

Islamic feminism: an overview



Introduction

Feminism is a secular ideology and Islam today rests on fundamentalist foundations. Those who advocate that feminist projects be conducted within an Islamic framework have clearly despaired of secular options for change without considering how have elaborated Lila's argument against the possibility of the coexistence of Islam and feminism because it explains the anxiety many Muslim women public intellectuals, including Chandra Talpade (2003), Jasmine (2004), and Martin (2003), feel as they watch the Taliban taking away women's rights in Afghanistan, the Algerian Front Islamique de Salut targeting women intellectuals, the fundamentalist Sudanese government oppressing its women. Many are sure that compromise with such a religion is fatal.

Some women are joining religious groups despite their gender conservatism. Others are fighting these same groups, fearing the dangerous chemistry of politics and religion. Whether through or against religion they are choosing to become part of the struggle for a better world. The question many pose to women who voluntarily Islamize is: Do they accept their communities' reactionary norms or do they appropriate and in the process subvert them? If there are some who can be considered "feminists" according to my definition of the term, how do they adapt their convictions that women have certain rights with the perceived need to subsume them to the community interest? How will the ways in which they position themselves to assert responsibility for the construction of their own, new religious "identity" change the face of Islam? How does participation in jihad allow for feminist activism? These are the questions which are imposed and discussed by

Amina Wadud, Badran (1995), Hamid (2006), Saba (2005), Lila (2002) and other writers in their respective books and articles.

Feminism according to Holy Quran

The Qur'an is unequivocally opposed to gender equality, and the " Sharia is not compatible with the principles of equality of human beings" (Afshar, 1996, p. 122). Despite its growing currency throughout the Muslim world, Lila asserts that Islamic feminism has no " coherent, self-identified and/or easily identifiable" ideology or movement.

Those who advocate its utility as a concept and a marker for a specific brand of feminism are not women from within Muslim societies but rather " diasporic feminist academics and researchers of Muslim background living and working in the West" (126). These women she later characterizes as " exceptionally forgiving, postmodern relativist feminists in the West" whose indigenized and exotic form of Western feminism excludes " core ideas of legal and social equity, sexual democracy and women's control over their sexuality" (146).

The attitudes to Islamic feminism span the gamut of leftists like herself who reject its possibility because they consider divine laws inherently hostile toward feminism, to those who " posit that feminism within an Islamic framework is the only culturally sound and effective strategy for the region's women's movement" (134). The latter group may include secularists overwhelmed by " the political and discursive influence of Islamic fundamentalism" (134).

Here lies the major problem in Lila's argument: she confounds Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, as though the two were the same. This affirmation, she dramatically asserts, "relies on twisting facts or distorting realities, ignoring or hiding that which should be clear" (135). Her very real fear is that to celebrate Islamic feminism is "to highlight only one of the many forms of identity available to Middle Eastern women, obscuring ways that identity is asserted or reclaimed, overshadowing forms of struggle outside religious practices and silencing the secular voices which are still raised against the region's stifling Islamification policies" (137-38).

An Anti-Modern Feminist Perspective

A considerably different perspective is presented in Anouar Majid's "The Politics of Feminism in Islam." Majid is wary of the dangers of imposing Western feminist traditions on non-Western cultures and attempts therefore to recuperate a feminist tradition within traditional Islamic culture, though he is not entirely successful in doing so. Majid recognizes that the problems women face in Islamic societies cannot be divorced from European colonialism. For Majid, the political and economic structures that have resulted from independence from European domination have not emancipated the poor (341). He feels that nationalist elites have established Eurocentric models of government, namely nation-states (342, n. 17). For Majid, representations of Islamic culture as undemocratic and patriarchal reify the history of Muslim culture and downplay the impact of imperialism on gender relations in Islamic countries (349).

Majid finds that a major problem in attempting to develop Islamic feminist perspectives is the difficulty of overcoming the Western and often Orientalist

biases that pervade feminist thought. These biases include a dehistoricised notion of human rights and “ an implicit acceptance of the bourgeois political apparatus as a reliable mechanism for negotiating the grievances of the exploited” (339). Western feminism cannot be readily separated from hostility to Islamic culture, according to Majid. To illustrate the point, he cites the example of upper-class Islamic women who have sometimes embraced Western feminist values and in the process “ condemned native customs as backward, proclaimed the superiority of the West, and uncompromisingly equated unveiling with liberation” (338).

Females in Islam

Even though women may have high-status professional jobs and make important decisions in the course of the day, and even though Islamic sharia insists that women have the right to keep their income, it appears that husbands continue to control the decisions concerning expenditures. The husband is pivotal in allowing his wife to work in the interest of the welfare of the family, he is also the final arbiter in defining what constitutes that welfare. In many instances, while accepting that she may work outside the home, he will not allow her to participate in public events. As already noted, Over the power of the constitutions of various countries affirming the determination of the sharia that men are in charge of women, there is little chance for change in the foreseeable future.

Modernization and urbanization, however, have brought about certain changes in family life. One is a preference for nuclear families. This has altered the traditional power of the mother-in-law which has been undermined by the new system. Instead of being a guest in her mother-in-

law's home, the bride gets to be in charge of her own household. But, if she also has to go out to work in order to maintain private residence, her workload is doubled. In addition, the change in housing design from the traditional open courtyard with a garden and opening to the sky to the small apartment has confined the woman and restricted her contact with other members of the family as well as with nature. If her husband restricts her going out, she feels imprisoned and lacks contact with friends and intimate relations.

Zine identifies what she sees as the roles for women, determined by the tripartite class structure of Arab society: the working class, the middle class, and the upper class. In the working class, she says, a sharp distinction is made between feminine and masculine characteristics (Zine, 2006, p. 19).

Conclusion

One of the themes that emerges from contemporary writing about Muslim women is that of woman as victim of the experience of oppression in developing countries. The oppression is not unique to the Arab context but is a consequence of disempowerment and feelings of impotence. The condition of the woman serves to demonstrate the extremes of disempowerment. She has become the projection of the inadequacy of the society, shackled with the burden of failure and weakness. Her inherent worth is devalued in relation to her physique, intellect, gender, productivity, and status. At the same time, her role as mother is symbolically elevated. Islam provides security and equivalence to the females and it has made many laws which secures the importance of females in this male dominant world.

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