophy of feminism and the social realities of women. However, there exist imbrications in both discourses.

In point of fact, there is a need for Muslim women to know, and hence be given their Islamic rights. It is unfit to reinterpret Islam in order to fit alien secular ideologies like feminism. Instead, understand Islam – understand *why* it says *what* it says rather than trying to change it.

Ultimately, the question remains: is there a need for an '*Islamic Feminism*'?

### NOTES

*din or deen*: the Islamic belief system or worldview, encompassing religion and culture; a complete way of life.

*fadala*: to provide, to grant, to favour

*fiqh*: Islamic jurisprudence

*hadith*: a saying, tradition, or narrative of the Prophet Mohammed

*ijtihad*: jurisprudential interpretations; intellectual reasoning in Islamic *fiqh*; interpretation of Islamic law

*mufti*: jurisconsult

*nisa'iyya*: the Arabic word for feminism

*qawwammun*: usually interpreted as meaning the position of boss or head of the family. The plural form of this word refers to men as advisors, protectors over women.

*Qur'an*: the revealed word of Allah

*tafsir*: the science of Qur'anic commentary and exegesis

*turath*: tradition

*umma*: living community

*zakat*: one of the five pillars of Islam, where Muslims should be benevolent and give the needy part of what they have with no expectation of material reward

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