

Islam and Woman in the Contemporary Arab World: An Interpretation of Rajaa al-Sanea's Girls of Riyadh from Islamic Feminist Perspective

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Version of Record Online/Print: 16-12-2019

Accepted: 15-11-2019

Received: 31-07-2019



Abstract

The present position paper explores to examine Rajaa al-Sanea's "Girls of Riyadh" (2005) from the Islamic feminist perspective. Also, the study highlights the model of western feminism epitomised in the narrative under reference, vis-à-vis the Islamic concept of feminism. Islamic feminism grants equal rights to women and ensures its implementation in the Islamic state and society, whereas Western-sponsored feminism dwells on the archetype of women's liberalism. That, in turn, leads to an anarchic and chaotic society, because of its believing in bringing women not only equal to men but superseding them in socio-cultural positioning. In the existing situation, the novel decries phallogocentric society of Saudi Arabia and aiming at replacing it by the sensate-secular feminism that believes in the undue autonomy of the women. In order to investigate the presence of overwhelming patrilineal mores, the study pursues Islamic feminism as a theoretical model and employs reader's response technique as a methodology. More far the findings of the research are concerned, the researchers conclude that replacing the patriarchal autonomy in the said society by Islamic feminism is befitting and benefitting than to replace it by the western feminism.

Keywords: Feminism, western feminism, Islamic feminism, Saudi society, patriarchy

Introduction

Rajaa al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2005) is an Arabic translated novel portraying the Saudi Arabian Society.¹ The narrative gained acclaim in the Western world as it has touched upon the Islamic society and its leading principles in Saudi Arabia. The writer renders the unexplored aspect of the Arab culture, religion and allied customs behind the *burqa*-clad women. In the current context, patriarchal dominance has restricted a woman to the enclosure of the home and has denied her of her legal rights. The women, in the Arab world, are said to be parasitic on men. Visiting the public places without the company of men is thought to be inappropriate and, thus, proscribed. Such representation of Saudi Arab and its treatment of women have been spotlighted as incompatible to the contemporary world by most of the Western critics of Islam. They have dubbed Islam and its followers as gender-bigots, of which they take pride in projecting Islam as a male-dominated religion. However, the present study converges on Islam that believes in equity and credits peaceful co-existence for all. In it, a woman has a prestigious place in the shape of a mother, sister, wife and daughter. She avails the right of inheritance and all other birthrights as men do, that makes her equally significant in the society.

Since Rajaa al-Sanea hailed from Saudi Arabia, that is why her novel was barred in the country, as it attempted to reveal Saudi society. She highlights the male-dominated Saudi society that restricts women from exercising the choice of freedom. As a feminist, she asserts that the Saudi women, in contrast to men, have the least access to the prospective opportunities in society, which she articulates as:

*"and because every one of them lives huddled in the shadow of a man, or a wall, or a man who is a wall"*²

However, the Islamic feminism testifies that it is incumbent upon women to be at their houses, as it is stated in the Holy Qur'an (*Sura Al-Ahzab*), that:

*"And abide in your houses and do not display yourselves as [was] the display of the former times of ignorance. And establish prayer and give Zakah and obey Allah [SWT] and His Messenger. Allah [SWT] intends only to remove from you the impurity [of sin], O people of the [Prophet's] household, and to purify you with [extensive] purification."*³

From the Islamic viewpoint, a woman is advised to stay at her home, as she is an integral part of the family institution. All her roles and responsibilities (at home) ensure strengthening the homely life and, thus, she might become a role model for the whole family. Therefore, Allah (SWT) has

chosen home as the preeminent abode for her, not for domestication, but for establishing an instrumental family institution.

The study explores the narrative from an Islamic feminist perspective, unlike Western feminism. The Western feminists enable women to be at par with men at the risk of sacrificing their homely life. That, too, intends to distribute man's burden by sharing it with a woman; thus, redoubling her errand. However, Islamic feminism focuses on equity that benefits her in all contexts. The researchers have figured out the missing link of Islamic feminism, which they employ as a theoretical model to the current study. Islamic feminism protects and secures women by endowing her all she is entitled to for empowerment in society. Conversely, al-Sanea's narrative pursues Western ideals that chiefly dwell upon parochialism apropos woman's due rights. The researchers have selected the novel as it is not only the archetypal feminist novel of the writer, but it touches upon the Saudi society.

Literature Review: An Overview

From the feminist perspective, *Girls of Riyadh* calls for equal rights for both men and women in a society that has barred women from accessing their birthrights. Singhai's findings in a Ph.D. dissertation supports the argument by commenting that "Al-Sanea's country is ultra-orthodox and women are not given any freedom. They are not allowed to drive. They always have to wear the *hijab* in public. They cannot meet men who are not related to them".⁴ However, if looked at the communal background of Saudi Arabia, chronologically, more than fourteen hundred years back, its foundation was laid by Muhammad ﷺ as *Fatih* (the opener of the modern age) along the Islamic lines. The Islamic welfare state and society gave equal rights to everyone irrespective of their colour, creed and gender. The message of justice for all was not only addressed in the last sermon of the prophet at the ground of *Arafaat* but was executed expediently at all levels under the guided supervision of impartial jurists. During the last message, while advocating the women's rights, the prophet emphatically underlined that "you have rights over your wives and your wives have rights over you. Treat them with kindness and affection. If they commit a fault, do not be harsh to them" (as quoted by Al-Khail).⁵ The speech singles out in the sense that women were not entitled to such prerogatives ever before nor such just legislation was enacted thereafter apropos women's rights. A *hijab* that is identified with stashing away a woman's autonomy (in Western feminism) is her protective sheath to acclaim her high pedestal in society.

Contrary to Islamic law, Saudi society, as projected in the novel, adheres to patrilineal mores that levies needless constraints on womenfolk.

That, too, seizes women's rights of acquiring education, stifles her access to business, and above all, hampers her liberty of speech as is given to her by Islam. Therefore, there is nothing valid (in Islam) of her pointless domestication and unwarranted restraints. Similarly, the holy prophet Muhammad ﷺ also emphasised about equality in the dissemination of knowledge (for both men and women) thus, "seeking knowledge is mandatory both on male and female".⁶ Despite such compelling and convincing saying of the prophet, mostly women succumb to phallogocentric doctrines and dictations. In the current vein, Al Alhareth, Al Alhareth and Al Dighrir remark about cultural orientation of Saudi Arabia towards women are thus: "some customs, such as the belief that women should not drive cars or practice Law or Engineering are not from Islamic law but have become entrenched in the culture".⁷ Instead, they are derived from a male-controlled society, which does not enable women to be independent in the decisions related to them. Likewise, other socio-cultural prohibitions that are un-Islamic, too, are as:

*"Women in Saudi Arabia are still not legally permitted to drive. It is rare to find someone talking about women without mentioning this. Conservative clerics and religious puritans who object to the very idea of women are exposed to strangers outside their homes by driving. In contrast, liberal clerics argue that there is no basis for this prohibition. This topic has not only provoked much public debate but, as our analysis shows, it also proved to be a rich source for novelists wishing to address the subject of marginalization of women in Saudi society."*⁸

Aggravatingly, the secular feminists embark upon awakening the Arab Muslim women to set out against Islamic culture. Most of the Arab world has become victim to the western feminism and their indoctrinated principle – that convince them to raise their voices against Islamic feminism – which is depicted as to have thwarted their fundamental rights. In effect, they are charmed by the greener pastures of western feminism and thus decline the tenets of Islamic feminism. In this regard, Al Areqi extrapolates:

*"The Arab women have revolted against inequality and oppression practiced in the name of Islam and social conventions. They struggle to unfetter themselves from social and cultural restrictions. It is no surprise to find some Arab writers and feminists inspire the feminist uprising, portray the oppression of women and call for women emancipation to catch up with their western counterparts."*⁹

Opposing the notion of secular feminism, Islam endows equal rights to all members of its society, especially to women, older people, orphans, destitute citizens, and children; because of acknowledging their practical

needs. As the status of women is susceptible to ordeals in society, therefore Islam treats and maintains women's rights as per their social positioning. Primarily, it is the man's responsibility to protect her rights, fulfil her personal and social needs as directed by and disseminated through Islamic feminism. Al Alhareth, Al Alhareth and Al Dighrir, too, point out that women face challenges and are susceptible to cultural odds in Saudi Arabia. She (mostly) remains subordinate to the man's social authority and complies with his patriarchal autonomy that they intently associate with Islamic law, which is otherwise.¹⁰

Similarly, al-Sanea portrays that woman holds a subtle role in Islamic society, because of which she needs to be cautious of her social standing and vigilant to the role assigned to her. However, the western parochial thinkers and distracted theorists indict Islamic feminism as it has tamed a woman in social confinements. The researchers, on the other hand, pinpoint the caring, sharing and just teachings of Islam for all its followers, especially the women. They, too, exclude the study from the analyses done in this regard and project Islamic feminism as poised and, thus justified.

Core Objective

The core objective of the study is as follows:

1. To figure out equity provided to women by Islamic feminism contrasted with the novel under study that supports Western feminism.

Research Questions

2. How is the Western feminism embodied in the novel juxtaposed to the concept of Islamic feminism?
3. How is the egalitarianism in Islamic feminism contrasted with Western feminism of inequity?

Significance of the Study

The scope of the current study lies in its significance. Since the narrative reflects and propagates the Western mode of feminism, that in turn, is counteracted by the researchers through a counter-narrative of Islamic feminism. Islamic feminism grants full freedom of thought and action to women in the given parameters of Islamic law and jurisprudence that equate women with men in every sphere of life regardless of gender-bias. Therefore, the current study is significant because it underlines the balanced picture of Islamic feminism, unlike the tilted assessment being carried out in the novel. The import of Islamic feminism is an analytical rejoinder to the Western outlook on feminism typified in the storyline under reference. Thus the

analysis rendered in the light of Islamic feminism informs its perceptive readers of the birthrights of women and their substantial status in society.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Islamic feminism is employed as a theoretical framework for the current study. Islamic feminism grants specific roles and responsibilities to men and women and, in turn, make them accountable for their actions to ensure a just society. That is inspired and guided by the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and the sayings of the prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

The researchers aim to analyse the novel, qualitatively that focuses on close reading technique. The purpose is to fill in the gap by examining the text through an in-depth study and introducing Islamic feminism as an essential component to the current research.

Feminism

The term feminism is employed to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at claiming and establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism subsumes and necessitates political and sociological theories and philosophies related to issues of gender bigotry as well as a movement that advocates gender equality for women and campaigns for women's rights and interests. Thus, it refers to a movement that promotes equality between men and women in all walks of life. As is extrapolated by Dar:

*"Feminism is a cultural, political and intellectual movement that recognizes the fact of oppression of women and seeks ways to emancipate them. It is the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men and the struggle to achieve this aim. Feminist criticism questions long-standing dominant phallogocentric ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretation in literature. It also challenges traditional and accepted male ideas about the nature of women and about how women feel."*¹¹

Feminism has multiple types and connotations in the contemporary world. The notable among them are as follows. The Marxist feminism attributes women's oppression to a sensate-secular capitalist economy and the private property system. The Materialist feminism that emerged by the close of 19th century intends to give away freedom to women by improving their socio-economic conditions, removing domestic responsibilities such as cooking and housework, and allowing women to earn for their livelihood. The Moderate feminism that is more or less similar to liberal feminism; it foresees the need for and importance of change within the institutions hence they claim for gender parity that often comprises younger women who draw on feminist ideas without calling themselves, feminists.

The Postcolonial feminism essentially underscores the denial of colonial hegemony. Thus, they argue for the deconstruction of phallogocentric power dynamics and the necessitation of a racial component within feminist discourses. The Psychoanalytic feminism calls for psychoanalysis as a means of female emancipation by revisiting certain patrilineal tenets, such as Freudian postulation on mothering, Oedipus-and-Electra complex and female sexuality. Moreover, the Islamic feminism that epitomises the fundamental rights of men and women as is commanded by Allah (SWT) and guided by the holy prophet Muhammad ﷺ. While exploring the current issue, the study employs Islamic feminism as a theoretical and research model.

Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism is the combination of two words, that is, “Islam” and “feminism”. “Islam” means the submission to One and the Only Allah (SWT) and His Absolute Commandments in entirety, while feminism calls for equal fundamental rights of men and women. Therefore, Islamic feminism may be interpreted as a way of life whereby men and women are valued regardless of gender disparity as per Sovereign Islamic law and jurisprudence. Likewise, Badran (2002) states of Islamic feminism as a “feminist discourse and practise articulated within an Islamic paradigm”.¹² The perennial Islamic paradigm refers to the system of justice, and equity in Islam laid down by Allah (SWT) in Al-Qur’an and subsequently preached by the last messenger with a lasting message (in *Ahadith*). Similarly, Al Alhareth, Al Alhareth and Al Dighrir argue that “Islamic feminism attempts to work within the values of Islam, not against them, by offering social benefits in a culturally satisfactory and sustainable way to families through enhanced opportunities for daughters, sisters, wives and mothers”.¹³ That well explains the treasured status and due prerogative of a woman in an Islamic state and society.

Islamic feminism principally concentrates on the roles and responsibilities of women in Islam. That, eventually, underpins the thorough equality of all Muslims irrespective of their genders, ethnicities, regional affiliations and the places they work in – both in public and private capacities. Islamic feminists reinforce socio-cultural parity for women folk, ensure their entitled privileges, and foregrounds measures for their birthrights as rooted in Islamic jurisprudence guided by Islamic law. The movement underlines the principles of equality in the holy Al-Qur’an as well as in the teachings of the prophet and the Islamic jurisprudence. In the same vein, Tonnessen remarks about Islamic feminism in his lectures as follows:

“I came to the realization that women and men are equal as a result not of reading feminist texts, but of reading the Qur’an. This position has come to be known as Islamic feminism.”¹⁴

Thus, the Islamic law unbiasedly explicates and rationalises the roles and responsibilities, rights and privileges, rewards and punishments for every individual. However, the contemporary sensate-secular world indicts Islam being gender-bias and propagates it without cogent evidence. The fake allegations and unproven accusations are concocted and tagged with Islam and its faithful followers for creating a tilted picture of Islam. In short, Islamic feminism enjoins upon its followers the absolute injunctions of Allah (SWT) and His last messenger regarding all undertakings of human life, including gender-egalitarian state and society. Of that, Tonnessen states:

“Islam is an interpretive project it focuses on re-interpreting the Qur’an and seeing patriarchy as incompatible with the Islamic concept of believing in God (tawhid). Islamic feminists are utilizing the notion of Ijtihad to establish interpretations of the Qur’an which bring to light the gender-egalitarian impulse of the Qur’an. These new interpretations then form the basis for demanding full gender equality within Islamic law in contemporary states in the Muslim world. The project captures the “idea of Islam without patriarchy,” which guarantees women legal and social rights, equal with men.”¹⁵

Hence, Islamic feminism dissuades patriarchy and gender inequality and urges its followers to adhere to the universal teachings of Islam.

“Girls of Riyadh” (Al-Banat-ul-Riadh): An Analysis

The novel was initially published in 2005 by the title of “Al Banat-ul-Riadh” in the Arabic language; however, later on, on account of its global acclaim, it was translated by Marylyn Booth and got published in 2007. The storyline develops through electronic mails sent out by the unknown narrator every week (on Friday) to the internet navigators all over Saudi Arabia. As far the characterisation is concerned, the narrative revolves around four girls, namely, Gumrah, Sadeem, Michelle and Lamees, from the elite class of the country. They are infatuated with love, but cannot disclose due to the inhibitive society they live in. Besides, it is a taboo to be in love with someone during a pre-marital stage and relate it explicitly. Chastity in moral character will ensure a woman’s matrimony and her prospective wedlock. Since falling in love is believed to be tainted before solemnising marriage; therefore, a woman is said to restrict herself from such amorous whims. Even the state is constrictive in this regard and never allows commingling of both sexes in public places. If found mingled together, they will incur punishment upon themselves that might amount to death sentence even. The researchers argue that Islamic feminism does not comply with the intermingling of men and women in a manner that leads to immoral advances and the arousal of carnal desires. Of such unchaste idiosyncrasy, the Holy Qur’an (*Al-Isra*) states thus: “And do not come near to adultery, it is a shameful deed and an evil, and

opening the road to other evils".¹⁶ It is because of the reason that Islam wants a morally virtuous and ethically hygienic society, which is corruption-free and unblemished. Such society proves to be morally instrumental and socially influential.

As electronic mails are the safe source of interacting with and expressing their love affairs, the female characters, while being at home send forth their sentimental messages to their loved ones. They believe, as mentioned in the narrative, too, that falling in love is a typical human feeling that is not associated with a particular culture or region. Since the novelist hails from Saudi Arabia; hence, she unequivocally underlines the ardent passion behind the *burqa*-clad women in Saudi society. That she explains as:

*"Saudi Arabia is made up of oil wells, terrorists and 'women dressed in black from head to toe'. Giving the problematic first two a wide berth, she sets out to redress this injustice by proving that 'women here fall deeply in and out of love just like women everywhere else.'"*¹⁷

The Western parochial critic of Islam opionate that veil symbolically stands for attitudinal ignorance as it not only hides the face of a woman but the brain, too, to the observation of the world around. Therefore, the veil is a metaphor for forced captivity that blinds a woman for candidly seeing the world towards a higher understanding. However, the researchers view the concept of the veil as a means of personal safety and security that eschews wanton sight and nasty intentions. The Holy Book (*Sura Al-Ahzab*) supports the current argument as: "O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, so that they may be recognised and not annoyed. Allah [SWT] is ever Forgiving, Merciful".¹⁸ That intently introduces the means of modesty and piety to purify the womenfolk for establishing a productive and constructive society. Here the focus is laid on the virtue of a woman as she is seminal to establishing and sustaining a committed family institution. That, too, shuns distraction of a woman from carrying out the tasks assigned to her in different capacities in a gender-neutral society. Thus, *hijab* is a protective shield for ensuring the prestigious position of a woman in an Islamic society.

Conclusion

The current research has highlighted the need for and importance of Islamic feminism in the current-contemporary world of chaotic secular feminism. The study also addressed the issue of the inhibitive and lopsided western concept of feminism contrasted with Islamic feminism that ensures equal rights for all, indiscriminately. The roles and responsibilities of a woman in Islam are pivotal in the sense that she is foundational to a family

institution and is a principal component in upbringing a generation.

Contrary to that, western feminism has granted women excessive freedom and access to institutional rights at the cost of their dignity and grandeur, which otherwise is ensured by Islamic society. They are employed as disposable commodity and pawn in the hands of western feminists, who manipulate them against Islamic feminism. The western feminists are hostile to Islamic feminism and incite women to raise their voices against excessive restrictions levied by Islamic feminism. Opposing the Western-sponsored feminism, Islam decries the humiliation of women and advocates their birthrights following Muhammadi Moral Model (MMM) inspired by the injunctions of Al-Qur'an. That abides by and complies with equity for every member of the Islamic state and society regardless of ethnic differences, gender bias, racial discrimination and linguistic variations.

Because of pursuing the western model of feminism and refuting the Islamic feminism, the narrative secured wide acclaim among the interested readers and critics of the Western feminism. Claimants and advocates of the western feminism chiefly blemish the wearing of *hijab* by women, freedom of choice in matrimonial ties and their access to education. However, the current paper has proved that Islam, as a complete code of life, pays conscious attention to every aspect of human life, including feminine roles, responsibilities and their legal rights in society.

Recommendations

- Literature (especially fiction that touches upon feminism as its theme and trope) should refer to Islamic feminism as a guiding image for creating a balanced picture of society.
- Literature written in the backdrop of Islamic feminism should be encouraged in academia for its right representation of women empowerment in Islam.
- Islamic countries should sponsor and patronise such literature that deals with Islamic feminism and its golden principles.



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