



Islamic Feminism's Facet of Un-Reading and Re-Reading the Traditional Sources

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Abstract:

From the last almost two decades, Islamic feminism has been the subject of analysis. This debate has raised many questions like does feminism has any space in Islam? Is Islamic feminism a movement of Muslim women? Is Islamic feminism a secular discourse and or a movement? Is Islamic feminism against the basic/fundamental principles of Islam? Is Islamic feminism opening new doors to achieve gender equality for Muslim women? This paper presents a critical analysis of such questions and many others in the light of work done by prominent Islamic feminists including Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Irshad Manji, Fatima Mernissi and Margot Badran.

Key words: Islam and feminism, Re-visiting traditional sources, Amīna Wadūd.

Feminism, as a concept, was conceived and perpetuated in France in the late 1880s. Though an ideology of the 'West', contrary to popular and Western belief, feminism was also rigorously explored and used in the East from the very onset of its birth. Known then as 'Nisa'yya' in Arabic, the ideology was advocated in the 1920s Egyptian world and was as unwelcome as it was in the French and other Western world¹. The notion of Islamic Feminism, however, is not as ancient. With the proliferation of 'Feminism' and its objectives of political, social and cultural independence and rights, many a women of Islamic origin voiced their reservations with the patriarchal stronghold on the Islamic culture and religion. Using the feminist discourse and mandate of complete liberty and independence, a schism, self proclaimed Progressive Muslims and labelled for convenience as Muslim Secular Feminists, attempted to highlight the misogyny and female subjugation in the Islamic world and literature. Their aim was to institute the understanding and notion that a just God is free from such social injustice; thereby, highlighting the significance of separation of church and state and the consequent effect on social and gender norms. Incensed and provoked by this batch of 'Muslims' and their beliefs, a new group of Muslims arose. They hailed, applauded and supported the

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**Assistant Prof., Dept. of Gender Studies, Punjab University, Lahore, Pakistan. existing Islamic literature, albeit of patriarchal and subordinating nature and influence, and considered it in all sense liberatory for the female faction of the religion. This clan was recognized as 'Islamist Feminist' in the academia and feminist discourse. This group was indeed paradoxical in nature for several Muslims and Non-Muslims alike and, gradually, a new bloc arose. Its belief was marginalized between that of Islamic and Progressive tendencies in that while they recognized that Islam was liberatory, they also conceded to the realization that there were rigorous and exhausting patriarchal tendencies in the religion and culture. This piece revisits the prominent literature of and about this new bloc and presents its ideology and stake in the Islamic world and feminist discourse.

Although the scholars and supporters of this neo-Muslim-feminism separate themselves from the label, they are, regardless, considered and called 'Islamic Feminists'. The works of Islamic Feminism, for the most part, are critical of the existing interpretation of the Islamic texts and are at perpetual contention with the patriarchal social contexts within which they are translated, understood, interpreted and consequently implemented. It is in this spirit that they call for the un-reading of the texts, followed closely by a more informed and careful re-reading. For them, this two-fold process of un-reading and re-reading lends to the female faction of Islam much agency and frees them from not only the patriarchal control of fathers/husbands/brothers, but also relegates to them the agency and true character and role of a believing subject to God - something that the 'rule of the father' and primary obedience to him snatches from them.

This article revisits and reviews Margot Badron's significant penmanship on Islamic Feminism's advent and evolution and the notion's primary discourse and tenets. In comparison to this new theologized, though liberal, feminism is the scholarship of Irshad Manji, a Progressive Muslim and perpetuator of secular Muslim feminism. Her works problematize the politicized, sexualized and subordinated female gender in the Islamic world and attempt to extenuate and redeem such a predicament through 'secular' means. In contrast are the primary and preliminary Islamic Feminists - Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Asra Nomani and Fatima Mernissi. Their works together are canonized under the banner of 'Islamic Feminism' and, thus, exhort the need to revise traditional religious sources - which, in short, is the basic precept and dogma of Islamic Feminism.

Margot Badran is a historian of Feminist Studies, notably Islamic Feminism. Her works particularly engage the Islamic approach and wielding of Feminism in both the Western and Eastern world. Furthermore, they trace the birth, evolution and entrenchment of both the

seminal and recent literature and, thus, offers a detailed view of development and progress of this feminist schism. Her paper, 'Engaging Islamic Feminism', particularly calls into account this slow and then booming development. In 1990's, Badran notes, when identity and gender politics problems were common, some Muslim ladies stepped to the forefront to "subvert the patriarchal Islamist project through what appeared to be a new form of feminism in making ... [they] were beginning to re-read the Quran in order to reclaim the rights accorded to them by Islam"². The aim was to re-examine the "Quran to work out a new 'feminist' paradigm grounded in scripture". Badran further mentions that these new champions "abhorred" the word feminism and were yet appreciative and acknowledging of the work the despised label had done at home and abroad. She analyzes historically, though, that the Secular/Progressive Muslim Feminists were the first to originate and in doing so became the forerunners of Islamic Feminists. Progressive feminists' mandate was from the Western precepts of the selfsame ideology and their aim was to lend the Muslim women complete freedom in the public sphere; private, however, was not completely approached and, resultantly, patriarchy maintained its reins in that sphere.

Towards the end of the 20th Century, when Muslim Secular Feminist bloc was failing miserably at the domestic level and the public had also been attacked and subverted by the Islamist clan, the time was ripe for a "powerful gender sensitive Islamic discourse to counteract the patriarchal resurgence imposed in the name of religion"². It was then that a vast amount of Muslim women writers came to the forefront and championed the equality rights. Iran, Malaysia, United States and Morocco witnessed budding, yet rigorous, female scholars who approached the scripture to elucidate gender and social equality and justice². Badran discusses and exhausts the discourse of Islamic Feminism in her other work *Feminism in Islam -Secular and Religious Convergences* and highlights the constitution of the ideology's fundamental arguments, expectations, contentions and objectives.

The historian writes that "Islamic Feminism argues that the Quran affirms the principle of equality of all human beings, and that the practice of equality between women and men (and other categories of people) has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas (ideology) and practices"¹. This brand of feminism believes that Islamic Jurisprudence in its classical form is "heavily saturated" in patriarchal thinking of the day; thereby, the eventually formulated Shariah objectifies and subjugates the feminine gender. Hadiths of unsure provenance, and sometimes otherwise, are also conveniently used to "shore up patriarchal ideas" and are thus of "negative

consequence for women". Resultantly, the "basic priority of Islamic Feminism is to go straight to Islam's fundamental text, the Quran"¹.

The basic methodology, then, of Islamic Feminists is that of Ijtihad and Tafasir followed by the handy tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, etc. This new Islamic Feminism Hermeneutics offers compelling evidence that the principle of gender equality is prevalent in the Quran and it is the male self-serving/patriarchal influence on the exegesis that has rendered the religion into a male centered and biased belief-system. It is, therefore, that the Islamic feminists argue that the present reading be un-read. Islam and its primary text enjoin social justice and equality of "An-Nas", the humankind. How is it then possible that women be marginalized, subjugated, violated and ignored? Such compelling arguments, Badron pens, allow Islamic Feminism to champion over Progressive/Secular Muslim Feminists. Unlike the latter's objectives, the public and the private become a single entity and the rule of fathers is expunge un-regretfully.

In stark contrast to this feminist discourse and objective, is the mandate of Secular Muslim Feminists. I visit it over here to put into perspective the former's extremely different ideology and approach. Amongst the horde of Progressive Muslims vouching for Feminism and freedom in Islamic world is the Canadian author and activist, Irshad Manji³. Manji is an avid proponent of Secularism i.e. the separation of the Church and the State and so is visible in her works - mostly in *Allah, Liberty and Love*³. Although a "loose", progressive Muslim and believer in God, her works have quite less to do with the Islamic traditional sources. She completely sets herself apart from all the secondary sources and only refers to the Quran, and that too quite sparingly. Although, like Islamic Feminism, Manji emphasizes on Ijtihad, she does not go into the details of the verses and nor does she problematize the patriarchal interpretations of the verses. Although, she does contend the gender and culture politics within Islam, she is more interested in the freedom to question religion and its traditions. Manji portrays in her book a picture of an immensely Loving, Affectionate and Intelligent God that desires progress and development. Consequently, the author argues, Muslims should stay abreast of schisms and other tacky ritualistic and traditional trappings and connect with God on a more personal and deeper level. This is, in reality, her call to dissent from the stagnancy of the traditional ways and norms. Such a recourse, Manji believes, will free women from all shackles of

gender constraints and make the Muslim community more humane and distant from religious and gender violence. In short, the activist's mandate stems from the Secular and Western Feminist ideologies. She is not at par with Islamic Feminism who take the trouble to rigorously engage Islamic texts, exegesis and hermeneutics to free the religion from patriarchal and misogynistic trends. Manji, instead, resorts to the more liberal take on religion and exhorts the Muslim community to question, dissent and establish a more personal relationship with God. These 3 elements, along with many others, she argues lend the Muslim community faith and ability and endurance to remain informed and be active agents and participants in the modern world³.

Amina Wadud, on the other hand, is for the convenience of labels - an Islamic Feminist of Afro-American origin. She is considered one of the pioneer and most radical scholars of the bloc and has the designation and brand of leading the first mixed-gender prayer. Her two seminal works *Qur'an and Woman* and *Inside Gender Jihad: Reform in Islam* are classics in the Feminist discourse and do much to elucidate the methodologies of the ideology.

Wadud's 1999 publication, *Qur'an and Woman*, is a "female-sensitive" and "inclusive" understanding of the Quran that aims to establish once and for all the equality of the two genders, alongside their agency and independence. Wadud begins by problematizing the identity politics ripe with in the Islamic culture. She notes that men are considered the "normative" beings and women are compared to and analyzed accordingly. It is as if the former category is whole and the latter deficient. Years and years of exegesis have either held on to this view or perpetuated it implicitly, without giving much thought to verses that oppose and simultaneously establish the equality, sameness and complementary nature of the two genders. Wadud urges upon the need to un-read this felony and re-read from a neutral, un-patriarchal lens and standpoint.

Furthermore, Wadud proposes a "hermeneutics of Tawhid to emphasize how the unity of the Quran permeates all its parts"⁴. She contends with the general exegetic practice of translating/interpreting one verse at a time and ignoring all other references and following/preceding contexts. This, she argues, only creates a dismal and untrue picture and, thus, allows the patriarchal wielders to exploit the verses in their own

favor. Similarly, Wadud points out that the Quran is polysemic - it has a large semantic field and can have multiple related meanings. Why is it then, she questions, that patriarchal commentators choose the dehumanizing alternatives when the Book itself instructs to choose the best of meanings? In addition to this, Quran is a word of a Just God and thus has innumerable references to social justice, equity, fairness and non-violence⁶. Is it possible then, she wonders, to establish a just society with the womenfolk marginalized and despised? With various references to linguistics, grammar, syntax and verse analyses, Wadud highlights the complementary nature of a woman, her simultaneous creation with man, her role as a Khalifah and her position in front of Allah in terms of Taqwa alone. Given such evidences, the activist decries the patriarchal and misogynistic lens and trends and calls for a woman-inclusive re-reading of the Quran. This, she believes, will also improve the gender reforms in many Muslim countries and free the 'sisters in Islam' from the shackles of unjust male subordination.

In her other book, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Reform in Islam*, Wadud⁵ dedicates a whole chapter to interpretive techniques - "Qur'an, Gender, and Interpretive Possibilities". Her first objective in this chapter is to accept and concede to the criticism of her previous book. In doing so, she refers to the three instances where apparently the female gender and sexuality is relatively unequal to that of its male counterpart. Wadud offers no understanding of this instance, other than that either it is limited to the 7th Century Arab or that it is from the male perspective. She embraces it as the immutable word of God, but does not consider any of the 3 instances to be patriarchal or misogynistic since the Quran is consistent within its 'Tawhidic' hermeneutics and social issues and also because the Book is polysemic with a large semantic field. Finally, Wadud problematizes the issue of the Quran's male audience. Why is it, she questions, that the male community is mostly communicated with? Her answer to this is that it is God's wisest way of reform. Power, for the most part, is in the hands of males and the project of bringing about social justice begins from them. While God is with the oppressed and weak, it is not the strategically wise choice to begin change - rather insurgency - from them. It is only when the powerful alter that Change truly comes. This given, Wadud notes that "instead of affording themselves the opportunity

to become true servants and agents of Allah's will, Muslim men throughout history have lavished more attention on the language directed toward them than upon attaining goals of justice directly commanded of them"⁵ . And it is only after the advent of Muslim women's participation in the reading and exposition of the Quran that these "flippant" habits were unveiled. Wadud, therefore, concludes that if men further perpetuate this tendency and expect women to "surrender the reformation and re-examination of Islam's paradigmatic foundations through its primary sources to male elites" is to negate and deny the Divine potential of Justice, Recompense and Retribution.

Fatima Merinissi⁷ is another prominent and pioneer Islamic Feminist of Moroccan origin, Merinissi is a historian and sociologist who believes in the egalitarian spirit of the Quran and Islam and is highly critical of the patriarchal social trends and literature. Her canonical work *The Veil and The Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Islam*⁷ challenges all resistance to women's agency and independence and considers such an approach to be in perpetual opposition to the message of the Quran and the Prophet. Her discourse is not that of feminist hermeneutics or linguistics, but that of a historical and sociological approach. Merinissi argues that the Hadith used by the exploitative powers were a "formidable political weapon" even in the early days of Islam. The male elite, for self-serving purposes, fabricated and used misogynistic Hadiths and thus they became an unopposed, unfettered part of the Islamic corpus and tradition. She particularly singles out Abu Bakr and Abu Hurayrah - two Hadith narrators - from whom couple of extremely misogynistic hadiths originate. She brings into attention their shady and unreliable characters and the stakes they had in the innovation of anti-female hadiths. Merinissi, thus, calls for the re-analysis and re-reading of the traditional sources that have colluded in the defamation and derision of womankind. She also recounts various instances, where political and social conditions relatively affected the liberation of women; otherwise, she recounts, the Quran and its prophet were champions of gender equality - lending the female class public and private life and independence, inheritance rights and, most of all, the status of a vicegerent in front of God - perks and rights hitherto unknown to the gender. Consequently, Merinissi asks that it is imperative to study the contexts of the literature

for it has been shrouded in male bias and political expediency for centuries. To un-read and re-read is crucial and indispensable, Merinissi⁷ notes and concludes like her fellow Islamic Feminist scholars.

Asma Barlas⁸ is a US based Pakistani Islamic Feminist of the 21st Century and a specialist of Islam and Quran hermeneutics and gender. Barlas's take on patriarchy, gender and Islam, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran*⁸, picks upon where Wadud leaves and further poses the questions of whether "the Quran teaches or condones sexual inequality or oppression? Is it, as critics allege, a patriarchal and even sexist and misogynistic text?" and "Does the Quran permit and encourage liberation for women?"⁸. Her answers are in negative. Patriarchy, Barlas believes, is absent in the Quran. "Rule of father" becomes redundant when God is the Supreme and the Law Maker. She quotes, in particular, the story of Abraham: his culture of patriarchy, the inevitable dissent from it and the establishment of a society where the rule of law is that of God Alone and no intermediaries exist. She mentions, in relation to it, the stories of other prophets and God's perception of them as messengers alone. God instructs the followers to take them as prophets of God and forbids rather strictly their canonization and worship⁹. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press. The mandate and edict belongs to God alone and no power is transferred to fathers/husbands/brothers. Each individual comes to the Creator as an individual. As for sexual inequality, Barlas⁸ re-visits various verses that establish man and woman as originating from a single nafs. No dualisms, binary oppositions and sexual essentialisms are perpetuated by the Quran; instead, both male and female are complementary and, being 'zawj'/pair, are incomplete without the other¹⁰. Furthermore, the Word of God asserts the freedom and liberty of womenfolk. Judged as men are by the yardstick of Taqwa, women are vicegerents of their Creator on this Earth and have concomitant responsibilities and duties to undertake and perform. Like Wadud⁴ and Mernissi⁷, Barlas⁸ is on the mission of exposing the patriarchy read into the Quran. As a word of a Just God that wants social equality and progress, the Quran is a text devoid of injustice. To impose on it such traits and exegesis is fabrication on the part of the readers and commentators. Therefore, as Barlas⁸ implores, to arrive at what God truly

wants and expects, the reader needs to unread the already enforced readings and re-read in a light that renders the Book into a text that allows and cultivates space for egalitarianism, impartiality and justice.

Islamic Feminism is, as Badran summarizes, "a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm"¹. This bloc picks upon the aims and objectives of the Feminist ideology: independence across public and private sphere with rights to education, agency, political and gender identity, etc and being at par with the male counterparts. All of this, however, is mandated from the primary source of Islam, the Quran. While Quranic hermeneutics and interpretive methodologies have been established and dealt with in detail by all Islamic feminist scholars alike, much less is done for the interpretation of the Hadithic literature, the next in line source of Islam to the Quran¹¹. Although, Mernissi has concerted many efforts to problematize the expediency of the Hadiths and others have argued that the secondary sources' patriarchal tendencies fall short in front of the egalitarianism of the Quran, scholarly endeavors must be undertaken to appease the general population of Islam. While beliefs have relatively changed in the academia, the laymen still remain under the patriarchal influence and readings of the Quran and, consequently, many Hadiths are wielded for self-serving, expedient purposes. Furthermore, much needs to be done in regards to implementing this female-inclusive reading. Although Morocco has progressed enough to introduce a family law code that virtually makes polygamy impossible and women can now initiate divorce, the other Muslim countries are quite far behind. It just so happens that the Islamic feminists are mostly either expatriates of Muslim states or nationals of secular countries and can thus voice their opinions. To make un-reading and re-reading possible in Muslim states presently is rather unthinkable. It would involve a paradigm change at the grassroots level and, for that, more local scholarship is imperative. Islamic feminists, therefore, though successful in academia and amongst Muslims residing in secular states, need to struggle much more to establish their place in the hearts of Muslim states. The call to un-read and re-read is currently not enough - much is at stake for the Muslim patriarchs; and, thus, drastic recourses and scholarship are required to attack the very foundations of such groups and individuals.

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