

Islamic Feminism from A Liberal Muslim Perspective

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Abstract

The challenge addressed herein are impacts from feminism on Muslims in particular. The authors discuss this based on an understanding of the position of women in the west vis-à-vis variegated Muslim societies. Some believe that Islamic feminism obtains full sovereignty for women and thus gel with western rejection of male chauvinism and dominance with arguments straight from the Quran. Liberal Muslim feminists believe a woman must be given equal considerations in various circumstances to include inheritance rights, legal testimony and so forth. Based on hermeneutic interpretations, socio-historical analysis and relativism, Muslim feminists believe the Quran needs a robust dusting and reinterpretation that allow socio-historical reconsiderations for this worthy cause. Since Muslim societies embrace Islam and its prevailing patriarchal culture, it is difficult to accept the concept of Islamic feminism. This paper investigates feminism from a liberal muslim perspective. A literature review provides a thematic analysis that refers to emerging trends in gender issues. Findings reveal that ideas and practices regarding rights and freedom seek to enhance the status of women. The discussion solely focuses on historical and contextual analysis to realize the expanding potential of feminism's path to freedom of choice in the Islamic context.

Keywords: Social issues, gender, Islamic feminism, Liberal Islam, freedom of choice

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Feminism comprises a set of social theories, political movements and moral philosophy that largely concerns the emancipation of women. It involves a wide range of movements, theories and philosophies concerning gender discrimination and prioritizes women's rights and interests (Humm, 1990: 278; Bhasin, 2001: 1–7). Scholars divide the history of feminism into three waves. The first involved voting rights during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The second concerned ideas and political movements during the 1960s that actively pursued equal legal and social positions. The third flux occurred during the 1990s, mostly as a continuation of the second and can be considered a reactionary response to the second wave's failure. As a result of this ongoing history, several schools of thoughts were initiated including marxist, socialist, radical and liberal theories on feminism all with separate interpretations and approaches (Yunahar, 1997: 40-60).

Despite these diverse streams, they share similar values that influence liberalism's struggle for freedom, with materialism being the measure of success. What separates them is interpretations regarding the significance of women's rights, whether they are individual or general. The distinction led to additional interpretations, resolutions and approaches. Presently, all feminists seem to agree on any campaign related to matters concerning women's rights. These include freedom of movement, abortion, sexual intercourse, domestic violence, sexual assault, divorce, political and corporate leadership, employment and sexual harassment, etc. Feminists also regard their efforts as a grassroots movement that crosses boundaries of class, race, culture and religious teachings.

Such incremental thinking and approaches nourished various streams of thought in support of the feminist struggle. These schools not only evolved as political, economic and social movements, but also came to associate themselves with religious doctrines, including Christian feminism, Jewish feminism, and Islamic feminism (Anderson & Clack, 2004; Frank & Leaman, 2003).

As far as Christian feminism is concerns, they are a civil society movement that calls for equality of rights and freedom between men and women in the aspects of moral, social, leadership and spiritual realms. This group believe that God never discriminates against a group based on gender and race. So, they view the contributions of women as important to the understanding of the Christian religion. As the first wave of Christian feminism, this movement actively campaigned for their rights in religious aspects. These figures actively questioned the position of women as second-class citizens in church institutions and doctrines. Jewish feminism movement also promote the same course. It seeks to advance the fate and status of women in religion, legal and social aspects from the Jewish perspective. They emphasize the opening of new opportunities and broader spaces for the involvement of women in religious practice and position in religious leadership and belief systems. This movement became active in the United States in the early 1970s. Judith Plaskow is one of the popular figures of this movement who actively calls for Jewish reform and activities.

2.0 THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC FEMINIST

Historically, an important figure in Islamic feminism was Qasim Amin who was markedly influenced by western religious liberals. He concluded that Islamic laws on women's issues were irregular and further determined that certain legal categories can change to realign laws with current social developments. Thus, in his view, *Shari'ah's* set of statements and general principles relate to branches of law (*juzu'iyat*) that can change according to time and place (Imarah, 1976: 210).

So laws pertaining to custom and muamalat accept changes according to current reality and place. It is for us to decide eating, drinking and general affairs in our lives; thus making room to elect what is right for us and in line with our welfare and needs, provided we do not dispose with basic principles.

His second principle is based on rejecting Hadith as a source of law. He assumes that not all recorded Hadith relate deeds and words that are genuinely prophetic; as such, they do not represent sound ideas or sources. On this basis, Muslims can therefore escape attachments to these ideas. He considers that the giving of religious advice, wisdom and philosophy do not demand commitment on the part of the receiver. Such advice is not considered related to *fiqh* or to religious legislation. He therefore stresses that only a few Hadith are included in aspects of religious law and that this set specifically clarifies and complements Al-Qur'an's content. Hence, Hadith need to pass through detailed and careful observations as narratives that parallel both *nas* and spirit of Al-Qur'an (Imarah, 1976: 326).

Based on these principles, therefore, Qasim rejects the hijab and calls on Muslim women to abandon it. He assumes the customary costume was the result of a cultural legacy and societal backcloth by which the hijab effectively and occultly permitted Western advances. Muslim women are thus urged to exit cultural mores that restrict association and move towards freer expressions of social connexions regardless of gender issues. This reform allows Muslim women to become more productive and progressive. Muslim women are also to engage all areas of life, beginning with education and progressing to careers, arts, science, music, singing and dancing, etc. Accordingly, obstacles, by way of religious restrictions, only thwart the process of human and social development, and that all aforementioned advances in culture, science and art reflect a nation's progress. He then rejects polygamy laws and depicts polygamy as an insult to women. In addition, he calls for breaking the monopoly that Muslim men now enjoy regarding divorce (*talak*) and contrary suggests rights to divorce by juridical consent.

Islamic liberals and feminists such as Ashgar Ali Engineer, Fatima Mernissi, Riffat Hassan and Amina Wadud Muhsin (1999) joined Qasim Amin's struggle for women's rights and emancipation. These ladies are founders and activists of a growing Islamic Feminist Movement (IFM). They share views, approaches and struggle on the same basis of do other feminist movements, and pursue the same objectives and methods that largely oppose Islamic authority and current religious dogma.

This group criticizes or prevent the implementation of Islamic rule and doctrines as presently inherited from early days (traditionalism). Criticisms are made, not to thwart Islam but in good faith for the purpose of advancing Islamic thought.

3.0 ISLAMIC FEMINISM AS A LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE

Liberal Muslim feminists claim their cause is not new but part of an ongoing contextual and historical discourse. This infers the IFM is a philosophical effort that emerged in response to

injustices directed towards Muslim and non-Muslim women. Feminism is an awareness of oppressive constructs and systems that extort the value women, whether professionally, sexually, economically, family- or legal wise, etc. Further, the IFM is rational response which then collectively demands changes that assure justice rather than legalize injustice. Liberal Islamists, therefore, also focus on chauvinist patriarchy as an legacy justified by vain religious interpretations that have become the tradition of culturally afforded male scholars (Rachman, 2004: 528–529).

Dr. Azza M. Karam, a renown Islamic liberal feminist, defined Islamic Feminism in 1998:

Someone who adopts a worldview in which Islam can be contextualized and reinterpreted in order to promote concepts of equity and equality between men and women, and for whom freedom of choice plays an important part in expression.

This affords an understanding for the IFM's struggle and includes universal aspects of an interpretive process with contextualized intentions that promote gender equity and equality, which infers that men and women both have the freedom to make their own decisions.

4.0 AGENDA AND APPROACH OF LIBERAL MUSLIM FEMINISM

To actualize the feminist agenda, liberal Muslims use several approaches and methods in the debate over relevant Islamic laws. These include traditional *ijtihad* and legal victory. Other methods involve anthropology, sociology, history, linguistics and literary criticism. The main goal is to reject male chauvinism. Virtues of the IFM orbit the reconstruction of religious laws related to women, particularly a complete re-evaluation of Islamic Family Law (*munakabat*). These efforts involve analyses and intense re-examinations of *Shari'ah*'s sources, Al-Qur'an and al-Sunnah, as well as methods of interpreting *fiqh* that conflict with classical approaches (Ali, 1999: 4). Such interpretations and considerations are founded on the experience and views of an informed female *ullema*, something that is sorely missing from most all classical emanations.

Muslim feminists emphasize that realization of their goals is via reformation; i.e., the liberalization of Islam's doctrine and law. They outline three approaches to assure such success. The first concerns the recitation of the Qur'an as a source of law; the second, removal and/or re-examination of Hadith as a source of law; and third, *Shari'ah*'s revision (classic *fiqh*). The agenda (religious liberalization) focuses on reinterpreting the Qur'an in alignment with the emancipation of women. This school of thought emphasizes the pressing need for continuous reinterpretation to ensure contemporary relevance. Thus, they reason that Islamic law varies from country to country, which demonstrates that laws are greatly influenced by socio-political circumstances rather than divine injunction. Hence, religious texts can indeed be interpreted differently depending on the comprehension of prior considerations and circumstances in view of present needs. Moreover, they argue that differences in the *tafsir* of prior scholars allowed rather singular, perhaps even arbitrary interpretations (Ali, 1999: 17).

Hence, reform efforts must abandon ambiguous reasoning and defer to critical analysis of all statements that subordinate women and restrict their justly due rights. When a statement is viewed as promoting a double standard regarding gender equality – equality, even if literally taken from holy texts, it remains subject to reform. For instance, Allah says:

O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful (Al-Qur'an, 33:59).

Here, Allah commands women to wear clothes that cover their entire body while out of the house. This verse is specifically directed to the wives of the Prophet alone and cannot be used as evidence that the Qur'an limits the aurat of women that must be covered throughout all ages and places. To the contrary, feminists argue the Qur'an only expounds a general principle, that of concern for the safety of women at a specific place and moment in time. The verse concerns simplicity of conduct and clothing. When interpreted in the socio-historical context, it exalts an attitude of simplicity rather than one of transcendence for the purpose of avoiding indecent acts. It is not a sign of piety. The Qur'an nowhere says that Muslim women should cover their entire body except the face and palms (Sisters In Islam, 1993: 41; *Kod Pakaian Terengganu*, 2000).

Regarding polygamy, Muslim feminists suggest that related verses in the Qur'an be interpreted hermeneutically, again emphasizing the socio-historical context of when the verses were revealed. Regarding the following verse:

And if you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphan girls, then marry those that please you of [other] women, two or three or four. But if you fear that you will not be just, then [marry only] one or those your right hand possesses. That is more suitable that you may not incline [to injustice] (Al-Qur'an, 4:3).

Islamic Feminists explain the verse's significance based on its socio-historical context:

It is often forgotten that there was a socio-historical context within which the verse was revealed. The context was a period of tragedy in Islam after the battle of Uhud when dozens of muslim fighter were killed in one day. Numerous women and children were left without support. To deal with this problem, Allah revealed the verse permitting polygamy (*Islam and Polygamy*, 1990).

Feminist Muslims argue that this verse should be read and interpreted in conjunction with another:

And you will never be able to be equal [in feeling] between wives, even if you should strive [to do so]. So do not incline completely [toward one] and leave another hanging. And if you amend [your affairs] and fear Allah - then indeed, Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful (al-Qur'an, 4:129).

This clearly says men are unable to equally love their wives, even if they try. Yet the Qur'an requires the '*ability to be fair*' as a condition for polygamy. Hermeneutically, therefore, it is claimed that the Qur'an never conferred a right to marry more than one wife. What is understood by Muslim feminists is that these verses were divinely intended to prevent polygamy practices as an Arab legacy. Thus, polygamy is not considered a "right" but rather a responsibility that ensures social justice and protection for single mothers and orphans (*Islam and Polygamy*, 1990; *Ideal State of Marriage in Islam*, 1996).

These verses allow us to conclude that the Qur'an actually checks polygamy except when there is a real need. Conversely, the scripture clearly recognizes monogamy as the ideal compared to polygamy (*Islam and Polygamy*, 1990; *Ideal State of Marriage in Islam*, 1996). Furthermore, Muslim feminists reject the argument that polygamy helps reduce social problems, especially regarding out-of-bound marriages, brothels and illegitimate births. To the contrary, polygamy more likely increases these problems, especially among adolescents raised in families that are abandoned because of polygamy (*Kontroversi Mengenai Poligami*, 2002). Hence, they reject the view that polygamy is a prestigious practice drawn from the sunnah as most believe it is (*Islam and Polygamy*, 1990; *Ideal State of Marriage in Islam*, 1996; *Kontroversi Mengenai Poligami*, 2002; *Kempen Monogami*, 2003; *Deception and Dishonesty in the Practice of Poligamy*, 2005; *Memberikan Subsidi Kepada Lelaki Berpoligami*, 2004).

As for equal rights, the reassessment and re-interpretations of the Qur'an, and the revision of Hadith positions as sources of Islamic law, liberal Islamic thinkers, especially in the IFM, replace notions and laws which, in their view, conflict with concepts of equality, justice, and universally recognized human rights. However they do not deem this a cancellation or replacement of Islamic law, but rather the pursuit of reform via careful screening, interpretation, rectification and correction of classic interpretations of Qur'an and Hadith.

Liberal Muslim feminists severely criticize a system that allows men to dominate family systems; legal testimony (e.g., one male witness equals two female witnesses); inheritance law, which distributes two parts for men and a part for women; polygamy and any law that restrains women's rights and social boundaries pertaining to aurat, etc. Some reject *fiqh* law regarding menstruating women as it prohibits sexual intercourse and forbids formal prayer. They also reject prayer rituals that place women behind menfolk. Many reject texts from the Qur'an and Hadith that promote the superiority of men in positions of leadership. To the contrary, these people allow women to preach at Jummah on Fridays, be solat imams, and administer azan. In short, all laws that distinguish gender differences and promote male superiority are rejected and replaced with laws that provide equal rights and gender equality (Yunahar, 1997: 61–104).

To justify *Shari'ah* reforms, they propose hermeneutic interpretations, socio-historical analyses, and relativism. On the reinterpretation of the Qur'an, they much admire hermeneutics developed by Fazlur Rahman and consider them ideal for the reform of religious laws that parallel and maintain relevance with current human developments; and thus reap much benefit for all human life (Rachman, 2004: 553–554). This school assumes that hermeneutic models advance the reinterpretation of the Qur'an and are more likely to successfully reform classic interpretations. Qur'anic verses, in their opinion, appear to literally segregate women's rights and must be transmuted to achieve gender equality (Rachman, 2004: 283). Finally, they believe that liberal policies and approaches pioneered by Islamic thinkers to reinterpret the law have achieved *par excellence* status. Such scholars are classed as "Liberal Islamist Thinkers". Thus far, the Muslim discourse refers to them as Neo-Modernists, Rationalists, Feminists, etc. (Rachman, 2004: 559).

The IFM therefore emphasizes the legitimacy and rationality of hermeneutic methods based on historical and sociological analysis, and they have laid down a theoretical foundation with society as the biological mother who gives birth to various rules of life including the practice of religion. As such, social venues and conditions become sources that birth the law and depend-on or are influenced-by the state and contemporary social milieu relevant to a certain place, time and historical phase. Hence, if contexts change then rules and regulations must also change; consequently, Islamic laws must also undergo such a process (Yunahar, 1997: 144). Proponents claim that phenomena and arguments supporting current Islamic laws are the result of events in a distant Arabian society that is no longer relevant to contemporary Islamic venues. Hence, the development of society must remain forever open to changes depending on time, social conditions, and place.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Muslim Liberalism began with religiously oriented liberals of the occidental Renaissance, particularly the struggle to end the oppression of women. Gustavo Gutierrez believed God favored oppressed people and included women as part of his liberalizing effort to reinterpret the holy texts of hermeneutical Christianity based on historical and contextual analysis (Boff & Boff, 1987: 28–29). Muslim liberals who embrace feminism fall in step with this call. However, they stay within Islam's framework and can be considered Islamic Feminists. Islamic Feminism, as previously

discussed, allows that its fundamental concepts emerged somewhat in sync and harmony with Western feminism. Strictly speaking, however, Islamic Feminism, as understood by Liberal Muslims, is characterized by a stream of religious thought and social movements that focus on equality, freedom, equal rights, and equitable opportunities for both genders. The primary struggle is to uphold social justice while demanding women's rights, individually and generally, based on interpretations that are soundly linked to Islamic doctrine as championed by Liberal Muslims.

The concept of Islamic Feminism and its agenda, as understood and embraced by Muslim liberals, is to be found with Budhy Munawar-Rachman who concluded that the Muslim liberal agenda is to initially create situations that provide opportunity for 'freedom of choice' for women on the basis of equal rights with men. Such conditions are neither immanent nor highly regarded in traditional Islamic terms. Secondly, they must abolish the coercion of women to become housewives as a main tasking because of gender or feminine ability. Muslim liberals emphasize that this is the most striking of foundations discoverable in *fiqh* writings on women. Thirdly, women should not be encouraged to perform a special "feminine" roles on the basis of feminine modesty. To liberalize this traditional agenda, Muslim liberals reject gender apartheid and stereotypes found in all Islamic interpretations centered on the masculine hegemony of patriarchal systems linked to religion (Rachman, 2004: 568–569).

Advocates of Islamic Liberal feminism therefore emphasize a socio-historical approach and framework of hermeneutics when reinterpreting sacred texts and legal pronouncements referring to rights, liberty, equity and gender equality. In summary, all IFM reform efforts concern 1) reinterpreting the Qur'an and revision; 2) rejection of a group of Hadith as a source of law; 3) reconstruction of *fiqh*, especially chapters regarding women and *fiqh munakahat*; 4) upholding human rights and universally recognized liberty.

The future of the liberal Islamic feminist movement in Malaysia is seen as far behind compared to what is happening in Indonesia. The position of Islam as the official religion of the country, the role of sharia courts and Islamic organisations and schools which clearly still defend the values and heritage of Islamic traditionalism are considered as a great competitor to the development of this feminism movement.

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