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FEMINISM IN POSTMODERN SOCIETY: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE*

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Abstract

In this research, an attempt is made to focus on the real nature of the challenges of postmodern feminism and its implications on not only Muslim women but also on the family and society at large. The research also examines the typology of this phenomenon known as Islamic feminism to reveal how some Muslim women are now confronting postmodern feminism in today's global village. The goal here is to provide a basis for exploring the main dimensions of postmodern feminism as central to practices in the Muslim world. It is hoped that this can stimulate Islamic organizations to address these dimensions in formulating their policies on women. The research will therefore reply to western feminist writers who unjustly believe that Islam treats women with utter scorn, injustice and humiliation. It will also demonstrate that Islam and what is now known as Islamic feminism are not incompatible if the eradication of women's oppression is the primary aim of feminism. It is not contradictory to Islamic tenets of equity, equality, and justice for all races, groups and sexes. The study concludes that labeling any political and intellectual activism in support of Muslim women's public roles in society "Islamic feminism" will show the difference between Islam, a religion that preaches moderation in any human endeavor, and the extremism of secular postmodern feminism.

Introduction

Feminism is one of the major themes in postmodern society and the status of Muslim women and the veil in particular occupies a central place in postmodern feminist discourse. Many western feminists would rather situate the oppression of women in many Muslim Societies within the context of Islamic laws on dress and therefore conclude that the veil

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is a constraint to the emancipation of women. In contrast to the above portrayal of veiling and the conditions of women, the 'Ulamā' tend to dismiss feminist claims and deny that Islamic tenets on women are oppressive. They counter-pose the indignity women are suffering in other religions with the advancement of women in Islam and conclude that in Islam lays true liberation. Thus, the 'Ulamā' imply that advancement of women in Islam is relative and subsists only when juxtaposed with a degrading status in other religions,¹ making feminists see Islam like all other world-religions that affirm gender inequities. By conceding that Islam represents advancement because it is better than others in oppressive practices against women, the 'Ulamā' display a unique conservatism and stand accused of remaining decades behind the societies they are supposed to guide. According to feminists, gender issues that dominate the debate on women's rights are closely bound up with the use of veil.² The feminist obsession with the veil is because it does not represent a religious obligation but rather a socio-political and cultural symbol to reduce women to mere objects of men's pleasures. They see it as a pressure on women to be modest, restricting them to a culturally acceptable conduct designed and conducted by men but for the pleasure of men. Feminists may differ on how to deal with the issue of veiling of Muslim women but they are all unanimous that Muslim women are oppressed in one form or another. Some argue that they are not more oppressed than non-Muslim women, to some Muslim women's oppression is extrinsic to Islam while others blame Islam for this oppression.³ The question that may well be asked here which is germane

¹ See for instance M Cardell and J. McHair, *Women in the World Terms*, Integrative studies (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 334 and Fatima Umar Naseef, *Women In Islām, A Discourse in Rights and Obligations* (Cairo: International Islamic Committee For Women & Child, 1999), pp. 1-32.

² Reuben Levy, *The Social Structure of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 124.

³ Haleh Afshar, "Fundamentalism and its Female Apologists", Renee Prendergast and H. W. Singer eds., *Development Perspectives for the 1990s* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 315; Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 106-114; 178-179,=

to this research is why are gender issues that dominate the debate on women's rights closely bound up with the use of veil, what is the basis of postmodern feminism and how does western secular brand of feminism differ from what is now known as Islamic feminism; what is the true spirit of Islamic feminism; what are the real aspirations of Muslim women and can these aspirations be fulfilled within the Islamic provisions?⁴ This research proposes to answer the above questions.

The Origin and Development of Feminism and 20th Century Postmodern Feminism

Contemporary feminism can be traced back to 18th century Europe when many people became concerned with the illiteracy rates among women. For some feminists, illiteracy was seen as the cause of disenfranchising women and therefore, there was the need to raise their literacy rates.⁵ For others, the problem was the lack of equal employment opportunity for women, hence, according to Boris the term feminism grew out of the desire of women for equal treatment with men in the specific area of workforce.⁶ The early feminists campaigned for women's right to vote but still women had to wait until 1928 for this right to be granted to them. Equal pay for equal work with men took longer and was not won until 1975. This early feminism is regarded as

=185, Elizabeth Fernea and Bassima Berzigan eds., *Middle Eastern Women Speak Out* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1977); Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, "Women and Modernisation: A Reevaluation"; Amira El Azhary Sonbol ed., *Women, the Family and Divorce Laws in Islamic History* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 50; Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, "Entrepreneurial Egypt Women in Egypt", Mai Yamani ed., *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 33-47.

⁴ Reuben Levy, *The Social Structure of Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 1969) p.124.

⁵ See Zeenath Kausar, "Oikos/Polis Conflict: Perspectives of Gender Feminists and Islamic Revivalists" *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 4 (1996): pp. 476-496.

⁶ Eileen Boris, *Home to Work-Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.21 and 158.

equity feminism. Its champions mainly advocated for equal treatment with men in the above areas and they made women become more aware of their lack of basic rights in society.⁷

Following the postmodern developments of the latter part of the twentieth century above, feminism assumed wider dimensions and in recent years it has centered mostly round the granting of women gender equality. Unlike early liberal feminists, gender feminists in the late 20th centuries are more concerned with socio-religious and cultural perceptions of gender and sexuality.⁸ To them, gender refers to socio-religious and cultural perceptions that guide what people consider masculine and feminine conduct and if nature stands in the way of eliminating such sexual preferences like heterosexuality and the acceptance of all sexual orientations like pre and extra marital sex, and lesbianism, then nature must be fought. Thus a function of postmodern feminism is not only the bringing of women out from the home to the public but also the externalization and in fact globalization of women sexuality,⁹ turning women into sex workers, mistresses and at best single mothers. Such women are reduced to mere playgrounds for men who abandon the women after sowing their wild oats then become free to move on and haunt for other willing victims in their play-boyish games. This is the reason why many young married American couples who live in areas with plenty of unmarried and available men and women risk divorce because there is an eye for a better partner and the more possibilities they see, the better the chances of finding someone worth leaving the marriage for.¹⁰

⁷ Christina Hoff Sommers in *Who Stole Feminism? How women betrayed women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 12-18, 19-40, 41-49, 50-73, 2092-26, and 258.

⁸ Christina Hoff Sommers in *Who Stole Feminism?* p. 258.

⁹ Zeenath Kausar, *Ikos/Polis Conflict*, pp. 476-496.

¹⁰ *Arab News*, February 18, 1995.

The Secular Muslim Feminist Discourse

Feminism in the Muslim world as championed by secular feminists actually has its root in Lebanon and Egypt at the end of 19th century and soon spread to all parts of the Muslim world. There are too many classic works that deal with the topic of women in Islam from secular feminist perspectives, which posit that Islam like other religious traditions lends great support to the oppression of women. They ask Muslim women to disown marital, social, legal, economic and political Islamic regulations, which they argue uphold women status as inferior to that of men. One such oppression in marriage is the personification of a woman as an object of men's sexual gratification. According to Magida Salma, the expunging of any notion of sin or guilt from sexual pleasure is not synonymous with freedom for women because it only profits men and consecrates women's role as sexual object, hence 'the woman in the Koran is not a lover but a wife, virgin girl and mother.'¹¹ To her while most Islamic legislations have given way to modern adaptations, only the norms regulating the lives of women [marriage, divorce, polygamy, the care of children and the imposition of male guardians] remain static. She argued that though usury is a great sin in Islam, even the 'most Muslim' ruling classes do not for-swear the interest generated by their bank accounts. She also submitted that it is the attachment to Arab-Islamic traditions that worsened the lots of women. The generalization of the veil developed as a reaction to women right to inherit property that was guaranteed by Islam. The prohibition of Muslim women marrying non-Muslims further placed them under the grip of men.¹²

For Leila Ahmed, the position of women in Islam has also been politicized with Islamic movements stressing the conduct of women as an anti colonial rhetoric. She asserted that the use of feminism by colonialism and the Christian West in promoting the imperial culture and

¹¹ Magida Salman, "Arab Women" Khamsin: *Journal of Revolutionary Socialists of the Middle East*, pp. 24-32.

¹² *Ibid.*

assault against the veiling of women and other “backward” practices compelled the Islamists to view the feminist struggle as Westernization. In short, the Islamists focused on the importance of women veiling and proper conduct as a form of resistance to the colonial and Christian crusade.¹³ Having developed as a resistance narrative against Western colonialism, Ahmed argues, the Islamist adoption of the new veil simply entrenches the debate over veiling and Islamists say if to be ‘Western’ is to be unveiled; then to be veiled is to be Muslim.¹⁴ Kandiyoti agrees that the colonial depiction of Muslim women as epitomizing the primitiveness of Islam has helped in sustaining the backwardness and degradation of these women. She insists that despite the reception of the ‘*Ulamā*’ of modernization and the technological institutions that would herald changes in the society during and after the anti imperial struggles in Muslim societies, they were however opposed to reformations in women place and conduct. All were united, both the modernists and anti modernists, the ‘*Ulamā*’ and the laymen as well as the secular nationalists and the Islamists.¹⁵ She explains that in Muslim societies feminist discourse can proceed only in two directions: either denying that Islamic practices are necessarily oppressive or asserting that those oppressive practices are not necessarily Islamic. To her, the two options are untenable as they are both based on a discourse that is unacceptable to feminists.¹⁶

Fatima Mernissi in her autobiography, *Dreams of Trespass*, describes her childish struggles in Morocco as a young girl to understand the meaning of the word harem. Within the context of her feminist struggles in a traditional Muslim society, she talks about the many rules regulating

¹³ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam, Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1992), pp. 236-237.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁵ Deniz Kandiyoti, “Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (London: London School of Economic, 1991), Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 429-43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the spaces where women had to move and how their actions were severely restricted. Accordingly, a harem was about rules as every space had its own invisible rules which, most of the time, are against women.¹⁷ Fatima Mernissi concludes that the invisible rules severely restricted women and obliterated the initial idealistic egalitarian hope of equality nurtured by the visionary Prophet of Islam. It was sacrificed under the burden and task of building the nascent community in order to protect the maiden Muslims from disintegration.¹⁸ She therefore opposes the Islamist call for a return to the so-called pristine past. To her, the return to the past means return of women to their archaic, former traditional and marginalized place where Islamists want to confine them.¹⁹ For Mernissi, the call for a return to the veil depicts graphically the confined marginal, restricted and above all subordinate territories designated by Islamists for women.

To these feminists, upholding a liberal Muslim perspective on women's rights and returning to the sources of Islam so as to develop religious authenticity for gender and feminist rights cannot be negotiated. They therefore demand for a comprehensive re-interpretation of Islamic texts through a non-patriarchal perspective, moving away from both the traditional and orthodox interpretations of the status of women in Islam to a radical and feminist analysis of texts which were hitherto considered authentic but which they believe contain some unwholesome degrading and humiliating regulations on Muslim women. Amīnah Wadūd-Muḥsīn is an example of such Muslim feminists who look at their struggle for women's rights within this methodological approach. She begins her dissertation by explaining that the Qur'ān

¹⁷ Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Perseus Books, 1994), pp. 61-62.

¹⁸ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: a Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, Trans. by Mary Jo Lakeland (US: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company Inc., 1991), pp. vi-ix, pp. 85-101, 102-114; 115-140, 141-160, 161-179 and 180-188. See also her *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Trans. by Mary Jo Lakeland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 106-114; 178-179, 185.

¹⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, pp. ix, 8, 24.

addresses women equally with men.²⁰ She is convinced that the Qur'ān aims at erasing all notions of women as sub-human or man's distorted female partner extracted from him as an afterthought and for his utility. Dualism according to her is the primordial design for all creation: 'From all (created) things are pairs' [Qur'ān/51:49]. Wadūd-Muhsīn argues that when the proto-human soul, self or person (*nafs*) is brought into existence, its mate (*zawj*) is already a part of the plan. This means that Hawā had the same nature with Adam, she was created not from Adam but from the divine soul (*rūh*), the same soul from which Ādam was created. Hence the two are perfect, complete and equal. When the Qur'ān recounts the event in the Garden, explains Wadūd-Muhsīn, it uses the unique dual form in Arabic grammar showing that both were guilty. The female is never singled out and chastised for being a temptress. Ultimately, the two sought forgiveness and it was granted the two. They began life on earth untainted by a 'fall' from grace and with no trace of original sin. On the contrary, in Islam the creation story for humans on earth began with forgiveness and mercy as well as a most important promise or covenant from God. God would provide guidance through revelation. Ādam became the first prophet and transmitter of this guidance.²¹ In short, Wadūd concludes that both men and women are appointed as the vicegerents of God to carry out mutually supportive roles in the society. As a result, whatever differences existing between the male and female gender is not indicative of an inherent superiority or inferiority or else the mutual role of *Khilāfah* would be meaningless.²² According to Wadūd, it is in order to exercise and play the above egalitarian role of *Khilāfah* that she went ahead to become the first woman to lead both men and women in the Friday Congregational prayers in the United States of America on Friday March 18th 2005, a significant religious role that has divided scholars in the Muslim world. According to Barbara Shoetzau a *New York* reporter, controversy erupted in New York on Friday March 18th and spread across the Muslim world as Amīnah Wadūd led the mixed-gender service at a building on

²⁰ Amīnah Wadūd-Muhsīn, *Qur'ān and Woman*, pp. 1-5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-20.

²² Amīnah Wadūd-Muhsīn, *Qur'ān and Woman*: pp. 18-35.

the grounds of the episcopal Cathedral of Saint John the Divine after the original venue was changed following threats.²³ No doubt, this is Amīnah Wadūd's pragmatic way of demonstrating her understanding of the egalitarian role of *Khilāfah* in Islam. While most Muslim scholars have condemned the exercise, the *Muftī* of Egypt, *Shaikh* 'Alī Jum'ah has supported it.²⁴

Following this feminist liberal approach to counteract classical interpretations of the Islamic conduct of women particularly on *Hijāb* and the working of women, feminists argue that Muslim women are given the freedom of choice to interpret what they can wear in order to conform to the Islamic dress code and other Islamic ideals. Thus, Mai submits on the issue of *Hijāb* that the first relevant question for Muslim feminists today is the element of choice that should be attached to the female garment in Islam, and the woman's right to choose whether to veil or not to veil.²⁵

The School of Islamic Feminism

As already established, the depiction of Muslim woman as the ultimate symbol of backwardness and oppression and the so-called degraded image of Muslim societies has been further exacerbated by the mistaken belief in feminist discourse that the only true model of emancipation was the western model of feminism. Yet, over the last few decades of the twentieth century in particular, there has arisen a growing elite of Muslim women and men who choose to reject this oriental representation as alien to their perception of Islam. These Muslims believe strongly in the egalitarian teachings of Islam and find gender empowerment and equity fully supported by the pristine and original sources of the Islamic faith and in fact the nascent Islamic state founded by the Prophet. To them, it is possible to re-establish again these gender

²³ See Barbara Shoetzau, "Woman Leads Muslim Prayers in New York, Sparking Worldwide Controversy" *New York Times*, March 19 2005.

²⁴ *Sheikh* 'Alī Jum'ah, available at <http://www.muslimwakeup.com>

²⁵ Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1996), p. 20.

empowerment and equity in today's Muslim societies as done by the Prophet and his early successors to match the vision of the Islam that is projected in the egalitarian teachings of Islam, a religion that is egalitarian at its core. They uphold that there abound in the Qur'ān a good number of verses that describe equality in creation, faith and equality of rewards for good works, that have become a beacon of hope for Muslim feminists ever since the seventh century when Umm Salāmah on behalf of a some Muslim women petitioned the Prophet Muhammad asking why God did not appear to address women as well men in the verses of the Qur'ān. In response to her protest, Qur'ānic passages: [3:195], [33:35] and [48:25] were revealed. These and other Qur'ānic injunctions set out, without any ambiguity whatsoever, the basic and fundamental status of women as equal partners with men in Islam and their rights to all righteous deeds, forgiveness and paradise.²⁶ There is also the divine response to the cries of a Muslim woman, Khawlah Bint Tha'labah against the injustices of her husband.²⁷ Even the highest title in the Muslim community after that of the Prophet "Mothers of the Believers" (which applied to the wives of the Prophet (ﷺ)) was conferred on Muslim women. All other Muslim women were also conferred with the title of *Ṣahābiyyah* like their fellow men. Most of these are so glaring in Islamic history that the new generations of both Muslim men and women therefore tend to support the Islamic aspirations for the genuine emancipation and empowerment of women in all ramifications.

Contrary to accusations of feminists, the *Jihād* scholars in Hausa land following the above dignity conferred on Muslim women during the Qur'ānic generation, fought vigorously against all the oppressive practices women were made to suffer in the name of Islam both before

²⁶ Muḥammad al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1984), Vol. 22, p. 10.

²⁷ Umar Kahhala, *A'lām al-nisā' fī 'ālamay al-'Arabī wa-al-Islāmī* (Damascus: Mu'asasat al-Risālah, 1982), p. 38.

and after the *Jihād*.²⁸ Neither did the *Jihād* scholars keep women at bay or push them to the domestic sphere after the *Jihād*.²⁹ Sayyid Quṭb, a great thinker as well as ideologue of al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn³⁰ is one of the scholars who argue that the Qur'ān itself considers both men and women as humans enjoy superiority in both mental and spiritual qualities over all other creatures including the high ranking Angels and that women have been granted equal rights with men except in some few areas where the two sexes differ in natural aptitudes.³¹ One such few areas according to him is the male duty of breadwinning. He argues that Islam does not compel women to earn livelihood in order to maintain themselves and the family because they are already saddled with the burdens of pregnancy, breastfeeding and menstruations among others. Sayyid Quṭb also discusses the injunction on *tabarruj al-jāhiliyyah al-'ūlā* at length and concludes that the prescription was meant only to prevent the dazzling or exposure of feminine charms and fineries by women and not to segregate them or annul any of their civic rights. He explains that the injunction will protect and safeguard women's honor and dignity from being stalked or attacked by men.³² Even Wadūd-Muḥsin, agrees with Sayyid Quṭb that male leadership in Islam denotes male duty and responsibility to assist women so as to balance the greater contribution of women as a result of the burdens of pregnancy, breastfeeding and menstruations etc in the daytime and at night rather than male authoritarianism over women.³³

²⁸ See A.A. Ādam, *Al-Islām Al-yawm Wa Gadan Fī Nayjīriyyah* (Egypt: Matba' al-Mukhtār al-Islām, 1985); D.M Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (London: Longman, 1972).

²⁹ Kandiyoti D., "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation", *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (London: London School of Economic, 1991), Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 429-43.

³⁰ This means the Muslim Brotherhood an Islamic Movement founded by Shaykh Hasan al-Banā in Egypt.

³¹ Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1985), p. 65.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 2859.

³³ Amīna Wadūd-Muḥsin, *Qur'ān and Woman*, p. 73.

This accounted for the recent moves by some Muslim women activists or Islamists to call for change in the conditions of Muslim women under the banner of Islam itself. The brand of the struggle championed by these Muslim women activists or Islamists against patriarchy or male dominance should be labeled as "Islamic feminism" contrary to Miriam Cooke who included in this classification non-activists or Islamists.³⁴ The label of their social, political, and intellectual activism in support of Muslim women's public roles in society as "Islamic feminism" shows the difference between Islam as a religion that matches the egalitarian vision at the core of its teachings with realism and pragmatism, a religion that is predicated on moderation and balance as opposed totally to the extremism of secular feminism. Islamic feminists are therefore resolute in advocating that women should be granted their full humanity and safeguarded from all harmful social and cultural practices such as male abduction, stalking rape, male domination, subjugation and other abuse etc. One such Islamist who falls into the category of Islamic feminists opposed to the marketing of women sexuality espoused by secular feminists is Zaynab al-Ghazālī al-Jubaylī. In her memoirs, *Ayyām min ḥayātī* (Days from my Life), she tells the story of her leadership of the Muslim Ladies' Association which she founded, her relationship with the Muslim Brothers, her ordeals in 1960s Egyptian prisons and the state's methods of terrorism and control. Zaynab, a daughter of an Azhāri graduate starts her tales with how her sons in the *Da'wah* consider it expedient to document the comparable experiences of what the Muslim Brothers suffered in the hands of Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir, the then Egyptian President as well as to answer his accusation of the Muslim Brothers' alleged conspiracy to kill him and overthrow his regime. She does this very well in the language of the Islamic movement and then moves on to how she had earlier joined the Hudā Sha'rāwī led feminist Union but later became disaffected because

³⁴ See Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: creating Islamic feminism through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

of its western and secular biases as well as her realization that Islam has given women every right-political, economic, social, marital and personal-so much that Muslim women do not need to be liberated.³⁵ She continues to work with Western and secular feminist organizations as seen in 1952 when her Muslim Ladies' Association joined the Women's Committee for Popular Resistance in their independence struggles. This really portrays Zaynab al-Ghazālī al-Jubaylī as a feminist albeit an Islamic feminist hence she had dedicated her life to *Jihād* in the path of Allāh and the establishment of the Islamic state at the age of eighteen in 1935. She divorced her first husband because of his interference in her *Jihād* efforts and reminded her second husband of her pledge to *Jihād* and her pledge to Ḥasan al-Bannā to work under the banner of the Muslim Brothers before accepting his proposal for marriage. Hence she preferred *Jihād* to marriage. Eventually, it was her *Jihād* that took Zaynab to Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir's goal where she first spent a year in the men's prison, War Prison with the famous Muslim Brothers' leaders like Sayyid Quṭb, Ismā'īl Farāgī and 'Abd al Qādir 'Awdah before she was later sent to the women's prison, *Qanātīr*. In these prisons, Zaynab chronicles the unspeakable things the government of Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir subjected people to. They consist of hell-a crucible meant for melting even men of metals, tortures, whippings, biting ferocious dogs, weeklong immersions in water, suspended hangings, fire-cells and for some the ultimate price. All the sufferings were meted to members of the Muslim Brothers because of propped-up charges. Miriam Cooke who conducted an interview with Zaynab in 1995, sought to know if *Jihād* in the path of Allāh as propounded by her should end the Islamic state is established and if women could assume political offices. Zaynab's response was that the authorities in the new Islamic state would determine at that point the eventual status of women and that she

³⁵ Valerie J. Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist: Zaynab al-Ghazālī" in Elizabeth W. Fernea, ed., *Women and the family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), pp. 234- 235.

believes, women could certainly work in the Islamic government save for the office of the president.³⁶

A perusal of Zaynab's memoirs, *Ayyām min ḥayātī*, reveals that her life struggles supports the term Islamic feminism. She does not seek equality with men in the western secular sense but gender equity that she believes is granted in Islam. To her, *Jihād* is not meant for men alone but women too. The heroines who inspire her are the early generation of Muslim women like Laylā Tārif, a woman that belonged to the warmongering *Khawārij* School of thought in Islam and Nusaybah bint Ka'b al-Mazniyyah, a woman who fought alongside the Prophet (ﷺ). Zaynab describes herself as a soldier in the *Jihād* against the twentieth-century *Jāhiliyyah* for an Islamic state. She propounds an Islamic way of life for all Muslim women—marriage, children upbringing and education—and at the same time, an active *Da'wah* work. She calls on Muslim women to free themselves from the fetters of a poorly understood Islam and to become active in the *Jihād* for the establishment of the Islamic state. Her own life is a testimony to this and a guide to others on the path of active Islamic work. She did not allow marriage to stop her active Islamic work nor her husband to restrict her *Da'wah* activities. Hence, her exemplary life for Muslim women activists has been likened to that of Sukaynah, Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) great grand daughter who stipulated in her marriage contract that she would not obey her husband, do as she pleased as well as revoked her husband's right to polygamy.³⁷ In an interview with her in 1981, Zaynab argues that Islam does not forbid women from active participation in *Da'wah* as well as public life as long as it does not affect their primary duty as mothers and trainers to build the caliber of men that are needed to fill the ranks of the Islamic work. To her, though the family and sexual life come first, they are not the first and last goals of marriage and therefore do not preclude an

³⁶ Zaynab al-Ghazālī, *Ayyām min ḥayātī* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1986), pp. 5-305.

³⁷ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, pp. 83-106.

active *Da'wah* work.³⁸ Zaynab al-Ghazālī al-Jubaylī is therefore a pace blazer in the contemporary evolution of Islamic feminism. Muslim women movement workers all over the Muslim world are today employing her Islamic idioms in their struggles for women's rights. For instance, women in the Muslim Brothers of Egypt say politics is not the men's realm alone but that of women too and that it became so right from the time of the Prophet when women not by proxy but directly and personally gave him and the Caliphs after him their *bay'ah* and vote, thus becoming equal partners with men in the political realm. No wonder, Duval, the Swedish sociologist praises and describes Zaynab al-Ghazālī as a pioneer of a brand of feminism that Islamist and active Muslim women can champion. To her, Zaynab al-Ghazālī was determined to find feminism within Islam³⁹ and I think she did it successfully too.

According to Ziba Mir-Hosseini, the need to expound the Islamic brand of feminism in Iran became inevitable because of the contradictions that arose from the Iranian Islamic revolutionary experiment.⁴⁰ She believes Iranian Islamic revolutionary feminists were forced to challenge the hegemony of the orthodox interpretative patriarchal elites of the *Sharī'ah* leading to the Iranian Islamic government making a complete U-turn in its supposedly Islamic divorce laws with the 1992 Divorce Amendments which curtails men's rights to divorce and grants women financial domestic rewards known as *ujrat al-mithl* or standard wages for housework. Juristic articles in *Zanan*, an Iranian women's magazine launched in February 1992, signaled this complete U-turn by Iranian revolutionary government. *Zanan*, a fruit of the Iranian Islamic revolution began by holding the Iranian Civil Codes

³⁸ Valerie J. Hoffman, *An Islamic Activist: Zaynab al-Ghazali*, pp. 236-237.

³⁹ Soroya Duval, "New Veils and New Voices: Islamist women's Groups in Egypt", in eds., Ask, Karin and Marit Tjomslund, *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), pp. 62-7.

⁴⁰ Haleh Afshar, "Islām and feminism: An Analysis of Political Strategies" in Mai Yamani, ed., *Feminism and Islam*, pp. 201-216.

responsible for the subordinate position of women and appealing to the *Sharī'ah* for redress. It then gradually moved to expounding a re-reading of the concept of *qiwwāmah* or headship of the family and *tamkīn* or woman's submission to her husband, *nushūz* or recalcitrance of either parties in marriage, *nāaqis* or defectiveness of women, the appointment of women as judges and arbitrators in family courts, wife-beating and their economic empowerment. It also established the need for a new *Ijtihād* on the gender inequalities that exists in the *Sharī'ah* penal codes of *qisās* (retribution), *ḥudūd* (fixed punishments) and *ta'zīrāt* (discretionary punishments). The juristic re-reading of the *Sharī'ah* divorce laws enacted after the 1979 Islamic revolution by Zanan culminated in the Divorce Amendments.⁴¹ Thus Islamic feminism which uses Islamic texts to demand the rights granted Muslim women by the *Sharī'ah* was born. This brand of feminism, which takes Islam and not the West as its source of legitimacy, is said to have its intellectual base in Kiyān cultural Institute with Dr. Abdul karīm who is regarded as the Iranian Luther as the guiding inspiration.⁴²

As the Zanan, the Iranian women's revolutionary magazine was laying the intellectual basis of Islamic feminism; women representatives in the parliamentary were involved in the political and judicial aspects of the struggle. In 1991, Maryam Behruzi, a veteran representative who served a prison sentence in post revolutionary period and whose son was martyred during the Iran-Iraq war demanded that bills allowing early retirement age for women, reforming the divorce laws, allowing single women to travel abroad to continue their studies and making adequate provision of national insurance for women and children be put before the *Majlis*. The request was however rejected by the Presidential adviser on women's issues. Shahla Habibi, a woman herself stating that her demands would dishonor and devalue the Iranian women. But Behruzi succeeded in putting through the bill that allowed women to retire after twenty years of active service. A proposal by the Women's Cultural-

⁴¹ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Stretching the limits: A feminist Reading of the *Sharī'ah* in Post-Khomeini Iran" in Mai Yamani, ed. *Feminism and Islam*, pp. 285-316.

⁴² R. Wright, "An Iranian Luther shakes the foundation of Islam" *the Guardian*, 1 February 1995.

Social Council submitted to the High Council of Cultural Revolution to eliminate the prejudicial treatment of women in higher education and in the selection for degree courses was also ratified in 1991. In addition, women's struggle for re-entry into the judicial domain had been boosted in 1982 when women lawyers were permitted to serve as advisers in family courts and on matters relating to care and responsibility for children and minors. Two years later, the Head of Judiciary was empowered to appoint women to judicial functions as advisers to administrative justice courts, family courts, posts of Assistant to the Public Prosecutor, Examining Magistrate and offices concerned with legal preparation of laws. Even when in May 1994, the *Majlis* Legal and Judicial Affairs Committee decried these last achievements; women members of the *Majlis* were not disillusioned. They, remaining within Islamic matrices to demand for women participation in the domain of law and so they retained their foothold in the courts.⁴³ Among the growing elite of Muslim women and men who choose to reject the depiction of Muslim women as the ultimate symbol of backwardness, oppression, and the degraded image of Muslim societies in Iran is Zahra Moustafavi, the oldest daughter of Ayatollah Khomeini. As a Professor of Philosophy at Tehran University and President of the Iranian Women's association, Zahra Moustafavi argues that Islam grants men and women equal rights and therefore women should rebel starting from the home in order to get their rights. She believes that if a woman wants to work outside the home, nobody can stop her since Islam has given her the rights and the woman has the right to equally to collect equal salary with men for the same job. She calls for the provision of nurseries for working mothers and the right to work for three days a week.

Following the above Iranian revolution, the phenomenon of Islamic feminism also emerged in Saudi Arabia from the women's sections of the universities in the 1980s. The goal of Saudi Arabia Islamic feminists is to return to the pristine precepts of Islam. They wear their veils from head to toe both indoors and outdoors, they reject western corruption and they enter into erudite and serious disputations that can infuriate both the religious and liberal groups. They work in the women's sections of the universities, banks, businesses etc. They are mostly young women in their twenties and thirties and they gather in large numbers that cut across class,

⁴³ Haleh Afshar, "Islam and feminism: An Analysis", pp. 201-216.

economic and social barriers under the leadership of women knowledgeable in religion who are usually university educated, lecturers and writers. It is said that as the Saudi Arabia Islamic feminists became caught in the complexity of factors that arose from the Iranian revolution of the 1980s, they are today deriving a liberating force from going back to the basics of the *Dīn* and have created a forum within a cultural context with which they are negotiating power.⁴⁴ Perhaps the best known of these Saudi Arabia Islamic feminists is Fātimah 'Umār Naseef. She is the only woman licensed in Saudi Arabia to give *fatwā* (religious verdicts) on Islamic issues and she lectures to over five hundred women in a sitting on women's right to seek knowledge in Islam on her rights and not just duties-political, social, economic, religious, legal, educational and even rights to partake in reconstruction of the society as well as her rights to put the knowledge that is learnt into practice. She declares that women's rights to partake in *Jihād* is next in the Islamic religion only to the five pillars and during which women do not require the permission of their husbands just like children do not require the permission of their parents and slaves that of their masters.⁴⁵ According to her, the basic rights of Muslim women also include their rights to motherhood and wifhood but this should not prevent them from societal reconstruction in collaboration with other Muslim women and this she believes they have always done. For, Muslim women have always been connected and networked with whomever they wanted even when alone at home and with the explosion in information technology, she believes that they are now more connected than ever before.⁴⁶ It is the same phenomenon that is found in Cairo where according to Samia Serageldin, middle-aged women brought up in secular homes are now taking lessons on the correct preparation for prayer, head covering and *Tajwīd* or correct pronunciation of the Qur'ān etc. Women themselves who have studied formally for at least two years and have received a certificate to "preach" by the al-Azhar or other authorities give the lessons.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Mai Yamani, "Some Observations on Women In Saudi Arabia" in Mai Yamani, ed., *Feminism and Islam*, pp.266-270; 278-280.

⁴⁵ Fatima Umar Naseef, *Women In Islam*, pp.1-32 and 150-160.

⁴⁶ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, pp. xv-xvii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Today the postmodernist secular challenges pose serious implications in the world in general, especially the Muslim world. In this research, an attempt has been made to offer an insight into the main themes and aspirations of the postmodern feminist movement as well as its postmodern trends. This study offers an introduction to the main themes and aspirations of the feminist movement especially in Muslim societies and as advocated by some Muslim women who are activists in the Islamic movements. It traces the concept, origin and emergence of feminism, especially the version labeled Islamic, its nature, and various developments. There are many definitions of feminism as there are many different perspectives in the feminist movement that show that it is not baseless but it rather demands serious study.⁴⁸ The feminist typology known as Islamic feminism is real despite the sheer diversity in the backgrounds of those who debate the role and empowerment of women within the Islamic tradition.⁴⁹ The term Islamic feminism should however only refer to those feminists who are also Islamic activists. The core Islamic expression of the movement is only desirous of justice for all, both men and women. It is ultimately focused on gaining for women in practical terms all the rights that Islam has granted them, hence the term Islamic feminism.

Today as more women are stepping out into the limelight and the public sphere, demanding that not only the Muslim women's unconditional and total humanity be acknowledged both also the challenges posed by the postmodern developments be addressed, it is no longer possible to wish away the feminist movement for women's emancipation. The feminist question may only appear simple but it involves a number of complexities and intricacies. While these complexities may be of mere academic and intellectual interests to the post-modernist, atheist and secularist scholars, they ought to be of far greater ethical and religious concerns to Muslim scholars. Islamic scholars' disposition to these feminist complexities will certainly go a long way in reflecting the depth of their integrity and commitment to the

⁴⁸ Bell Hooks, "Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression" in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires eds., *Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 23.

⁴⁹ Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nations: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.3.

Islamic tenet on justice. As scholars of high integrity and commitment to this Islamic tenet, Muslim scholars must respond to all the manifestations of injustice in the society whether towards Muslim women or non-Muslims. These responses while recognizing the universality and immutability of justice in Islam must however also focus on cultural differences and practices that have engendered maltreatment of women in Muslim societies so as to ensure and guarantee the efficacy of the implementation of Islamic justice for all members of these societies. While the struggle for gender justice is about equity and human rights for women, it cannot be regarded as women's struggle solely. Maltreatment of women is not women's problem alone in Islam. It is rather very much that of men. In the Qur'ānic injunctions, man is appointed as a *Qawwām* or maintainer and caretaker of women which include the responsibility to protect and preserve women's honor, dignity, integrity, welfare and health. So in a society where women are second-class citizens, deprived of their genuine Allāh given rights and treated inhumanely, no Muslim man can claim to be truly a *Qawwām* for women and in fact that he is morally and ethically a human being. Hence the need to study seriously the feminist movement in relation to the conditions of women in Muslim societies, even as men in order to fulfill this task of maintaining women that has been imposed on us by Allāh. For the whole of humanity, women included to be free, respected and therefore truly treated as humans, all humans including men must work for justice- gender equity- in particular.

المجلد ٢ العدد ٢ • ديسمبر ٢٠٠٥ م

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