

Feminism and Islam; Contradiction in Terms or a Profound Nexus

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ABSTRACT:

There are a thousand ways to be imaginative of any entity in this contemporary world. One can lend an opinion from different schools of thought while contemplating on this rather productive topic of how Islam has acted as a beacon of light to women, oppressed and empowered both in the same era. The western narrative has failed to comprehend the fundamental message of Islam up to its full extent which has ultimately resulted in an almost immediate suggestion of modification by the perspective of the west. This article reviews the very limited literature available on the subject so that some conclusion is drawn about the values Islam has given to women. This article also reviews the idea of western/secular feminism and how it differs from the Islamic feminism. In the end, it discusses and concludes that in terms of respect, rights and values there is no other religion than Islam who has given more to women and there is no bigger advocate of the idea of feminism in its pure form than Prophet Muhammad Peace be upon him.

Keywords: Feminism, Islamic feminism, secular feminism

1. INTRODUCTION

There are a thousand ways to be imaginative of any entity in this contemporary world. One can lend an opinion from different schools of thought while contemplating on this rather productive topic of how Islam has acted as a beacon of light to women, oppressed and empowered both in the same era. Looking beyond the horizon one finds a reality,

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exemplary in nature depicting the true importance of women as the center-piece imperative to creation, progress, and triumphs in the modern scenario. Islam has deemed women and men as equals in the eyes of God and no Human being let alone the gender is perceived as superior, other than those who practice Taqwah.

In the words of Abu al-Ala Mawdudi (d. 1979) taqwa is recognized as the basic Islamic principle of God-consciousness, together with brotherhood, equality, fairness, and justice, on which the true Islamic society is established. Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) systematically elaborated the significance of taqwa in his Quranic commentary, which is characterized by an emphasis on political activism (Taqwa, 2019).

It has been established that the issue pertinent to women and Islam has been crafted out of nowhere by the influential western mindset reeking of imperialism. One could easily conclude from the knowledge available that a mere difference of opinion which originated from catholic churches and protestant led to the birth of positivism (Zaman, 2013). Positivism is now regarded as the only approach to accepting or rejecting any way of life (Lundberg, 1939). It is very important to realize that each culture in its own way contributes to the very world that we live in, and trying to bombard a culture with particles from other cultures, times and again, is ultimately going to be the death of the very differences that are essential for individual recognition (Bennet, Bennet, & Lewis, 2015). The end result cannot be a good one in any manner.

The western narrative has failed to comprehend the fundamental message of Islam up to its full extent which has ultimately resulted in an almost immediate suggestion of modification by the perspective of the west (Lewis, 1990). Islam has been and still is an integral part of a Muslim's daily life and contributes to policies, laws, and state matters in ways unimaginable and inexplicable to the outsiders. Secularism is thought of as the

ultimate answer to every question asked about any aspect within the circle of Islam (Yalman, 1973). Muslims, men and women both follow the teachings of Quran and the Holy Prophet (P.B.U.H) in every walk of life and there is no second opinion in this regard. This study emphasizes on the empowerment of women in accordance with the teachings of Islam and focuses on extending the research area to clarify the misconceptions pertinent to rights of the women.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the rise of waves of feminism, a never ending debate on the topic of women rights and equity started and has continued since then. Here is the review of some delicately selected research studies to review the feminism and its nexus with Islamic ideology.

As per an article by (McAfee, 2018), “feminism” is a term with multiple uses and there is hardly any consensus over its meanings. The term is sometimes used for referring a political movement (historically famous) held in the Europe and United States; while many times it is used to refer to the general belief that world is unjust for women and not treat them equally. As per the author’s opinion, this term has a strong historical background in English, having its nexus with women’s activism from the late 19th century to the current times.

The study by (Smith, 1979) argues that Islam has sheltered the woman like no other religion in the world in terms of respect and honor. In fact, the women’s rights are clearly stated and a Muslim has to follow them as an obligation. Whether it is a matter of marriage, divorce or inheritance, Quran instructs about the provision of protection that was missing in Pre-Islamic society. However, the societal norms have always given those jurisdictions their own interpretation and marginalized women, making them deprived of the prerequisites they have been granted. Though, policies have been designed to favor

women a big time in the field of education and healthcare but there is still a long way to go in the areas of political participation, employment and divorce.

In her research study, (Hammer, 2016) shares that when she had diverted her research from Muslim women qua women to a more pronounced interest in gender as a category of discourse, as well as to questions of gendered authority and practice in Muslim anti-Domestic Violence work, she got to know the contradiction of opinions and perspectives with hers. This is especially obvious in encounters with ideas of protective patriarchy, marital hierarchy, and men as victims of domestic abuse.

One of the key findings of a report (Offenhauer, 2005), there is a lot of gender-bias prevail in Muslim societies and communities where the patriarchy remains the driving force. This originally pre-capitalistic system is being practiced more in rural areas despite of religion. This system is totally independent of religion where sometimes basic laws and jurisdictions are tarnished. Male domination, marriage before the legitimate age, non-consensual pregnancies, and separate code of ethics for men and women etc. are the general features of these type of societies.

3. GENDER DISPARITY – THE WAY FORWARD

The way feminism movements are heading forward is due to the unjust implementation of laws covering women rights. Because of this, gender disparity increases and thus the movement provokers get the chance to strengthen their narrative. Over the period of time, several strategies and approaches have been adopted in order to narrow down the gap between gender rights (Bryan & Varat, 2008). Yet all those approaches, strategies and for that matter debates have to be given more emphasis for their efficacy.

The policy makers need to brainstorm where the loopholes are and can be removed. They will have to design a proper framework that is based on Islamic Shariah laws and

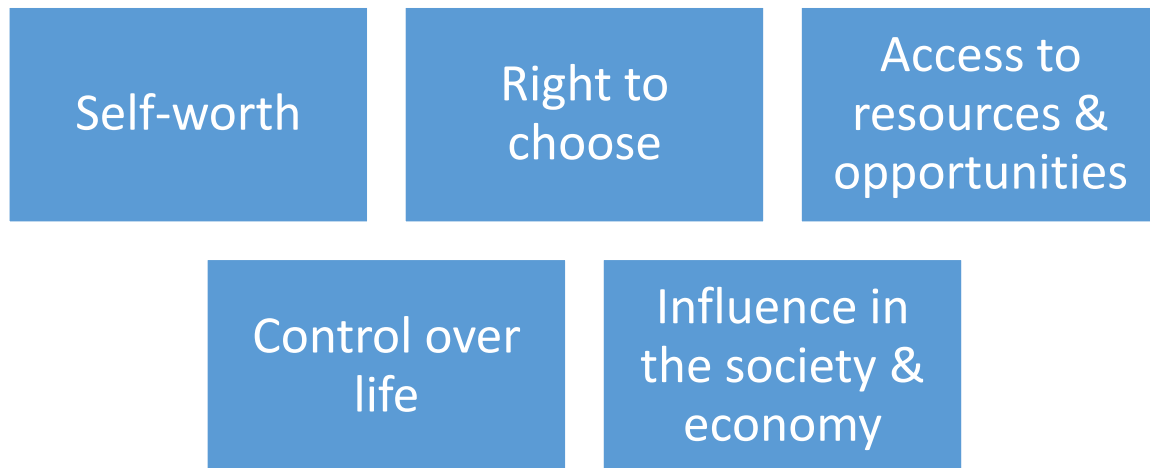
commands regarding women empowerment. Otherwise, the manipulation and exploitation of the women rights in the name of feminism will continue to bring its devastating effects in the society.

4. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In a broader perspective, women empowerment refers to the freedom of choice, consent and action to proceed life. A woman must have an equal control over resources and decisions like men do. The discrimination that makes women feel a bit or more inferior to men is the women oppression that leads to rebellious movements where a group of leftists come forward and raise the matter in a defiant way.

For a society to progress, it is important to keep the women empowered so that they play equal role in strengthening the economy and societal structure. Weak and marginalized women are nothing but an additional burden on the economy for so many reasons. Those reasons may include, e.g. a civil engineer who is not allowed to practice her profession on field is a waste of resources because heavy investments have been made during her study. Moreover, women under the heavy influence of male-dominance or patriarchy are not mentally stable. They continue to feel inferior and this inferiority complex lead to mental and emotional instability (Nasir, 2012).

If we divide this whole idea of women empowerment then we can break it into 5 components:



Giving these five prerequisites to women can bring a massive change in the society and also in the overall behavior of women.

4.1. Women & Islam – A matter overlooked

To prove the equality of status given to men and women in Islam, one crucial, unequivocal verse in the Qur'an is enough to quote:

“The believers, men and women, are allies (awliya) of one another. They enjoin the ‘common good’ (al ma‘ruf) and forbid the bad (al munkar), they observe prayers (salat) and give charitable alms (zakat) and obey God and his Prophet”; Qur'an, 9:71.

As a great surprise for all who are aware of the core meaning of this verse, this is commonly ignored by the patriarchal societies. This verse is a clear indication of how women are equal to men and are not supposed to be marginalized. This is also very tragic

that this verse is not quoted so often which is easy to comprehend rather the ones that have multiple interpretations.

The second term used in this verse, *awliya* refers to the alliance, mutual assistance and mutual reinforcement. Means, Allah is directly commanding the followers to be supportive for each other. Which means man is not superior when it comes to the rights and rules.

Muslims, as believers take it a pride in following the steps of Prophet Muhammad Peace and Mercy be upon Him, who has always preached people to treat women well. Before him, in Pre-Islamic societies were the ones where it would have been considered a crime to have a daughter. That concept was thrashed by Muhammad Peace be Upon Him once and for all. However, the Muslim societies, instead of following the guidelines given by Prophet Peace be Upon Him, follow the societal norms where patriarchy wins. This is why, the societies where Muslims are majority have started to observe a segment of women synchronizing their voices with the ones talking about the exploited form of feminism.

Feminism, in its purest form is a divine concept for it demands the equal rights for women. It will not be considered exaggeration if we claim that Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) has been the biggest supporter of feminism (in its pure form). The barriers of the kind Muslim women have been facing today were the ones faced by the women in 7th century but the Prophet Muhammad Peace be Upon Him thrashed them down. Even today, Muslim feminist will not blame Islam to be the reason of the prevailing prejudice against women. However, a very big segment of the Non-Muslim feminists believe that religion is the major cause behind all whatever discrimination is happening (Zainuddin & Mahdy, 2017).

4.2. Policy Making – Is it enough?

Policy without implementation is not valuable than a tissue paper. Policy making is important only when there is no policy available. However, every single Muslim country has a policy for women rights and the matters related to her. The problem is, there is so much societal pressure that implementation is obscured. So in a brief note, it is to be advised that the special emphasis should be given to the enactment of the already designed policies. This way the mere frustration among women related to their rights can be fixed gradually.

5. FEMINISM AND ISLAM

Margot badran writing on feminism in Islam who has concluded that the chance for productive conversation between Islamist feminists and other Islamic feminists is unlikely (Badran, Understanding Islam, Islamism, and Islamic Feminism, 2001). In *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Badran, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*, 2009), she follows others in distinguishing between Western and Islamic feminisms, which are less radical. She characterizes the latter as inherently religious, between Muslim.

- 1) Secular feminisms on the one side
- 2) Islamist feminisms on the other.

In Badran's view, secular feminism in Islam developed over a century ago and is located within the context of a secular territorial nation-state composed of equal citizens, irrespective of religious affiliation and a state protective of religion while not organized officially around religion. Islamic feminism, by contrast, burst on the global scene as a new discourse or interpretation of Islam grounded in *ijtihad*, or independent investigation

of the Qur'an and other religious texts. So in total according to her, there are 3 types of feminism

- 1) Secular feminism
- 2) Islamic feminism
- 3) Islamist feminism/ absolutist Islamic feminism

Now the thing about ISLAMIST feminist is that they promote Political Islam and its patriarchal version of the religion. Secular and Islamic feminism are not “hermetically sealed” and are open to dialogue while the third type i.e. Islamist feminist do not want to engage in dialogue with the other two.

6. MODERN ISLAMIC THEOLOGY WITH REFERENCE TO FEMINISM

Saba Mahmood's work on urban woman's mosque movement in Cairo (Mahmood, 2011) in which she argues that feminist theorists have not adequately responded to increased participation of women from variety of social classes in the Islamic revival, since their participation would intervene with their intentions.

In the movement, women gather together in a mosque to study Islamic texts, traditions and bodily practices aimed towards the “ideal virtuous self”. The characterization is not easy as in Mahmood's work she describes that the participants of the mosque gathering do not exactly like to be mentioned by the term feminists because although they promote feminist agenda of women empowerment but also concentrate on cultivating values such as submission and obedience.

Al Huda International considered a part of women mosque movement, has successfully incorporated itself in higher middle class and urban women of Pakistan. This organization deviates itself from secular or popular Islam and promotes HIJAB AND ABAYA amongst its students.

Besides, Al-Huda is regarded as a great contributor in educating women about their social status as given by the religion Islam, writers such as Khanum Shaikh and Sadaf Ahmed have been highly critical of the philosophy behind the Al-Huda International as it promotes the puritanical and fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that rose in Saudi Arabia in eighteenth century (Ahmad, 2009).

7. Neo Mu'tazilites

We may conclude then that some contemporary feminist appeals have found the rationalism and ethical humanism of the medieval Mu'tazilite Theologians amenable to their own understanding of the Islamic Shari'ah and for their own ethical responsibility for establishing a just society. These "neo Mu'tazilites" operate as individual scholars who participate in common liberal theological conversation through conferences, professional societies, and their writings. They do not attempt to challenge their Islamist opponents (or each other) with the dialectical methods of disputation that dominated discourse in the ninth to eleventh centuries, nor do they attempt to revive the scholastic categories of the medieval mutakallimun. However, they do attach importance to reviving Mu'tazili theological ideas in the form of a modern Islamic discourse that, even though its ancestors lost to Ash'arism as the main Sunni school of theology, by its rationalism and potential for liberalism and progressivism makes it an alternative "Islamic" form of reasoning.

8. THE FREEDOM REDEFINED - DISCUSSION

The loud defenders of secular feminism, when they talk about freedom mean something far above than demanding for right to choices, marriage, vote or wage gap etc. They are asking for the type of life when their id no one to supervise whether a woman is following any discipline. They demand for the complete freedom where nobody should dictate

them what to say what not to and what to wear what not to. This type of narrative could gain the attention in Western societies and it did, but when it came to the conservative Muslim societies like Pakistan, the supporters of this theory were in hot waters. For example, some activists organized a protest with the name “Aurat March” against unjust restrictions and taboos attached with women. However, this March created a lot of backlash for some of the participants were carrying posters with some explicit comments that contradict the moral and ethical values let alone the religious ones. Those who carried those posters had their own say on this but it was not appreciated much. So the bottom line is, the marginalized women of the society deserve equal rights to men but it never means that they are given with the freedom from every sort of discipline, whether it is religious or ethical.

9. CONCLUSION

Some people think feminism is a theory of seculars who seek for the extreme level of freedom of women where she is allowed to break religious, cultural and ethical boundaries so easily. Little do they know that feminism, in its purest form is something else, bigger and better than this. Feminism is the idea where gender disparity and bias against women in the societies have to be eradicated. People, when they research about women rights and jurisdictions, they will come to know Islam is the biggest shelter who has provided women with impeccable values and Prophet Muhammad Peace be Upon Him as the biggest advocate of feminism when it came to inheritance laws, marriage and divorce matters, respect and much more. These values were totally absent in Pre-Islamic societies.

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