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Islamic Feminism & Gender Equality

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The ethical project of Islamic feminism shares the central ideals and values of Islam itself—of justice, egalitarianism, equity, compassion, and tolerance. By opening up the question of who has the authority to interpret scripture, and by challenging the power of traditional interpretive communities and the producers of religious knowledge, Islamic feminists are at the forefront of the contemporary reformist movement. Writers such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas are conferring upon themselves the authority to challenge the monopoly of traditional interpreters of the Quran, whilst scholars such as Fatima Mernissi are engaged in contesting received notions of Hadith literature. All such scholars are engaged in revisiting Islamic sources and actively furthering what has been succinctly termed the “democratization of *ijtihad*.”¹ Working within Islamic jurisprudence, this entails the use of an interpretive methodology, *ijtihad* (to strive for) to dynamically re-interpret foundational Quranic principles in order to bring about equal rights for women.

Feminists look to the time of Islam’s origin and assert that women, who had played a significant role as the creators of oral texts, became invisible after the inception of Islam, both as originators and interpreters of such texts. Scriptural literature was then produced by men who

incorporated their own restrictive assumptions and understanding of gender relations. Legal texts were also created in this way and a masculine bent was inscribed into the legal literature of that time, resulting in the atrophy of the egalitarian ethos of Islam.² Thus, the feminist project is based squarely upon an Islamic framework within which an ethically correct gender paradigm and resulting legal rights for women may be figured.

The reform of Islamic law is seen as one of the principal means by which the discrimination women have suffered under certain interpretations of Islam can be addressed. In pursuance of this, feminists are advancing new interpretations of the sources of Islamic law, and theorizing a “liberatory praxis” with a “Quranic hermeneutics of liberation” at the vanguard of this endeavour. This means that writers such as Wadud and Barlas are utilizing the notion of *ijtihad* to establish interpretations of the Quran which bring to light the gender egalitarian impulse

of the Quran. These new interpretations then form the basis for an emancipatory agenda for the establishment of equality. Therefore, this project encapsulates the vision of a post-patriarchal Islam which guarantees women legal and social rights, equal with men. This will only be possible, feminists argue, by liberating Islamic orthodox scripture from the stranglehold of male-centred interpretations that have become entrenched in the Islamic canon. Thus, by challenging traditional notions of authority, and deconstructing gendered Islamic discourses, Islamic feminists are producing interpretations of scripture that can be utilized for the radical re-configuration of gendered legal rights.

However, despite this uniformity of aim, Islamic feminism is also characterized by great diversity of opinion. Therefore, it may be more appropriate to talk of Islamic *feminisms* which can be differentiated by

Islamic feminists are reinterpreting Islamic sources in order to achieve equal rights for women within an Islamic framework. They have challenged traditional interpretations of scripture and received notions of interpretive authority, both in Muslim majority societies as well as in the diasporic Islamic world. With their new interpretations they have contributed to the transformation of the legal, political and social rights of Muslim women. There are, however, also limitations to the feminist interpretations of scripture and their potential to deliver gender equality.

cultural and regional, as well as significant doctrinal differences, which have led to divergent schools of thought. A number of writers have offered typologies of contemporary feminist thought and, broadly speaking, they can be divided into two main groups: first, those who see the “inequality” of the sexes in Islam as divinely ordained; and second, those who have engaged in progressive readings of the Quran and the Hadith to unearth the authentic configuration of women’s rights in Islam.

Diversity of opinion

For Safia Iqbal, who belongs to the former group, the literal interpretation of the Quran sanctions a differentiation between the sexes. This is based upon a delineation between the public and the private in which men and women inhabit different domains under the “separate but equal” rubric. Women and men have different roles, and occupy different spheres of life, and it is this definition of equality which challenges conservative representations of women as spiritually inferior to men. The second approach includes writers such as Wadud, Barlas, and Riffat Hassan, who are developing readings of scripture that often depart radically from classical interpretations.

The heterogeneity of this second feminist approach ranges from the creation of new interpretive methodologies in scriptural exegesis, to more critical analyses of the viability of locating gender equality within Islam. Someone who is highly critical of the Islamic feminist project is Haideh Moghissi, who asserts that Islam and feminism are fundamentally incompatible because Islamic scripture contains a highly developed gender hierarchy. Consequently, Moghissi doubts the possibility of developing a programme of social and legal rights for women within Islamic parameters—as these, for her, are inherently antithetical to the notion of gender equality.³

Nevertheless, what is abundantly clear is that most feminists are striving for a renewal of gender equality within the parameters of a discursive framework which is deemed to be faithful to an ethically correct Islamic impulse. This approach is predicated upon the view that such gender equality was an integral part of Islam at its very inception, and that feminists are reviving what has been lost or marginalized throughout the centuries of Islamic history. As a result, the feminist movement embodies both a trenchant critique of conservative Islamic thought as well as opening a new phase in the politics of gender, and of reformist theorization in Islamic thought.

Consequently, there is much to approve of in the advances being made by Islamic feminism and it is a force that is clearly gathering momentum. In the recent past, one can see the changes made to family laws in Iran, and the revisions made to the Moroccan Family Code, the *Mudawwana*, in 2004, as the result of feminist revisionist thinking. However, at this juncture of its development, it is worth raising a number of concerns about the theoretical advances in this intellectual movement and to be more realistic about its potential to transform gender relations in the Muslim world.

A critique of employing authenticity

One of the most striking consequences of the contemporary rise of political Islam (Islamism) is that it has provided a space in which Muslim women have begun to question established versions of their faith in their struggle for gender equality. The Islamist agenda of instituting ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam under the banner of “a return to the past and an original Sharia” has galvanized

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women to challenge discriminatory interpretations of their rights. What has been less remarked upon is the remarkable convergence, in methodological terms, between this Islamist discourse of authenticity and the deployment of authenticity by contemporary Islamic feminists.

This is demonstrated by Islamism and feminism possessing a number of common characteristics: both are anchored in the central texts of the Quran and the Hadith literature; both represent their own interpretation as the expression of authentic or “true” Islam; and both discourses have appropriated the notion of the ideal past of Islam as the foundation of law. Of course, the difference between the two discourses lies in how they each conceptualize that ideal(ized) past and, in turn, how that past is used to implement a contemporary legal, political and social order. Thus, the idea of a cultural revival, an authenticity and a “purity of origin” which can be re-created through the mechanism of law is pivotal in both discourses.⁴ Allied to this is the important question of temporality for feminists carving out a new scriptural hermeneutics: what is the relationship between the past and the present in Islam? A central tension that needs to be addressed is that the Quran is a historical response to a historical problem; simultaneously, it is also a transcendental text which is normative and atemporal. How do we reconcile these two ways of reading the Quran, and is it strategic for feminists to deploy a discourse of authenticity?

A critique of methodology

There is also the need to realize the limitations of effecting lasting change purely through the medium of new scriptural interpretations. This is based upon an emerging critique of reformist methodologies, particularly those interpretive techniques which make distinctions between Quranic verses by imbuing some with a normative quality and others with specific, limited application. Criticisms are made of the artificial manner in which a distinction is made between Quranic verses revealed in the earlier Meccan period, which point to gender equality, and are thus viewed as normative, and the later Medinan verses which appear to discriminate against women. This latter type of verse is categorized by feminist theorists as having limited and restricted application.

The critique centres first around the fact that it is not always possible to differentiate clearly between verses revealed in Mecca and those revealed in Medina. Second, many Medinan verses encapsulate principles that are at the very core of the Islamic approach to justice (which incorporates the notion of gender equality) and should, therefore, be viewed as of normative, rather than of limited application. A further critique is that a great deal of emphasis is placed upon a few Quranic verses pointing to a specific type of equality and, from this, feminists conclude that the Quran advocates egalitarianism as a norm. This is counter to evidence to the contrary: that the Quran is a clearly patriarchal text, because this is the historical condition in which it was revealed.⁵

Critics contend that it is incorrect for feminists to avow that Islam is the *only* model within which to frame reformist agendas for women’s rights. In emphasizing scriptural interpretation, feminists fail to take into account the social, political, economic, and cultural factors which may have an equal or even greater power in determining women’s unequal status and legal rights in Islamic societies and communities. In the Egyptian context, Abu-Odeh argues correctly that the feminist sacrifice of secular space for reforms that are couched purely in religious terms, may be problematic—even though those reforms are liberal in nature—as they may prove hard to critique after a while.⁶



PHOTO BY SERGEI CHIRIKOV / © AFP, 2001

A critique of “equality”

We must also be clearer about the concept of equality that is deployed in Islamic feminism. Two important points need to be made about the idea that gender equality can be achieved within an explicitly Islamic framework. First, the concept of equality is one that is assumed, with little or no theoretical discussion of the implications of basing it on the concept of sexual difference, or sameness, with men. The feminist rejoinder to conservative interpretations of the Quran has been to emphasize how sexual difference has been deployed to justify the establishment of lesser rights for women. However, feminist writers have not addressed the question of when, and to what extent, the idea of sexual difference is acceptable within scripture. Second, by basing demands for gender equality in purely scriptural terms, feminists are limited to the depiction of women in scripture itself, of wives and mothers, thus failing to recognize the heterogeneity of

Girls read the Quran together, Afghanistan.

Muslim women and further marginalizing those who fall outside the traditional paradigms of women depicted within scriptural texts.

The need to put forward a systematic feminist position located within an Islamic framework may be necessary from a strategic perspective, particularly as it is the more conservative of feminist thinkers who have had the most political success in their work being translated into legal and political gains. The more radical proposals offered by Islamic feminists remain outside the mainstream of legal thought and peripheral to the centres of power. The question for scholars and activists is how are we to influence those in power—the ulama, mosque leaders, politicians, and the whole gamut of religious and political authority—so that theoretical improvements are implemented into legal and political rights that effect real change in the material reality of women’s lives. Additionally, feminists may also feel that it is necessary to advance a more uniform idea of the “Muslim woman”—which denies difference amongst women—in order to exercise political power which effects real change.

The radical nature of many of the conceptual advances made by contemporary feminist interpreters of scripture is undeniable, and a development that is gaining more supporters. The potential for utilizing these new interpretations to transform the legal, political, and social rights of Muslim women is enormous. In broader reformist terms, the feminist challenge to the traditional notion of interpretive authority, both in Muslim majority societies as well as in the diasporic Islamic world, is also a significant and worthy phenomenon. However, there are both substantive and methodological limitations to feminist interpretations of scripture, and thus to its potential to deliver equality for *all* women. By recognizing both the restrictions as well as the possibilities of such theorizing, feminists can offer a more nuanced and responsive understanding of Muslim women’s calls for equality.

Notes

1. A term coined by Yvonne Haddad and Barbara Stowasser in “Introduction,” in *Islamic Law and the Challenges of Modernity*, ed. Yvonne Haddad and Barbara Stowasser (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 7.
2. See Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
3. Haideh Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (London, New York: Zed Books, 1999).
4. See Qudsia Mirza, “Islamic Feminism and the Exemplary Past,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Law and Theory*, ed. Janice Richardson and Ralph Sandland (London: Cavendish, 2000).
5. “Reply,” in *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, ed. Khalid Abou El Fadl et al (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002), 109–110; Ebrahim Moosa, “The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam,” in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003).
6. Lama Abu-Odeh, “Egyptian Feminism: Trapped in the Identity Debate,” in Haddad and Stowasser, 202.

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