



SOUTH ASIAN JOURNAL OF
SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

ISSN: 2582-7065 (Online)

SAJSSH, VOL 2, ISSUE 2, PP. 101-110

Islamic Feminism as a Rising Field of Inquiry in Contemporary Times

Ruqayya Bahar

Research Scholar, Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, U.P., India

Corresponding author: Ruqayya Bahar, **Email:** ruqsbahar.989@gmail.com

Received: 25th December 2020

Accepted: 13th March 2021

Published: 10TH April 2021

ABSTRACT

Over the past few years an emerging class of writers, particularly women, have taken up the task of analysing Islam and the Quran from their perspective. In the process of rereading and reinterpretation of the Holy text, women bring about their own personal experiences and doubts into consideration for a better understanding. These women writers aim to highlight how the previous interpretations were moulded to satisfy male interests only. They deny any such beliefs and interpretations which only serve the male members of the community, neglecting their women counterparts. Reading it through the lens of Islamic feminists, therefore, subverts all such beliefs.

KEYWORDS

Religion, Islamic Feminism, Patriarchy, Reinterpretation, Identity, Oppression

Cite as: Bahar, R. (2021). Islamic feminism as a rising field of inquiry in contemporary times. *South Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2(2), 101-110.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary feminist theory is a result of the late nineteenth-century wave of feminism and the subsequent waves of feminist movements that followed. Numerous subsets of feminist ideologies have been developed over time, grouped under cultural, postcolonial, Marxist, post-structural, liberal, ecological, radical, religious feminism and so on (Suleman & Mohamed, 2019; Suleman, Mohamed & Ahmmed, 2020). Talking about religious feminism, it is one such argument that reviews and reconsiders the practices, traditions, scriptures and theologies of religion from a feminist viewpoint. Keeping a feminist mindset, it seeks to reposition women in the earlier neglected spheres. It seeks for an equal position of women among the clergy, higher religious authorities, re-investigating and re-interpreting the male-dominated character of religious scriptures and values (Badran, 2011; Suleman & Rahman, 2020).

Christian, Jewish and Islamic feminism are all subsets of religious feminism which have gained increased attention in recent times. Dignity, honour and equality of women is the core focus of religious feminism. Talking of Islamic feminism in a greater sense, it is that branch of feminist studies which seeks to interpret or rather reinterpret and contemplate Islam taking note of equality among both the sexes. Since this parity has been neglected throughout the ages, Islamic feminists believe their opinions and contributions are necessary for a proper and correct understanding of religion. All Islamic feminists believe in the egalitarian nature of religion. They collectively agree that neither God nor religion discriminates on the basis of sex. They believe in abandoning male dominance over religion and religious texts (Badran, 2011). The major issues of investigation are therefore a subordinate status of women in Islamic societies, male dominance and inequality in marriage, ghettoization and segregation of women in comparison to men.

Islamic feminism is a comparatively new concept than feminism which refers to a more general idea of women liberation and equity. However, this concept may not be entirely new since there have been debates on the nature of the Holy text and its guidelines concerning both men and women since ages. In the year 1990s, it started to be visible worldwide, making it a new field of enquiry that needed a collective concern. In the year 1990, a group of well-acknowledged scholars particularly Muslim women scholars, gathered to attend a Roundtable on Identity Politics and Women, organized at the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics. They assembled to interrogate and look into the matters of contemporary gender and identity politics to comprehend ways and means of women oppression and subordination, how women are deemed powerless, controlled and pressurised to subsume the inferior status they are accorded and how women themselves play a part in their

own oppression serving the male-centric agenda. It was reported under this setting that a new class of Muslim women writers were challenging the male-centred nature of religion and religious politics which would soon be called Islamic feminism. The aim being subverting all the predetermined notions about Islam as an unfair and gender-biased religion (Badran, 2008).

In the near time, a plethora of contributions particularly from Muslim women came to surface. Most of these writings were directed towards the issue of gender parity within the Islamic framework. Much of the writings included those by Sisters in Islam from Malaysia, issued in the form of pamphlets criticizing wife-beating supported for the sake of religion, the works of the Moroccan feminist scholar and activist Fatima Mernissi (1991) whose research, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* exposed a sort of misleading and sexist nature of several Islamic hadiths. The work was initially published in French under the title *La harem Politique* (1987) and it was four years later that it was translated and published into English. The work was an immediate success and a major contribution in the earlier stage of Islamic feminism. Additionally, Amina Wadud (1999) also published her foremost literary work, *Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. This text can be seen as an explanation and clarification of gender equity and justice found within the sacred text. It is a discourse on the nature of Islam as a religion of justice and the Quran its authentication (Badran, 2008).

Alongside these fundamental texts on Islamic feminism and gender parity within an Islamic paradigm, the Pakistani scholar, Riffat Hassan also rereads the Quran. Among one of her earlier works, the critical article named "Equal before Allah? Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition" (1987), unravels some overwhelming religious translations and interpretations that survive only to serve the patriarchal needs of men (Badran, 2011). It exposes a male-centric interpretation of Quran which only levies biases against women. It intends to deliver a new worldview that puts forth the defence for sexual equity and justice within the Islamic circles.

The Islamic feminists draw their understanding on the Quran questioning its gender specific rendering without scrutinizing the sacred nature of the Quran but only the transience of its interpretations over the ages (Cooke, 2005). Cooke (2005) discusses the stance of the Iranian anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini who believes that women should be given an equal say in the Islamic discourse. She believes that when the dominant discourse is no longer part of the privileged male authority, women will be given their due Islamic rights. Women are said

to primarily belong in the familial space, and since family is the primary unit of a society, it becomes much required that the laws neglecting them must be reviewed.

Additionally, Islamic feminism seeks to rise above the polarities of East-West, open-private and secular-religious (Badran, 2011). It aims to establish the possibility of the *umma* or the Islamic community sharing a similar space- a space shared both by men and women uniformly. It attacks and opposes any such institution which goes against this very fundamental principle of Islam. The Islamic feminists are trying to re-establish the lost values and meaning of the Quran in its actual form. The Holy text initially came as an expression of God manifesting the message of universal equity and harmony among all human beings and to guide them from going astray (Badran, 2011). The intent of the Holy text was never to place men on a superior pedestal or women any lower. However, after being tampered with individual understanding and interpretations, the real meaning of this Holy text got lost over the ages. These writers recognise the urgent need of reinterpreting the Quran for a more just understanding of it.

The Islamic feminists oppose the “male serving fabrication” of the Quran, forceful veiling and restraints imposed on Muslim women, and call for an ungendered interpretation of the Holy text (Moghissi, 2002). This is not to say that all women are forced to cover their heads or veil but those who are silenced and oppressed by the weight of the veil giving religion as an excuse. Many women do cover their heads out of their free will and many feels more empowered when they veil. It is quite different from those women on whom the veil is superimposed by the male tyrants of their family.

The primary concern of these scholars is to work towards a more just and accurate interpretation of the Quran. In order to properly reinterpret a text that was written several ages ago and also in a language not very familiar to all, it takes a feminist to look into various interpretations and translations over time, the changes over the course of time and additionally the historical context of the time it was written (Badran, 2011).

The easiest tool for oppressing women comes handy in the name of religion and social convention. In a foul society like ours, honour and dignity are only for the women to maintain which men may very conveniently ward off. Moreover, the stigma is so deep-rooted that women feebly accept this fate. The Quran imposes the same basic rules for both the genders. Both are expected to adhere to the same standards of moral righteousness but in case of any non-adherence to the same, only the woman falls prey, which in itself is the biggest call for the religion to be re-examined and the Quran reread (Badran, 2011).

In addition to promoting women's right to work, property and education, the feminists demanded a shared space for women in the religious institutions and authorities. Such demands included for the positioning of women as judges in the religious courts, for the position of *mufti*, as well a shared space for women in the mosques (Badran, 2008). The earlier male-centred character of the mosque and other religious spaces was therefore challenged to be channelized for more women welcoming space.

The previous three decades of Islamic feminist reformation has made a huge difference to the earlier doctrines of religion and gender but there is still a great deal to be covered. It has brought about considerable advancement in its targeted area of male predominance in the name of religion and is still operating to eradicate this shortcoming from its very root (Badran, 2008). At the core of its study is the stringent Quran advocating its impartial disposition to both the sexes across all spaces.

In contrast to the secular feminists, the Islamic feminists take on women equality is more radical which concerns with an egalitarian women status across all spheres whether public or private, whereas secular feminists do argue for complete gender equality in the public sphere but not the religious. With regard to their idea of a gender-specific religious sphere, they accepted the patriarchal model for practice. Utilizing both, the Islamic religious sciences along with the current social sciences the Islamic feminists expose how a man-controlled family in the private sphere and a male-controlled society in the public sphere is both unacceptable and un-Islamic. Gender equality, therefore, is an integral part of the notion of equality in Islam across all spheres transcending the boundaries and differences of class, caste, race etc (Badran, 2008).

Ever since the beginning, the term Islamic feminist as a label of recognition and identity has been under continuous debate and argument. Where some scholars have accepted the label over time, others are still reluctant to be reduced under a single identity label. Amina Wadud who calls herself a pro-feminist, has grown to be more accepting towards the label (Badran, 2008). Feminism and Islamic feminism have universal implications for the equal rightful status of women across all borders, therefore limiting the works and identity of these writers under a singular classification seems troublesome to a few. The Egyptian American writer Mona Eltahawy (2016) earlier used to call herself an Islamic feminist which she no longer does. She now identifies herself as a Muslim and a feminist, where Islam and feminism are two separate parts of her being. Asma Barlas also responded to Margot Badran who called her an Islamic feminist saying, "Feminism doesn't always provide a common language and, more to the point,

that common languages also create analytical and political problems. So, we may need more than the shared discourse of feminism to understand Muslims and build solidarities with them” (Pepicelli, 2008).

There is not a single stringent reason for writers to object this label. The primary reason being reduced to a single identity, that of an Islamic feminist (Badran, 2008). These writers believe they are more than just that since they reason out issues of gender parity and equality among classes which are more of social concerns. Miriam Cooke (2005) asserts that to be an “Islamic feminist is not to describe a fixed identity but to create a new, contingent subject position” (p. 59). Most of us want a just society and an equal libertarian bar for women but not all of us are feminists or even Islamic feminists for that matter. So, here are those who willingly accept it, those who reject and also those who have accepted it over time since their main intent has been to educate the masses of the problematic areas of Islamic jurisprudence and the role of patriarchy within the same (Pepicelli, 2008). These writers do realise the urgent need of their contributions and have moved past the label problem (Badran, 2008).

Additionally, ‘Islam’ and ‘feminism’ are often believed to contradict one another. There has been a considerable debate over the oxymoronic character of these two words when used together. Albeit this, the Islamic feminist writers do not shy away from contributing their share of ideas to reduce such misapprehensions (Djelloul, 2018).

Fatima Mernissi (1991) and Amina Wadud (1999), both rational and progressive women writers also aim to lay bare the dangerous politics of Muslim societies where men have been the interpreters of the sacred text for ages, keeping in mind their own egoistic gains to satisfy. Both, Mernissi and Wadud advocate for a feminist reinterpretation by women, not men. Since women are the better judges of their oppression and coercion in patriarchal societies, their reinterpretation could serve as a more rational contribution. Been given little or no say traditionally, women must be given their long due say now (Suleman & Mohamed, 2019; Suleman, Mohamed & Ahmmed, 2020).

In her influential work, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Mernissi (1991) infuriates over the low status accorded to women even in the contemporary modern Muslim societies which trace back its roots to the traditional codes and norms set by Muslim scholars in the name of religion (KOC, 2016). Wadud (1999) in *Quran and Woman, Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* also strongly condemns the traditional patriarchal reading of the Quran where women were either partially or completely neglected from consideration. This discrepancy, therefore, demands another reading of the text, a reading

with a more egalitarian understanding mindful of the interests and rights of both the sexes. It is quite evident that many Muslim cultures today do not accept Muslim women as “fully human”. Men and women in these cultures are on different hierarchical levels in terms of equality, humanity and justice. She questions the development of Islamic philosophy where the female voice goes unheard.

Additionally, Wadud (1999) says that each individual interacts with the Holy text differently. Each reader interacts differently therefore limiting it to a single masculine interpretation of the text is unjustified. The Quran is the direct word from God, and therefore it must be beneficial and agreeable to all. The patriarchal interpretation goes against the universal and humanitarian message the Quran holds.

Other than these two major influences, Asma Barlas (2001) is yet another name one cannot possibly ignore while reading and investigating Islamic feminism. Barlas’ works delve into a much greater detail centred on Islamic rereading of the Quran. She presents Prophet Muhammad as a role model of contemporary society. In his time women actively participated in all spheres of life (KOC, 2016). His wife Khadija was a businesswoman, many years elder to him and knowledgeable. She was strong and assertive, and the Prophet supported her throughout. She was not only his wife but also an advisor for several important concerns. Even in the public sphere women had a fair share of expression and participation. The society was just in terms of moral conduct and social participation with the same amount of liberty and restraint for both the sexes (KOC, 2016). Barlas (2001) holds her ground reaffirming the unbiased nature of the Quran. This is not to say that the Quran is a feminist text, it is not, nor has it ever been. It only promotes humanitarianism and egalitarianism of both the sexes.

The Islamic feminists argue that the Quranic misrepresentation is the major cause of complexities with regard to gender parity and unjust treatment of women. For instance, the requirement of two women instead of one man to serve as witnesses to debt transactions does not imply for a woman’s testimony as half a man which many Muslim patriarchal societies hold. In the matter of infidelity or adultery, the Quran gives a more prominent weight to the woman’s testimony than the husband, in addition to presenting at least four witnesses of the action, the husband under no condition can accuse her if the wife gives her word against it. Also, the Quranic concept of polygamy for men was initially enacted for the protection and betterment of the most underprivileged women in society, including widows (Barlas, 2002). Quran under no circumstance favours or privileges men over women.

Islam brought about noteworthy changes to the situation of women, be it social, financial or legal in contrast to the pre-Islamic societal conventions and traditions. It considers men and women as equivalent individuals. Allah sent mankind in pairs, to support and respect each other for a peaceful and harmonious life. Islam does not suit the conviction of the principal sin being committed by a female which likewise drove the man to similar wrongdoing (KOC, 2016).

As per the Quran, Adam and Eve were both misdirected by the fallen angel i.e. Satan. It defies the Christian belief of the first sin being submitted by Eve which led Adam to do the same. No individual is born a sinner, and no woman lures a man towards sins either. No person is brought into the world with evil intentions and all of their wrongdoings are a result of their own choices and flaws. As said, an individual becomes a sinner not because of their sex but rather by the subsequently committed sins (KOC, 2016). These writers argue that the Quran delineates women as equivalent to men with equal rights, duties and obligations (Wadud, 1999).

What's worth noting is that people often associate patriarchy with Islam and it must be brought to light that these two are entirely different concepts. Islam in any way neither endorses nor promotes patriarchy or a biasness against women. However, it is also true that the male interpretations of the Quran till date have a patriarchal agenda as its end goal. A feminist and in-depth analysis of the Holy text defies this primitive standpoint. The bitter reality here is that the first-ever religion to call for uniformity and equity among the sexes is now known for its patriarchal order where the so-called God-fearing men and religious leaders have been very conveniently serving their own narcissistic interests in the name of religion and conduct.

CONCLUSION

Women across boundaries have experienced sexism in some manner or the other where gender bias is generated by the social order. Along with time and culture, it is just reinforced. Concerning this context, the idea of Islamic feminism is to explore and lay bare the hegemonic nature of this perspective. Islamic feminism, therefore, can be viewed as a methodology which battles with the convention that creates gender disparity in Islamic societies and spots accentuation on Islam being a balance grounded religion dependent on the Quran. For the most part, Islamic feminists emphasise on the pre-historic times where women were 'silenced' without having a say in either the political affairs or in any other serious issues like that of employment, education and social participation. Islam brought about changes such as giving women utmost respect and the opportunity to participate in social and political affairs. So,

delineating the contemporary fundamentalist beliefs of giving women secondary importance, one finds out how feminism and equality are very much parts of both the basic principles of Islam as well as earlier Islamic societies (Moghissi, 2002). And it had been the same in the absence of patriarchal outmanoeuvring of religion today. In simple terms, these writers demand a reinterpretation of Islam in its original form which maintains equality between the two genders.

Demanding for a fair share of women in both public and private domain, these writers hold their grounds towards a more fair and honest interpretation of the Quran. It's about time women are given their long due worth. To counter the neglected status of women all these years, it becomes significant for the Quran to be re-read and understood from a feminist lens now.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, L. (1992). *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Connecticut, USA: Yale University Press.
- Badran, M. (2008). Engaging Islamic Feminism. In Anitta Kynsilehto (Ed.), *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives* (pp. 25- 36). Tampere, Finland: Tampere Peace Research Institute.
- Badran, M. (2011). *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences*. Oxford, England: Oneworld.
- Barlas, A. (2001). Muslim Women and Sexual Oppression: Reading Liberation from the Quran. *Macalester International*, 10(15), 117- 46. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1250&context=macintl>
- Barlas, A. (2002). *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Beauvoir, S. (2011). *The Second Sex*. New York, USA: Vintage Books.
- Cooke, M. (2005). *Women Claim Islam*. London, England: Routledge.
- Djelloul, G. (2018). Islamic Feminism: A Contradiction in Terms? Retrieved from <https://www.eurozine.com/islamic-feminism-contradiction-terms/>
- Eltahawy, M. (2016). *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution*. London, England: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
- KOC, C. (2016). Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud: Patriarchal Dominance and Misinterpretation of Sacred Texts in Islamic Countries. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 6(8), 176-184. Retrieved from http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_6_No_8_August_2016/18.pdf

- Mernissi, F. (1991). *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Moghissi, H. (2002). *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*. New York, USA: Zed Books.
- Pepicelli, R. (2008). Why Keep Asking me about my Identity? Thoughts of a Non-Muslim. In Anitta Kynsilehto (Ed.), *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives* (pp. 91- 101). Tampere, Finland: Tampere Peace Research Institute.
- Suleman, D., & Mohamed, A. H. (2019). Examining the Women Issues and Child Abuse as Mirrored by Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. *Indonesian Journal of Cultural and Community Development*, 3, 10-21070.
- Suleman, D., Mohamed, A. H., & Ahmmed, M. F. (2020). Political and Gender issues in Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness". *Indonesian Journal of Cultural and Community Development*, 5, 10-21070.
- Suleman, D., & binti Ab Rahman, F. (2020). Transgender Issues in Indian Society from the Viewpoint of Arundhati Roy's Novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. *South Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 1(3), 159-172.
- Wadud, A. (1999). *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. New York, USA: Oxford University Press.