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ISLAMIC FEMINISM – A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

BY AMBAR AHMAD

- In recent times, Islamic feminism has emerged as a challenge to patriarchy in Muslim societies. Given the varieties of Islam and feminisms that exist, a fixed meaning cannot be attached to the term.
- Islamic feminism can be better understood through the strategies employed. Ranging from re-interpretation of holy sources to recovering indisputable Islamic rights of women, Islamic feminists challenge patriarchy in multiple ways.
- Islamic feminism has elicited strong responses ranging from outright dismissal to enthusiastic approval from sections of the traditional religious establishment as well as some secular feminists.
- Islamic feminism should be evaluated pragmatically on grounds of strategic successes and failures, rather than rejecting or endorsing it wholesale.

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The discourse on Islamic feminism has generated a language that many young women in the Muslim world are able to draw upon while challenging patriarchal norms, which are culturally entrenched within the family and society, by arguing that they have nothing to do with Islam and everything to do with tradition. Their insistence on following what is Islamic rather than familial or cultural can potentially enable them to recover their long obfuscated rights.

Introduction

In the non-West, feminism has largely been considered an alien concept, contrary to indigenous norms and traditions. Associated with Western colonial intrusion, feminism per se and Western feminism in particular, are easily discredited as an attack on the cultural authenticity of non-West societies and a corrupting influence.

When questions of gender justice emerged, there were efforts to frame women's concerns in the context of the specificities of their situation rather than with reference to the standards set by Western feminism. Religion, inevitably, was to play a major role in this enterprise. It is in this context that questions about the possibility and desirability of Islamic feminism arise.

What is Islamic Feminism?

When speaking of Islamic feminism, one must take into account the meaning of the two words that make up this term: Islam and feminism. Islam is not a monolithic entity. The sectarian differences in the belief and practice of Islam, particularly among the Shiites and the Sunnis, introduce a level of complexity that has to be taken into account. Moreover, geographically and historically, Islam was and is practised around the globe in diverse cultural settings.

If we talk of feminism, it is a widely accepted notion that instead of a single feminism, there are multiple feminisms that exist today. All feminist positions agree on some salient points. They concur that we live in a world where organised patriarchy leads to men and women living different realities. They consider patriarchy to be a human social construct rather than an inevitable or inescapable fact of nature. Perceiving patriarchy as unjust and indefensible, feminists of all shades are, therefore, committed to its dismantling and to the establishment of a gender just society as they view it. Beyond these common beliefs, there is extensive diversity in feminist positions, especially on grounds of how patriarchy has arisen and how it should be challenged and defeated. Considering the plethora of feminisms that exist, it is not difficult to introduce another variation called Islamic feminism. However, given the discomfort of feminism with organised religion, some basic questions do arise: Are Islam and feminism mutually compatible, or do they contradict each other? Which one has primacy: Islam or feminism? Can Islamic feminism achieve gender justice?

Interestingly, many women working towards the goal of gender justice from within the framework of Islam are wary of identifying themselves as feminists because of the historical baggage associated with this term.

Yet, significant work has been done on the subject of Islamic feminism in various parts of the Muslim world. Many of the debates presented draw from the experience of Iran, which is a good example to study for several reasons. Iran is a Shiite state and central to Shiite Islam is the concept of *Ijtehad* - that is a re-interpretation of religious laws according to the socio-economic and political context of the times and in keeping with basic Islamic injunctions, opening up possibilities for social change. Iran is also a state where a considerable gap exists between the state-prescribed role for women and their actual lives. Strongly and visibly active in the public arena, Iranian women present a strong counterpoint to the experiences of their counterparts under another self-professed Islamic regime – the Taliban.

Really then, the best way to understand Islamic feminism is to study what the Islamic feminists do.

Strategies Employed

The first strategy employed is the reinterpretation of the holy texts. Feminists argue that the problems faced by women are generally the result of misguided male interpretations of the principles of Islam, as opposed to the actual religious edicts. Consequently, they believe that a woman-centred re-reading of Islam's holy sources can become a powerful source of gender justice.

In keeping with this, in the recent years, Islamic feminists have turned to the religious texts and traditions to read them critically, reinterpret them from a woman-friendly position and displace the traditional, well-entrenched misogynist understandings that have long held sway. Their attempts have ranged from looking at the *asbab al nuzool* (reasons for the revelation of a particular verse or chapter of the Quran), to contextualising *hadiths* (the collection of reported teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet) and highlighting the woman-friendly aspects of the religion in order to challenge the patriarchal interpretations that the clergy favour.

Ijtehad is central to the Islamic feminist project, as it allows for the intellectual re-interpretation of the holy sources so that their spirit is retained but the concrete manifestation can be transformed in accordance with the present needs. An example of this exercise is Islamic thinker Abdul Karim Soroush's (Iran) thesis that distinguishes between the 'essential' and 'accidental' elements of Islam. The former are elements without which Islam is not Islam - they are enduring and unchanging beliefs. The latter elements are socially and historically contingent and, therefore, subject to change. The present environment is very different from Arabia of the seventh century; therefore, many injunctions, especially with regard to relations between men and women, can be legitimately transformed.

For instance, feminists argue that the verse in the Quran that gives primacy to men does so explicitly by stating that men are the maintainers of women. While this was true of an earlier era – where motherhood was a woman's inevitable role and that made her a dependent – today, where not only do women have greater control over their

reproductive choices but are also often self-reliant, this understanding can definitely change.

In their analyses, Islamic feminists have also employed the conceptual tools of post-modernism, particularly the view of language functioning as a mechanism of institutional control. This engagement with language is central to the re-interpretation of texts. The assumption that language is value-laden has led to the attempt to expand the domain of reinterpretation to a new linguistic construction of the Arabic language.

Another strategy pursued by renowned Arab women writers like Fatima Mernissi (Morocco) and Assia Djebbar (Algeria), among others, is to recover a lost history where women are included. They have studied the lives of women in the formative years of Islamic history and argue that predominantly male narrative traditions have rendered women invisible, whereas during the Prophet's lifespan women were both visible and active members of the community. That they could walk into a mosque and address their questions and concerns directly to the Prophet of Islam is

indicative of their unmediated access to authority. In fact, Mernissi, in particular, states that the message of Islam was one of radical equality and, hence, quite unpalatable to the privileged male elite that was reluctantly willing to accept changes in the public domain but was fiercely insistent on the private domain remaining untouched by any change. This was why the ideals fell apart after the Prophet's death. By drawing upon an 'authentic' Islam, feminists argue against women's marginalisation from social, religious and community matters in the present.

One important approach adopted towards securing greater gender justice has been to reject the imposed marginalisation in largely male-defined and dominated religious spaces. Women have made attempts to create their own spaces, on their own terms. In India, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, the Muslim Women's Jamaat set up an all-women's mosque in Pudukkottai despite a stiff opposition to the move. The setting up of all-female spaces may appear to be entrenching segregation as argued by feminists in other contexts, but supporters believe that it provides

the only context where religion can be debated by women without interference from the male religious elite.

Islamic feminists also focus their energies on recovering and enforcing the undisputed rights that women can lay claim to within the structure of Islam but that have become obscure because of cultural norms of honour and shame. For instance, *nikah*, or marriage, is a contract between two consenting parties with both sides entitled to lay down certain conditions which, after mutual agreement, would be binding upon them. The rights of women to lay down conditions regarding polygamy, custody of children in the event of divorce and other important matters, can give them a significant degree of control over their lives. Unfortunately, due to cultural norms, it is often considered shameful, particularly in South Asia, for a prospective bride to talk openly about the issues that could impact her marital future.

Similarly, feminists state that women who stay in an abusive marriage - considering it a divine decree and an obligation to serve and obey the husband - can

benefit from a better understanding and enforcement of existing rights in Islam, rendered insignificant by patriarchy.

Of course, Islamic feminism is not an exercise in isolation. Therefore, conscious effort has been made to engage with the ideas of secular feminists, forge linkages with them, as well as initiate conversations with Muslim women across the globe. Acclaimed historian and gender theorist Afsaneh Najmabadi has documented how Islamic feminist magazines in Iran regularly feature translations of feminist writings by secular feminists on diverse issues of religion, culture, law and education. Translations of classic essays by authors, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Evelyn Reed, Nadine Gordimer and Alison Jaggar, along with other contemporary feminist writings, are included as well.

An excellent example of the synergy between secular and Islamist feminists is the global movement called *Musawah* (meaning equality), initiated by 12 women from countries as diverse as Egypt, Gambia, Turkey and Pakistan in 2009. These women spent two years

laying out the movement's guiding principles. Operating on the core belief that Islam is not inherently biased towards men and that patriarchy is the result of male-dominated interpretations of religion, *Musawah* has been empowering women to understand and shape the interpretations, norms and laws that affect their lives and then push for legal reforms in their respective countries.

Responses to Islamic Feminism

All these various attempts made by the Islamic feminists to resurrect a woman-friendly Islam have been both welcomed and viewed with considerable suspicion.

Those who support the endeavours come from two camps. The first consists of what can be called the 'Islam Only' position that claims Islam is the only possible framework within which a feminist impulse, true to the traditions and societal norms of non-Western Muslim societies, can develop and thrive. Exhorting a return to authentic Islam, proponents of this position claim that no other resources are required or even desirable to achieve gender justice. The secular Western feminist construct is seen as alien, inapplicable and wholly rejected.

The other staunch supporters of Islamic feminism include secular-oriented feminists who consider Islamic feminism to be a valuable addition to the repertoire needed to grapple with entrenched patriarchy. They believe that an Islamic base is crucial for crafting a feminist practice that will have an appeal for the masses. They stress that engaging with Islam is not a matter of choice but one of necessity and that the re-interpretative exercise is important. Simply invoking ideas of universal human rights and upholding the advances made by women in the West would have no resonance for the Muslim woman and, thus, these would be discredited as alien and elitist.

There are concrete reasons behind the need to engage with Islam rather than bypass it, as well as certain benefits of using religious vocabulary. This, of course, is in addition to the fact that for many women, Islam may actually be the primary identity that they identify themselves with but do not see this identity as a bar to working towards a more egalitarian and gender-just society. Islamic feminists refuse to pose the gender question as an either-or choice, where one could be either a feminist or believe in Islam.

The engagement with theological issues and the reinterpretation of texts has put Islamic feminists in a position of knowledge about the sources from where legitimacy for patriarchal politics is often derived. This enables them to mount a challenge to religious patriarchy from a position of strength.

Many secular feminists who support their Islamic sisters' work believe that the forces of resistance and reform, from wherever they are emanating, are formed around incremental, pragmatic day-to-day issues that cannot be neatly separated by the secular/theocratic divide. In the context of Iran, feminist scholar Valentine Moghadam stresses on the importance of the writings and public pronouncements of Islamic feminists and points out that the women's press and the Islamic feminists associated with it play an important role in broadening the discursive universe and in expanding legal literacy and gender consciousness among their readers.

Apart from these two camps of support, Islamic feminists are viewed with considerable suspicion and misgivings not just by sections of the traditional religious establishment but also by many secular-

oriented feminists. While the former finds the interference in the authorised discourse of Islam an illegitimate and misguided enterprise, for secular feminists, such as Haideh Moghissi, women's rights can only stem from secular, cross-cultural and universal premises that should not be undermined by the specific socio-religious context of a society.

Proponents of this position deem the Islamic feminist project, at best, inadequate and suspect; and flawed and dangerous at its worst. In the first case, it is believed that well-meaning Islamic feminists are going to come to the realisation of the inadequacy and limitedness of their approach and will then have to grapple with the question of what is primary for them in Islamic feminism: Islam or feminism? Which one has to be fitted within the frame of the other? They maintain that the activities and goals of Islamic feminism are circumscribed and compromised. This section of secular feminists allege that Islamic feminism is divisive and ends up damaging the cause of secular feminists, who argue for women's rights in the universal language of human rights. They believe that the

insistence by Islamic feminists on deriving solutions for women's problems within the framework of Islamic norms discredits the secular feminists as alien, westernised and anti-Islam.

Moghissi draws attention to exactly what is meant by Islam and feminism when the term Islamic feminism is employed. In the broadest sense, feminism is the refusal to subordinate one's life to the male-centred dictates of religious and non-religious institutions. She claims that feminism's core idea is that the biological difference between men and women should not be translated into an unequal variation in women's and men's experience. Biology should not lead to differences in legal status and the privileging of one over the other. If Islamic means a reliance on the Quran and the *sharia*, she argues, then one has to grapple with the problem of reconciling Quranic injunctions regarding women, which stress on gender-differentiated roles and obligations. Moghissi further adds that it is possible for a 'Muslim' feminist to demand equal rights for women and have Islam as a personal faith, but for this she would have to leave the framework of the *sharia* behind. However, in the case of the assertion of feminist consciousness

along with a reliance on the *sharia* as the legitimate framework for achieving feminist goals, both feminism and *sharia* need to be redefined.

Conclusions

Keeping aside all arguments in favour of or against the concept, what cannot be denied is that Islamic feminism has impacted the discourse on gender justice in Muslim societies in several ways.

While it was easier for authorities in Muslim societies to brush aside feminist questions earlier on by labelling feminism as alien, Western, anti-Islam and corrupt, knowledgeable interrogations by Islamic feminists have made it impossible to dismiss these questions anymore. By virtue of the language used and stratagem employed, the questions have gained legitimacy and widespread visibility. This is an important step towards challenging patriarchy. At the same time, it has led to an engagement with women's concerns, which is very different from the earlier attitude that Islam resolved all these questions in the seventh century and nothing more is required. Sections of the traditional

religious establishment is responding to this important shift in consciousness by accepting that present concerns need to be looked at in innovative and contemporary ways.

Across the globe, Islamic feminists have been able to bargain with religious and state authorities and wrest legal reforms to improve the situation of women. From raising the minimum age of marriage for women and instituting woman-friendly marriage and divorce laws, to securing women's right to study and pursue professions, Islamic feminists along with secular feminists have played a major role.

The discourse on Islamic feminism has generated a language that many young women are able to draw upon while challenging patriarchal norms - culturally entrenched within the family and society - by arguing that they have nothing to do with Islam and everything to do with tradition. Their insistence on following what is 'Islamic' rather than familial or cultural can potentially enable them to recover long obfuscated rights.

So, can Islamic feminism advance gender justice?

Feminisms of all varieties are an ongoing exercise in challenging and destroying, in a painstaking and incremental way, the gender injustice entrenched in all societies in different ways. Just as we do not question whether secular feminism can advance gender justice, assuming that the journey with all its vicissitudes is one well worth undertaking even though the ultimate goal may nowhere be in sight, similarly when it comes to Islamic feminism the question is not whether it can ultimately achieve gender justice, but whether its present strategies of challenging patriarchy are fruitful.

The answer to this question, I believe, is a positive one.

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