

Muslim and Islamic Feminism: Is There Cohesiveness in Divergence?

Hamida Bano*

Feminist theory, in general, is in disarray and there are serious in-house battles raging between rival camps of feminists. Many critics of feminism see this as a victory for themselves. There are various accusations and counter accusations giving the impression that feminists first need to settle in-house battles or that the whole idea is flawed. But the important point to note is that there is little disagreement on two key issues among feminists of different hues:

(a) That there is a serious problem with current and historical situation regarding status or rights of women.

(b) That we need to fight against male domination on various fronts though the methodologies they adopt are very different.

Let me first of all present the scenario of conflict among rival groups in Muslim world all of whom claim to represent the rights of women in contemporary debate on Islamic cultural theory. But before that a few remarks on the extent of divergence among three rival interpretative frameworks- Marxist, Postmodernist and traditionalists –in modern cultural theory, elements of which are appropriated by certain Muslim theorists.

Marxist feminism conceives feminist struggle as part of larger class struggle and asserts that as long as the institution of family exists, there can be no emancipation as it is based on fundamental marginalization of the weaker sex /class. Family is a miniature state in which it is not the bourgeoisie or feudal lord who rules but the male person.

The aggressive postmodern feminism of Derrida developing the logic of excess and deficit, advocates that

*Professor Department of English University of Kashmir Hazratbal, Srinagar
Email: hameedah.naveem@gmail.com

women should not be women nor men but hermaphrodite. Sexuality as an excess, can only be polysexual - polysexuality and non-sexuality must co-inhere. The traditional concept of women he calls She/it, a writing, untruth, matter- language. She is it, a thing, a thing woman. Derrida's is a feminist anti-feminism. He rejects geocentrism as he does phallogocentrism. According to it, to be equal to man is to be like man, to be same as woman but to be the other of man, not man, not woman. But something in-between. The traditional position legitimizes what is denounced as patriarchy on metaphysical grounds though it takes a symbolic view of what we call man – woman relationship and does not fix any particular role for women rather it assumes a classless society where man is not defined by his purchasing power but by his relation to the eternal power.

Almost every element of postmodernism/Marxism goes against the traditional picture of women but modern Muslim theorists have been appropriating them for their interpretations. Compare some standard Islamist feminist writing and some standard postmodern works, the gulf between the two will show up and the difficulty of dialogue between the two and hence the consequent negative repercussions for Islam could be envisaged.

The Situation in the Muslim World

Here I follow the classification of feminism into Islamist Feminism, Muslim Feminism and Secular Feminism as put forth by Azza Karam to state the problem of convergence and divergence in feminist theory as applied to Muslim culture. Most of the Islamist women shy away from term feminist as irrelevant and inaccurate Western construction. They are aware of a particular oppression of women and actively seek to rectify this by recourse to Islamic principles. According to them 'women are oppressed precisely because they try to be equal to men and are therefore being placed in unnatural settings and unfair situations, which denigrates them and take away their

integrity and dignity as women'. Western feminism, with its emphasis on the total equality of the sexes, results in women striving to be superhuman and in the process, losing much of their effort while taking on more burdens.

Muslim feminists are women activists who also use Islamic sources, like the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*, but their aim is to show that the discourse of equality between men and women is valid within Islam. They also try to steer a middle course between interpretations of socio-political and cultural realities according to Islam and human rights discourse. They argue for a form of *ijtihad* and many Islamist feminists agree with Muslim feminists that women are indeed capable of taking on tasks involving the interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence and providing social and political leadership. However, Muslim feminists (in contrast to Islamists) are writing to contextualize religious (and particularly Quranic) injunctions in order to allow for the possibilities of textual re-interpretation. 'Reinterpretation involves challenging the traditional hierarchical, institutional and predominantly patriarchal theological power structures, a task, women, in general, are not encouraged to do especially when these women have not gone through the traditional religious institutional training (e.g in Al-Azhar) They face the same accusations of 'cultural in- authenticity' faced by other promoters of secular discourses which advocate the concept of *asala* (authenticity) at the expense of an appreciation of conjectural and historical realities. They are perceived by Islamists as a direct threat to almost all inherited religious values. The point is that it is an enormously difficult task to challenge the power base of what Allama Iqbal called dictatorship of *ulama* and therefore, getting a legitimate space for interpretation.¹

Most modernist and reformist and even what Khundmari calls 'inner radicalist' thought in Islam is branded as inauthentic. Foucauldian framework of power and disciplinary stratagems is found to be relevant here by such Muslim feminists as Azza Karam. This issue needs to be contextualized in broader

framework of traditional versus modern interpretations of Islam. The complexity of the issue is underscored by the fact that even traditional authorities are not unanimous in recognizing traditional orthodox credentials of different or rival traditional authorities. Qardawi, by all means a traditional *a'lim* and Maulana Maududi an arch traditionalist and Ahmed Amin, well grounded in traditional disciplines, are a few examples of many 'inauthentic' authorities according to dominant orthodoxy of *ulama*. Perhaps most profound intellectuals or scholars (in contradistinction to *madrassa* trained *ulama*) are and can be branded as inauthentic by the *ulama*. *Fatwa*, an important disciplinary institution is controlled wholly by *ulama*. No non-traditional authority can issue a *fatwa*. Sir Sayyid has given a bold justification for his non-traditional credentials. He says that it is God's favour on him that he did not go to any *madarasa* (traditional schools) because that would have conditioned him (and put blinkers on his eyes) to look at the world through a narrow and limited perspective, for he would have been brain-washed and disciplined to be yet another *a'lim*. There have been very vocal protests against the 'hegemony of church' in Islam and some have advocated a bold reform on the pattern of Protestantism. There is, however, a significant difference between *ulama's* demand for any interpreter of Islam to acquire required traditional qualifications and (so as not to allow playing with the sources or trivialize the responsible job of interpretation) and Christian Church's approach and consequent protestant revolt against all authorities and making individual conscience the supreme authority in the matters of interpretation. Appeal to liberalization in interpretation is genuine, but Protestant attitude cannot be accepted. The important role of authentic traditions and reference to classical great masters is best appreciated and advocated by traditionalist/perennialist Orthodoxy in Islam. Sufi tradition has always stressed this point. However, extending this to legal thought in Islam and thus practically closing the gates of *ijtihad*, is not defensible, even from strictly Quranic perspective.

There is a great value in maintaining the tradition but when tradition itself is problematized and its Orthodox credentials challenged from both within and without, not only on the basis of modern critical practice but even from certain traditional circles, one can hardly veto against Muslim intellectual's right of re-interpretation of Islamic sources. Unholy alliance between profane factors of power and gender bias, and the sacrosanct holy tradition of Islamic law which is basically relevant to feminist discourse, cannot be denied after postmodernism has laid bare such alliances and thus the call for purging tradition from un-Islamic elements (which modern and postmodern and even traditional/medieval critical practices expose) is not dismissible on Islamic traditional grounds. Islam has not much respect for orthodoxy/heterodoxy binarism, as in Christianity and in fundamentalist ideology in all religions. 'Holier than thou' 'Pure Islam' 'authentic tradition' and all such labels used by structuralist orthodox approach are problematized. In the name of 'pure' authentic Islam and Orthodox interpretation, marginalized and suppressed discourses (with which Muslim feminism identifies itself) cannot be silenced, especially in an age which believes in democratic right. The practice of Inquisition no longer works in our age and thus traditional way of ensuring conformity to tradition are no longer practically feasible. The veto against Muslim feminist discourse by Islamist feminist *ulama* has resulted in the proliferation of secularist feminist discourse. More and more Muslim women have adopted secularist feminist theory and practice due to alienating and othering nature of Islamist discourse. Most Muslim women are still devout and orthodox as for as their beliefs are concerned but in practice are heavily influenced by secularist character of modern states. This result in a kind of schizophrenia and duplicitous behaviour can be illustrated by examining the issue of veil.

Islamist feminist *ulama* take the veil as an indisputable religious obligation, and, even more importantly, a symbol of the depth of religious conviction and solidarity with other Muslims.

The veil is essential and without it one is westernized and not really committed to Islam. It is ID card of a good Muslim woman. In contrast to this, Muslim feminists look upon the issue of veil as one that should be based on women's choice and conviction and they defend its *polyvalency* and advocate bare minimum standards of modesty in Islam. A vast majority of Muslim (or formerly Muslim) women go unveiled by choice or by compulsion. Many of those who do so by choice reject veil on this or that ground and this becomes their motivation for leaving Islam altogether, although some may still pay some nominal lip service to it. Thus Islam once perceived to be synonymous with veiling and *purdah* system (there being no space for a Muslim woman to go unveiled and still be called a genuine Muslim) is thrown overboard. Many are conditioned to see it as a sign of oppression and evaluate the entire edifice of Islam in this light. Thus, whether we like it or not, their demand (and compulsion) to go unveiled within Islamic framework, if not conceded, results in their total alienation from Islam. Not many Muslim feminists are bold enough to reject Islamist feminist veto against unveiling within the Islamic framework. However, they are accused (and it really becomes a handicap for them and their Islamic credentials in a traditional society) of westoxication and licentiousness. The Secularist feminist discourse, then, comes handy to them as an alternative.

The *ulama* are denying the opening of the gates of absolute *ijtihad* for even male Muslim scholarship, not to speak for women.² There is no precedent of great women commentator or interpreter of Islam. So Muslim feminist demand is dubbed as *biddat* (innovation). Many conscientious Muslim women thus feel compelled to adopt secular feminist approach of grounding their discourse outside the realm of Islam and placing it, instead, within the international human rights discourse. Secular feminists totally reject Islam as a basis from which to formulate any agenda for women's emancipation although they may respect Islam as a private matter. By so doing, they avoid being caught

up in interminable debates on the position and status of women within religion. (Mustafa Kamal has cited this as one of the important reasons for adoption of secularism. Because women's issues and failure of orthodoxy to appropriate Muslim feminists even get a consensus over rival interpretations within traditional framework has been responsible for one of the most decisive events in 20th century Islam – Turkey's turning away from Islam and looking towards the West and adoption of secularism. This shows the importance of the problem. This turning away helps to escape the brunt of potential accusations, levelled by religious conservatives, regarding the right to interpret religious texts. A number of cultural and political criticisms are directed at them: they are clones of the West, implementers of imperialist agendas and – the ultimate de-legitimiser- non-believers'. The very existence of aggressive secular feminist discourse shows disenchantment with patriarchal version of Islam to the extent of alienation from Islam in contemporary society. No thorough rejection of it can do; there is a need to carry a dialogue with secular feminists. Any formerly Muslim woman who feels disillusioned with orthodox version of Islam is labelled as feminist in common practice. All leftist and other non-Islamic discourses are subsumed within secularist feminism. It provides a space for all dissenting and heterodox elements. Majority of highly educated women in Muslim countries are migrants have distanced themselves from such Islam.

Seriousness of the challenge from secular feminism has increased because of the alliance between secular feminism and most kinds of irreligious forces dominant in the modern world. Because modernist humanist secularism and neo-paganist relativist postmodernism have managed to influence so much of current thought and ethos that in the present global village Muslims are constantly bombarded by this rejection of Islam, and even though Islamist feminism and even Muslim feminism is taking place all the time, which results in proportional increase in the number of secular feminists. Unless Muslim world learns to

seriously reckon with modernity and post modernity in the manner of their Christian counterparts (although this does not entail similar response from Muslims) and appropriate it and develop a viable Islamic critique of these anti Islamic ideologies, the rising tide of secular feminism cannot be averted or arrested.³ Muslim answers to modernism and postmodernism are, in general, either naive and betray ignorance of the issue at hand, or reactionary. There are very few worth reckoning critiques of the West by Muslims. Nasr, Schuon, Faruqi, Shariati, Pervez Manzoor and the like are exceptions. What is current are like Maulana Thanwi's *Answer to Modernism*. (Even Muhammad Qutub fails to convince). Islamization of disciplines is prior requirement for appeal of any Islamist or Islamic feminist discourse at the highest intellectual levels. Economic imperialism, before which Muslims are so helpless, brings in its wake western cultural imperialism, and thus secular feminism (although not all secular feminism could be thus rejected or labelled). So the challenge from feminism is not easily challengeable and if we insist on rejecting and suspecting Muslim feminism, as many Islamists do, we are further weakened in our defence against secular feminism. Demand for single, final or homogenized version of Islam in relation to women's rights is proving counterproductive. Arkoun's plea for rethinking Islam and coming to terms with the unthinkable is not to be dismissed so easily. Perennialist orthodoxy will hardly be effective in this connection because of its primary concern with metaphysical dimensions of Islam and that too couched in a very abstract and obscure format, hardly understandable to most young Muslim women. Islamist feminist writings on the issue are not usually of such a calibre or standard to match the opponents on their own terms. It is difficult to find a match of Simone de Beauvoir's *The second Sex* or Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* in any respects in Islamist writing on the women's issue. Hardly are they addressed to global audience. Facing modernity and its feminism is not such an easy task. Mastering the discipline (which as Faruqi says, is the first step for

Islamization of the relevant discipline) of modernist humanist and postmodernist feminism is not easy, that is why there are very few effective critiques of it by Muslim feminists and Islamist feminists because they are not masters of this discipline and hence their rebuttals of it do not carry much weight. To complicate the issue further, they are very complacent and their ultimate argument is to reject all others which differ from them as perverts suffering from false consciousness.

Viewed this way, there is one prominent Islamist feminist, Amina Wadud who takes on patriarchy by exegetical intervention. She says in her book *Quran and Women* that what concerns her most about 'traditional' *tafsir* is that they were written exclusively for males. This means that men and men's experience were included and women and women's experiences or needs were either excluded or interpreted through the male vision. According to her women's voicelessness during critical periods of development in Quranic interpretation has been mistakenly equated with voicelessness in the text itself. She accuses secularist feminists of failure to draw a distinction between the interpretation (which gave poor status to women) and the intentions of many Muslim feminists who are committed to Islam and to women's cause and using former only to make liberation of women possible. Because shunning Islam in order to defend women's rights will be counterproductive in societies which always look towards ideal of Islam and judge their actions accordingly. Amina Wudud points out the shortcomings of secularists who try to vindicate the position of women on grounds entirely incongruous with the Quranic position on women and argues for the more effective tool for the liberation of Muslim women by establishing a link between that liberation and the primary source of Islamic ideology and theology.

Qur'an and Women: Rereading the sacred text from a women's perspective can be regarded as a ground breaking work in the field of female Quranic exegesis. It represents a departure from previous works that attempt to accommodate greater rights

for women in Islam but which nonetheless consider male superiority as justifiable and desirable because such writings explain and rationalize inequality within the parameters of traditional exegetical methodology. Wadud's book steps out of the paradigm by challenging both the notion of gender inequality as well as the exegetical approach employed which insists that mimicry of the Quranic legislation introduced to regulate 7th century Arabian society is the only valid approach. Wadud argues that it is essentially the principles behind the specific legislations that must be upheld not necessarily the actual legislation. She recommends instead "the method of restricting the particulars to a specific context, extracting the principles extended by Quran through that particular" With this principle as a basis for her hermeneutical approach to Quranic interpretation, Wadud proposes revisiting controversial issues such as polygamy, women's testimony, male authority, divorce and inheritance in the light of modern circumstances. She, thus, proposes 'a reading of the Quran within and without the stereotypes which have been the framework for many of the male interpretations.'⁴

It sounds convincing. It can be illustrated by Benazir's case. Even if she was a hard core secularist eschewing all reference to Islam yet could not afford not to give Islamic legitimacy to her feminism as the head of Islamic State. Azza Karam, a Muslim postmodern feminist, makes the same point. For her a feminism that doesn't justify itself within Islam is bound to be rejected by the rest of society and is therefore self-defeating. Moreover, Muslim feminists feel that to attempt to separate Islamic discourses from current discourses (whether they are accused of being western or not) can only lead to serious fragmentation within society and is thus undesirable. Such a separation, many argue succeeds in preventing a process of mutual enlightenment between the two discourses and in fact risks making the Islamic one poorer, patriarchal and isolated from others.

Is there Divergence or hidden cohesiveness?

Despite the picture painted above and contrary to what may appear from this brief survey of seemingly chaotic situation, there is a fundamental underlying cohesion in what all these groups are aiming at and in their basic agreement on the issues that are at stake.

All agree that current situation in the Muslim world needs drastic critique though the critical lens adopted to formulate this critique may differ. There is an agreement that majority of the males do not treat women according to Islamic guidelines. Justice for women is yet to be realized. It hardly makes much difference if we assert that there was once upon a time certain utopian situation in which women were ideally treated and locating it either in the classical age of Islam or primitive society when family had not yet originated or in some future date when classes would no longer exist or marginalized would have spoken.

All agree that freedom, dignity, individuality of women needs to be safeguarded. None claims that dress itself is an issue to be made into a fetish but assign different symbolic importance to it as per their interpretative frameworks. *Hijab* as such is neither liberating nor enslaving but could be either according to one's perception framed in one's interpretative horizon. *Hijab* can't be imposed in a society whose economy is not geared to providing support to women so that they don't need to work and can feel comfortable with *hijab*.

All agree that justice needs to be done here and now and not left to other world.

All agree that women need to actively strive for their freedom and justice.

All agree that fresh legislation is required for changing economy and for seeking to redress current inequalities or injustices.

All agree that God/Law can't allow any kind of oppression but what constitutes oppression may be differently conceived.

Notes (by Editor)

¹Iqbal hardly described ulama as dictators, instead he respected them much and called them custodians of Islamic knowledge and guidance. That is why he turned frequently to Maulana Sulaiman Nadvi, Maulana Anwar Shah Kashmiri and Maulana Abdul Majid Daryaabadi for clarification on many points about Islamic issues and sciences. See Qazi Afzal Haq Qarshi, *Iqbal kay Mamduh Ulama*, Maktaba Danish, Deoband, UP.

² Neither ulama, in general, hold that *ijtihad* is closed nor is any *mujtahid/imam* called a final in making interpretations of the *nasus*. Absolute *ijtihad* as some hold including Shah Wali-u Allah is not required now is in the sense of *usul*/ principles of *ijtihad* yet by principle high level of *ijtihad* cannot be denied. See *ijtihad aur Masail-i-ijtihad*, Institute of Objective Studies, Delhi.

³ The issue of gender justice in Islam have been extensively dealt by scholars of modern/ contemporary times making a critique of Western and secularist view-points about the subject. See Maulana Abul Ala Mawdudi, *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam*, Markazi Maktaba Islami, Delhi, Maryam Jameela, *Islam and Western Society*, Adam publishers, Delhi. Anis Ahmad, *Women and Social Justice: An Islamic Paradigm*, Institute of Policy Studies, Pakistan, Zeenat Kausar's writings particularly *Women's Empowerment and Islam*, Kuala Lumpur, *Women in Feminism and Politics: New Directions Towards Islamisation*, Kuala Lumpur. *Muslim Women at the Cross Roads: Rights of Women in Islam and General Muslim Practices* Kuala Lumpur. Our Institute had also the privilege to publish her one such article, "Women Between Family and Workplace: Islamic and Feminist Perspectives" in 2003 issue of the present journal.

⁴ It is not the spirit of Islam that man has exclusive right of interpreting the texts (*nasus*), woman can also do it provided she has such moral and intellectual uprightness that is required for the purpose. In the early days of Islam, woman preserved a good treasure of Prophet's sayings and even questioned/corrected male

companions of the Prophet (SAAS) in their interpretations of Islamic *Shariah*. See Shiekh Abu Abudl Rahman Abul Halim Muhammad Abu Shaqah, *The Freedom of Women During the Times of the Prophet (SAAS)* IIIT, Herdon, USA.

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