



AL-RISALA



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THE RENAISSANCE OF MUSLIM WOMEN: AN IDENTITY OF AUTHENTIC ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Dr. Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman *

Abstract

This study which employs both a textual and comparative approach seeks to explore the recent developments and conditions of Muslim women in some selected Middle Eastern countries. It traces the origins and development of Islamic feminism and seeks to understand the place and image of women portrayed by Islamic feminists as they contradict those of secular feminists and their feminist aspirations.

The study reveals that though today, the Muslim woman has come to represent the ultimate symbol of oppression, a depiction that has been exacerbated by the mistaken belief in feminist discourse that the only true model of emancipation is the Western model; yet, there has arisen a growing elite of Muslim women who choose to reject this secular representation as alien to their perception of Islam.

To these women who believe strongly in the egalitarian teachings of Islam, it is possible to re-establish gender 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.

This study then concludes that the feminist aspirations of these women, especially in respect of what they perceive as a destructive and overzealous implementation of the shari'ah law in Muslim societies, can be checked not by going outside Islam to establish gender justice, empowerment and freedom for women but by supporting the Islamic aspirations for the genuine emancipation and empowerment of women in all ramifications within only Islamic matrices.

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Background to the Study

This study brings into the open the views of Muslim women activists in line with the need to capture the 'feelings, experiences and perspectives' of Muslim women who hold tenaciously to the Islamic creed and its tenets but who have usually been excluded from the feminist discourse about Muslim women.¹ It argues in support of labeling the brand of the struggle by Muslim women against patriarchy or male domination as "Islamic feminism and tries to incorporate the works of Katherine Bullock into this brand of feminism."²

While Miriam Cooke identifies feminists working within both secular and Islamic matrices; women who work for or against Islam, support or subvert Islamic activities, and most importantly, women who believe in the authenticity of the Islamic faith or not as Islamic feminists,³ the study however disagrees with her. In opposing her identification, the study raises some fundamental questions. Is it really possible to define the term, Islamic feminism and completely overlook or gloss over the ideological convictions of those lumped together? Is it really identical, the disgusting tossing away of *hijāb* and the conviction that this very *hijāb* is dignity and empowerment for women? Or is the belief that the egalitarian message of Islam was the mere product of a visionary who finally submitted to a patriarchal cabal in a severe moment of stress the same as the conviction that the egalitarian message of Islam was not only divine but is also for all time and that it did achieve for women of all times justice, shelter and, in fact, resistance to male domination and oppression? Hence, Lamyā' al-Fārūqī has stated categorically that for the feminist movement to be accepted in Muslim societies, it needed to come to terms with the goal of Muslim women to uphold the teachings of Islam which they regard as ideal and to which they want to return.

It must also come to terms with the Islamic concept of justice which is in tandem with the wider justice for all human or non-human beings and finally, it must accept Islam as an ideology whose concept of *Dīn* encompasses the entire spectrum of life.⁴ It is, therefore, such women who uphold the teachings of Islam which they regard as ideal and to which they want to return that are identified as Islamic feminists in this research just as Zaynab al-Ghazālī did not recognize the secular and Western feminist movement for women's empowerment because according to her, the rights of Muslim women are guaranteed practically.⁵

In contrast to Miriam Cooke from whom the study appropriates the term 'Islamic feminism' however,⁶ it is only such Muslim women that work within Islamic movements that it identifies as falling under the term, "Islamic feminism".

This study has also only examined the socio-political conditions of women, thus limiting the scope of the study. It has, therefore, not delved deeply into the theological and juristic controversies surrounding the political status of Muslim women as part of *fiqh* praxis. In any case, a *fiqh* perspective is beyond the scope of both Islamic political thought that forms the areas of interest of this researcher in addition to the broad nature and complexity of the *fiqh* corpus on the subject of this study.

It is against this backdrop that it is of utmost importance to examine the socio-political conditions of women within Muslim societies from the empirical perspective of socio-cultural practices in these societies and see to what extent Anne Sofie Roald has rightly pointed out that the question of Muslim women has hardly ever been treated as a religious question. It has instead, according to her, been usually perceived in socio-political terms.⁷

In what follows, this research will begin by examining the roots of Islamic feminism in the revolutionary, visionary, egalitarian and divine message of Islam and how Muslim women activists especially within Islamic movements are trying today to recapture this authentic Islamic feminism. There abounds in the primary sources of Islam, the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* a good number of verses and texts that affirm gender equity and complementarities in creation, faith as well as rewards for good works, that have become a beacon of hope for Islamic feminists ever since the seventh century when Umm Salamah on behalf of some Muslim women petitioned the Prophet Muhammad asking why God did not appear to address women as it addressed men in the verses of the Qur'ān. In response to her protest, Qur'ānic passages: 3: 195 and 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 equitable and complementary partners with men in Islam and their rights to all righteous deeds, whether religious, social, public and political, legal, economic and all human rights. Like men, they are also entitled to forgiveness and paradise in the hereafter.⁸ There is also the divine response to the cries of a Muslim woman, Khawlah bint Tha'labah against the injustices of her husband. But for her challenge of a patriarchal oppressive matrimonial act, women would have continued to bear a conjugal relationship that does not offer them happiness or freedom.

In one poignant declaration, men were compelled to either offer women conjugal happiness or freedom from matrimony if it would entail their imprisonment and maltreatment.⁹ The rights granted married women in Islam include partnership with their husbands, as marriage is deemed as a contract

between consenting individuals, legal and economic independence, as Muslim women retain their maiden names as well as ownership and control of their property. In fact, the husband was obliged to capitalize the Muslim woman through the *mahr* which is a kind of bridal love gift as it is payable only to the bride and not her family, father or other male relatives.

Women were also entitled to maintenance allowances while marriage subsists and during divorce proceedings. In the same vein, men are obliged to still maintain their divorced wives at least for a year. Even as many feminists have noted,¹⁰ the highest title in the Muslim community after that of the Prophet, "Mothers of the Believers" (which applied to the wives of the Holy Prophet, (PBUH), was conferred on Muslim women. All other Muslim women were also conferred with the title of *Ṣaḥābiyyah* like their fellow men. All these honors and distinctions granted the early Muslim women are so glaring in Islamic history that many contemporary writers such as John Esposito are now coming to terms with the gender equity in Islam.¹¹

Muslim women were active participants at all levels of community affairs, religious, political, social, educational, and intellectual during the period of the Prophet and the early period immediately following his death. They played key roles in preserving traditions, disseminating knowledge and challenging the political authority when it erred according to their understanding of the Qur'ān or the Prophetic legacy. But it is in the field of education and learning that the contributions of Muslim women appear to be most profound. The case of 'Ā'ishah is fairly well known, but her greatness is not so much in her intellectual and educational contributions in the fields of Islamic law, history, medicine, astronomy, and Ḥadīth literature but more importantly in her socio-religious and political contributions.

Contrary to the claim of many Western and secular writers who try to show that it is Muslim men who construct and portray women's contributions in Muslim society, the case of 'Ā'ishah is perhaps the most vivid example of how Muslim women in the early days of Islam shaped the Muslim society and constructed its legacy in their own unique ways.

In fact, 'Ā'ishah as she challenged leading companions of the Prophet on the narrations from the Prophet and corrected these narrations, was as a Muslim woman, taking an active and leading part in constructing almost all the teachings of Islam. This is what most Western and secular writers like Spellberg fail to acknowledge when they argue that all the Muslim women in the early days of Islam like 'Ā'ishah could not control the preservation or selection of their words as well as their applications in Muslim societies.¹² Umm 'Atīyah also was a medical professional who used to perform circumcision for females, wash and enshroud the deceased female companions who died in Madīnah, and nurse and treat the injured Muslim warriors in battlefields, in addition to preparing food for the surviving warriors.

Ramlah bint Abu Sufyān, Umm Ammarah and Nusaybah bint Ka'b were brave women who took the oath of allegiance at the hands of the Prophet and they took part on the battlefield in providing water for the thirsty and nursing the wounded Muslim soldiers. In fact, at Uhud, they were among those who encircled the Prophet and fought to protect him when he was badly wounded. It must be added that many Muslim women continued to play the above roles of socio-political, religious and economic activism in Muslim society for many centuries until the Islamic state stagnated and women receded to the background.

The new generations of both Muslim men and women who are described as Islamic feminists in this study therefore need not go outside Islam to establish gender equity, empowerment and freedom for women. They therefore,

which is all they need do, tend to support the Islamic aspirations for the genuine emancipation and empowerment of women in all ramifications within only Islamic matrices.

Muslim Women and Some Contemporary Middle Eastern Countries

The above rich depiction of the role that was played by Muslim women during the prophetic era contradicts the oppressive conditions of Muslim women today. It may not be out of place to conclude that the prevailing conditions of Muslim women in most contemporary Muslim societies are truly pathetic as is often affirmed by feminists. *Shaykh* Mu'ammad Nāsir al-Dīn al-Albānī's views in his book also tally with those of most feminists on the root causes of the appalling conditions of Muslim women in contemporary societies especially on the perception of women's sexuality as a social threat by some Muslim scholars and their gender-biased State implementation of the *sharī'ah* laws.¹³

The appalling conditions of Muslim women according to the *Shaykh* can be traced to the emergence of an extreme religious fervor which has been termed extremism, fundamentalism, and traditionalism. Feminists would also agree with the *Shaykh* that this aberration arose in Islamic history when the door to *Ijtihād* was said to have been closed and it was then declared a grievous sin to do *Ijtihād* so much that it could take a Muslim outside of Islam.¹⁴ According to the author of *fiqh al-Sunnah*, this aberration was so extreme that *Taqīd* became the order of the day. Gradually, the sayings of early Muslim scholars were substituted for the Islamic law and vice versa.¹⁵

Dr. Zaki Badawi of the Muslim College in London agrees that the lot of Muslim women is today determined by a wave of extremism that is destructive to Islam and this can be perceived in its anti-woman, anti-intellectual, anti-progress and anti-science doctrine. The submission of Dr. Zaki Badawi

is that the Islamic world today is characterized by what he terms petro-Islam or Islam backed by oil money. To him the Arab world especially Saudi Arabia and Kuwait with their vast amount of oil money are responsible for the extreme form of Islam being witnessed today.¹⁶

This wave of extremism can be seen almost all over the Muslim world especially in the Middle East. Today in Iran, following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 which brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power, a black full dress is mandatory for all women starting from the age of nine. Failure to do so is regarded as an act of prostitution and the penalty ranges from fines to twelve months imprisonment or flogging. Girls are also mature enough for marriage from that age according to Ayatollah Khomeini though he pegged the marriage age for them at thirteen.

According to an Iranian woman lawyer this led to the injury of very young girls due to early intercourse and when infection set in, the girls died. In addition, the family Protection Acts of 1965 and 1975 which granted women some marriage, divorce and custody rights were repealed by the Ayatollah Khomeini led Mullahs. Consequently, husbands could divorce their wives without their consent or without even telling them while women were not given the right to divorce. A woman was said to have spent three years trying to get a divorce from her husband to no avail while the husband was in America frolicking every night with different girls.

In order to defend women's lack of divorce rights, the head of Iran's Supreme Court, Ayatollah Ali Moghtadai in 1992 said it was because they were prone to emotional and irrational decision making. Men were also legally permitted to kill their wives if they found them committing adultery and many women were actually killed on mere suspicion. Women were

also banned from working and it was decreed that a woman must not leave her home without her husband's permission even if it is to attend her father's funeral.

At the same time, all Iranian schools were gender segregated and women were banned from studying engineering, mining and agriculture. Child care centers were closed and birth control was banned. Couples were stopped on the streets and in their cars and asked to provide evidence of being related. If they were found not to be related, they would be separated. Young unmarried couples found together were arrested and the women given virginity tests and those found not to be virgins were forced to get married. This charade was taken too far when it was ruled that unmarried women condemned to death must first lose their virginity through *Mut'a* marriage to the guards and for this Amnesty International was reported to have lambasted Iran in a 1986 report.¹⁷

The same examples, if not worse ones, are also prevalent in the Arab world. Despite recent and ongoing reforms in most Muslim countries, there are still serious indications that confirm the submissions of al-Albānī in Arab countries of the Middle East.

In all these countries from Saudi Arabia to all the Gulf countries, women still suffer a lot of restrictions and discrimination in matters of matrimony, divorce, inheritance, employment and mobility. They are excluded from public activities and jobs. Even where women are allowed to take up paid employment in some Gulf countries; it is in sexually segregated areas. Another well-known form of discrimination against Muslim women is in the area of civic and political rights. In most of these countries, women are denied the right to vote and be voted for. In this respect,

Saudi women are described as the most deprived women in the Gulf region. It is, in fact, the only country where women are not allowed to drive. They are also required to wear the face-veil in public and are not permitted to travel out of the country except in the company of a male relative even though he may be a mere minor or idiot. Like their Saudi colleagues, Qatari women are also not allowed to drive cars except for a few working women.¹⁸

It is believed that the religious fervor in Saudi Arabia started after the Khomeini revolution in Iran. Since it offered an alternative to *Sunni* doctrine, the Iranian revolution compelled the Saudi ruling elites to step up religious practices and one of the consequences is the marginalization of women. Following this, women's education fell under stricter control and women were forced to be educated at home rather than abroad which was the practice hitherto. The face-veil also became compulsory for women in public and their freedom of movement became minimal. In November 1990, when forty-seven veiled, professional and prominent Saudi women including university professors drove their cars on the King Abdul Aziz highway in Riyadh, they were arrested and jailed for some hours. They lost their jobs, their passports were confiscated for a year and driving by women became officially banned. Gender segregation is a Saudi government policy strictly applied in all public spheres whether in schools, universities, restaurants, ministries or banks.¹⁹

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the women most of whom cover fully are segregated and could only be met by foreigners on rare occasions. They are also not encouraged to work; hence many young Emirate women do not see the need to be educated. The few that work are severely discriminated against.

For instance, while male doctors get grants for building their own houses, female doctors do not because they are expected to be supported by their husbands. In fact, it is said that clerks in the hospitals earn more than female doctors.

According to *Shaykha* Lubna bint Khālid bint Sultān Al-Qāsim of Sharjah, aged thirty-six and a computer specialist with an executive position with the General Information Authority in the Emirates, the restrictions on women are the fallouts of a resurgence of religious extremism in the Emirates. To her, it is extremists who are insisting that women stay at home and veil their faces. They also insist on men marrying four wives and are backed by the UAE government; they pay out financial bonuses to men who are willing to take additional wives. Asked why she was not yet married, she replied that she could not marry because the tradition is for her to marry one of her cousins but since she delayed marriage to get an education, there are no unmarried cousins to marry her. Yet it is permitted for her brothers to marry outside the royal family because they are males.²⁰

Perhaps Kuwait is the only Muslim country that is not at all officially pretentious about its puritanical credentials. It is believed that the Kuwaiti ruler alone has over seventy wives and that the al-Sabah royal family frequent gambling tables and discos in London, wild parties in Paris and indulge in other pastimes. They are described by five-star hotel service staff in Egypt as "whoremongers and drunks who come here to buy women and drink alcohol".

But following the 1992 elections, Islamists are trying to change this image of Kuwait. They see Islam as an alternative to the corrupt, inept and nepotistic government of the al-Sabah royal family. Unfortunately, they appear to support the categorization of women as second-class citizens. They

are opposed to women's suffrage and want women to cover fully. As in the Emirates, they also call on men to marry more than one wife. Similarly, they pay out financial bonuses such as monetary wedding gifts and long-term loans to men who are willing to take additional wives. Most importantly, like their Emirate partners, Kuwait Islamists are backed by the government which is trying to appease them.²¹ Yet, Kuwaiti women are not silent about their conditions.

For instance, the feminists were enraged by the call on men to marry more than one wife and women wrote angry letters to the Kuwaiti Arab Times over the issue.²² Kuwait is one other place where Islamic feminists are making progress. Some of these Islamic feminists are in fact, Europeans especially Americans married to Kuwaiti men and according to Jan, they position themselves as Islamists and are happy to adopt the veil from head to toe even in its most conservative form and they have regular meetings where they learn, teach, promote and practice Islamic teachings.

Within the meetings, women are trained to reject Western secularism and its brand of feminism led in the Muslim world by secular oriented women who posit themselves as Islamist feminists. At the same time, they perceive themselves as the upholders and markers of Islamic norms which have placed them on a pedestal of respect, honor and importance.

One of the practices and customs women suffer from in most Muslim societies is what is known as crimes of honor. This covers all inhuman maltreatment of women such as killing and battering by women's close male relatives because she engages or is even suspected to engage in sexual misconduct outside marriage. It has been shown that this un-Islamic and barbaric act, however, has a support in classical criminal

jurisprudence in the Arab world where a man who has seen his wife or any of his female relatives in an ugly state of misconduct is allowed to beat, injure or kill one or both of them.

Yet, women who found their male relatives in a similar state of misconduct were not given equal permission to beat or injure or kill them. It also constitutes sexual misconduct if a woman fails to prove her virginity by bleeding during sex on her wedding night and this shame can only be erased by her bleeding to death. In short, it appears that a man is justified to ensure the virginity of a woman even at the point of butchering her.²³

It baffles this researcher how the mere sighting of a woman with a non-*Mahram* or even in uncompromising circumstances as well as the absence of bleeding on the woman's wedding night can establish her guilt of fornication or adultery in a religion that has set very high and impeccable standards for the procedure of establishing the commission of *zinā*.

The Rise of Islamic Feminism

Despite the above appalling conditions of Muslim women in the above Muslim countries, Muslim women are now beginning to achieve political freedom and other basic rights as can be seen in the cases of Muslim women in Iran, Saudi Arabia and other countries already discussed earlier in this research.

This accounted for the moves by some Muslim women 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 against patriarchy or male domination has been rightly labeled as Islamic feminism. The

label of their social, political, and intellectual activism in support of Muslim women's public roles in society as Islamic feminism according to Ishaq Olatunbosun Tijani, shows the difference between their perceptions of Islam as a religion that matches the egalitarian vision at the core of its teachings with realism and pragmatism and Western secularism. Islam, to him, is a religion that is predicated on moderation and balance and, therefore, upholds gender equity but is opposed totally to the extremism of secular and gender feminism. He, therefore, submits that those who fall under the label of Islamic feminists are not only resolute but also realistic by advocating that women should be granted their full humanity and protected from all harmful social and cultural practices.²⁴

Though the phenomenon of Islamic feminism as a call for change in women's conditions under the banner of Islam started at the time of the Prophet himself as shown at the beginning of this research, the modern brand of the struggle championed by Muslim women activists or Islamists in Muslim societies, however, emerged in contemporary times during the Islamist struggles in modern Egypt under the banner of the *Al-Ikhwān Al-Muslimūn* (Muslim Brothers) and gained currency in the waves of complexities that followed the Iranian revolution of 1979.

It was born out of the need to provide Islamic alternatives to the feminist question and accommodate the aspirations of Muslim women for better conditions and roles in Muslim societies. The basic aim of Islamic feminism is to achieve the above aspirations of Muslim women by going back to the pristine precepts of their religion or *Dīn*. In doing so, they seek to oppose corrupt Western values and lifestyles which have made women second-class citizens who serve as sex objects and advertising tools. One such Islamist who falls

into the category of Islamic feminists opposed to the marketing of women is sexuality espoused by secular feminists is Zaynab al-Ghazālī al-Jubaylī.

In her memoirs, "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 Egyptian prisons in the 1960s and the state's methods of terrorism and control. Zaynab, a daughter of an Azhār 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 at 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 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 so that Muslim women do not need to be liberated.²⁵

Yet 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 struggle. This really portrays Zaynab al-Ghazālī al-Jubaylī as a feminist, albeit an Islamic feminist, hence she 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 *asan al-Banā* to work

under the banner of the Muslim Brothers before accepting his proposal of marriage.

Hence she preferred *Jihād* to marriage. Eventually, it was her *Jihād* that took Zaynab to Jamāl 'Abd al-Nā'ir's gaol where she first spent a year in the men's prison, known as the War Prison with the famous Muslim Brothers' leaders like sayyid Qutb, Ismā'īl FarāgĒl and 'Abdul 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-Nā'ir subjected people to. They consist of hell, a crucible meant for melting even men of metal, tortures, whippings, biting of ferocious dogs, weeklong immersions in water, suspended hangings, fire-cells and for some the ultimate price. All the sufferings were meted out to members of the Muslim Brothers because of trumped-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 if 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 believes, women could certainly work in the Islamic government save for the office of the president.²⁶

A perusal of Zaynab's memoirs reveals that her life struggles support 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 for women too. Her heroines who inspire her are the early generation of Muslim women like Laylā Tārif, a woman who belonged to

the warmongering *Khawārij* School of thought in Islam and Nusaybah bint Ka'b al-Mazniyyah, a woman who fought alongside the Prophet. 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, 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 (SAW) great-granddaughter who stipulated in her marriage contract that she would not obey her husband; do as she pleased as well as revoking her husband's right to polygamy.²⁷

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 building 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 active *da'wah* work.²⁸

Zaynab al-Ghazālī al-Jubaylī is, therefore, a trail blazer in the contemporary evolution of Islamic feminism. The Muslim women's movement workers all over the Muslim world are

today employing her Islamic idioms in their struggle 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-Ghazzālī as a pioneer of a brand of feminism that both Islamists and active Muslim women can champion. To her, Zaynab al-Ghazālī was determined to find feminism within Islam²⁹ and I think she did so and 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. At its inception, the Iranian Islamic revolutionary government took some steps that curtailed the rights of women. It closed down some female educational activities such as barring women from law courses, sacked female judges, and abolished the 1976 Family law.

Consequently, women were excluded from 54% of the subjects taught at the tertiary level and were reduced to 10% of the total student population by 1983. They were not given high political office such as ministerial posts, they were excluded from high-powered committees in parliament, the evidence of women if uncorroborated by men was rejected and even became punishable as slander. The murder of a woman became a lesser crime to killing a man, male murderers could pay blood money to the descendants of the murdered in lieu of the death penalty but female murderers must be executed and men became entitled to kill any

woman under their charge-wives, daughters, sisters and even mothers-on the charge of adultery.

Women could also not be employed without the consent of their husbands and were encouraged to abandon paid employment because it was a danger to their honor. Interestingly all this happened in an Iran where Ayatollah Khomeini himself was said to be in support of women's support in all domains. He used to say and repeatedly too that Islam has made women equal to men and rendered services and entitlements to them that were much greater than those of men. Women, therefore, lost more under the Iranian Islamic government. Yet they remained undaunted but rather turned to Islam to fight back for those rights and, indeed, they succeeded too.³⁰

Ziba Mir-Hosseini believes Iranian Islamic revolutionary feminists were forced to challenge the hegemony of the orthodox interpretative patriarchal elites of the *shari'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 the Iranian revolutionary government. Zanan, a fruit of the Iranian Islamic revolution, began by holding the Iranian Civil Codes responsible for the subordinate position of women and appealing to the *shari'ah* for redress. It then gradually moved to expounding a re-reading of the concept of *qiwāmah* or headship of the family and *tamkīn* or woman's submission to her husband, *nushūs* or recalcitrance of either parties in marriage, *naqīs* 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 exist in the *sharī'ah* penal codes of *qisās* (retribution), *hudūd* (fixed punishments) and *tañzirāt* (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.³¹ 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 the Kiyān cultural Institute with Dr. Abdul Karīm, who is regarded as the Iranian Luther, as the guiding inspiration.³²

As the Zanan, the Iranian women's revolutionary magazine was laying the intellectual basis of Islamic feminism; women representatives in parliament were involved in the political and judicial aspects of the struggle. In 1991, Maryam Behruzi, a veteran representative who served a prison sentence in the 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 stated 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-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 the 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 remained within Islamic matrices to demand for women participation in the domain of law and so they retained their foothold in the courts.³³ 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 eldest 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 right and the woman has the right to collect an equal salary to 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.³⁴

Following the above Iranian revolution that compelled the Saudi ruling elites to step up religious practices and the marginalization of women, 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 Arabian 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, economic and social barriers under the leadership of women knowledgeable in the *Dīn* who are usually university educated, lecturers and writers. It is said that as the Saudi Arabian 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.³⁵

Perhaps the best known of these Saudi Arabian 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 their rights and not just duties-political, social, economic, religious, legal, educational and even rights to partake in reconstruction of the society as well as their rights to put the knowledge that is learnt into practice. She declares that women's rights to partake in *Jihād* are next in the Islamic *Dīn* only to the five pillars and for which women do not require the permission of their husbands and parents and.³⁶

According to her, the basic rights of Muslim women also include their rights to motherhood and wifehood but this should not prevent them from societal reconstruction in collaboration with other Muslim women.

For her, Muslim women have always been connected and networked with whomever they want even when alone at home and with the explosion in information technology, she believes that they are now more connected than ever before.³⁷

In Saudi Arabia, women have through Islamic precepts retained certain amounts of freedom and equality with men. For instance, women's education only began in Saudi Arabia less than five decades ago yet many Saudi women like other Arab women are today educated. Saudi women seized the opportunity of education which started for them in the 60s when the wife of King Faisal, 'Iffat, sponsored the first women's school, *Dar al-Hanān* with the motto "The mother can be a school in herself if you prepare her well".

Today, most Saudi women under the age of 40, have some form of modern education, including university education. In addition, Saudi women own and manage import/export, shipping, lime and gravel factories, book stores and other businesses. They retain the control of their money and the right to continue their education after marriage. Saudi women have access to courts, they can ask the court to dissolve their marriages if their husbands take co-wives and they can stipulate the right of *'ismat* to dissolve their marriages in their marriage contract. They have also invaded the gender segregated academic environment and have been able to balance the conservative traditions with the progressive provisions in Islam.

In fact, the current phenomenon of Islamic feminism in Saudi Arabia today is said to have emerged from the women's sections of the universities in the 1980s.³⁸

In short, Muslim women are now re-emerging as active participants in all areas of public, political, economic, intellectual, social, cultural and spiritual spheres as did the early Muslim women at the time of the Prophet. Today, Muslim women are striving for greater inclusiveness in many diverse ways, though not all of them are in agreement with each other about how to go about their affairs according to the Beijing Global Women's Conference in 1995, where Muslim women's many different strategies and perspectives just could not be brought to a consensus. Islamists identified an ideal Islam as the one lived by the Prophet's companions and followers in Madīnah and argued that all that is required today is to adopt a complete *shari'ah* state. For them, there are no inequities towards women in the divine law of Islam and women who become relevant in Muslim society can remove the problem of patriarchal interpretations.

While Muslim women Islamists would not give up their allegiance to Islam as an essential part of self-determination and identity, they would critique patriarchal control over the basic Islamic world-view. Islamic feminism does define these women though many still reject the term. Some see themselves as crusaders for justice for humanity regardless of gender, religion, race or tribe. They believe that Islamic feminists should see themselves not as feminists but rather as Muslims who want justice for all people and this should be the position of every Muslim on gender matters.

However, the term Islamic feminism helps one to understand the distinction between the approaches of Muslim women activists and other dominant approaches for Muslim women's rights. Today more women are active in the discussion and reformation of their identity than at any other time in human history. By going back to primary sources and

interpreting them afresh, Muslim women Islamists, activists and scholars are endeavoring to remove the fetters imposed by centuries of both traditional and Western-cum-orientalist interpretations and stereotypes.

One such notable Muslim woman is Katherine Bullock. She converted to Islam, one and a half years into her doctorate candidacy (July 1994) and at the peak of the postmodern wave of the feminist movement in the 1990s and since then, she has been questioning underlying presumptions and stereotypes that the feminist movement, in continuation of the work of the orientalists, have created and woven round Muslim women. She does this based on the mandate of the Qur'ān and other religious texts that can be implemented today for the full status of women as active and transforming moral agents at all levels of human society.

This active role of Muslim women, according to her, cannot be restricted by any amount of historical colonialism with its Western and occidental stereotypes of Muslim women as well as the traditional-cum-social customs of Muslim societies. This is a theme she has taken up in many academic papers.³⁹

Conclusion

According to the findings of this research, however one may view the status of Muslims in Muslim societies, it is clear that the picture is not good. Muslim women are still being inhibited by many socio-cultural and religious biases from fulfilling their Allah-given roles in both the socio-religious and political arenas. In line with the findings of this research, there is, therefore, the need for more political will to redress the conditions of Muslim women. Muslim women in the Middle East like in other places are in need of the kind of

political support and leadership provided by the early Islamic state. This may be facilitated when Muslim women are allowed to play leading political roles in contemporary society. Most of the men, who rule over the Muslim countries today, have failed their citizens.

They have mismanaged and misappropriated the country's wealth and because of this, Muslim women and children have suffered greatly. Perhaps if these women who feel their countries' economic woes most both as women and as mothers were at the helm of affairs, they would be able to put in place structures that would provide adequately for all people. This will include proper education of women in all fields especially those fields considered by women themselves as essential to their survival in a modern society. It may also include adequate remuneration and, more importantly, relief packages for women who are working. Though many women are working today both as mothers and wives, they still have other domestic chores which add to their workload. As the primary home-makers and caretakers, they are in need of these provisions to be able to combine their dual roles in society.

The analysis of the socio-religious status of Muslim women in the Middle East contained in this research has revealed that Muslim women welcome the term Islamic feminism. Perhaps the most serious of the restrictions confronting these women is the imposition of the face-veil on Muslim women and their subsequent segregation from society. It is such socio-cultural restrictions that make Muslim societies adverse to gender equity, justice and even democratization.

It is, therefore, concluded that while Islam is compatible with women's empowerment and full participation in society, Muslim women are restricted socio-culturally in most Muslim societies, hence there is really no need for the

Western version of feminism that advocates women's empowerment and liberation in Islam. This is why Muslim women are proud to adorn themselves with the modest Islamic dress as they see themselves as Muslims trying to revive the authentic teachings of Islam in respect of their gender; hence they fall under this research's definition of Islamic feminists. In short, Muslim women are supportive of equal political rights and opportunities for women. Perhaps it is needless to add that seeking knowledge today becomes more urgent for Muslim women because of their multiple roles as mothers, wives, and social and public workers etc. Most importantly, people are not sufficiently aware of such revolutionary notions about women in Islam. This is the key to understanding the position of the women discussed in this study.

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Endnotes:

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- ¹⁵ Sayyid Sābiq, *Fiqh al-Sunnah*, (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), Vol. 1, p. 9
- ¹⁶ See Dr. Zaki Badawi in Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honour: Muslim women lift the Veil of silence on the Islamic World* above, p. 27.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, pp. 103-115.
- ¹⁸ Munira Fakhro, "Gulf Women and Islamic Law" in *Feminism and Islam*, pp. 256-258.

- ¹⁹ Mai Yamani, "Some Observations on Women" in *Feminism and Islam*, pp. 266-268, 270-273.
- ²⁰ Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honour*, pp. 130-154.
- ²¹ Ibid, pp. 154-162.
- ²² Jan Goodwin, *Price of Honour: Muslim women lift the Veil of silence*, pp. 162.
- ²³ Lama Abu-Odeh, "Crimes of Honour and the Construction of Gender In Arab Societies" in *Feminism and Islam*, 141-194.
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- ³⁹ Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*, pp. vii-xli.