

ISLAMIC FEMINISTS' VIEW ON MUSLIM WOMEN'S EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract

This paper aims to focus on gender equality, especially on women's equal rights, opportunities and empowerment from Islamic feminists' point of view. The Qur'an is generally alleged as a main source of women's subordination or oppression. Islamic feminists argue that there is no single verse in the entire Qur'an that subordinates women. For them, the Qur'an is the main source of women's empowerment and gender equality. However, the patriarchal society has interpreted and represented the Qur'anic teaching in a wrong way throughout the centuries. Thus, Islamic feminists rise with contextual interpretation of the Qur'anic verses to substantiate their own view. They show that male and female both are equal in all respects. They both are moral individual agents, and for this, they earn equal recompense for their duties. Islamic feminists argue that women's empowerment is not possible if both male and female are not equally treated in rights and opportunities. Thus, they give importance to build gender equality in Islam.

Keywords: *Muslim Women, Equality, Rights, Empowerment, Qur'an*

Man and women both are equal not only to the eye of Islam but also to the eye of humanism. But this simple truth has not been accepted in the long history of patriarchy. Women are oppressed from the very beginning. Male are physically stronger than women. For this reason, they dominated women for their own benefit. The core identity of men and women does not depend on their physical body or on gender; first of all they both are the same human beings. Human nature and abilities are gender-neutral. But the patriarchal society does not accept it. Nowadays, many countries treat women as equal to men and give them equal opportunities. But unfortunately in Muslim societies, women are oppressed and neglected till now. Therefore, Islamic feminists build a revolution against the concept of inequality and unequal treatment of men and women. They believe that such a negative and heinous attitude towards women should be removed as early as possible. Thus, Islamic feminism focuses on empowering Muslim women in our society.

Empowering women is about recognizing their immense potential fostering an environment where they can prosper their all aspects of life. Empowering women means dismantling the barriers and creating a field where they can compete and succeed on their own merits. In a broad sense, empowerment refers to expanding freedom of choice and action. This includes addressing issues like gender pay gaps, education, access to healthcare, and representation in leadership positions. Empowering women is not just about the present; it's about building a more just and equitable future for all. When women are free to reach their full potential, it creates a ripple effect of positive change that benefits future generations. Empowering women can modify themselves, their families, communities, nations, and even for the whole world positively. Thus, they need equal rights in every field. Only equal rights and opportunities can empower women. Women's empowerment advocate fundamental ethical principles e.g. equal rights and opportunities, justice, human values and potentials. Islamic feminists refer to the Islamic holy text to establish gender equality.

A number of Islamic feminists trying to empower women not only seek to promote the rights and opportunities of Muslim women but also try to restore the actual positions of women inside the boundaries of Islamic law. Islamic feminists argue that Islam has granted equal opportunities to the women in its religious text. Women's empowerment or equality is possible only when we understand the actual meaning of the *Qur'an*. For this reason, many Islamic feminists have given more importance to reinterpret the *Qur'an*. There are various approaches to Muslim women's empowerment and equal rights. One approach is to focus on reinterpret Islamic texts in a way that affirms the equality of women. This approach often has been made by the scholars of Islamic feminism. They state that neither the *Qur'an* nor *Hādīth* support or promote the patriarchal interpretations that have been frequently used to justify the oppression of women. Another approach is to focus on changing the social and cultural practices that disadvantage women. This approach often involves challenging the stereotypes about women that are perpetuated in the media and in everyday life. It also encourages working to increase women's access to education, employment, and political representation. This approach has been meet up with both support and opposition. Some people argue that these approaches are a betrayal of Islam, while others state that they are essential to the preservation of Islam's core values. Despite the challenges, feminist approaches to the revival of women's position in Islam are gaining momentum. There are now a number of organizations and movements working to promote the rights and empowerment of women. These efforts are helping to create a more just and equitable society for all Muslims.

Fatima Mernissi argues that the subordination of women in Islam is a result of cultural, patriarchal interpretations of the *Qur'an*, not the religion itself. She calls for a secular revolution that would overthrow these interpretations and establish gender equality. She argues that Islam is a source of women's empowerment. She has pointed to the *Qur'anic* verses that promote gender equality and has called for a reinterpretation of these verses in light of contemporary understandings of human rights. Mernissi has become more critical on Western feminism. She thinks that western feminism is too individualistic and materialistic. She argues that Islamic feminists should focus on building a more just and equitable society for all rather than simply seeking individual rights. Mernissi in *Beyond the Veil*, suggests that *shari'a* is an uncompromising, rigid divine law.¹ She states that Islamic law has a legal and ideological impact on family structure.

Mernissi, in her book *The Veil and the Male Elite*, states that Muslim women have the rights to go through the modern world with honour and dignity. They have the rights to lives in a democratic era, where they feel absolute freedom just like a man did.² She focuses on the historical context when the *Qur'an* is revealed. She contextualises some *Qur'anic* verses in the light of historical, political and social conditions when the verses were revealed. The contextual analysis of the holy *Qur'an* can make a new path. Through this analysis, Islamic society gains a new ideology of the *Qur'an*. However, it is true that opposing or disagreeing with patriarchal understanding of Islamic text does not entail opposing Islam or Islamic ideology. Indeed, it creates a positive intellectual energy that helps us to reform Islam and eliminate the conservative aspects of Islam.

Here, Mernissi makes an attempt to investigate the revelation of the veil (in the Islamic context, it's called *hijāb*). The verse regarding *hijāb* was revealed in the wedding room after the marriage of the Prophet and Zaynab. It was suggested for the wedding guests, who had stayed in the wedding room to welcome newly married couples. She states, "The veil was to be God's answer to a community with boorish manners whose lack of delicacy offended a Prophet whose politeness bordered on timidity."³ The main purpose beyond the revelation of *hijāb* is to protecting from an ill-mannered community. The *Qur'anic* verse (33:53) regarding *hijāb* indicates a suggestion for its followers to understand the proper social and spiritual behaviour for

¹ Mernissi, F., *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society*, London, J. Wiley and Sons, New York, 1975, p 21

² Mernissi, F., *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland, Perseus Books Publishing, Great Britain, 1991, p. 16

³ *Ibid*, p. 85

its followers. Since, social and spiritual delicate considerations are considered as the highest virtues in Islam.

Mernissi argues that the *hijāb* was initially intended to protect women from harassment and allow them to participate in public life. However, due to male supremacy, strategy and the analysis of the *Qur'an*, the *hijāb* has come to be seen as a symbol of women's seclusion and oppression. She points out that the verse of the *hijāb* was revealed during a time of great political turmoil and social upheaval.⁴ *Hijāb* is not an Islamic obligation for every Muslim woman. The hypocrites had seized control of Medina and were inciting violence and discord. In this context, the *hijāb* is a protective measure for women, allowing them to move freely without fear of harassment. Mernissi also cites the case of post-liberation Kuwait as evidence in favour of *hijāb*. In Kuwait many Muslim women prefer to wear *hijāb* as a way to assert their identity and protect themselves from harassment.⁵ Mernissi acknowledges that due to the male manipulation and patriarchal interpretation, nowadays, *hijāb* has been used to oppress women and deny them their rights.⁶ For centuries, men have used *hijāb* to justify keeping women out of public life and denying them their freedoms. *Hijāb* has both positive and negative connotations. Islamic feminist scholars oppose veiling in one side. On the contrary, Margot Badron states that *hijāb* was proposed to protect them from violence in the outside of their house. Badron argues that *hijāb* is a symbol of women's liberation.⁷ She also states that the main purpose beyond the revelation of *hijāb* was to provide the right to participate independently in public places. And for this reason, some modern Muslim women choose to wear it.⁸

Mernissi believes that Muslim societies should embrace a liberating interpretation of Islam, even if it differs from the traditional views of the male elite. To secure gender equality in Muslim societies or in Islamic countries does not require rejecting Islamic laws. By Islamic laws, there is no hierarchy between male and female. We need to re-examine the ancient texts to distinguish between God's specific commands and the universal divine order. Her intellectual evolution represents a revolutionary message for Muslims to change the scenario of its people in social, cultural, political, educational and economic overhaul. Mernissi's work has been highly

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 80

⁵ Stowasser, B. F., *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1935, p. 91

⁶ Barlow, R., & Akbarzadeh, S., "Women's Rights in the Muslim World: Reform or Reconstruction?", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 8, Taylor & Francis, 2006, p. 1488

⁷ Badran, M., 'Gender, Islam, and the State: Kuwaiti women in struggle, pre-invasion to postliberation', in Haddad & Esposito, *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, 1998, pp 202-203.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp 202-203.

influential in this regard, and she has helped to pave the way for a more egalitarian and just vision of Islam. Her ideas are particularly relevant in today's context; since, Muslim communities are faces various challenges, including political instability, economic inequality, and gender inequality. She claims that Muslim women are in a problematic position only for the patriarchal interpretation of the Islamic sacred texts. She constantly supports gender equality and women's rights. Mernissi states:

“The image of “his” woman will change when he feels the pressing need to root his future in a liberating memory. Perhaps the woman should help him do this through daily pressure for equality, thereby bringing him into a fabulous present. And the present is always fabulous, because there everything is possible - even the end of always looking to the past and the beginning of confidence, of enjoying in harmony the moment that we have.”⁹

Asma Barlas argues that the *Qur'an* contains many verses in support of women's equal rights, such as the right to education, marriage, divorce, employment, and property ownership. She also argues that the *Qur'an* teaches that men and women are equal in the eyes of God. The *Qur'an* should be read in its historical context when it was revealed. And its teaching should be interpreted in light of the social and political realities of that time. When the *Qur'an* was revealed, women had no rights (or only had a few rights for upper-class women). Barlas argues that the *Qur'an* is a text that promotes justice and equality for all people. For her, any interpretation of the *Qur'an* that leads to oppression or injustice is defective. Her approach has been influential in the field of Islamic feminism. In “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, she challenges traditional patriarchal interpretations of the *Qur'an* and provides a framework for Muslim women to reclaim their rights and dignity in Islam.

In the very beginning of “*Believing Women*” in *Islam*, Barlas states that in a large number of the countries (e.g. Afghanistan to Algeria) Muslim women are oppressed. The degree of violence is being increased against women. She states that Muslim women are being oppressed from the past to present century only because of misunderstanding or lack of understanding of the teaching of Islam.¹⁰ For her, it is a worldwide tendency to blame Islam rather than blaming Muslims for their misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Islamic ideology.¹¹ She argues that Islam

⁹ Mernissi, F., *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland, Perseus Books Publishing, Great Britain, 1991, p. 195

¹⁰ Barlas, A., “*Believing Women*” in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, University of Texas Press, Austin, United States of America, 2002, p. 2

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 2

is not a text promoting patriarchy rather, it states about equal rights and women's liberation.¹² Using the interpretative (hermeneutics interpretation) methodology of the holy *Qur'an*, she states that the epistemological meaning is thoroughly liberal. It suggests for gender equality. She criticizes gender inequalities, violence and oppression against women in Muslim societies.

The reasons behind the gender discrimination or inequalities in Muslim societies are occurred mainly for the misogynistic reading or the misinterpretation of the *Qur'an*.¹³ For her, the history of Western civilization demonstrates that misogyny, inequality, and patriarchy are not Islamic teachings. However, Muslim states and clerics frequently justify these three concepts in the name of Islam. This use of sacred knowledge or more precisely, the knowledge that is claimed to be derived from religion to justify sexual oppression, is the outcome of mis-association of the sacred texts with misogyny. This issue motivates and influences her to engage with *Qur'anic* hermeneutics. She believes that this engagement is essential, even unavoidable, for any venture of Muslim women's (and men's) liberation.

Barlas argues that a *Qur'anic* hermeneutics is essential, even if it cannot by itself put an end to patriarchal, authoritarian, and undemocratic regimes and practices. There is a connection between how we interpret texts and treat real women. She believes that if we wish to ensure Muslim women for their privileges, liberties and equalities, we need to contest readings of the *Qur'an* that justify the maltreatment and degradation of women, and establish the legitimacy of liberal readings. Even if such readings fail to effect a fundamental change in Muslim societies, no meaningful change can occur in these societies. Muslim women directly experience the consequences of oppressive misinterpretations of the *Qur'an*. Only a little number of them put questions on the legitimacy of these interpretations. And fewer have explored the liberatory aspects of the *Qur'anic* teachings. She believes that without doing so, Muslim women cannot contest the association between the sacred and sexual oppression, which is falsely constructed by misreading Scripture.¹⁴ This association is the strongest argument for inequality and discrimination among Muslims. Since, many people either have not read the whole *Qur'an* properly or accept its patriarchal exegesis unquestioningly. However, it is noted that inequality and oppression are not deriving

¹² *Ibid*, p. 2

¹³ El-Sohl, C. F., & Mabro, J., *Muslim Women's Choices: Religious Belief and Social Reality*, Berg Publishers, UK, 1994, p. 4

¹⁴ Barlas, A., "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, University of Texas Press, Austin, United States of America, 2002, p. 3

from the teachings of the *Qur'an*, but from secondary religious texts – *Tafsīr* (*Qur'ānic* exegesis) and the *Ahādith*.

For Barlas, the *Qur'an* represents a role model for us that teaches equality, liberty and morality for both men and women. She believes that Muslim women need to take control of their religious interpretation. They need to study the *Qur'an* and develop their own understandings of its teachings. The traditional oppressive interpretations make them inferior to man. The only way to making Islam truly liberatory and egalitarian is reinterpretation of the holy text with its proper context. Fazlur Rahman is saying that Muslims need to have a more open and critical approach to interpreting the *Qur'an* in order to develop a theory of sexual equality. He argues that the traditional methods of *Qur'anic* interpretation are often too rigid and literal.¹⁵ Muslim women have the freedom to interpret the *Qur'an* in a way that is consistent with their own values and experiences. Muslims can develop a more progressive and egalitarian understanding of Islam by rereading the *Qur'an* from a liberationist perspective. Thus, for Barlas, a reinterpretation of the holy text is essential.

Riffat Hassan's work on human creation is most valuable in Islam. Through this work, she tries to establish gender equality in Islam. Her interpretation is the most extensive and referenced work for Islamic feminists. For her, all humans are created in an egalitarian way, followed by the *Qur'an*, i.e. from the single soul and at the same time.¹⁶ She states that "the first woman is neither created from nor for men; nor does she cause men's "fall" from grace."¹⁷ She explains the story of Adam and Eve with its moral aspects in an Islamic context. Hassan argues that there are various verses in the *Qur'an* where it is clearly stated that they both are created from the same single soul (and equal by nature), provoked by the Satan and committed the sin by eating from the tree of knowledge. She also argues that *Qur'an* does not mention even in a single verse that woman is the cause of this sin.¹⁸ Hassan writes in her work that "almost all Muslims believe that the first woman (Hawwa in Islamic context) was created from Adam's rib."¹⁹ The only reason is that they are very much influenced by the biblical

¹⁵ Rahman, F., *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982, p. 2

¹⁶ Hidayatullah, A. A., *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, Oxford university Press, New York, 2014, p. 90

¹⁷ Ali, A. Yusuf, *The Holy Qur'an*, India, 1937, 25-26)

¹⁸ Hassan, R., "Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam", *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions*, Ed. Paula M. Cooley, William R. Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel., Orbis Books, New York, 1991, p. 49-50

¹⁹ "The Issue of Woman-Man Equality in the Islamic Tradition", *Women's and Men's Liberation: Testimonies of Spirit*, Ed. Leonard Grob, Riffat Hassan, and Haim Gordon, Greenwood Press, New York, 1991, p. 80

texts Genesis 2 and 3. This understanding or misunderstanding of creation led Muslims to believe that women are inferior in creation and in righteousness. Hassan points out that *Qur'an* itself is the source of gender equality on the basis of human creation. Hassan further states, “Allah's original creation was undifferentiated humanity and not either man or woman”, and “both man and woman were made in the same manner of the same substance, at the same time”.²⁰ With this evidence, Islamic feminists argue that both women and men have the same equal capacity for moral agency, choice and individuality. Citing the *Qur'anic* verse 33:35, they state that both male and female are equally able to acquire moral personality. They can enhance their moral personality, making a partnership among themselves. They are fully responsible for their righteous actions and its recompense.²¹ Amina Wadud states, that recompense is acquired based on their actions.²² As a moral individual, everyone is judged for her/his actions. No one either male or female is responsible for another's actions. She further asserts that no one can destroy or increase the merits earned by another, even one can't share the merits or demerits of others.²³ Thus, the *Qur'an* does not make any inequalities between male and female in creation, as moral individual, care, reward or punishment. Hassan points out that both males and females have absolutely equal rights in the side of God; they are members and protectors of each other. They are created equally, justly and mercifully. There is no hierarchy between males and females.

Throughout the entire discussion, we have seen that Islamic feminists have tried to establish gender equality within the *Qur'anic* perspectives. So, they have tried to reinterpret the holy text in a new way. For them, the inequalities happen only because of the misunderstanding or the lack of understanding of the holy text. The *Qur'an* granted equal rights, opportunities, and even equal recompenses to both males and females. However, the androcentric society makes it difficult for women. Patriarchal interpretation of the *Qur'an* makes women oppressed and inferior. In several verses the *Qur'an* suggests explicitly about gender equality but a few verses are highly misinterpreted by Muslims. For example, we can say the *Qur'anic* verse 34 from *surā an- Nisā* as –

“Men are the protectors and maintainers of women”.²⁴

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 80

²¹ Hidayatullah, A. A., *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, Oxford university Press, New York, 2014, p. 90

²² Wadud, A., *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999. P. 63

²³ *Ibid*, P. 63

²⁴ Ali, A. Yusuf, *The Holy Qur'an*, India, 1937, p. 190

For the feminist scholars, this verse has been interpreted without its proper context. By this verse, God has not given them the authority over women; but has given some responsibilities and duties to protect the female from sexual harassment (since, at the time of *Qur'anic* revelation, women were frequently harassed physically, sexually and socially) or any kind of oppression. Thus, we see no gender inequity in the *Qur'an* but inequalities in its interpretation. I think the scenario of Muslim women can be changed if we follow the *Qur'anic* ethical or moral commandments. As we know the *Qur'an* acknowledges both male and female are individual moral agents. And thus, they are equal in all respects.

In conclusion it can be maintained that the observations made by the Islamic feminists discussed above are logically justified and therefore acceptable. Each and every verse of *Qur'an* is highly contextual. Patriarchy society and male biased interpretation of the *Qur'anic* verses are contextual and therefore it is misleading. Besides the arguments given by the feminists dealt so far, I think there is also another fundamental argument in favour of Islamic feminism. *Qur'an* is religious sacred text. Religion necessarily ensures justice. Justice presupposes equal treatment for all. This implies that *Qur'anic* verses never support unequal treatment for man and women.