

Implications of Feminist Thought on Understanding Qur'an: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Recently, Islamic women scholars have presented an understanding and interpretation of Qur'anic texts and hadiths to better understand women issues as well as to discuss the concept of feminism, in the context of claims made by some of the leading Western researchers and scholars during the last century. Notable among them are Amina Wadud, Fatima Marnisi and Asma Barlas, who have discussed various concepts, including women domination, slavery, superiority of men over women, Eve's creation from Adam's rib, the concept of Qawamiyat, polygamy, women leadership and legal and political rights of women. Seen from and applied to the present age, these prevailing commentaries present conceptions from an Islamic standpoint, emphasizing on the role of women in society as well as highlights the privileges they enjoy as per the teachings of the religion. This article will review the Qur'anic interpretations and trends related to feminism and the interpretation of Qur'anic verses by Muslim thinkers and commentators to better understand the rights of men and women in social settings.

Key Words: *Women scholars, feminist theologians, theology, civilization, qawamiyat*

Introduction

The term feminism in English was first used by a woman named 'Hebertine Acklert' in the late seventeenth century to oppose male domination in society and to demand rights and privileges³ that were promised to women during the French Revolution. The term was used in a French journal titled 'La Citoyenne' and was later used to derive a variety of meanings and concepts. This attractive slogan highlighted the advancement and struggle of women for equal rights and empowerment in a male-dominated society. In specific political, social and religious contexts in France, the term played an important role to empower women. In the early half of the twentieth century, the term was introduced in Britain and became a part of the English language.⁴

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³ . Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam*, Publisher one world publications, London, 2001, p345

⁴ . Calandar, D. David. C, *Economics*, Mc Graw- Hill, New York 2001, p23

In 1920, the term feminism came to Egypt through the French language, entering the Arab world, or in other words the Muslim world. It was translated as "Nisā"⁵ in Arabic. The French feminism was quite different from the British feminism, a concept unknown in the United States. Although the term was coined in France, it had different meanings in other parts of the world due to varying environmental conditions and the social fabric. Thus, when the term was introduced in Egypt, the social, political, religious and sociological conditions of the region played an integral role in defining the term. A feminist movement emerged in the western world which later spread to Europe and the rest of the world.⁶

The main element of this feminist movement was the struggle of women against male domination in society. This movement demanded equal legal, economic and political rights for women as to that of men, raising discussing about the rights of women to property, protection of women against sexual violence, equal rights to employment, right to vote in elections, right to sexual freedom, right to have children or not, right to abortion, right to divorce.⁷

Stages and periods

According to historians of this movement, this movement is divided into three periods also known as waves. The first wave started in the early half of the twentieth century and called out the government to change old laws related women rights, especially the right of women to vote in the political realm. Feminist movement reached the US in 1918. At this time, different articles were written by Crystal Eastman which gained popularity among the American women, leading to a series of legal changes. She was a renowned lawyer, socialist leader and journalist, who is considered as the pioneers of the feminist movement in the United States.⁸ This wave is also known as 'Suffrage,' as it highlights the political struggle of women to secure the right to vote in the United States.

The second wave started in 1960 and ended in 1990. Activists during this wave demanded a raise in women salaries, to make it equivalent to that of men. During this period, the movement was provided with an ideological foundation as well as a conducive environment was created in the political, social and economic spheres. In the

⁵ . Encyclopedia of Britannica, Encyclopedia of Britannica Press London 1950, p12

⁶ . Maududi Syed Abul A'la, Haqooql Zuijan, idara Tarjamanul Quran, Lahore 1952, p;120

⁷ . Abdul Qayyum Nadvi, Islam or Aurat ,Swara art press,1952,p;117

⁸ . Campbell R. McConnell, Economics, Mc Graw- Hill New York 2001, p321

second wave, women demanded equal economic opportunities, leading to less gender discrimination from a legal perspective. A theory was established that there should be no difference between men and women, and that the phenomenon of human birth attached to women was a result of social and cultural conditioning. To support this notion, scientific and technological measures were introduced, proposing that men like women can bear children through minor physical changes⁹. Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Steinem, Friedan and Gloria are some of the notable activists who highlighted the economic plight of women during this era.

The third wave of this movement is the post-1990 era which is still continuing till date. Attempts were made to offset the negative effects of the first round of acquisitions, as some new ideas were added with the old ones. Issues such as women's ability to have children, homosexuality, economic rights of women and social justice were some of the important agendas of this wave.

The founders of the movement, including Kirsten Rockfurt, Kirsten Delphi and Anne Tristan, struggled to turn their ideologies into actionable events. Their collective efforts led to the formal initiation of the feminist movement, effects of which can be seen in the Eastern and Western side of the world till date. Due to this movement, women won equal rights to that of men in different spheres such as the right to education, the right to work and the right to vote¹⁰.

This movement also faced some challenges pertaining to ban on abortion and the use of contraceptives. The movement called these challenges as a violation of women's rights and launched a struggle against them. A statement entitled "Le Manifestos de 343" was publicized with over 343 signatures of women, stating that they opted for illegal abortion. This statement was published in two popular French newspapers on April 5, 1971, due to which this declaration received a strong support and a law was passed in 1975, allowing women the right to abortion.

This feminist movement played an integral role in transforming the Western society. As a result, women's sufferings were reduced, as divorce proceedings were legally allowed to be initiated by the woman. Also, they were given the right to divorce their husband without any reason and were considered free to decide whether or not to

⁹ . Cedaw, "Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women -99- 25918, December 1999

¹⁰ . Lila Abu Lughod, *Do Muslim Women need saving*, Publisher one world publications, London, 2001, p342

have a baby or stay pregnant.¹¹ Women were given the right to own property, right to work and right to demand equal pay to that of men. They had access to higher education and started pursuing their academic dreams.

Simon de Boerra, who was born on 9 January 1908 in Paris¹², is considered as the lifeblood of the movement. She not only proposed the ideological underpinnings of the movement, but also played a pivotal role in spreading awareness about the movement in the Eastern and the Western world through her writings.¹³

The feminist movement emerged after the French Revolution. After reaching the United States and the United Kingdom, its effects were felt all over the world, shaping its meaning as per the social, cultural and political environment of each country or state. One of the prominent reasons of its popularity in the West is rapid spread of feminist ideology by activists and feminist thinkers.

Impact on Religiosity

In regions where the feminist movement was in full-swing, the church's religious system dominated society. Religion was monopolized and even the basic human rights of women were violated in the name of religion, due which some people called the French Revolution a revolt against religion. This is an accurate analysis of the political, social and cultural conditions prevailing in these regions. The feminist movement was a severe blow to the religious ideology and affected the cultural setting. The effects of this movement were mainly anti-religious,¹⁴ as it played an important role in liberating people, especially women, from the grip of the papal system, leading a change in the traditional religious settings. The idea of thinking free from the restrictions set forth by religion arose among the masses. Religious commentators also supported women rights movement. With the advent of the 21st century, in the European world, women were given positions in the church that were previously reserved for men only. In the same way, in the system of Judaism, women were given the ranks of Rabbi and Canters, which were previously given to men only. An example of this can be found in the Indian society, where women were not allowed to go to temples and other places of worship, but now women were allowed to visit these

¹¹ . Mai Yamani, *Feminism and Islam*, Publisher one world publications, London, 2001

¹² . *Feminism*. De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Kensington Publishing Corp, 1948) p.16

¹³ . *Feminism*. De Beauvoir, *Feminist Ethics*, Columbia University Press, p23

¹⁴ . Jalāluddin Umri, *Aurat Islāmi Muāsharey Mein*, Islamic publications, 1962,p:78

religious places. The latest example of this is the entry of women into the Sabarimala temple in Kerala which the Supreme Court has ruled in one of its historic decisions.

Rejecting the dominance of religion over women, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an American woman, sharply attacked religion, especially Christianity. She was an expert jurist, socialist leader and social activist¹⁵. In her book, "The Women's Bible", Stanton seeks to prove that Christianity has made women captives, however the need of the hour was to treat both men and women as equals. She told the world that religious books and the teachings of religion should be read from a woman's point of view, leading to empathetic emotions towards their plights. She further added that unless religious traditions, practices and teachings were read from a woman's perspective, the stature of women could not be improved. Elizabeth Cady Stanton died in New York in 1902, however, she provided a great deal of ideological literature for the movement, including books.

Islamic Feminism

In the 1990s, the term Islamic feminism began to be used in the Muslim world as well. It was first used in Turkey, than in Iran, and later in Saudi Arabia in 1996, when Mai Yamani, a Saudi woman, published her book titled "Feminism and Islam"¹⁶. Similarly, among the Islamic women scholars, Amina Wadud, Fatima Marnisi and Asma Barlas are prominent for their work in which they seek solutions to Islamic problems from a modern standpoint.

These Muslim commentators demanded that women must be given the mandate to step up to their responsibilities and to fight against all the measures that can lead to an identity crisis or their development as holistic human beings. Their research revolves around gender discrimination in the Qur'an, to highlight how woman receive unequal treatment and to pinpoint women struggle against violence and treatment as second-class beings in society. These commentators assert that if you look at the Qur'anic verses from a researcher's perspective, you can clearly see the possibility of equality between men and women and a freedom of thought, however in some places it is explicit and in other places it is allusive. Several feminine issues are mentioned in the Qur'an, including women's testimony, diyat, marriage and divorce issues, as well as other issues related to Islamic society in which women are considered secondary. These

¹⁵ . Nikki Keddie, *Women in the Middle east*, Publisher one world Publications, p,1131, London, 200

¹⁶ . P.M. Pickthall *Marmaduke, Islamic Culture*, Lahore Ferozsons Ltd

commenters have presented their perspectives in the light of Qur'anic texts and arguments.

Dr. Amina Wadud in her book, "Women and Quran" and Fatima Marnisi in her books, "Beyond the Veil, goes West", "Women and Islam", "The Forgotten Queens of Islam", "Women's Rebellion and Islam", and "Islam, Muslims, and the US" state their arguments related to feminism and Islam.

Dr. Amina Wadud has interpreted the verses of the Qur'an in a very different manner in reference to the concept of feminism. Regarding the birth of a woman, the Holy Qur'an states:

"O people! We created you from a single soul, then We made from it its mate, then from these two spread many men and women."¹⁷

According to the Imams and commentators in this verse, "Nafs-e-Wahdah" refers to Adam (peace be upon him) and "Nafs-e-Wahdah" refers to his wife Eve and their union led to the creation of human beings. "Dabee-Nafs-e-Wahida" means the germ that was born on the shore of the beach billions of years back, while "Khalq Minha Zojha" means the germ that is divided into two parts, later combining to spread Allah's creation in different parts of the world.

Amina Wadūd has found another way to prove equality between men and women in creation. After presenting the same verse to illustrate her point of view, she separates the three words in this verse: "Min, Nafs and Zoj." According to her "Min" has two meanings. Firstly, it is used to define a thing that is obtained from another thing or being. Secondly it can be used to state "like it", however this word can never be used in this context, but still Wadūd uses the second meaning in her writings.

The second word that she uses is Nafs, stating that this word describes humankind as a whole. She states that this word is not only used for Adam (AS) but also for Eve. This word neither represents a male or a female, but is used for humankind in general, meaning that both men and women are equal. She further asserts that nowhere in the Qur'an does it say that the process of creation began with Adam, who is a man, perhaps they want to prove that Adam was born of Eve and that Eve was born of Adam. However, it is still ambiguous how the word Nafs has been used by her to refer to humans rather than Adam (AS).

¹⁷ . Al-Nisa1:4

The third word Zouj has been used to refer to spouse. This word is used for both men and women which means that both are equal, meaning that man is spouse to a woman and woman is a spouse to man.¹⁸ The interpretation of this verse has been one of the most difficult tasks for Muslim feminists, as the longer part of this verse discusses obedience and submission to men. The Almighty says:

”الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ فَالصَّالِحَاتُ قَنَاطُتٌ حَافِظَاتٌ لِّلْغَيْبِ بِمَا حَفِظَ اللَّهُ وَاللَّاتِي تَخَافُونَ نُشُوزَهُنَّ فَعِظُوهُنَّ وَامْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ وَاصْبِرُوهُنَّ فَإِنْ أَطَعْنَكُمْ فَلَا تَبْغُوا عَلَمَهُنَّ سَبِيلًا.”¹⁹

“Men rule over women because Allah has favored some over others and also because they spend out of their wealth (on wives and children). So virtuous women are those who are obedient and the absence of man. I protect wealth and honor under the protection of Allah and explain to the women whom you fear disobedience, keep them apart in their dormitories and beat them up quickly then there is no excuse to persecute them if they are obedient. Don't look”

Amina Wadūd has criticized the stature of a man, stating that his significance is grounded on the fact that he is considered as the guarantor of women in Islam. She further adds that absence of this reason can ultimately diminish the stature of men altogether. This point by Amina is valid in the concurrent times, as the invasion of western culture and civilization has redefined the stature of women who are now responsible to bear economic responsibilities just like men. Failure of men in recognizing the role and efforts of women with claims of superiority over them will definitely be a contradiction of the actual teachings of Islam. Rights can only be demanded by men who fulfill their responsibilities. All those men who take advantage of their stature must bear in mind the words of Allah Almighty in the last part of this verse.

Dr. Javed Iqbal also states that settings in which a woman earns, as her brother is destitute, or her father is old/crippled or her mother is illiterate, this girl getting half share in all the legal matters to that of the men of her family, is unfair. In such a case, the laws of inheritance must be modified. Similarly, if a wife shares the responsibilities of a household with her husband, then the claim of a man's superiority is baseless.

¹⁸. Quran and Women.pp20-29.

¹⁹. Al-Nisā, 34:4

However, it is unfair on the part of Dr. Javed Iqbal and Amina Wadud to assert on only one angle of man's superiority over woman. Men are responsible for the 'Kifalat' of women, however this is not the only reason they enjoy superiority over women.²⁰

The Issue of Women's Obedience:

“So those who are virtuous women are obedient to men and in the absence of men they warn of their wealth and honor under the protection of Allah.”

Ghulam Ahmad Pervez, provided a new interpretation of this verse stating that the word "فَالصَّالِحَاتُ" indicates that the needs of the women can be met with men's wealth alone, leading to further development of their abilities. Dr. Amina Wadud also believes the same. However, over here it is wrong to refer to the obedience of the husband. This verse refers to the women who are obedient to Allah, because in another place in the Qur'an, the word "Qantin" has been used, along with "Qanat" referring to both men and women who are obedient to Allah.²¹

Muslim feminists have used this personal standpoint of Amina Wadud's as an argument, changing the actual meaning of "Wazirbohuna." This word does not mean that a husband can beat his wife, rather emphasizes upon reaching a mutual decision to resolve domestic issues. Even if the issue cannot be resolved amicably, the men must not beat their wives, as violence against women is not allowed in Islam. According to the Arabic language, 'Zarba' does not mean the use of force or violence, but it is used in the Qur'an to refer to someone who is going on a journey. The second meaning is completely opposite to the meaning that refers to beating or using force.²²

Equality in Islam:

Amina Wadud talks about equality between men and women by asserting:

"No system of memorization can be derived from Islam that is unchangeable or that is eternal and from Allah."²³

Amina mentions two verses in this regard:

”الرِّجَالُ قَوَّامُونَ عَلَى النِّسَاءِ بِمَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بَعْضَهُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ وَبِمَا أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ.”²⁴

“Men have dominion over women because Allah has made some of them superior to others and because of what they spend of their wealth on them.”

²⁰ . Jawad Iqbal, Islami Tahzeeb Ba Moqabila Magrabi Tahzeeb hareef ya haleef (interview), p;75

²¹ . awadud@saturn.vcu.edu

²² . Qur'an ke khilaf Jawaz na dhoondho ,Shabana Arif, , Mobariza (newsletter) p15

²³ . Qur'an and women, p64-65.

²⁴ . Al-Nisā,4:34

Explaining this verse, she says that here the Qur'an discusses superiority of men in an objective sense rather than an absolute sense. For example, when the Qur'an says that we have given superiority to some prophets over others, it does not differentiate between them. Even if this virtue is considered, it is conditional on Wamama al-Nafqwa, and the interpretation of this verse is by no means correct that man enjoy superiority over women on the basis of their strength and intellect. If this was the nature of the matter, then the style of the verse would not be that men were given precedence over women but some men were given superiority over some women.²⁵

She further writes:

"Some words are used here in the general human context. Men do not enjoy superiority over women in all matters, which means that virtue mentioned by Allah to enjoy superiority is not absolute."²⁶

In the context of the second verse, {وَالرِّجَالُ عَلَيْهِمْ دَرَجَةٌ}, Amina states that the levels mentioned in the verse are only related to the issue of divorce. The interpretation of this verse that all men enjoy similar status over all women is incorrect. This cannot be considered a general law.²⁷

This statement of Wadūd is correct, as both men and women deserve equal amounts of respect and esteem. The principle of family organization emphasizes that the woman is primarily the in-charge of the domestic issues, while the men are primarily responsible for the provision of livelihood.

Conclusion

Islam has given human beings the rights that no other religion has given them, which is why every aspect of human life has been preserved in Islamic teachings. The Creator of the universe has done great good to mankind by providing answers to their questions through religious injunctions. Islamic teachings are holistic and ever-encompassing. Islamic commentators and researchers through their work, have tried to understand Qur'an and its divine meaning and purpose. For the interpretation of the Qur'an, the commentators put forth the issues of each age and time, especially those issues whose interpretations have not been given a final status, with the help of Ijtihad-e-Istinbatat.

Gender is also one of such issues and hence Qur'anic texts have been interpreted to understand the rights and duties of men and women, as well as their issues and

²⁵ . Qur'an and women, p64-65

²⁶ . do

²⁷ . do

stature. Women have been the subject of debate among the general public and modern commentators. Also, issues faced by women segments of society have gained popularity due to advent of feminist movement, across the globe. This movement has affected the lives of Muslim women as well. Qur'anic interpretations have been used to better understand the role and rights of women in Islamic settings. Works of Amina Wadud and other Muslim feminists have played an integral role in demanding equality among men and women through a thorough interpretation of Qur'anic verses and texts.