

Gender and the Changing Feminist Discourse in Islam - A Socio-Historical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Feminism within Islam represents a dynamic and growing discourse, shaped by scholarly inquiry into the intersection of gender and religion, debates regarding interpretations of religious texts, cultural practices and the lived experiences of Muslim women. This paper explores the socio-historical aspects of gender dynamics and feminist discourse within Islam. It acknowledges the fluidity of feminist thought and the changing interpretations of gender roles over time. Using secondary data, including scholarly articles, books and reports, the analysis examines historical shifts and contemporary developments in Islamic feminist discourse.

One important development in the changing feminist discourse within Islam is the re-evaluation of religious texts through a gender-sensitive lens. Scholars such as Amina Wadud have challenged patriarchal interpretations, advocating for an inclusive and egalitarian understanding of Islam. This shift is influenced by factors like: increased access to education, globalization, and digital communication technologies, facilitating transnational networks of feminist solidarity and activism.

Wadud's investigation of Islamic feminism highlights the critical re-interpretation of the Quran and Hadith, emphasizing passages promoting justice and gender equality. Scholars also emphasize the importance of women's rights within Islamic frameworks, advocating for legal reforms which address gender-based violence and discriminatory family laws. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, specifically a literature review methodology to systematically analyze secondary sources. The selection of materials is guided by their relevance, reliability, and scholarly rigor, ensuring a comprehensive coverage of socio-historical aspects of gender dynamics and feminist discourse within Islam. By combining a socio-historical lens along with an awareness of diverse interpretations within Islam, this paper aims to contribute to an informed understanding of gender dynamics, feminism and the evolving discourse within the Islamic community.

Keywords: Islam, Feminism, Gender dynamics, scholarly inquiry, qualitative method, socio-historical.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism, within the context of Islam, is a dynamic as well as evolving discourse. The intersection of gender and Islam has been a subject of scholarly inquiry since a long time, with debates surrounding interpretations of religious texts, cultural practices and the lived experiences of Muslim women. Over the past few decades, there has been a noticeable shift in the feminist discourse within Islamic contexts, marked by a diversification of voices, emergence of new paradigms and a growing recognition of the need for gender equality within religious frameworks (Abdul, 2006).

Historically, interpretations of Islamic teachings have been mainly patriarchal, resulting in the marginalization of women in various spheres of life. However, feminist scholars and activists have challenged such traditional interpretations, advocating for

a more inclusive and egalitarian understanding of Islam. This shift has been influenced by various factors, including increased access to education, globalization and the proliferation of digital communication technologies, that have facilitated transnational networks of feminist solidarity and activism.

Of all, one significant development in the changing feminist discourse in Islam is the re-evaluation of religious texts through a gender-sensitive lens. Scholars and activists have been actively engaged in critical re-interpretations of the Quran and Hadith (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), highlighting passages that promote gender equality and justice. This approach, often referred to as Islamic feminism, tries to reconcile Islamic principles with contemporary notions of gender equality, challenging patriarchal interpretations while remaining rooted in the Islamic tradition (Wadud, 2006). Moreover, Islamic feminism encompasses a wide range of perspectives and methodologies, reflecting the cultural, ideological, and theological diversity within Muslim communities.

Some scholars emphasize the importance of women's rights within an Islamic framework, advocating for legal reforms which address issues like gender-based violence, discriminatory family laws, and unequal access to education and employment. Others focus on grassroots activism and community organizing, mobilizing women in order to challenge patriarchal norms and practices at the local level.

In this paper, my aim is to explore the socio-historical aspects of gender dynamics and feminist discourse within Islam. It tries to understand the fluidity of feminist thought within Islamic

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communities, recognizing that interpretations of gender roles can change over time. Using secondary data, by examining historical shifts and contemporary developments, this analysis aims to provide insights into the ways in which Islamic feminist discourse has responded to, and perhaps influenced wider social transformations. By combining a socio-historical lens with an awareness of the diverse interpretations within Islam by Islamic feminist scholars, this paper tries to contribute to an informed understanding of gender dynamics, feminism, and the evolving discourse within the Islamic community.

METHODOLOGY

The study has used secondary sources, including scholarly articles and books focused on gender dynamics and feminist discourse within Islam. The sources cover a wide range of topics, including historical perspectives, contemporary developments, interpretations of Islamic texts, and the evolution of feminist thought within Islamic communities. The selection of materials is guided by their relevance to the research objectives, ensuring that they provide a comprehensive coverage of the socio-historical aspects of gender dynamics and feminist discourse within Islam. The important criteria for their inclusion involve the reliability, credibility, and scholarly rigor of the sources, as well as their ability to contribute to the analysis and discussion.

The study uses a qualitative research approach, specifically a literature review methodology, in order to explore the socio-historical dimensions of gender dynamics and feminist discourse within Islam. The literature review involves systematically searching, selecting, and analyzing secondary sources to identify relevant themes, patterns, and insights. The identified sources are systematically reviewed and analyzed to extract key findings, themes, and perspectives related to gender dynamics and feminist discourse within Islam. The findings are synthesized and organized thematically to provide an analysis of the subject matter. By using a rigorous and systematic approach to literature review, the study aims to provide valuable insights into the socio-historical aspects of gender dynamics and feminist discourse within Islam.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the Middle East, the history of feminism goes back over a century, with differing perspectives among Muslims and non-Muslims regarding its compatibility with Islam. While some Muslims contend that Islam embodies an ideal gender prototype, the non-Muslims often perceive it as hostile to women. Consequently, Muslim women frequently face unequal status relative to men in both majority and minority communities. To address this inequality, Islamic feminism emerged in the 1990s, especially in Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The primary aim of this movement is to re-evaluate and reinterpret Islamic sources from a feminine standpoint, challenging patriarchal interpretations that have long prevailed.

Islamic feminism has developed as a significant and evolving movement within the broader landscape of feminist thought. Rooted in the Islamic tradition, Islamic feminism tries to reconcile religious teachings with principles of gender equality and social justice.

Critics argue that androcentric interpretations of Islamic texts perpetuate gender disparities, pushing women to inferior positions. Excluded from public life and the production of official Islamic knowledge, educated Muslim women increasingly tend to view Islam as a tool of oppression.

As a result, they have become vocal in challenging patriarchal values and oppressive social structures prevalent in many Islamic countries. Hence, women in these regions are reinterpreting Islamic texts to interrogate gender issues.

The roots of Islamic feminism can be traced back to the early history of Islam, where women played an active role in the community and the transmission of religious knowledge. Figures as those like Khadijah, the Prophet Muhammad's first wife and a successful businesswoman, and Aisha, a prominent scholar and wife of the Prophet, served as sources of inspiration for later generations of Muslim women (Ahmed, 1992). Their leadership and contributions challenged traditional gender roles and provided examples of women's agency within the Islamic tradition. During the medieval period, Islamic scholarship flourished. It produced a wealth of literature on varied subjects, including theology, jurisprudence, and philosophy. While much of this scholarship was dominated by men, there were notable exceptions, like Rabia al-Adawiyya, a mystic and poet, and Raziya al-Din, a ruler of the Delhi Sultanate (Keddie, 2006). Such women challenged prevailing norms and contributed to intellectual debates within their respective fields. The modern Islamic feminist movement traces its roots back to 19th-century Iran, with figures like Tahiri Qurrat al-'Ayn playing vital roles (Mir-Hosseini, 2006). Despite facing persecution and execution for her advocacy against practices like polygyny and veiling, Tahiri's influence sparked significant re-evaluations of Quranic exegesis among both women and men. Concurrently, male thinkers like Qasim Amin and European-educated Muslim women like Huda Sha'arawi advocated for women's liberation, laying the groundwork for a paradigm shift allowing modern women to interpret the Quran through a feminist lens (Anwar, 2006). Amina Wadud, a prominent advocate, has adopted a reformist approach to Islam and *ijtihad*, notably in her work *"Quran and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective."* Her linguistic analysis of the Quran has inspired others to challenge patriarchal norms in their societies. However, defining "Islamic feminism" remains complex due to the differing conceptualizations of feminism and debates surrounding its compatibility with Islam. Scholars like Amina Wadud argue that patriarchal interpretations, rather than the texts, perpetuate gender inequalities. Despite resistance from conservative factions, the term "feminism" is gaining acceptance among scholars and Muslim women engaged in both academic research as well as activism (Kodir, 2006).

Two primary feminist paradigms have emerged- 'secular feminism' and 'Islamic feminism'. While secular feminism originated in the late 19th century, Islamic feminism began to gain prominence in the late 20th century. In the dynamic historical context of the Middle East, urban women belonging to middle and upper strata across various locations in these countries sought to create a feminist discourse. This discourse was aimed at critiquing the constraints preventing women from accessing the benefits of modernity as freely as men, while also legitimizing their advancement.

Until quite recently, Islamic feminism was marginalized, overshadowed by secular feminism associated with Western secular tendencies or nationalistic ideals. While secular feminism aimed to match the advancements of European society, it faced backlash for alienating the Muslim women unwilling to compromise their Islamic identity. However, secular feminists continued to highlight abuses faced by Muslim women all over the world and advocated for justice. The emergence of secular feminism coincided with the spread of

new information technology, like the printing press, and increased literacy among upper and middle-class women. These developments led to the creation of a new feminist discourse transcending religious boundaries, manifested through new writings and networks of women (Zuraidah et al., 2018).

By the 1990s, Islamic feminism emerged in parts of the Middle East amidst dissatisfaction with the inefficiency of postcolonial states in achieving democracy and economic prosperity. The contemporary middle classes, experiencing the complexities of modernity and cultural shifts, were drawn to Islamism's critique of society and state. This new Islamist discourse, with a gender-conservative voice, called for the inclusion of women in both domestic and public spheres.

DISCUSSION

a. Feminist Interpretation of the Quran

Scholars suggest that Islamic feminist thought was marginalized until the 1970s. Since that time, it has since gained increasing traction among both scholars and activists. Haifa Jawad describes Islamic feminism as:

"a category that includes scholars and activists who represent a mid-point position between the positions of secular feminists, who regard Islam as a purely cultural issue and hence understand Muslim women's rights in mainly Western terms, and the ultra-conservative females and those who desire to replicate the historical model of Islam without taking into consideration the complexities of modern life or the impact of modernity on Muslim society" (Anwar, 2006)

It is essential to recognize that 'Islamic feminism' does not encompass all women within the Muslim community, highlighting the diversity among Muslim individuals. Muslims represent a diverse ideological spectrum, with varying interpretations of the Qur'an. Many Islamic feminists aim to challenge male-centric authority within Islam and advocate for interpretations that promote gender equality, particularly within legal contexts. However, achieving this objective poses significant challenges.

Among the various efforts to reinterpret the Quran, Amina Wadud's book "The Quran and Woman" stands out as particularly influential. In this work, Wadud (2006) attempts to highlight gender equality within the Quranic worldview and demonstrate the Quran's relevance to the lives of contemporary women. She states:

"I believe that Quran adapts to the context of a modern woman as smoothly as it adapted to the original Muslim community fourteen centuries ago. This adaptation can be demonstrated if the text is interpreted with her in mind, thus indicating the universality of the text." (Jawad: 2003)

Wadud delineates three approaches to interpreting the portrayal of women in the Quran. Firstly, she critiques the traditional approach, which relies on exegetical works (*tafsirs*¹) in order to interpret the Quran through the lenses of grammar, history, rhetoric, and legislation.

However, Wadud argues that this approach tends to be atomistic and lacks hermeneutical principles, thus neglecting the holistic interpretation of Quranic verses, and excluding women's experiences as they are predominantly written by men. Secondly, Wadud discusses the reactive approach, wherein modern scholars criticize the Quran and Islam, often citing the poor status of women in their society. However, she asserts that this approach is flawed since it fails to distinguish between the Quranic text and its interpretations. Finally, Wadud advocates for the holistic approach which includes modern social, moral,

economic, and political issues, including women's issues. This approach, she contends, is the most significant, and her own work is rooted in it (Wadud, 2006). Her own interpretation transcends earlier readings that disregarded fundamental principles of justice, equality, and common humanity, which she considers essential aspects of the Quran. She uses a hermeneutical model that considers three key aspects of the text: the context in which it was written (the Quran), its grammatical composition, and its worldview. Drawing on Fazlur Rahman's Quranic approach to interpretation, she talks about the importance of understanding the implications of Quranic expressions within their historical context to discern their intended meaning and the underlying principles therein (Kamaruddin & Yunus, 2018).

b. Reinterpretation of the Islamic Text Quran

Ziba Mir Hosseini (2006) argues that despite Muslim jurists and believers asserting that justice and equality are fundamental values in Islam and Sharia, these principles are not reflected in laws regulating gender relations. Like other Muslim women scholars, she also discusses the emergence of a new gender discourse advocating for women's equality within an Islamic framework. In Islamic belief, Sharia encompasses God's will as revealed to Prophet Muhammad, while *fiqh*² pertains to the process of deriving legal rules from the sacred sources such as the Quran and Sunna. While the Sharia is considered sacred and universal, *fiqh* is subjected to interpretation and change. However, the *fiqh* texts have often been patriarchal in both content and form, invoked to suppress Muslims' pursuit of legal justice and equality.

The earliest initiatives to reinterpret the Quran occurred in post-Khomeini Iran, where women, joined by some male clerics, used Quranic language in an attempt to articulate a new feminism within an Islamic context. This Islamic feminism did not seek to justify the Islamic Republic of Iran but rather critiqued it, advocating for a different interpretation of Islam to achieve "gender justice," as Mir-Hosseini terms it. In modern Islamic history, there have been few women who have attempted to engage in the task of reinterpreting the Quran. Aisha Abd al-Rahman, Professor of Arabic Literature, was among the first women to do so. Her approach was critical, especially of early interpretations, emphasizing the Quran's moral and spiritual guidance. In the domain of family life, Muslim women advocate for a fresh concept of womanhood, drawing inspiration from early Muslim models characterized by fair and just treatment of women. They engage in discussions regarding crucial issues like marriage, divorce, and child custody from a female standpoint, expressing their perspectives through various channels such as meetings, gatherings, public lectures, and personal writings.

Wadud posits that a comprehensive understanding of the Quranic perspective on women could serve as a catalyst for women's empowerment within the sphere of Islam. With her hermeneutical model, she challenges traditional or patriarchal interpretations, particularly regarding terms used in texts to achieve universal guidance. She argues against the negative and inferior portrayal of women, which has influenced Quranic interpretation. She highlights the depiction of Muslim women as weak, inferior, intellectually inadequate, and spiritually inadequate, contrasting it with the perceived superiority of men, who enjoy greater opportunities for employment, participation, and individuality. Consequently, women are constrained from engaging in various activities. Acknowledging physiological differences between men and women,

Wadud argues that Quranic prescriptions reflect cultural distinctions prevalent at the time of revelation in seventh-century Arabia, which have worked against women's interests due to prevalent misconceptions. She advocates for prohibition of practices such as polygamy, unrestricted divorce, conjugal violence and concubinage. However, she also questions why certain practices, including social and marital patriarchy, economic hierarchy, and gendered division of labor within families, remain neutral in the Quran.

It is argued that while certain practices encouraged by the Quran may have been specific to the society of its time, the Quran transcends any single society or a historical context (Wadud, 1999). Thus, each new Islamic society must grasp the underlying principles intended by these specifics, which are timeless and applicable in various social contexts. This is exemplified by the principle of veiling among Muslim women, where the idea of veiling was practiced by wealthy and powerful tribes in Arabia as a symbol of protection. The Quran also advocates modesty for all women, reflecting the prevailing cultural norms. However, this method of contextualizing particulars, extracting Quranic principles and applying them to a wide range of cultural contexts marks a departure from previous exegetical methodologies, rendering Quranic interpretation perpetually open to revision.

Certain words and expressions have been scrutinized in terms of their broader implications for humanity, particularly women, to unveil contextual understanding. Words have inherent meanings as well as relational meanings, shaped by the context in which they are used. Islamic feminists such as Wadud emphasize the concept of the "Unseen," a dimension of reality beyond human perception (Wadud, 1999). She explores various aspects and interpretations of the Unseen, highlighting its significance in understanding Quranic teachings:

i. Perspectives on Gender

Wadud argues that while the Quran distinguishes between men and women, it attributes no inherent value difference to them. Both are deemed equal and indispensable before the Almighty. She views that the intricacies of creation are beyond human comprehension, as "every discussion of the unseen involves the ineffable" (Wadud, 1999). Hence, all debates concerning human creation in the text are essentially linguistic. She challenges the view that human creation started with a man and that women are subordinate and less significant. Instead, Wadud (1999) asserts that humanity is inherently gender-neutral, with no indication to the contrary in the Quran. She substantiates this argument by citing verse 4:1, which states:

"And from (min) His signs (ayat) is that He created you (humankind) from (min) a single soul (nafs) and created from (min) in its mate (zawj) and from (min) the1se two He spread countless men and women."

The interpretations of key terms like "min," "ayat," and "nafs" are pivotal in Islamic feminist discourse:

- The term "min" has dual meanings- it can denote extraction or similarity in nature. Hence, the interpretation of the verse varies depending on the chosen interpretation of "min." Wadud explains this through the example of al-Zamakhshari, who interprets the verse to imply that humankind was created in the likeness of a single soul, with its mate derived from it. This interpretation, influenced by Biblical narratives, talks about the superiority of man, created whole, over woman, created from a part.

- The term "nafs" has both common as well as technical usage. Though commonly translated as "self," in the Quran, it signifies the common origin of the entire mankind. Despite its feminine grammatical form, conceptually, it transcends gender. Specifically, the Quranic narrative of human creation does not begin with a male figure like Adam, avoiding gendered connotations.
- The term "zawj" refers to the second part of the creation of mankind, often associated with Eve. Wadud highlights the lack of information regarding "zawj," leading interpreters to consult Biblical narratives. In spite of its masculine grammatical form, "zawj" is conceptually gender-neutral.

In essence, Wadud's analysis underscores the Quran's non-gendered depiction of human creation and the nuanced interpretations of key terms within the Islamic feminist discourse. The Quran mentions two aspects of creation, as indicated in verses 4:1, 7:189, and 39:6, stating that creation is "*min the first nafs*" and "*zawj in relation to that of the nafs*" (Wadud, 1999). Wadud challenges the notion of woman as a temptress or source of evil, prevalent in both Judeo-Christian heritage and certain Muslim beliefs. This establishes the mutual necessity of pairs in creation. She highlights Quran's use of the dual form, indicating that woman is not solely responsible for Adam's initial mistake. Both are depicted as equally culpable for disobeying God, seeking forgiveness, and being pardoned. She focuses that human creation is inherently gender-neutral, with no inherent disparities between men and women; they are instead viewed as a harmonious pair.

ii. Perspectives on Guidance

Wadud posits that the Quran recognizes women as individuals in their own right, treating them equally with men in matters of individual potential and their relationship with the Almighty. She also emphasizes that the Quran's discussion of the relationship between Allah and individuals does not have gender distinctions, indicating equality between men and women in their personal aspirations. Moreover, she asserts that the Quran does not establish a fundamental spiritual distinction between men and women. Rather, it portrays both genders as possessing equal worth, with differentiation based solely on factors like wealth, nationality or sex. To support this, Wadud utilizes references of female figures in the Quran, thereby illustrating that women not only receive revelation but also serve as models for universal guidance (Wadud, 2006). These "universal examples" are often interpreted as gender-specific, in spite of their relevance to both men and women.

For example, Wadud cites the example of Bilqis, the queen of Sheba, who is depicted as a powerful and knowledgeable leader capable of wise governance in spiritual matters. Although she serves as an universal example of leadership for both genders, many Muslims consider leadership roles inappropriate for women. This highlights the disparity between the Quran's portrayal of women's capabilities and the societal attitudes toward women in positions of authority.

iii. View of Women's Roles in the World:

According to the Quran, women's roles can be categorized into three main types:

- Roles influenced by the social, cultural, and historical context of individual women.
- Roles fulfilling universally accepted female functions, such as caregiving or nurturing, with exceptions acknowledged even within the Quran.
- Roles fulfilling functions not specific to gender.

Starting from these points, Wadud asserts that there is no inherent value assigned to women, nor is there a predetermined and eternal hierarchy. Additionally, there is no rigid assignment of roles for men and women, as each gender possesses multiple possibilities. Wadud argues that the Quran acknowledges human beings operating within social systems with functional distinctions, but it does not imply inherent superiority of men over women. For instance, the Quran identifies childbearing and rearing as primary features of women. However, the interpretation of "primary" as implying that women are solely meant for motherhood and domestic activities is erroneous. Instead, this designation emphasizes the crucial role of women in the continuation of the human race due to their unique capacity for childbirth.

In her exploration of women's roles, Wadud offers a distinctive interpretation rooted in the principles of the Quran. Challenging traditional perspectives that often limit women to predefined societal roles, she advocates for a more nuanced understanding that acknowledges women's inherent value and diverse capabilities. Central to her interpretation is the Quranic principle of equality before God. She argues that the Quran does not prescribe rigid gender roles, rather emphasizes the equal spiritual worth of men and women. Wadud highlights verses such as 4:1, which speaks of the creation of humanity from a single soul, focusing on the common origin and equality of all individuals regardless of gender.

Wadud challenges the idea that women's primary role is confined to domestic duties or child-rearing. While acknowledging the importance of these roles, she rejects the notion that they should be the sole domain of women. Instead, she emphasizes the Quran's recognition of women's diverse capabilities and potential contributions to society beyond traditional gender roles. One key aspect of her interpretation is her rejection of the patriarchal view that women are inherently inferior to men. She argues that such beliefs are not supported by the Quran, which affirms the equal worth of all individuals in the eyes of God. Wadud cites verses like 49:13, which emphasizes that all humans are created from a single male and female, as evidence of the Quran's egalitarian stance.

Moreover, Wadud challenges the traditional interpretations of Quranic verses that have been used to justify the subordination of women. She argues that such interpretations are often based on cultural biases rather than the true message of the Quran. By reexamining these verses within their historical and linguistic context, Wadud gives a more egalitarian reading that talks about the dignity and agency of women.

CONCLUSION

The portrayal of Islam as oppressive and violent towards women, particularly by Western feminists, reflects a complex narrative. While critiques of religious practices, including those of Islam, have long been present in feminist discourse, it is important to acknowledge the diversity within the Islamic world and the variety of interpretations. Pointing out countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran as indicative of Islam's stance on women oversimplifies the intricate relationship between religion, culture and gender dynamics.

Scholars like Amina Wadud and others have challenged the patriarchal interpretations of Quran and advocated for a more inclusive and reasonable understanding of gender roles within Islamic teachings. Recognizing that interpretations of religious texts are not uniform, and that Muslim communities worldwide hold diverse perspectives on women's rights and

empowerment, is crucial. Overall, her interpretation of women's roles according to the Quran is grounded in principles of equality, dignity and agency. She rejects the narrow gender stereotypes and advocates for a more inclusive understanding which affirms the diverse capabilities of women. Through her work, Wadud seeks to promote gender equality and empower women to realize their potential in all aspects of life, in alignment with the teachings of the Quran.

End Notes

*Tafsirs*¹- It denotes scholarly commentary on the Quran, explaining its verses' meanings, context, and significance. It helps in understanding and application of Quranic teachings, with diverse interpretations by scholars throughout history reflecting different methodologies, viewpoints and cultural contexts.

*Fiqh*²- In Islam, the term refers to the science of jurisprudence, extracting legal rules from the Quran and Sunna. It governs different aspects of life. While Sharia incorporates God's will, fiqh is the human interpretation subject to change. It is often patriarchal and criticized for hindering justice and gender equality.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The undersigned author hereby declares that she has no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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