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A Triadic Re-Reading of Zaynab al-Ghazālī and the Feminist Movement in Islam

IBRAHIM OLATUNDE UTHMAN

Abstract

This paper inquires into the personality, identity and work of the contemporary Muslim woman activist Zaynab al-Ghazālī al-Jubaylī (1917–2005). The quality and quantity of studies that she has attracted attest to her eminent position in both contemporary Islamic circles and feminist discourses. She has succeeded in bringing her brand of Islamic feminism to the front burners of feminist discourse at the international level. Nevertheless, there still appears to be a serious misreading of her brand of Islamic feminism. This misreading is due to the categorization of her with other Muslim women activists such as Fatima Mernissi. This paper will ground itself upon Showalter's framework which differentiates between the female, the feminist and the feminine. Also, a methodological and characteristic differentiation will be made between "Islamic feminism" and "Muslim feminism." It is within this complete theoretical framework that this paper will discuss the life and works of Zaynab al-Ghazālī. This paper will explore the different dimensions of Zaynab al-Ghazālī's identity, especially as a medium for the uniqueness of her brand of feminism.



Introduction

In order to reveal the different and apparently conflicting aspects in Zaynab al-Ghazālī al-Jubaylī's identity, this paper adopts the definitions of the female, the feminist and the feminine as employed by Elaine Showalter.¹ Using this categorization, this paper seeks to demonstrate that alongside the contemporary discourses on Western feminism which focus on the extermination of gender discrimination and oppression against women, there is a tendency noted in the works and actions of some Muslim women who, though completely sympathetic to the aforementioned goals of Western feminist discourses, have decided to achieve these goals while remaining

¹ See, Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 13.

completely within the ambit of popular Islamic discourse. As observed by Tariq Ramadan, the movement that affirms the liberation of Muslim women within and through Islam itself is inspiring, maintaining complete faithfulness to the principles of Islam.² Their aim is to end the discrimination that Muslim women suffer with regard to education, marriage, divorce, public talk, driving, access to mosques and employment, political participation and code of dressing, etc.

Before delving into this exploration, however, this paper surveys the Muslim feminist milieu in which Zaynab al-Ghazālī al-Jubaylī (1335–1426/1917–2005) emerged. This offers an exploration into the main themes and aspirations of the feminist movement in Muslim societies as advocated by some Muslim women who are activists in this contemporary phenomenon. An example would be that of Fatima Mernissi.

Mernissi is discussed here in particular not because of her writings on the veil as a system of segregation in the Muslim world but because she has been described by Miriam Cooke alongside Zaynab al-Ghazālī as an Islamic feminist. To borrow from Pierre Machery, this paper argues that Zaynab al-Ghazālī has not finished being read³ because of this misreading. That she is still being studied is a function of her role in what I term as ‘authentic Islamic feminism’ which has been defined by me elsewhere as referring to the activism of those Muslim feminists who are not only studying but also living Islam based on their firm faith in the Islamic way of life.⁴ This is so because of the sheer diversity in the backgrounds of those who debate the role and empowerment of women within the Islamic tradition.⁵ Hence, the term ‘Islamic feminists’ in this paper refers to those Muslim women who hold tenaciously to the Islamic teachings and use Islamic matrices in their struggle for a change in their societies that would benefit all, especially women. ‘Islamic feminism’ refers to their struggle against injustice in all forms including gender injustice and oppression. The term ‘Muslim feminists,’ however, refers to feminists among whom Muslim women may be found as well, but who work mainly within secular matrices. The term ‘Muslim

² See, Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 141.

³ See, Pierre Machery, “Problems of Reflections” in Francis Barker et al., ed. *Literature, Society and the Sociology of Literature* (Colchester: University of Essex, 1977), 70.

⁴ See, Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman, “Feminism in Postmodern Society: An Islamic Perspective,” *Journal of Islam in Asia*, 2: 2 (2005), 131–150.

⁵ See, Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam and Nations: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3.

feminism' is used to refer to their struggle within Muslim traditions and societies in a secular milieu.⁶

Feminism and the Muslim World

Today the feminist discourses in Muslim societies revolve around the veil in particular as a major symbol of oppression of Muslim women. Leila Ahmed, the Egyptian born American historian, examines the preoccupation of Islamic organizations with the veil and argues that it was the way Christian West tainted the feminist struggle in the Muslim societies with their colonial and missionary assault against the veiling of women as part of other "backward" practices that contributed to the entrenchment of veiling in Muslim societies. According to Ahmed, the Islamist adoption of the veil simply entrenches the debate over identity. In short, the Islamists say that if to be 'western' is to be unveiled, then to be veiled is to be Muslim.⁷

Likewise, Ahmed argues that the veiling and segregation of Muslim women has led to the evolution of two brands of Islam. The first is that of men, who attend Friday congregational prayers, thereby being exposed to 'establishment' Islam, while the second is that of women who are barred from Friday congregational prayers and, by extension, from 'establishment' Islam, and have to work out their own brand of Islam. Thus, Ahmed sees two kinds of Islam: one for males which is the official and "establishment" Islam, and the other for females who interpret Islamic ethos and codes in a way that upholds gender justice and equality for both men and women.⁸

Similarly, Nawal El-Sadawi, the Egyptian doctor and women's rights activist who has dedicated her life to opposing all forms of injustices especially those perpetrated against Muslim and Arab women in the name of Islam, opposes the veiling and seclusion of women. In fact, the veil, according to El-Sadawi, is a symbol of sexuality that calls attention to the bodies of women in the same manner as an uncovered body may do.⁹ She criticizes those men who link women with the devil in order to oppress them. This is because oppressing women with the veil, according to El-Sadawi, is the only way to protect men from her *fitnah* (seduction, mischief, obscenity, etc.).¹⁰

⁶ See, *ibid.*

⁷ See, Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1992), 55, 225–237.

⁸ See, Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America: A Woman's Journey* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 123–126.

⁹ See, Yāsir Faraḥāt, *al-Muwājah: Nawāl al-Sa'dāwī fī Qafaṣ al-Ittihām* (Cairo: Dār al-Rawḍah, 1993), 182–196.

¹⁰ See, Nawal El-Sadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980), 47–59.

Fatima Mernissi, who has been described as an Islamic feminist by Miriam Cooke, employs her own personal experiences to depict the confusion confronting young girls in a harem life and how many rules regulating the spaces within which women had to move often exclude women from public space. Mernissi describes how the harem represented a sacred frontier that women always dreamt of trespassing.¹¹ In her autobiographical work, she takes her readers on a journey into the Moroccan harem within the context of her feminist struggles in a traditional Muslim society.¹² For the young Fatima Mernissi and many women like her, the business of going around with invisible laws written in their minds was too much to bear. These invisible rules stem from a “*qa’ida*, or (an) invisible rule. If you hold on to the *qa’ida*, nothing bad can happen to you”... “Unfortunately, most of the time, the *qa’ida* is against women.”¹³ In short, the women depicted in Mernissi’s book were severely restricted, yet they offered their resistance to hopelessness in the form of a dream. According to her Aunt Habiba [Habibah], “the main thing for the powerless is to have a dream” ... “True, a dream alone, without the accompanying bargaining power does not transform the world or make the walls vanish, but it does help to uphold dignity.”¹⁴ In all, the veiling and subsequent segregation and seclusion of Muslim women to Mernissi is a vivid and dramatic example of how the egalitarian teachings of the Prophet (peace be on him) were abandoned midway leading to the demise of the nascent egalitarian Islamic state. She rejected the veil because, according to her, the Prophet (peace be on him), under a period of great stress and turmoil, allowed himself to submit to the whims and caprices of a stern ‘Umar, an ‘Umar who, as the head of a patriarchal elite, subverted these Prophetic egalitarian teachings, as it is perceived today in most Muslim traditional societies.¹⁵

It is perhaps due to her aforementioned apparent rejection of the divine origin of the Islamic message that Mernissi, in her secular and western aspirations for Muslim women, is regarded as a foremost Muslim feminist who has “extricated herself from the cultural or ‘Islamic loyalty.’ It is this cultural or Islamic loyalty that is believed to plague many Muslim feminists today in

¹¹ See, Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of Harem Girlhood* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1994), 1–10.

¹² See, *ibid.*, 61–62.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁵ See, Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1991), vi–ix, 85–101, 102–114; 115–140, 141–160, 161–179, 180–188; and Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 106–114; 178–179, 185.

that they are torn between their double identities.”¹⁶ There is, however, a paradox in Mernissi’s line of argument in that she, unlike most feminists and secularists, accepts the *ḥijāb* as a religious requirement stipulated in the Qur’ān and *Sunnah*, the two basic textual sources of Islam. This is also contrary to the claim of the West today that contends that the *ḥijāb* is a socio-political and cultural symbol that connotes a socio-political and cultural statement.¹⁷

This brand of feminism, as championed today by these feminists, is contrary to that of Zaynab al-Ghazālī who is described as an Islamic feminist in a class of her own in this study. This is because she does not accept the aforementioned brand of feminism. The portrayal or image of Muslim women and Islam by the aforementioned feminists is rejected by Zaynab al-Ghazālī as we will see shortly. Zaynab al-Ghazālī’s feminism is similar to that of Muslim women activists like the Moroccan Nadia Yassine who has been described like her as a spokeswoman for a popular Islamist group while at the same time articulating the rights of Muslim women. Like Zaynab al-Ghazālī Nadia was also close to Ḥasan al-Bannā (1324–1368/1906–1949), the founder of the Egyptian Muslim brothers and she in fact got her inspiration from him. Like Zaynab al-Ghazālī she also does not believe that Muslim women need emancipation from Islam but rather from both political and despotic interpretations of Islam. Hence, she also remains covered and see the Islamic scarf as a form of liberation like Zaynab al-Ghazālī.¹⁸

Why is Zaynab al-Ghazālī an Islamic Feminist?

While the works of Muslim women, especially Arab feminists, have become popular in the West, the feminist struggle of Muslim women in Islamist activism has received little attention in the Western academia. This paper sets out to contribute to introduce the feminist struggle of Muslim women in Islamic activism in general and of Zaynab al-Ghazālī in particular. It is important to explain that I have stressed the term *Islamic feminism* specifically referring to Muslim women activists who hold on to the double commitment

¹⁶ Leila Ahmed, “Feminism and Feminist Movement in the Middle East,” *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 5: 2 (1982), 153–168.

¹⁷ See, Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical & Modern Stereotypes* (Herndon, VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2002), 172–177.

¹⁸ See, Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Nadia Yassine, 1958” in Roxanne L. Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds. and intro. *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Text and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 302–317.

of their faith and the feminist struggle rather than the generic term 'Islamic feminism' as used by Miriam Cooke.¹⁹

The main reason for this is to distinguish between Muslim women who are committed to Islam and those who bear Muslim names. These women activists attach great commitment to the Islamic faith while opposing the socio-cultural and political systems as represented by 'establishment' Islam which has continued to suppress and oppress Muslim women. These women are therefore not opposed to a 'patriarchal Islam' as represented in the media and much of the literature on Muslim women like that of Fatima Mernisi.

An example of such Muslim women activists is Zaynab al-Ghazālī, herein selected for study. Zaynab al-Ghazālī represents those Muslim women activists who are prototypically active and non-passive and at the same time conform to the dictates of the Islamic tenets and who have the ability to uphold double commitment. I shall invoke Elaine Showalter's categorization of the three phases of the female literary tradition to argue that Zaynab al-Ghazālī falls within the last two phases of her category of the 'feminine' narrative discourse. Showalter labels these phases as the 'feminine,' 'feminist,' and 'female.' The 'feminine' is a prolonged stage of imitation of the prevailing modes of the patriarchal tradition. The 'feminist' is a stage of protest and agitation against the patriarchal order and a call for minority rights and values including a demand for autonomy. The last category, the 'female,' is the stage of self-discovery, freed from the dependency of patriarchal opposition, assured an individual identity and place in the society.²⁰

As this paper will explain shortly, the Islamic feminist Zaynab al-Ghazālī demonstrates, to a large degree, a certain level of resistance against the socio-cultural practices of her society. The term 'feminist' is used here in line with Michele Le Doeuff's definition to refer to "a woman who does not allow anyone to think in her place."²¹ Based on this definition, I use the term to refer to any Muslim woman "who thinks, believes and acts subjectively on her own conviction and in a way that contradicts societal norms,"²² and by doing so defies the established social order and resists her oppression and suppression in the society using Islamic matrices.

¹⁹ See, Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism Through Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 59.

²⁰ See, Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*, 13.

²¹ Quoted in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds. *Feminisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 143.

²² Ishaq Tijani, *Male Domination, Female Revolt: Race, Class, and Gender in Kuwaiti Women's Fiction* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 3.

The Triadic Personality of Zaynab al-Ghazālī

Zaynab al-Ghazālī by virtue of being the daughter of an al-Azhar graduate, started her life in 20th century Egyptian upper class milieu. She soon became fully engaged in the Islamic *da'wah* or missionary activities and by the age of eighteen in 1936 she had dedicated her life to *jihād* in the path of Allah, for the establishment of an Islamic state.²³ In her memoirs, *Ayyām min Ḥayātī*, she considers it expedient to document the comparable experiences of what the Muslim Brothers suffered at the hands of the then Egyptian President Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir (1375–1390/1956–1970), as well as to answer his accusation of the Muslim Brothers' alleged conspiracy to kill him and overthrow his regime.²⁴

She, in the course of her *jihād*, carries out the work of fighting for the rights of Muslim women and in the language of the Islamic movement. She started to engage in the struggles for the rights of women while joining the Hudā Sha'rāwī (1296–1368/1879–1947) led feminist union, but later became dissatisfied due to its western and secular biases as well as her realization that Islam has on its own granted women every right be it political, economic, social, marital or personal.²⁵ Yet she continued to work with western and secular feminist organizations as noted in 1952, when her Muslim Ladies' Association joined the Women's Committee for Popular Resistance in their independence struggles.

An analysis of Zaynab's memoirs, *Ayyām min Ḥayātī*, reveals that her struggles in life confirm the definition of the term 'Islamic feminism' in this paper. She does not seek equality with men in the western secular sense but gender equity that she believes is granted in Islam. In her opinion, *jihād* is not intended for men alone but women too. Heroines who inspire her are found among the early generation of Muslim women like Laylā Ṭārif, a woman that belonged to the 'warmongering' Khawārij school of thought in Islam and Nuṣaybah bint Ka'b al-Mazniyyah, a woman who was engaged in war alongside the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). Zaynab describes herself as a soldier on behalf of the Islamic state against the twentieth-century *jāhiliyyah*. She propounds an Islamic way of life for all Muslim women; marriage, upbringing of children, their education, and at the same time, active *da'wah* work. She calls on Muslim women to free themselves from the shackles of a

²³ See, Zaynab al-Ghazālī, *Ayyām min Ḥayātī* [Days from My Life] (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1986), 5–305.

²⁴ See, *ibid.*

²⁵ See, Valerie J. Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist: Zaynab al-Ghazali" in Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, ed. *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 234–235.

poorly understood Islam and to become active in *jihād* for the establishment of an Islamic state. Her own life, therefore, is a testimony to this end and a guide to others on the path of active Islamic work.²⁶

Contrary to the observation of Leila Ahmed that “[f]amily law is the cornerstone of the system of male privilege set up” and her conclusion that the preservation of this system of male-dominated governments of most Muslim countries within Middle Eastern societies almost intact signals the existence of enormously powerful forces determined to uphold male privilege and male control over women,²⁷ many Islamic feminists like Zaynab al-Ghazālī question this. Her text examined herein reflects the progressiveness of Islamic legal texts on family matters, especially divorce. To strengthen this point, we see Zaynab al-Ghazālī, despite the appalling conditions of many Muslim women in the male dominated family structure in some Muslim countries, claiming both political freedom and other basic family rights under the banner of the Islamic movement, upholding and defending the Islamic provisions on Muslim women. She did not allow her own marriage to impede her *da‘wah* activities.²⁸

In fact, Zaynab al-Ghazālī herself claimed divorce from her first husband due to his interference in her *jihād* efforts and even reminded her second husband of her pledge to *jihād* and to Ḥasan al-Bannā to work under the banner of the Muslim Brothers, before accepting his proposal for marriage. By doing so, she showed her knowledge of the Islamic alternatives open to Muslim women in case of an unsatisfactory marriage. This option of divorce by her is one of the Islamic legal alternatives to marriage that can be explored by Muslim women. Lu’is Lamyā’ al-Fārūqī (1345–1406/1926–1986) has listed the circumstances surrounding these options.²⁹ No wonder, Zaynab al-Ghazālī’s exemplary life for Muslim women activists has been likened to that of Sukaynah bint Ḥusayn (56–117/676–735), Prophet Muḥammad’s great grand-daughter, who stipulated in her marriage contract that she would not obey her husband, conduct her affairs as she pleased as well as revoked her husband’s right to polygamy.³⁰

Zaynab al-Ghazālī, by the claiming of divorce, also questions her first husband as an agent of the ‘establishment Islam’ through which many Muslim women are reduced to objects of subjugation in the Muslim world. According to al-Fārūqī, “[a]s far as Muslim women are concerned, the source of any

²⁶ See, Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 59.

²⁷ See, Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 236–242.

²⁸ See, Al-Ghazālī, *Ayyām*, 5–305.

²⁹ Lamyā’ al-Fārūqī, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam* (Plainfield, IN: American Trust Publications, 1988, reprinted in 1994), 73.

³⁰ Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 83–106.

difficulties experienced today is not Islam and its traditions, but certain alien intrusions on our societies, ignorance, and distortion, of the true Islam, or exploitation by individuals within the society.”³¹

Rather than putting the blame of her failed marriage on her own failure, as is usually the case in much of the andocentric discourse on marriage dissolution in the Muslim world, Zaynab al-Ghazālī puts the blame on her Arab socio-cultural outlook. She also deconstructs the andocentric perceptive of a Muslim woman’s ultimate desire to be epitomized by love, sex and sexuality. This she does by preferring the path of *jihād* to marriage. At no time in her life was she torn between remaining a passive and conforming oppressed housewife and a feminist and female *jihād*ist.

Her refusal to collect monetary bridal gift from her second husband by stipulating as her *mahr* the autonomy to participate in the Islamic movement, also, represents her rejection of the objectification of Muslim women that is still a characteristic of some traditional Muslim societies. This also demonstrates her objection to the patriarchal notion of women as the weaker sex. Her thoughts and reflections portray her as an agent in refusing a doomed marital life. She is an agent different from Saba Mahmood’s agent, in that she does not “act out” any criticism and amendment to Islamic law and liturgy.³² Her Islamist contemplation and conviction on the legality of Muslim women’s activism, which she presents as Allah’s given right and not just a human right alongside her marital duties, makes her an Islamic feminist whom Cooke, as mentioned before, defines as a Muslim woman with a difficult double commitment to her faith: to Islam, and “to women’s rights both inside the home and outside.”³³

Zaynab also argues that Islam does not forbid women from active participation in *da‘wah* as well as public life as long as their activities do not impinge on their primary duty as mothers and trainers in cultivating the calibre of men and women that are required to fill the ranks of the Islamic world. To her, though the family and marital life must receive priority, these aspects are not the first and last goals of marriage, and therefore they do not preclude active *da‘wah* and public work.³⁴ This portrayal of women’s political activities as being conditional, very interestingly, is in tandem with the view of most Muslim scholars and is in contrast with the radical feminist discourse which advocates for women participation in political empowerment as being

³¹ Lamyā al-Faruqī, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam*, 29–30.

³² See, Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), particularly her chapter five on agency.

³³ Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 59.

³⁴ See, Hoffman, “An Islamic Activist,” 236–237.

unconditional. So also is her view on the biological roles of women which mainstream feminists have objected to as turning women into “breeding machines” as part of their advocacy for women’s rights to control their own bodies and their own reproductive functions.³⁵

Cooke conducted an interview with Zaynab al-Ghazālī and sought to learn if, according to her, *jihād* by women should end once the Islamic state is established and if women could assume political offices. Zaynab al-Ghazālī’s response was that while the authorities in the new Islamic state would determine at that point the eventual status of women, she believes women could certainly be holding posts in the Islamic government save for the office of the president.³⁶ Thus while upholding the domestic realm as the primary domain of women, Zaynab al-Ghazālī does not believe that a woman is naturally barred from the public space and restricted only to the “inescapable domestic realm fashioned by God for producing the next generation of Muslim men destined to restore Islam to its former glory.”³⁷ On the contrary, Zaynab al-Ghazālī believes that women can also take part in all out *jihād* including playing prominent roles in both Islamist movement and political public space.

Eventually, her *jihād* took her to Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s jail. She narrates the story of her ordeals in Egyptian prisons in the 1960s and the methods of terrorism and control by the state. There she first spent a year in the men’s prison, known as War Prison with the famous Muslim Brothers’ leaders such as Sayyid Quṭb (1324–1386/1906–1966), Ismā‘īl Farāghīl and ‘Abdul Qādir ‘Awdah (1324–1373/1906–1954) before she was later transferred to the women’s prison, *Qanāṭir*.³⁸ In these prisons, Zaynab chronicles the inhuman experiences that the government of Jamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir subjected its people to. They consisted of ‘hell,’ a crucible meant for melting even men by metals, tortures, whippings, biting by 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 on the basis of fabricated charges.³⁹

Zaynab al-Ghazālī is, therefore, a pace setter in the contemporary evolution of Islamic feminism. Workers within the Muslim women movement

³⁵ See, Michele Barrett, *Women’s Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1988), 46.

³⁶ See, Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 59.

³⁷ See, Euben and Zaman, “Introduction” in Euben and Zaman, eds, *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought*, 36–37.

³⁸ See, Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman, *The Muslim Women of Nigeria and the Feminist Discourse of Shaykh al-Albani* (Kuala Lumpur: The International Islamic University, 2008), 84–87.

³⁹ See, *ibid.*

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 argue that politics is not the men's realm alone but that of women's as well. And that it was so, right from the time of the Prophet (peace be on him) when women, not by proxy, but directly and personally, offered him and the Rightly Guided Caliphs after him their *bay'ah* and vote thus becoming equal partners with men in the political realm. Thus, Soroya Duval, the Swedish sociologist praises and describes Zaynab al-Ghazālī as a pioneer of a brand of feminism that Islamist and Muslim women can champion. In her opinion, Zaynab al-Ghazālī was determined to find feminism within Islam,⁴⁰ something she did quite successfully.

Yet, despite the panoply of the views of feminists on Muslim women, Zaynab al-Ghazālī is one Muslim woman who champions the cause of the Islamist movement and retains what Showalter appropriates as the female and the feminist as parts of her identity.⁴¹ She rejects in its totality the backward position of Muslim women as articulated by some Muslims as well as the secular postmodern gender feminists' postulations, who today, according to Zeenath Kausar, represent a deconstruction of women, the family, society and even nature. These gender feminists argue that if nature stands in the way of eliminating the traditions of heterosexuality and accepting all sexual orientations like lesbianism, then nature must be fought. Zeenath Kausar reveals that postmodern gender feminism has simply become a euphemism for licentiousness, as most feminists aim at eliminating the differences between men and women only in sexual infidelity and playing around through the revolution that has taken place in the fields of modern technology.⁴²

Christiana Sommers in *Who Stole Feminism?* explains how postmodern feminists aim at destroying socially-accepted aspects, such as motherhood and all heterosexual relations since, according to them, their existence sustains patriarchal control over women.⁴³ Consequently, one starts to believe that most marriages are worth breaking, as confirmed by research in many American neighbourhoods.⁴⁴ Pagila Camille demonstrates in *Sexual*

⁴⁰ See, Soroya Duval, "New Veils and New Voices: Islamist Women's Groups in Egypt" in Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland, eds. *Women and Islamization: Contemporary Dimensions of Discourse on Gender Relations* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), 62-7.

⁴¹ See, Showalter, *A Literature of their Own*, 13.

⁴² See, Zeenath Kausar, *Reproduction Technology or Adultery* (Kuala Lumpur: A. S. Noordeen, 2000) quoted in Zeenath Kausar, "Ikos/Polis Conflict: Perspectives of Gender Feminists and Islamic Revivalists," *The American Journal of Social Sciences*, 4 (1996): 476-496.

⁴³ See, Christina Hoff Sommers, *Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 11-18, 19-40, 41-49, 50-73, 256-275.

⁴⁴ See, *Arab News*, 18 February, 1995.

Harassment that men have become free to move and disturb women in their 'play-boyish' games. According to Camille, "Western culture has a roving eye, male sex is hunting and scanning: boys hang on yelping from honking cars, acting like jerks over strolling girls, men lurching on girders go through the primitive book of wolf whistles and animal clucks. Everywhere the beautiful woman is scrutinized and harassed."⁴⁵

Rather than ending the "grand rape of women" by men, these feminists view women who still endure marriage yet to be emancipated.⁴⁶ They applaud the new dramatic changes in women sexual conduct brought about by new technology. They also demonstrate a staggering and stunning — but amoral — approval of female liberal sexual attitudes of engaging in free sex like men.⁴⁷

Zaynab al-Ghazālī dismisses such feminist claims and denies the notion that Islamic tenets on women are oppressive. While rejecting the indignity women are suffering in some Muslim societies, she believes that this is one of the areas where Muslim practices violate the tenets of Islam, especially on the advancement of women as permitted in Islam and concludes that in Islam lays their true liberation. This is also the view of Fāṭimah 'Umar Naṣīf, a leading female scholar of *fiqh* [*faqīhah*] of this century.⁴⁸ Zaynab al-Ghazālī, a foremost Islamic activist, in short, can be said to have pioneered the struggles for the rights of the Muslim women who argue that Muslim women have been empowered or liberated to gain their rights as Muslim women and this requires education and awareness of these rights.⁴⁹

Hence, Lamyā' al-Fārūqī has stated categorically that for the feminist movement to be compatible with an Islamic milieu, it must first and foremost 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. This is contrary to the mainstream feminist movement which is opposed to the teachings of all religions and which considers all religions as the chief enemies of its objectives. It must also come to terms with the Islamic concept of justice that is in tandem with the wider scope of justice for all human or non-human beings and not just women or men alone. Finally, Islam must be accepted as an

⁴⁵ Pagila Camille, "Chapter 1" in Edmund Wall, ed. *Sexual Harassment: Confrontations and Decisions* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992), 119.

⁴⁶ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 403.

⁴⁷ See, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Fāṭimah 'Umar Naṣīf was given the license to issue Islamic verdicts on religious matters in Saudi Arabia according to Cooke. See, Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 56. Also see, Fatima Umar Naseef, *Women in Islam: A Discourse in Rights and Obligations*, tr. and ed. Saleha Mahmood Abedin (Cairo: International Islamic Committee for Women & Child, 1999).

⁴⁹ See, Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist," 234–235.

ideology whose concept of religion or *dīn* encompasses the entire spectrum of life.⁵⁰

As a chief spokesperson of this attitude, Zaynab al-Ghazālī does not recognize the secular and western feminist movements as instrumental in women's empowerment. In order for the rights of Muslim women to be guaranteed in practical terms, all they would require, according to her, is education.⁵¹

Zaynab al-Ghazālī, therefore, does not fit into the same descriptive role of 'Islamic feminist' with Fatima Mernissi as defined by Cooke because Mernissi and other activists like her are treated in accordance with the yardstick of justice and morality invoked by the normative claim of feminism.⁵² On the contrary, Zaynab al-Ghazālī is emblematic of the normative feminist perspective of how women should and ought to be viewed.

Zaynab al-Ghazālī is legendary in her headship of the Muslim Ladies' Association. She retains her independence after marriage and refuses to live under the shadow of her husband. Her identity is not tangential to the identity of her husband and her rights are not hinged on the status of his whims and caprices. After her first marriage, she stood up against the possible oppression and exploitation her second marriage might bring on her. She is thus free of all marriage entrapments in which women are usually considered to be in shackles. She does not need to belong to the group of women the Sudanese Islamic tradition would refer to as those who 'desire wedlock no more' to become free and neither is her freedom wrought paradoxically by nature and her society.⁵³ Her identity, on the contrary, is wrought by her own will and achievements. She is financially independent and materially comfortable. She has become, in the Qur'ānic term, a *qawwāmah*. She achieves all this though she has no children.

However, she has children that she cares and caters for. They are her sons and daughters who engaged with her in the *da'wah* of the Muslim Brothers. This is why she is situated amidst men in *Ayyām min Ḥayātī* (Days from my Life), and not amidst women. Thus she enjoys the respect, epithet and honour of the men in the Muslim Brothers. She engages in the Islamic activism of Muslim Brothers while retaining her own organization, the Muslim Ladies' Association, independent of the Muslim Brothers, and still assumed a high

⁵⁰ See, Lamya al-Faruqi, *Women, Muslim Society and Islam*, 28–30.

⁵¹ See, Hoffman, "An Islamic Activist," 234–235.

⁵² See, R. Delmar, "What is Feminism?" in Anne C. Hermann, ed. *Theorizing Feminism* (CO: Westview, 2001), 5–28.

⁵³ See, Afis Ayinde Oladosu, "The Female, the Feminist and the Feminine: Re-Reading of Migration to the North," *Studies in Humanities*, 35: 1 (June 2008): 99–117.

ranking position in its leadership cadre. In short, the tools of the Islamist Muslim Brothers have, in the words of Audre Lorde, *become hers*.⁵⁴

In making use of these tools, it matters a lot to her that sisters and fellow ladies do not suffer deprivations and oppressions and that she does not situate herself as the *other* in opposition to them. To achieve this, she did not need to masculinize herself. Her gait, voice and carriage remain that of a woman. In retaining her femininity, Zaynab seeks to *invalidate the eternal powerless identity of Muslim women*.⁵⁵ By not masculinizing her identity she demonstrates the potentials of the female in Islam and her ability to create a space in the male remit, *herspace*, as done by 'Muslim feminists' like Fatima Mernissi. She re-enacted for Muslim women the way to free themselves from the entrapments of cultural hierarchies within which they live and operate. They can become participants and not strangers in a world that is determined and shaped by them their own world. This world cannot turn against them or be at variance with their desires for change.

Interestingly, it is not the Islamist Muslim Brothers but the socialist government of Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir that images her in the descriptive and culturally weak position, in which she finds herself when she was imprisoned. She is treated by the government like 'a nobody who has no identity of her own or a common criminal' and all the rights and freedoms she enjoys among the Muslim Brothers were denied to her. Contrary to Haidah Moghissi's argument that Muslim feminists who champion feminist rights within a liberal Muslim discourse are composed of mere secular and postmodern relativist feminists and academics with Muslim backgrounds,⁵⁶ Zaynab al-Ghazālī and other similar women Islamic activists like Nadia Yassine⁵⁷ are pure Islamists who do reject the core un-Islamic expression of the secular feminist movements. Islamic feminist movement, as perceived by them, is ultimately focused on gaining for women in practical terms all the rights that Islam has granted them, hence the term 'Islamic feminism' itself. In the Qur'ānic injunctions, men are appointed as *qawwām*⁵⁸ or maintainers and caretakers of women, which include the responsibility to protect and preserve women's honour, dignity, integrity, welfare and health.

⁵⁴ Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" in Russel Ferguson et al., eds. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture* (New York: New Museum, 1989), 99.

⁵⁵ See, Oladosu, "The Female, the Feminist and the Feminine," 104–105.

⁵⁶ See, Haidah Moghissi, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limit of Postmodern Analysis* (London: Zed, 1999), 126–146.

⁵⁷ See, Euben and Zaman, "Nadia Yassine, 1958," 302–317.

⁵⁸ See, Qur'ān 4: 34.

Therefore, in a society where women are treated inhumanely, suppressed and marginalized as second-class citizens and deprived of their rights granted to them by Allah, no Muslim man can claim to be truly a *qawwām* for women and in fact, one might, in technical terms, even question his moral and ethical grounding.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the triadic personality of a Muslim woman who believes in, and holds tenaciously, to the Islamic teachings. The Zaynabian text examined in this article constitutes part of the Islamic feminist struggle against oppression of Muslim women. It documents the story of not only the various forms by which Muslim women are subjugated, but also of their resistance against this subjugation under the umbrella of Islam. Through this text, Zaynab has recorded how Islamic feminism was pioneered in modern Egypt, bringing a revolution to the gender relations and status of Muslim women in that society. This movement has demonstrated that the use of the veil by Muslim women should not constitute a barrier to their education, professions and activism, both inside and outside the home. It is this movement that is reverberating throughout the Muslim world today and arguably it is reflected in the recent appointment by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia of the first Muslim woman minister in the history of the kingdom as well as the opening of a new co-educational university – King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in September 2009.⁵⁹

Consequently, this brand of Islamic feminism, as discussed in this paper, is a movement working for the improvement of life of women according to Islamic teachings. Hence it seems justified to contend that the expression ‘Islamic feminism’ should only refer to those feminists whose writings and actions demonstrate that their vision of religious, social, political and economic empowerment is strongly grounded in Islamic teachings. For other feminists who are practicing Muslims and might even be living and operating in Muslim communities, but whose vision of feminism is not ideologically grounded in basic Islamic teachings, presumably the term ‘Muslim feminism’ would be preferable.



⁵⁹ For more information on changes in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, see, <<http://archive.gulfnews.com/articles/09/02/26/>>, cited in Tijani, *Male domination*, 3.