

Islamic Feminism Revisited

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I gave a talk in Cairo in 2002 titled: “Islamic Feminism: What’s in a Name?” There I explored the paradigm shift in feminism occurring within the Muslim *umma* at various locations during the 1990s that Muslim observers led in the process of naming Islamic feminism (see *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 17- 23 January, 2002). Now, four years later, I would look at the current chapter in Islamic feminism.

I had offered a concise definition of Islamic feminism gleaned from the writings and work of Muslim protagonists as a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Qur’anic notion of equality of all *insan* (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life. It rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh*) conceptualising a holistic *umma* in which Qur’anic ideals are operative in all space.

Islamic feminism aims to recover the notion of gender equality, radical in its day, that the Qur’anic revelation introduced into 7th century (C.E) patriarchal Arabia. *Insan*-ic equality, from which gender equality cannot be separated, did not sit well with the patriarchal cultures into which Islam was first introduced and spread. Patriarchal thought, institutions, and behaviours largely remained resistant over time to the revolutionary Qur’anic notion of gender equality to the extent that the equation of “patriarchy and Islam” became axiomatic.

Islamic feminism has taken on the two-fold task to expose and eradicate patriarchal ideas and practices glossed as Islamic — ‘naturalised’ and perpetuated in that guise — and to recuperate Islam’s core idea of gender equality (indivisible from human equality). For this Islamic feminism has incurred enemies from within and without the Muslim community: 1) from within — men who fear the loss of patriarchal privilege and women who fear the loss of patriarchal protection, and 2) from without — those whose pleasure and politics are found in denigrating Islam as irredeemably anti-women.

The new Islamic feminist paradigm began to surface a decade and a half ago simultaneously in old Muslim societies in parts of Africa and Asia and in newer communities in Europe and North America. I give three examples.

In Iran, immediately post-Khomeini, Muslim women, along with some male clerics, associated with the then new paper *Zanan*, as Muslims and citizens of an Islamic Republic called, in the name of Islam, for the practice of women’s rights they found being infringed upon or rolled back, grounding their arguments in their readings of the Qur’an as the virtual constitution of the republic.

In South Africa, Muslim women and men, who had engaged as South Africans in one of history’s fiercest battles for human dignity and justice, in the immediate post- apartheid period focussed their attention upon questions of justice, and especially gender justice, within their own Muslim community. Having been shunted around and cordoned off, conscientised (to use the expression from the Struggle) South African Muslims were sensitive to issues of access to space and the injustices and indignities attendant upon selective use of space and mandatory cordoning off of some

human beings (on the basis of physical attributes) from “preferred others.” These sensitised South African Muslims fought equal access to mosque/communal space for all Muslims, women and men alike.

In North America, women in immigrant (especially the second-generation) and convert communities turned to the Qur’an as a guide to life in new complex environments in which they did not have ready-made life-templates as Muslims. Patriarchal patterns of life in the villages and cities from which first-generation Muslim immigrants had come, which they tried to re-impose on women as Islamic, jarred in their new environments. Convert women in western societies were faced with a painful contradiction between what they understood to be Qur’anic ideals of justice and equality and various patriarchal notions and practices urged upon them as novices by self-appointed custodians of Islam.

Islamic feminism is an inter-Islamic phenomenon produced by Muslims at various locations around the globe. There is no East/West fault line. We cannot speak of Islamic feminism and the West. Islamic feminism, like Islam today, is in the West as it is in the East. Muslim detractors allege that “the West” has foisted feminism, first secular and now Islamic, upon Muslims to the detriment of Islam and society. Muslim proponents, on the other hand, hold that Islamic feminism promotes the enjoyment of social justice within the umma while it will also contribute to the creation of a more pluralistic and socially just West where all insan will be treated equal whatever their ethnic, religious, and gender affiliations. The triumph of Islamic feminism will also be part of the enhancement of social justice and equality in the African and Asian societies where Muslims live.

Turning to the older Muslim societies in Africa and Asia, Islamic feminism appeared first in countries where (patriarchal) Islamism got its earliest start, countries which had a large and expanding educated and professional female middleclass, and countries with a history of homegrown feminist thought and activism. Islamic feminism appeared on terrain prepared by Muslim women’s earlier secular feminisms that were an amalgam of Islamic modernist, secular nationalist, and humanitarian (later human rights) discourses. Islamic feminism gave paramount attention to the Islamic modernist strand of secular feminism and, through engaging in new Qur’anic hermeneutic work, articulated an Islamic doctrine of the full equality of women and men across the public/ private spectrum. As such, it was more radical than the secular feminisms that had accepted the notion of gender complementarity, not gender equality, within the sphere of the family.

It is important to note that Islamic feminism is the creation of women and men for whom religion is important in their daily lives and who are troubled by inequalities and injustices perpetrated in the name of religion. Islamic feminism continues to spread because it is relevant. It is engaged and enlightened. It is also controversial and unsettling.

Islamic feminism circulates globally with great speed and penetration. If early secular feminist thought circulated with the advent of the printing press and the rise of print journalism in Muslim societies, Islamic feminism is spreading infinitely faster and globally via the Internet and the Satellite. It has a vibrant presence in cyberspace reverberating in what Fatima Mernissi colourfully calls the “digital Islamic galaxy.”

The theoretical core of Islamic feminism continues to be grounded in Qur’anic interpretation or *tafsir*. The central focus remains the explication of gender equality in Islam. There is increased evidence of the application of Islamic feminist theory in practice. This is seen in the revision of the Moroccan Mudawwana or Civil Code, now the most gender-egalitarian sharia -grounded civil code. It is also evident in the new draft revision of the Family Code in Indonesia, devised by a commission of religious scholars (half of whom are women) appointed within the Ministry of Justice. Another example of the application of gender-just interpretation of Islam is found in the arguments

marshaled, through a dynamic investigation of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), that led to the acquittal of two Nigerian women accused of adultery and condemned to death under the new *hudud* (criminal laws) instituted in their northern Nigerian states while their partners were never held accountable.

The terms Islamic feminism and Islamic feminists are now more widely accepted. Islamic feminism is also part of the philosophy and politics of the movement of Progressive Islam. The term Progressive Islam first appeared in South Africa in the 1990s. Two years ago the Progressive Muslim Union was formed in the United States and recently the Progressive British Muslims group was launched in London at the House of Commons. Islamic feminism and progressive Islam are trans/nationally organised. The first international conference on Islamic feminism, held last fall in Barcelona, drew participants from old and new Muslim societies.

Muslim women are moving beyond passive knowledge of religion by engaging in *ijtihad* (independent investigation of religious sources) and becoming new authorities. In my historical investigation of Muslim women's early (secular) feminisms it was clear that Islam was salient in their gender thinking and activism. In the early decades of secular feminism (the late 19th and early 20th centuries), and let me take the Egyptian example, some women from within their gender-segregated worlds accessed the ideas of Islamic modernism advanced by Shaikh Muhammad Abduh (the famous late 19th and early 20th century Egyptian reformer) that were relevant to their lives as female Muslims. However, women's limited education at the time did not equip them to undertake their own interpretation of the Qur'an (Nazira Zain al-Din being an exception that proves the rule).

Since the final years of the 20th century women started to become part of new interpretive communities, producing compelling *tafsir* (analysis) and treatises on gender issues. While new female exegetes have commanded considerable respect in the global umma, they have also, not surprisingly, been discredited and maligned. However, if the messenger and her authority are attacked, the new gender-sensitive exegesis itself is becoming an authority. Meanwhile, it is becoming increasingly apparent that it is difficult to square Islamic notions of equality and justice with (secular) patriarchy still supported by conventional male religious authorities. The new Islamic feminist theorists and interpreters include: Asma Barlas (Pakistani), Riffat Hassan (Pakistani), Amina Wadud (African-American), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (Iranian), Qudsiyya Mirza (Iranian), and Aziza al-Hibri (Lebanese), to name just a few.

Muslim women are moving beyond patriarchal protection and re-figuring obedience. Islamic feminist *tafsir* elaborates a compelling explication of the equality of all human beings, male and female alike, while at the same time recognising gender difference. (There is a male/female duality in all creation, reflected in the grammatical construction of the Qur'anic language in reference to humankind and animals, which are rendered in the dual form: *insan* and *hayawan*.) Recognition of biological duality in no way diminishes the idea of fundamental equality of all human beings. Neither sex is superior to the other. Neither sex is ordained to rule over the other. Patriarchy, as ideology and practice, with its stringent hierarchal ordering, fundamentally disrupts the Qur'anic ideal and practice of human equality.

In explicating human equality Islamic feminist exegetes focus on the Qur'anic notions of *khilafa* and *tawhid*. The Qur'an speaks of *khilafa*, or the trusteeship of God on earth, delegated to all human beings, a divinely ordained human agency. This trusteeship or agency, logically and morally cannot be diminished, or "de-equalised", by the biological attributes of *insan* — sexual, racial, or whatever.

Islamic feminist exegetes connect the idea of equality of all humankind in its (biological) duality with the idea of *tawhid* — the one-ness of God. No human being can partake of this one-ness. No human being can or should act like a God or exact what is owed only to God. *Ta'a*, or obedience, is due to God alone. Within the patriarchal universe women owe obedience to men, and younger males to

older males. This obedience has often been so starkly constructed and stringently imposed that male human beings have made themselves into virtual gods.

The new gender-sensitive exegetes have focused attention on male supremacy in marriage and the family imposed in the name of Islam that is fundamentally disruptive of the Qur'anic principle of human equality. In 4:34 of the Qur'an, the term "*qawwamuna 'ala*" has been used to justify and perpetuate male authority over and protection of women as a prerogative and duty of men. The new women exegetes offer a rereading that affirms the Qur'anic ideal of human equality. They place the statement that men are *qawwamuna 'ala* women in the context of childbearing and nursing when women exert labor that men do not and cannot, and read this as men having responsibility "a degree above" in this context in a way that acts as a balancing or equalising of labour. Patriarchal interpretation reads this verse as ordaining that the male is in charge of the woman or has authority over the woman and he is a "degree above" her. The patriarchal reading has been so firmly and pervasively held over time and place that it is seen as "Islam itself."

This reading has promoted and entrenched the notion of male protection of women, the fundamental duty of a husband to support his wife materially and take charge of her spiritually and morally. Many women have welcomed this notion of male protection and material support as intrinsic to Islam and a decided benefit. But with this protection and material support have come exaggerated forms of obedience to men, to the point that it became a commonplace notion that a woman's path to heaven lay through obedience to her husband, thus detouring her obedience to God and rendering her *khilafa* second-class.

Along with deconstructing the notion of female dependency and male protection, Islamic feminists elaborate the idea of mutual support/protection of males and females embodied in the notion of *awliya* enjoined upon male and females believers, specifically citing the two genders. (Qur'an 9:71: "The believers, male and female, are protectors of one another.") Why has this idea historically not been made the touchstone of gender relations?

Islamic feminist interpreters work at the intersection of idea and reality. Gender-tuned interpreters of the Qur'an are mindful of changing social and economic realities as they approach the sacred text for guidance. Today in the greatly expanding middle classes in Muslim societies, husbands and wives have increasingly to pull their joint weight in the economic support of the family and in the everyday running of its affairs. Ideas of socially and religiously ascribed gender roles give way to practical imperatives. The Qur'anic notion of mutuality of spousal support is becoming increasingly operative in the middle strata of society as it has always been among the urban and rural poor who have historically constituted the majority of Muslims. The Qur'anic notion of gender equality, expressed in the notion of the mutual protection of the spouses of each other, has recently been legally established in the idea of dual headship of the family affirmed in the revised Moroccan *Mudawwana* and the new Indonesian draft family law, both of which are *sharia*-grounded.

Muslim women and men together are revamping ritual life. It is in Muslim minority communities, especially but not only in the West, that moves toward new ritual practices have been most apparent recently. In Muslim minority communities, participation in mosque-centered activities — especially congregational worship — has an intensity of meaning and social significance different from that found in Muslim majority societies. In minority contexts, individual and collective Muslim identity is expressed and re-affirmed within mosque space. If they are made unequal in religious space it casts them as second-class Muslims. In Muslim majority societies, Muslim identity prevails in society at large. However, while they may be part of the religious majority, women have acquired greater equality in secular space than in religious space. Muslim women find themselves equal in the larger national/secular society and unequal in their own communal space.

To return to the South African Islamic feminist contexts, in Cape Town in the mid-90s a woman (visiting theologian Amina Wadud) gave the first-ever pre- khutba talk at the Claremont Mosque. The 'mosque movement' in South Africa was a fulcrum for Islamic feminist demands for gender equality, or "gender jihad" — a term coined by an imam (Rashied Omar) in South Africa --- within the Muslim community. Now, a decade after the start of mosque activism in South Africa, mosque-centered movements are underway in the United States and Canada with women and men supporting the demand for female access to main mosque space during congregational prayer and women beginning to assume the role of imam, leading gender-mixed congregational worship.

Within the past year women have acted as imams in Friday services in the United States (the first time in a New York church when mosque space was refused them) and at a mosque in Canada. Women's demands for equal access to common mosque space and the ability to lead the congregational prayer for one American male convert conjured up sit-ins in the mid-20th-century United States by African- Americans who were demanding equal access to public institutions and space, denied them simply on the basis of race. This, in turn, reminds me of Muslims' post-apartheid demands in South Africa for non-discrimination of Muslims in mosque space on the basis of gender.

The mosque movement continues to spread and appears to be un-stoppable. The first-ever International Islamic Feminist Conference that took place in Barcelona last October, organised by the Junta Islamica Catalana, reaffirmed the call for women's free access to the mosque as a Muslim women's right. We note that here in Egypt ninety-four years ago among the secular/nationalist feminist demands presented to the Muslim National Congress meeting in Heliopolis (1911) was the call by women for access to mosques for congregational prayer. This was at a time when women of the middle and upper urban strata were segregated from public space; thus their entry into religious space would become part of their entry into public space.

Here I have only been able to touch the surface of the current chapter in the story of Islamic feminism. As seen from the presentation, the further elaboration of tafsir /theory and proliferation of activist projects are part of the dynamism of contemporary Islamic feminism. There are contradictions that Islamic feminist theorists and interpreters have to work through but they always keep their eyes on the highest Qur'anic ideals. There are practical roadblocks Islamic feminists face that not even the shield of unmarked discourse (the blotting out of the term Islamic feminism) can protect from. But, observation confirms that women as Islamic feminists remain committed to elaborating and living a gender- egalitarian Islam that they understand to be at the very core of the religion — a notion radical at the time of revelation and still radical today.

P.S.

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<http://www.countercurrents.org/gen-badran100206.htm>

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