

Three Main Perspectives on Women's Issues: Feminist, Islamic and Muslim Cultural Traditionalist Perspectives

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It is needless to emphasize here that the status and role of woman in family and society in Islam is shrouded in confusion and ambiguity yet, perhaps, two main reasons can be identified behind this confusion — 1) the ideological differences between Islam and feminism and 2) general attitude of Muslims towards Muslim women who are influenced more by local cultural traditions which may not necessarily be Islamic. Below we would like to list down some of the main differences between feminism, Muslim Cultural Traditionalism and real Islamic stance on women's issues to provide a concrete and clear understanding of the three perspectives.

Three Main Perspectives on Women's Issues

Feminism:

1. Feminism owes its origin to the eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy of the West. One of the main arguments of this philosophy is that man can understand all his problems and the problems of nature and environment through scientific method, which emphasizes rational investigation, and observation and all sense perceptions. Hence, man should develop his knowledge and resolve all his problems on the basis of this so-called scientific method without looking at the Biblical revelation. It implies that there is no need to refer to God and His injunction to know man and nature and to resolve any kind of problems of man.

2. Feminism like any other modern theory or ideology perceives man or woman from purely a secular perspective, making a distinction between a private and a public life. It implies that religion should be either avoided totally or it should remain a private affair and it should have nothing to do

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with the public life, which includes all aspects — familial, educational, social, economic, political and others. This further implies that if feminism addresses any question or issue of woman, it will look into the issues and will try to resolve the issues from the so-called scientific method using reason and observation and without any recourse to God and Biblical revelation, as though religion has nothing to do with those issues of woman.

3. Obviously due to the above reason, when feminism addresses any question or issue of woman, it does not show any concern to the question of accountability to God. Feminists believe that, religion has no concrete guidance on the issues of the development and empowerment of women, in fact, most of them hold the view that, religion is an obstacle in the way of the development of women.

4. Feminism, being a secular ideology perceives the development of woman from materialistic perspective. It is only concerned with the social status of woman and the economic or material development of woman for its own sake. It does not bother to see whether the foundation of the material development of woman is based on the spiritual principles or not.

5. Feminism in the beginning developed as a theory of women's rights, demanding equal rights as men for education, for economic and political participation. At this stage, feminists in general do not condemn family and motherhood as political institutions and do not look at them as obstacles in the way of the development of women. They were generally pro-family but at the same time they demanded equal rights for education, equal wages for equal work, property rights, right to vote and right to stand for election.

6. Gradually within feminism, some extreme trends developed and the theory of women's rights developed into a political ideology and an internationally influential political movement of women's liberation. Within its huge umbrella many schools emerged including modern, liberal, radical, socialist, Marxist, psychoanalytical, Existential, neo-

Marxist (gender) and postmodern. Although there are some differences among them, in their analysis of women's issues and their suggestions, but there are some common arguments among them. Most of them argue that wifehood and motherhood are the greatest obstacles in the development of women. They look at family and society as patriarchal. By patriarchy, they do not mean male headship but male-domination over female in family and society. According to them family is therefore, a basic political institution which engineers the relationship between male and female inside and outside the family on the basis of male-domination and female subordination. They also believe that heterosexuality and motherhood are also the parts of this political or patriarchal system of the family. Hence most of them except the anti-reproduction-technology school of feminists, believe that all the reproduction-aid and reproduction-control technological devices should be made accessible to women so that they can make use of them and can overcome the problems of motherhood. They believe in the promotion of in vitro fertilization, surrogacy, and all those techniques, which help them to overcome the problem of reproduction. They believe that sexuality and reproduction can be separated from the institution of marriage, for most of them marriage is an enslavement and childbirth is burdensome and an awful job.

7. Some of the feminists within the modern and postmodern schools of thought strongly believe that all kinds of sexuality — lesbianism, homosexuality, Tran sexuality and others should not only be accepted but should also be promoted. They assert that promotion of all kinds of sexuality would help women to break away from the dominant form of sexuality, heterosexuality. They agree that there is an urgent need to redefine marriage, family and reproduction because all these should be liberated from heterosexual union.

8. Most of the feminists believe in the legalization of abortion. They even work for the promotional abortion (Dilation and Extraction). These abortions are carried on patient 20-26 weeks LMP and even in some cases up to 32 weeks. This is a very barbaric kind of an abortion, which gives immense pain to the unborn child.

9. Most of the feminists believe that women should occupy 50% of the position in all social, economic and political structures in the society and state from local to international levels. According to them equality implies equal participation of men and women in all structures and institutions. In their emphasis on 50/50 quotas for men and women in all structures, they ignore the biological differences between men and women. According to them biological differences between men and women do not matter much and that should be ignored. They assert that biology is not destiny. Thus feminists are badly confused with 'equality' and 'identity'. They have mixed the question of equality and identity. They ignore the fact that men and women are not identical and therefore equality is different from identity.

10. Feminism does not offer a sublime purpose or mission to women. Its missions is only women's material, social and political development and empowerment for its own sake. For this reason, it is neither concerned about the attainment of its mission on the basis of some religious or spiritual consideration nor it is bothered to win the ultimate pleasure of God. Its mission is confined to this world alone and revolves around the material advancement.

Islam

1. Islam is not a man-made ideology, theory or religion. Its literal meaning is 'peace' and submission to Allah (swt) in all aspects of life. It implies that Islam is the complete and dynamic system of life. Islam can be traced back to that momentous time when the whole progeny of Adam (a.s.) took the covenant from Allah (swt) acknowledging Him that He is the God. Thus man even before coming to this world followed Islam — which means submission to Allah (swt). Furthermore, when the first man and the first Prophet, Adam (a.s.) was sent to the earth, he was given the knowledge from Allah (swt). Ever since that time, Allah (swt) had sent several Prophets and His revelations, which became the primary sources of knowledge to know man, nature and the entire universe and to live a life of obedience to Allah (swt) and to resolve all kinds of problems of

man in the light of the revelation. The final and authentic revelation is sent to the last Prophet, Muhammad صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ and it is none other than the Qur'ân. Hence in Islam the primary sources of knowledge are the Qur'ân and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ called (Sunnah). Moreover, Islam makes it clear that man should use his intellectual faculty and sense perceptions to understand man, nature, environment and everything. It implies that in fact, Islam emphasizes scientific method to acquire knowledge. However, in this scientific method of Islam, the reasoning and observation which man needs to acquire knowledge would be directed through the revelation, the Qur'ân and the Sunnah. In other words, the primary sources of knowledge and inspiration of the scientific method in Islam is the Qur'ân and the Sunnah. The reasons for this are quite obvious. It is Allah (swt) who possesses absolute and comprehensive knowledge of all the things. Furthermore, the reasoning ability and sense perceptions of man are also given to him by Allah (swt). Allah (swt) alone possesses absolute knowledge about man, what he is what is his purpose of creation, what is nature and all we see and cannot see. Hence, according to Islam, the so-called scientific method that is developed in the West — acquiring knowledge only through reason and observation while discarding the revelation is totally an unscientific method. This is so because, here man ignores the fact that he cannot attain any knowledge without the help of God, because knowledge comes from God and man. his intellectual faculty and his sense perceptions are also given to him by God. Thus, Islam totally rejects the main argument of the Enlightenment philosophy of the West, which has given rise to many modern theories and ideologies including feminism.

2. Islam as mentioned earlier is the complete system of life and therefore, it does not accept any compartmentalization or bifurcation of life into private and public life. Islam emphasizes that Allah (swt) had provided basic and broad guidance (*hidâyah*) in all aspects of life, private and public. Therefore, in Islam, all issues and questions concerning man or woman should be referred to the Qur'ân and Sunnah, so that we can get the better solution to all the problems and issues.

3. Islam believes that all the questions and issues on woman and man should be perceived while keeping into consideration the accountability before Allah (swt). It believes that scholars, leaders and general masses are all accountable to Allah (swt) for all their concepts and deeds and on the stance; they take on any given issue concerning man or woman.

4. Islam does not perceive man or woman purely from one side material perspective. In fact, in Islam there is nothing like a division between matter and spirit. In Islam material development is based on Islamic injunctions and thus the foundation of the material development in Islam lies in the spiritual principles. Thus, there is a unique combination of matter and spirit in Islam. Hence when Islam addresses woman's issues, it does not look into the issues from purely material perspective for its own sake, but together with its internal connection with the Islamic injunctions. This approach of Islam is balanced and holistic.

5. Islam has offered women rights for education, for participation in socio-economic and political structures from the very beginning. However, Islam demands that all these rights should be enjoyed by women while following Islamic injunctions of dress and social interaction. At the same time, Islam also emphasizes that women cannot overlook their prominent and dynamic role in the family. It implies that women can enjoy the familial, socio-economic and political rights, which Islam has offered to women while keeping into consideration the fact that family is the basic unit of civilization and their role in family should not be jeopardized.

6. Islamic stance on these issues is very clear. Islam accords to motherhood a respectable position. It looks at mother and motherhood as blessings for mankind, for the love compassion, and the basic responsibilities, which a mother undergrows for children. As far as marriage is concerned, Islam perceives it as one of the signs of Allah (swt). In Islam, marriage is not an enslavement of women because Islam condemns male or female domination in the family and emphasizes consultation. Family in Islam is therefore, neither patriarchal nor matriarchal rather consultational. Even though men are overall incharge of

women and children in family because they are entrusted with the financial responsibility of the family and they are physically stronger than women. But it does not however mean that they can dominate over women and can become despotic. They are expected to work in consultation with women. Some Muslim scholars describe Islamic family as patriarchal arguing that Islam believes in the headship of men in the families. They ignore the fact, that patriarchy as understood by the feminists is not mere headship of a family; rather it is male-domination over female in family and society. This kind of male-domination has no place for consultation rather it is despotic and authoritarian in nature. As far as, reproduction technology is concerned according to Islam husband and wife alone can use those technological devices for reproduction, which do not create the problem of adultery. IVF is allowed in Islam provided the ova come from the mother, the sperm from the father and the embryo is transferred into the uterus of one's own wife. Any other way, which gives way to adultery is not allowed in Islam. The whole idea of begetting children through artificial insemination through the help of some donated sperm from any person available in the sperm bank is totally forbidden. Islam also forbids surrogate mothering in which a woman as a third person leases her womb for the child of a couple who may or may not be husband and wife. Surrogate parenting gives rise to several legal and moral issues.

7. Islam perceives these types of sexuality — lesbianism, homosexuality, Tran sexuality as *jahiliyyah*, vulgar practices of ignorant people. Islam totally forbids pre-marital or extra-marital sexuality; in fact, Islam is so sensitive on these issues that, it believes in closing all the avenues, which lead to any kind of sexual laxity and sexual deviancy.

8. Islam does not allow abortion unless there is a threat to the life of the mother. All kinds of abortion, which are performed through direct human intervention, are rejected in Islam. It is considered a great sin to kill children for the fear of their sustenance and other lame excuses.

9. Islam is very clear about the issues of "equality" and "identity". Islam believes that men and women are not doubt equal but they are not

identical. This implies that men and women are equal because they are created from the single soul, they are given the same mission of life vicegerency, and they are given equal rights to acquire knowledge. But this equality does not mean that Islam ignores the biological differences between men and women. Hence, according to Islam, though men and women are equal but they are different. Therefore there are certain responsibilities, which are legally binding on men and women, for instance, the financial responsibility. In the same way the child bearing and childbirth responsibilities are assigned to women because they are biologically different from men. This is how Islam makes difference between 'equality' and 'identity' and believes that men and women complement each other. From Islamic point of view, women can participate in socio-economic, political and other institutions of the society provided she follows the Islamic injunctions of dress and social interactions and also performs her responsibility in the family. But Islam also believes in the cooperation of men with women because all kinds of house responsibilities cannot be entrusted to women alone. However, from Islamic perspective, equality of women and men do not mean that women should necessarily work outside. Even women who do not work outside and they do not have any separate income of their own and they are only engaged in the housework they are still equal to men. Furthermore, women in Islam need not have to emulate men in their dress, in hairstyle, in their whole outlook to be equal to men. Women in Islam can be equal to men while remaining as women and maintaining their different identity.

10. Islam offers to all men and women a higher purpose of life-vicegerency of Allah (swt). It perceives men and women as co-vicegerents of Allah (swt), created to establish His injunctions in all dimensions of life to establish justice on the earth and ultimately to attain pleasure of Allah (swt) to be successful here and hereafter. In this sense, whatever men and women think and perform in this world, they should do so as vicegerents of Allah (swt). Hence, they are expected to perform all their works, including the housework and outside work as '*Ibâdah*', obedience to Allah (swt). Therefore, if women perform only the housework following the injunctions of Allah (swt) as vicegerents, it is also '*Ibâdah*' and also a

part of vicegerency, the higher purpose of life. In this way, women in Islam whether they work outside or inside the house, they perform their sublime purpose of creation — vicegerency, provided they follow the injunctions of Allah (swt) and the Prophetic traditions. If women do not perform the housework or the outside work, without following the injunctions of Allah (swt) and the Prophetic traditions, it is neither *'ibâdah* nor vicegerency. Besides all these men and women are entrusted with the responsibility of this mission of vicegerency to be performed even in the public sphere in all dimensions, including the political at all levels. In other words, Islam has entrusted to men and women the mission of vicegerency through which they should promote virtues and forbid vices to establish the words of Allah (swt) supreme in the world.

Muslim Cultural Traditionalism

1. By Muslim Cultural Traditionalism, we mean two things — firstly, those writings of some Muslim Scholars on women's issues, which are although inspired by the Qur'ân and the Sunnah but at the same time, they are also influenced by some age old ideas, customs, concepts and traditions of the indigenous societies which are not necessarily Islamic. Secondly, we refer to those general practices in Muslim societies on Women's issues, which are not necessarily Islamic. Thus Muslim Cultural Traditionalism is composed of these elements — some writings of some scholars and some general Muslim practices, which are not necessarily Islamic.

2. They (scholars, leaders, and general masses) also believe that Islam is the complete guidance for the entire life, private and public. Hence, they also believe that we should refer to the Qur'ân and the Sunnah to address any question and issue concerning anything including women's issues. But they also get influenced by some local cultural traditions on women's issues, which may not be necessarily Islamic.

3. Scholars, leaders and the general masses believe that they are answerable to Allah (swt) for all their deeds. But at the same time, they also show concern to the local cultural pressure on the issues. The local

cultural pressure may be based on local cultural traditions, which may not be necessarily Islamic.

4. They (some scholars, leaders and general masses) also do not perceive man or woman from materialistic perspective. But, their perspective may be also influenced by the local cultural traditions which may be totally negative of the whole idea of the material advancement, particularly of women. There can be variations within this category. Some may totally disagree with the idea of material development and may believe that Islam is not much concerned with economic and material development of man. Some may believe that men alone bear the responsibility of material advancement of family and society and women need not have to participate in it.

5. Some of them believe that Islam has offered some rights to women for their role in family and some institutions of the society. They also believe that women should be allowed to enjoy these rights as far as the local cultural traditions allow them to do. There are some people in this category who believe that Islam does not assign any important role to women in the family as well as in the society. They assert that women should be submissive and passive in the family and inactive in the society.

6. They also reject all those reproduction — technological devices, which pave the way to adultery. As far as their views on marital relationship between husband and wife are concerned, they believe that as soon as a woman enters into a marital contract with a man, she becomes his subordinate in the sense that she should submit to him in all affairs. In theory, they believe in the headship of men in the families but they describe family as patriarchal family. However in many cases this headship becomes quite despotic and authoritarian and they believe that women should accept this kind of male domination. As for motherhood, they believe that along with the child bearing, childbirth, weaning and early childcare responsibilities, women should alone take care of all the house chores and other responsibilities of the house and children. They assert that father has only to take the financial responsibility of the wife

and the children as bread-winners. As for the food, education and moral upbringing and other works of children and other affairs of the house, men are expected only to give some instructions and to perform some outside responsibilities. They believe that men need not have to give any physical or moral co-operation to women in managing the house. On all small or big matters concerning the family, they believe that men should make the decisions without even any consultation with their wives and children.

7. They also reject all kinds of deviant sexuality and all types of sexual lapses.

8. They also believe that abortion is not allowed in Islam unless the life of the mother is in danger.

9. They generally do not believe in the equality of men and women. Like the feminists they also tend to mix up 'equality' with 'identity' but totally in a different way. They believe that women are inferior because they are physically weaker than men and they are also less intellectual and less capable than men in all public spheres. They also argue that due to all these reasons, the Qur'ân has made men the protectors of women and children in the family. They also hold the opinion that women are incapable of playing any leadership role in the society. They try to convince people that all their arguments on inequality and inferiority of women are based on their correct interpretation of the Qur'ân and the Prophetic traditions. But the reality is different. They are more influenced by local cultures; they have less understanding of the Qur'ân and the Sunnah; they failed to understand the differences between 'responsibility' and 'superiority'. They believe that since men are given the financial responsibility and they are made the *Qawwâmûn* in the family, they are superior to women. Furthermore, they tend to address the question of 'equality' looking into the lesser physical strength of women when compared to men. Thus they mix the issue of the different identity of women (based on their different biology from men) in the question of identity, and thus fail to differentiate between equality and identity.

10. They also believe that men and women are created with a sublime purpose-performance of vicegerency. But they also believe that it is not necessary for women to participate with men in the higher task of the establishments of Allah's sovereignty on the earth. They believe that this task should be taken by men alone. Some of them even believe that it is sufficient for women in Islam to perform all the housework and protect their chastity and obey their husbands to attain a place in heaven.

From the above, it may be quite explicit to the readers that neither the feminist perspective nor the Muslim cultural traditionalist perspective is balanced and holistic in their approaches towards the issues of women. If feminist perspective is too secular, materialistic and liberal, the perspective of Muslim cultural traditionalism is too limited, confused and narrow. Hence it is only the Islamic perspective, which is not only holistic and balanced but also practical and universal. Therefore, Muslim women need not have to perish themselves standing at the crossroad of feminism and Muslim cultural traditionalism; rather they can save themselves and others following the Islamic perspective, which is in fact the moderate and balanced perspective.