

***Islamic Feminism: From Women Advocacy to
Reformist Movement***

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Abstract

The movement of Islamic feminism is emerging with new trends and setups around the Muslim world since its emergence from early 90s to to-date. This paper primarily intends to explore Islamic Feminism its role, major trends, objectives, reform strategy and origins. The core objective of the feminist movement is a societal change of inadequate relations between males and females, maximum women freedom, including rejection of patriarchy against traditional status and role of women and beyond. The analytical research methodology has been adopted in this study with qualitative paradigm. On the basis of available literature, this study notices, the feminist movement has become a most vibrant reformist movement of the Muslim society in modern era. However, under the influence of Western feminism, Muslim women leadership feels a distance between socio-religious norms and feminist demands in Muslim world. The study suggests, they should link their demands with core issues of the Muslim women as unemployment, lack of education, heritage rights and right of marriage and divorce for more effectiveness.

Keywords: *Islamic Feminism, trends, objectives, reforms movement, women rights, advocacy*

Introduction

Largely, Feminism is a global movement for women's rights and gender equality, but in reality, it can take many diverse forms across nations, ideologies, and religions. Even though women's subordination is a global problem, its manifestations may differ despite the many similarities and differences among the various nations and cultures. For example, women's subordination can be similarly manifested in domestic violence

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against women and discrimination in the workplace.¹ The dominance of the Western narrative of the female subject of feminism makes it seem foreseeable that all women's equality struggles be supposed as feminist; that exertion is apparent in contestations naming Islamic feminism. Feminists interpret Muslim women's gender consciousness and understanding of sex equality as a form of feminism because of the imperial relationship they hold under feminism.² In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Muslims and others in the East, as well as Westerners, developed and shaped feminism as a phenomena that dealt with issues of women's rights, women's liberation, and gender equality as an integral aspect of the rights, freedom, and equality of everyone.³ It's also a debate in Muslim societies that how many types of feminism are within the Islamic or Muslim context. Therefore, Karam (1998) argues that within the Muslim societies besides the secular feminists there are two other versions of feminists: The Islamists and the Muslims. The author of this article contends that Islam is a religion, and Muslims are those who practice it. Therefore, women's rights advocates can be classified as either Muslim feminists or Islamist feminists, but not as members of two different categories.⁴ It seems like that the term Islamic or Muslim feminism is yet to be in ambiguity in front of scholars of the field and feminist activists. Some scholar seems it's a vague term. The details will be revealed in the paper. However, we cannot ignore its effectiveness and dynamic role in the Muslim society. Hence, the Islamic Feminist movement become a most vibrant reformist movement of the Muslim society in modern era. In this context, this study is an effort to explore Islamic Feminism its role, origins, objectives, strategy and its historical background in a brief.

Research Methodology:

This paper is an analytical study based on primary and secondary data that have been used to deduct the conclusion qualitatively. The authors thoroughly reviewed the published literature on feminist thoughts and Islamic feminism. The related research material has been extracted published research work from various esteemed journals, research reports, important books and significant web links. The Analytical and critical research methodology has been adopted to identify Islamic feminism, its role, strategy, major trends, origin and objectives. Primary and secondary sources have been used to explore feminist thought in Islamic context.

Themes of Islamic Feminism:

When we talk about core subject and themes of the feminism in an Islamic context. The trend are diverse and sometime different from secular feminism. From its emergence, the movement of Islamic feminism is emerging with new trends and setups around the Muslim world. Grami Amal pointed out, "Islamic Feminism brings

up issues related to identity formation and the means of expressing it, especially as regards feminine identity and anti-Western discourse that perceive women as the symbol of cultural identity. Islamic Feminism may express a view in which religious identity predominates over all other forms”⁵.

This trend have been seen that sometimes , Muslim feminists use Islamic texts like the Qur'an and Hadith in their fight for gender equality, in opposition to secular feminists. From an Islamic stance, they view that some of the Qur'ānic text as a benchmark for gender equality. Whether it's right or wrong interpretation, but a renowned Muslim feminist , Amina Wadud sheds a light in his book entitled, *Quran and Women*” on this important issue.⁶

Almighty Allah declares in the Holy Quran: “O mankind, Reverence your Lord Who created you from a single person created of like nature his mate and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; reverence Allah through Whom you demand your mutual and the wombs for Allah ever watches over you”.⁷ The other verse of the Quran reveals more clearly respect and modesty of the women. “Live with them honorably. If you dislike them, it may be that you dislike a thing through which Allah brings a great deal of good”.⁸ While the Holy Prophet (PBUH) advised women likewise: the first lady, Hazrat Aisha reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace, and blessings be upon him, said, “The best of you are the best to their families, and I am the best to my family. When your companion dies, then do not abuse him.”⁹ The other hadith defines the duties of women in his house and family. The Messenger of Allah said, “Surely, Every one of you is a guardian and is responsible for his charges: a man is the guardian of his family and is responsible for his subjects; a woman is the guardian of her husband's home and of his children and is responsible for them. Surely, every one of you is a guardian and responsible for his charges”.¹⁰

These verses or the Quran and traditions of the Prophet of Allah Muhammad (PBUH) narrate the Islamic view point regarding respect and status of the women in Islamic context. This opinion one side portrays the status of women while other hand reveals the duties of women in a Muslim family and society.

Similarly, several Muslim feminists think that the Qur'an liberates women from unnecessary sanctions and the patriarchal system. However, the Qur'an has been mostly interpreted to justify women's subordination, and therefore to liberate women is to reinterpret the Qur'an from a gender equality perspective.¹¹ The quest to define Islamic feminism is frequently seen as an effort to define and fix Muslim women in opposition to the prevalent narrative of a patriarchal Islam and for the benefit of an inclusive feminist paradigm¹².

It's a common perception that mostly the feminists, which are working in Muslim societies and for Muslim women, even though they are Muslims, do not usually know much about Islamic teaching and therefore they use secular laws and conventions, both national and international, such as CEDAW, instead of Islam, in their struggle for gender equality. This raises a greater concern that feminist safaris are functioning along western lines and orientations both inside and outside of feminist communities. Okin contends that there was a great deal of criticism coming from both inside and outside of their own nations in the early 1970s when third-world women somewhat reluctantly adopted the name "feminist." These criticisms frequently had crippling effects on feminism, especially for those who were attempting to be effective inside their native societies.¹³

The Rise of Islamic Feminism:

History shows that women of many races and nationalities, as well as Easterners and Westerners, Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as those of other religions, contributed to the development of feminism.¹⁴ Those who claim that feminism is 'western' and 'white' do not know their history and perpetuate the circulation of myths. Here the Grami Amal views seem more valid. She contended it likewise;

“The diminishing number of supporters of secular feminism and the difficulties of recruiting new and younger members on account of the distortions associated with the term in Muslim societies. Feminism is deemed a foreign, Western concept intent on westernizing society and changing existing social, cultural, and political arrangements. It is seen as an excuse for Western feminists to interfere in Islamic societies through various United Nations and other organizations, a perception that has led to the isolation of feminists from the general public”.¹⁵

Since women's issues have become a central theme in contemporary Islamic discourse during the past two decades, a new generation of feminists has emerged. Ahmadi, Fereshteh comments views are very interesting to understand rise of Islamic Feminism in modern Muslim societies ; “Everywhere in Muslim countries, Muslim and secular feminists, as well as those in political power, look for Islamic solutions to a very modern problem that is the result of the changed status of women”.¹⁶ Discourses on so-called Islamic feminism can be found in the 1980s and 1990s, claims Margot Badran, an authority and ardent supporter of the movement. According to her, a significant paradigm shift in Muslim gender thinking-which would later be referred to as "Islamic feminism"-was taking place in the 1980s and early 1990s. For the last three

decades, Islamic feminism has spread globally producing vast literature with an ever-increasing number of Islamic feminist scholars and activists.¹⁷

In 1990 when religious identity politics in general, including political Islam or Islamism, was rampant a group of international scholars, mainly women, gathered in Helsinki for a Roundtable on Identity Politics and Women organized by sociologist Val Moghadam at the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER). They came together to examine women and identity politics. They wanted to compare ways identity politics shaped and controlled women and were concerned about how women themselves were often complicit in supporting identity politics and its patriarchal agenda. Additionally, we observe a new tactic being used by women in Islamic nations to fight for their constitutional rights. Although we also observed it under the Taliban administration in Afghanistan, this trend is more prevalent in Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Amal might provide an interpretation;

“The ever-expanding Islamist movements and their success in attracting women as they gain dominance in the public arena and infiltrate all state institutions. There is a new generation of Islamist women known for their daring and confrontational style as regards the role and status of women in an Islamic state. Women activists insist that Islam is in harmony with the principle of human rights for women established by the United Nations, and cast doubts on the mainstream women's liberation movement which they believe has failed to address these rights, or promote the status of women both within the family and in society at large”¹⁸.

In other words, Islamic feminist's stance seems more reflective as if they are more inclined towards progressive approach than being more traditional. In comparison to religious groups, these Islamic feminists are more focused to choose a more liberal path out of the paths they have been lived a life before that was more consistent with societal values than their mixed approaches(secular and Islamic).

Divergence, feminists, and Islamic feminism

In the Muslim world, more and more women are demanding equality and getting involved in politics. Women are also working to improve the status of women in Islamic societies at the religious and cultural levels. Whether such solutions qualify as "feminist" in the sense that they represent women's perspectives has been a topic of discussion among many academics. In other words, is it possible to talk about Islamic feminism?¹⁹ The contemporary anti-modernization movement occasionally introduces new and dubious concepts and terminology, such as the "Islamic Declaration for Human Rights," "Islamic Democracy," "Islamic Socialism," "Islamic Baking," and so

forth. It is conceived that the development of such new formulations is not confined to the current; the Islamic world is also subjected to an onslaught of concepts and terminology related to Islam, such as "Islamophobia," "Gender Jihad," and others. The most recent of these is known as "Islamic Feminism," which is described as a global movement that unites all Muslim women who want to "redefine their identity in a more authentically modern manner that is appropriate to their religion and culture.

Moreover, in the 1990s, researchers like Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, and Amina Wadud sparked a new line of inquiry that connected the degradation of Muslim women's standing to early Muslim civilizations and modern Muslim behavior. This discursive shift and subsequent work which brings the feminist analysis to bear upon Islamic thought has come to be theorized as "Islamic Feminism."²⁰ Islamic feminism has roots outside of Islamic nations and Muslim-dominated society. Its boundaries now extend from the east to the west. A notable research scholar of Islamic Feminism Amal Grami identified:

"The geographic area of Islamic Feminism has expanded to include North America, several Asian, African, Arab and European countries, in addition to individual women from various backgrounds and professions who decided to join the movement. Some of these women lived under colonial rule and witnessed national struggles, while others did not; some are veiled, others are not; some are Muslims from the heartland; others are from the Diaspora; some are Arab Muslims, and some are non-Arab"²¹.

The classical Islamic term of *Ijtihād* (independent examination of religious sources) and *Tafsīr* (interpretation of the Qur'an)" are the primary methodology of Islamic feminism. The employment of "methods and instruments of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, etc." It is another practice of Islamic feminism. They draw inspiration for this from their own experiences and concerns as women. Beyond its expansion, compared to the towering Islamic scholars, the reputations of the Islamic feminists are far less. Kausar, Zeenath argues about differences of Muslim scholar's critique, "A gender difference exists between the Islamic scholars and the Islamic feminists due to an ongoing direct Islamic critique by Muslim women scholars on Islamic feminism which requires time to come to the fore"²².

In conclusion, scholars who oppose the notion of convergence and maintain the separation of Islam and feminism include Zeenath Kausar, Haideh Moghissi, and Reza Afshari. Scholars who support convergence refer to it as "Islamic feminism," as

have Badran, Miriam Cooke, and Jeenah. Thirdly, there are academics like Amna Wadud and Barlas who disagree with how Islam and feminism are portrayed and who fight against having their work simply labelled as "feminist." Finally, there is literature that takes Islam for granted while using feminist analysis, allowing for the confluence. This latter group includes Wadud and Barlas as well as other researchers like Mernissi and Ahmed, though in different ways.²³

Nonetheless, by the late 1980s, Islamic feminism constituted the basis for and content of the discourse on women. Women's activists and secular, Islamic, and Muslim feminists sought to redefine and reconstitute the idea and consciousness of women.²⁴ By the turn of the twenty-first century, the term "Islamic feminism" had become widely recognized. Asma Barlas' 2002 publication "Believing Women in Islam: Un-reading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an," which untangled patriarchal meanings affixed to the Qur'an, was immediately hailed as another work of Islamic feminism. In addition to continuing on her hermeneutic work on women and gender, Wadud wrote *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* in 2006, which some may argue better encapsulates the goal of "Islamic feminism."²⁵

Contrary to this, some scholars consider the term Islamic feminism a contradictory and oxymoron term in its original sense. Not only western scholars but also Muslim scholars see to cortices over it. As an Iranian Scholar Hammad Shahidain argues;

"If feminism is meant by easing patriarchal system pressure on women, making patriarchy less appalling, "Islamic Feminism", is certainly a feminist trend but if feminism is a movement to abolish patriarchy, to protect human beings from being prisoners of fixed identities, to contribute towards a society in which individuals can fashion their lives free from economic, political, social and cultural constraints than Islamic feminism proves considerably inadequate. I define feminism in this later term, and for that reason, I consider Islamic Feminism Oxymoron".²⁶

Until today, the consistency of Islamic values and feministic approaches have not been unnatural. From the very beginning, it caught the main issue and further created debates instead its solutions to be implemented with mutual agreement by Muslim feminists and Islamic scholars. Some individuals nowadays believe that women are unshackled in the Western countries and that the women's liberation movement began in the twentieth century. Women did not initiate the women's rights mobility, but the revolutionary freedom of women and their rights were given to them by religion of Islam in the seventh century through the guided Holy Prophet (PBUH).

Islamic Feminism and misperception:

Feminism is considered among the most significant and most advanced movements and reformist thought of the intellectual and academic culture of western and esteemed countries. We see the spread of feminist ideas today in social institutions, in the media, or everyday practice. It also has an impact on eastern countries' social and religious structures.

One of the alarming concerns is, the influence of Western feminism on Islamic societies and its emergence as home-based or local notion. He has been transferred through different means to Muslims communities as cultural revival that goes accurately with current modern demands. A leading feminist scholar Margon Badron's views:

"Islamic feminism like the secular nationalist feminism of its day, is a product of its time. Islamic feminism appeared on the scene in the wake of the spread of Islamism, or political Islam and with the broader ascendancy of an Islamic religious and cultural revival. An examination of popular and scholarly literature leads to a basic definition of Islamic feminism as feminism anchored in the discourse of Islam with the Qur'an as its central text, and exegesis as its main methodology. The core idea of Islamic feminism is the full equality of all Muslims, male and female alike, in both the public and private spheres".²⁷

At that time, Islamic feminism's objectives are both religious and socially reformist. Activists, writers, and academics are frequently among those who support it. "It is linked to democratic reform movements within the Islamic world as well as to civil rights movements in Europe and the USA and is supported by actors who resist the advances of patriarchal religious positions as well as Western secular definitions of modernity".²⁸

Therefore, Nadja-Christina Schneider noticed in his study:

"The very recent phenomenon called Islamic feminism receives quite a lot of attention And Criticism from academia and media alike. Although it is a discourse whose strategy and praxis are primarily script-related, there seems to be an overt tendency to equate Islamic feminism with an ideology for a transnational social or political movement. As a perceived singular movement, Islamic feminism is often distinguished from two other supposedly singular movements, namely "Muslim feminism" and "Islamist feminism".²⁹

One of the main controversies around the term 'Islamic feminism' has been the fact that it combines the seemingly contradictory and bi-polar opposites of 'Islamism', on one hand, and 'feminism', on the other, which have often been perceived, or more accurately misperceived, as uncomfortable bedfellows. "One of the main reasons behind this perception, or misperception, is that the term 'feminism'

has been widely defined as 'connoting Western women's activism and radical political movements, which made it in the minds of many incompatible with the prevailing norms and religious teachings guiding women's morality, behavior and conduct, especially in Arab and/or Muslim societies'.³⁰

However, it is crucial to keep in mind that there is a significant divide between the modernists and the most militant fundamentalist groups in the Muslim world today, and that these latter groups, "despite the media attention they receive, represent only the fringes of Islamic activism," when mapping these various trends and orientations, which coexist one another under the larger umbrella of the modern Islamic revival movement..³¹

Correspondingly, we see that Muslim women's identity And Protection are under question in Western media. As it could be understood in an interview and expression of a Muslim woman Mrs. Saliha in the UK.

"It's always been difficult for me to accept that people are seeing me as an inspiration. [But] people have come up to me and said that, and it's deeply flattering. I think it's a huge responsibility as well because being in the public eye and with people looking at your actions and assessing them you come under more scrutiny than you ever have done before so I view it as a challenge and a responsibility."³²

However, it's assumed that according to some Muslim and non-Muslim Scholars, civilizing and liberating the Asian and African nations from the West is a part of the Western attempts to empower women or alter their situation in society has been widely perceived as part of a postcolonial agenda and an attack on cultural and religious identity and authenticity. This view has been further strengthened in recent years, where Western military interventions in well-known Islamic Countries Afghanistan and Iraq were both partially legitimated by calls to free Muslim women.³³

Pakistan 'Aurat March is one of the best examples of Media influence and the public reaction to such feminist activities in Muslim societies.

"The relationship between Islam, feminism and women in the context of Pakistan has become of immense interest to media practitioners and scholars. Feminist scholars have written on feminism's applicability and challenges in a society like Pakistan. The country's conservative social norms have been supposedly challenged and the women's rights movement is perceived as "anti-Islam" and "foreign-funded" by different elements in society."³⁴

Contrary to this, it also observed that some important women issues was highlighted in the society through this significant March. As a study sheds lights up on it. "The Aurat March fills the gap between contemporary Pakistani women issues and Islamic ruling concerning

women's rights. These marches have also drawn the attention of religious scholars of the country towards emerging current social issues to build a viable and dynamic Muslim society based on Islamic teachings, social justice, and constitutional rights".³⁵

The above discussion concludes that feminism and its public reflection have a close relationship in Muslim societies that allows for the emergence of a dynamic movement for socio-political, socio-economic and religio-political change. However, it sometimes appears as though they are slavishly adhering to the standards and values of western nations while painting a very bizarre picture of Muslim society. For the average individual, this is unacceptable, and the media forces them to criticise them.

Islamic feminism as a worldview that advocates Reform;

Similar to western feminism, Islamic feminism has its own variations. Feminism's goals are typically described as fighting for gender equality and human rights, although we may define it as liberal, radical, traditional, or transnational. The most hazardous of them all and one that resembles western feminism is radical feminism. According to accounts from the Wilson Center, it is intense.

"Islamic feminism is more radical than secular feminism which called for equal rights in the public sphere but complementary rights in the private sphere. Concerning the public sphere, Islamic feminists argue that women may be heads of state and imams, a claim that secular feminists never advanced. In the private sphere, Islamic feminists are challenging the conventional notion of male authority over females in marriage and the family. Islamic feminists also call upon all Muslims, including men, to live by the egalitarianism of Islam, something secular feminism side-stepped".³⁶

Keeping in mind, the Islamic feminist movement is a new movement in postmodern reformist philosophy. It is reintroducing women's issues, concerns, and voices, which had been muted by the time the Islamic fiqh schools were established and began to be used in the formation of Islamic theology (Ilm ul Kalam) and jurisprudence (Fiqh). In this way, they want to alter the way modernist thought has traditionally interpreted the Islamic sacred scripture. They see it as a fundamental barrier to women's rights and other demands for gender equality.

Professor, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, one of the leading voices of Islamic feminism shed light on this issue accordingly.

"The close link between theology and politics can be a double-edged sword – it can cut both ways. It has been one of the main obstacles that Muslim women face, but it has also the potential to be a significant and effective means for challenging patriarchal laws and unjust structures. Since the nineteenth century, Muslim women's quest for equality has been hostage to various

political forces and tendencies. Paradoxically, the rise of political Islam in the second part of the twentieth century, and the politics of the 'War on Terror' in the present century, have shed new light on how ideological dichotomies such as 'secular' versus 'religious' feminism, or 'Islam' versus 'human rights' have masked the real site of the battle".³⁷

The above-mentioned decryption shows how the Islamic feminists portray the Islamic fiqh and theology. At the same time, they criticize classical Islamic jurisprudence, and at the same time, they search for and find out ways to use it for gender equality, women's rights, anti-patriotism, and feministic objectives. In the above case, we could not differentiate between the Islamic and general feminism movements at all. A pioneer feminist Amina Wadud views also support it. She identified in a study, "----- one had to choose between feminisms that were overwhelmingly hostile to religion-especially Islam-and the dominant interpretation of Islam that was overwhelmingly patriarchal. These are now referred to as secular feminism and Islamism or political Islam".³⁸

However, most of the time they mix up the arguments because they want to simultaneously gain from Islamic and Western sources, thus they don't really care if the sources are relevant. They don't hold back when criticising Islamic sources, their interpretation, and occasionally the divine scripture. It appears that Islamic feminism has a new trend. The feminist movement and Islamic tradition have cooperated and clashed in the past. On the reaction, there is no agreement. Here, I would like to offer Lois Lamy Al Faruqi's fascinating and accurate response.

"Whether living in the Middle East or Africa, in Central Asia, in Pakistan, in Southeast Asia, or Europe and the Americas, Muslim women tend to view the feminist movement with some apprehension. Although there are some features of the feminist cause with which we as Muslims would wish to join hands, other features generate our disappointment and even opposition. There is, therefore, no simple or "pat" answer to the question of the future cooperation or competition which feminism may meet in an Islamic environment".³⁹

Sequentially, on the basis of above discussion, it's perceived that the feminist movement in Muslim countries has a verity in terms of acceptance, rejection and issue which have been described in media debates and women marches. Although, the Muslim women want to flash out their genuine issues under the umbrella of feminist movement. But its seems under the influence of West is dominate so the crucial issue of Muslim women are going over looked and the western based issue get more attraction in the media . However, if Islamic feminist movement link its demands and objectives with core issues of the Muslim women as unemployment, lack of education,

right of heritage, right of marriage and divorce, right to achieve more balanced status for women, right to participate in legislation than it can play more effective and dynamic role in the Muslim society.

Conclusion

The discussion of equality between men and women and Muslims is frequently sensationalized and plagued with generalizations. Muslim women are not all Woman victims, powerless creatures, misfits, or religious or cultural victims. They are not tools for condemning Islam or for sympathetic Westerners to applaud themselves on their exceptionalism that has nothing to do with superiority or inferiority. True Muslim solidarity with women entails paying less attention to self-serving male rulers and more attention to the lively, often contentious debates that take place within Muslim societies. The debate above makes it clear that some Muslim feminist activists have been moving away from many aspects of western feminism in order to fight for their rights. Due to the tremendous opposition they have encountered inside Muslim societies.

Feminist conflict is seen as a form of conflict between Islamic principles and Islamic culture, just as it is in Muslim communities. The particular concern is to pay more attention to the diverse voices of women and their concepts about how they want to enhance their own cause while remaining constrained and consistent with cultural and religious values. These are secular and religious voices, young and old, and they are frequently critical of Western policies in the region. For this, the media means can play a perfect mediating role for the promotion of constructive values as we observed a significant impact of media and feminism on the public and society. Most of the time, the public has little interest in these matters of the elite, but they do support the demands of the feminist movement, which is also supported by the media

Furthermore, it is understood that in the feminist battle, ignorance, some cultural traditions, and conflicting communal customs are more problematic than Sharia Laws and Islamic teachings themselves. The majority of women's rights movements are not directed against Islam but rather against non-Islamic social norms such polygamy, marital status, rights to health, girls' education, property rights, and unwarranted male control and meddling in women's affairs.

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