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Gender Jihad: The Hermeneutical Resistance of Muslim Feminists against Conservative Muslim Critics

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Abstract: *Muslims feminists contend that they possess the intellectual capacity to challenge conservative juristic notions and patriarchal narratives regarding their roles and talents. They believe that gender-biased negative stereotypes have gone unquestioned owing to the dominance of male scholars in the hermeneutical domain. Scholars like Hibba Raouf, Amina Wadud and Farhat Hashmi confidently argue that the interpreter of the text, not the text itself, is to blame for androcentric bias towards women. Furthermore, they claim that conservative Ulama (intellectuals) misuse their position of authority and strive to preserve their dominance. Conservative scholars maintain that Islam prioritizes a woman's seclusion to the extent that she is not permitted to publicly preach the message of Islam. Disagreeing with their conservative critics, these female scholars argue that Islam does not impose such restrictions on women and they are free to pick the type of career and discipline which they think is compatible with their nature and disposition. This article analyses the perspectives of Hibba Rouf, Anima Wadud, and Farhat Hashmi on crucial topics including polygamy, female education, career choices, and political engagement.*

Key Words: Exegetical Methodology, Quranic Worldview, Patriarchal Lens, Polygamy, Andocentric Religious Worldview, Conservative Ulama, Nushuz, Shariah

Introduction

Most of people think that the feminist study of religion is a recent phenomenon but contrary to their misconception, it has a long history. In different historical periods, women in individual capacity as well as in groups have criticized the androcentric religious worldview. Today, the United Nations, local women's groups, civil society,

and other organizations are now collaborating to empower women and put an end to the man-centered understanding of the world.

Female scholars have challenged the misogynistic interpretations of scriptures by patriarchal mindsets. In the 19th century, religious feminism emerged as an organized movement and undertook academic debate over two issues: the

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right to have access to religious ministry and criticism of the holy Bible. Though nineteenth century women enthusiastically participated in religious life as nuns and missionaries and acted as philanthropists and fundraisers, the churchmen constantly reminded them that their primary domain was family life. Church authority deliberately kept them away from ecclesiastical positions and denied them the right to interpret Holy Scriptures.

The exegetical history of Islam bears some resemblance to the ecclesiastical paradigm but it differs in some respects too. Unlike the Christian tradition, Islam does not have a central interpretive authority and endows upon every qualified person the right to interpret legal sources. However, the truth is that most of the juristic interpretation has been done by male Muslim jurists and examples of female jurists have been quite rare throughout Islamic legal history.

David Bouchier describes feminism as: "Any form of opposition to any form of social, personal or economic discrimination which women suffer due to their sex." Islamic feminism is a bit different. It is concerned with what role and rights women have in light of Islamic sources. Islamic feminists struggle for gender equality and social justice within the Islamic framework. They question patriarchal interpretations of the Quran and Sunnah and seek to eliminate the male-centered understanding of Islam. Since the mid-nineteenth century female Muslim scholars have been vigorously opposing restrictions placed on them in matters of education, polygamy, segregation, and veiling. Modern feminists argue that original Islamic ideals were more liberal and egalitarian while orthodox contend that gender inequalities are divinely determined.

The movement of Islamic feminism is relatively recent. It first appeared in Egypt in the late nineteenth century as a result of the clash between the traditional Islamic religious worldview and western modernism. Muslim feminists rebelled against the oppressively sexist ideas that were thrust upon them in the name of Islamic Shariah. The rise of the political interpretation of Islam that support the establishment of the socio-political-economic order of Islam is another factor contributing to the

emergence of Islamic feminism. It raised concerns about who could or could not hold the position of head of state. Muslim women voiced their desire for equality in the public and private spheres during this political discussion. Women may run for any public office and could hold the position of head of state, they claimed.

By highlighting the egalitarian principles of the holy Quran, women started to demolish the patriarchal notion of male dominance over women in the household in the domestic domain.

In the contemporary world, Muslim societies across the globe are grappling with gender issues such as female education, their religious authority, their employment and participation in politics. Muslim scholars from various schools of thought have expressed their views and issued conflicting religious edicts on such gender issues. As a result of the vocal Muslim feminist voices, women have got increased access to education and now they can be seen playing various roles in diverse walks of life as journalists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, professors and administrators.

Women with different ideological orientations are seeking empowerment by claiming the right to being an interpreter of Islamic sources of law. They argue that the primary interpreters of the Quran and Sunnah have been men due to which patriarchal values have been perpetuated in the Islamic tradition.

Dr. Hibba Raouf thinks that male-dominant interpretations have held woman responsible for the degeneration of society as they believe that women are the major source of temptation and social conflicts. To eliminate the evil, they have always been at pains to restrict her presence in public places as well as in worship places. She regrets that though women have contributed to society in different ways, her contribution has been unkindly ignored. Her contributions as a mystic poet, educationist, hadith scholar, and—most importantly—as a teacher and mother of children have gone unnoticed. Denouncing the indifference of society to the diverse roles played by Muslim women, Raouf emphasizes the need for a reconceptualization of women's role in history. She maintains that Muslim women don't need to be inspired by Western

feminism to fight for their rights since Islam's liberating potential will be enough to grant them the rights they desire in the socio-economic and political realms. She contends that because the teaching of the Quran is timeless, it may be used in various cultural and historical situations. Its application in modern Muslim society necessitates a reevaluation of traditional juristic theory, for which academics must develop fresh interpretations that are appropriate to the time and place. According to her, it's women's duty to lead the Islamic renaissance and restructure the Muslim mind by reforming the traditional understanding of the words of God and the sayings of the holy prophet.

Amina Wadud (2013), a feminist Muslim scholar of the Quran, asserts that we need to re-read the holy Quran in order to correct misogynist interpretations of verses regarding legal, social, and political spheres of existence. She vehemently argues that androcentric prejudice against women can be attributed to the interpreter of the text, not to the text itself. According to her, male scholars abuse their power and they want to maintain their hegemony and superiority. In order for Islam's egalitarian goals to become a reality, she exhorts women to step forward and take on the necessary role in the field of hermeneutics. Wadud emphasizes the distinction between the literal text of the Quran and people's interpretations of it. She argues that every scholar first needs to understand the particular time and context of revelation before engaging in the interpretation of the given passage. Such a process will enable them to derive universal principles from the message of the Quran.

Her hermeneutical method is to interpret Quran with the help of the Quran. She argues that the essential step towards the interpretation of a Quranic passage is to search for all relevant verses and the context of their revelation. In addition, what she considers is essential to keep in mind the Quranic worldview throughout the interpretive exercise.

Amina Wadud insists that any re-interpretation of the holy text must take into account women's contemporary needs and circumstances. In other words, Quran should be viewed from a feminist perspective in which the

female experience is privileged over misogynistic stereotypes that have all along colored patriarchal lens. To bring out the distinctive feature of her exegetical methodology, we can contrast it with that of a traditionalist scholar like Timothy Winter. For determining the role of women in Islam, Timothy Winter falls back on the classical texts of medieval jurists. He maintains that Muslim societies have been simultaneously both patriarchal and matriarchal. Islam tends to divide the space into private and public, awarding dominance to women in the former and bestowing dominance on men in the latter. In Winter's view, Islam urges women to obey their husbands and to balance the scale of obedience, Islam enjoins reverence of mothers. He, like other traditionalists of his school, quotes the saying of the prophet (peace be upon him) who says: paradise lies at the feet of your mothers.

Contrary to Winter's views, Wadud emphatically argues that this hadith has not been used by the traditional Muslim society to persuade its members to revere women but it has rather been utilized to perpetuate the miseries they suffer in a patriarchal structure. Women are made to bear the extra burden as wives and mothers and no heed is paid to their indispensable needs and the great costs of their sacrifice.

Due to their veneration for medieval juristic authorities, traditional scholars such as Timothy Winter, Qardhawi and Ali Goma etc., don't allow women to act as imams in Friday congregational prayer. Despite the fact that such a prohibition has not been explicitly mentioned in the holy Quran or authentic texts of hadith, these traditionalist religious authorities buttress their religious point of view by quoting the consensus of classical Sunni jurists. Such a phenomenon is not unique to Islam. Conservative Jewish rabbis and Christian priests oppose women and use tradition as a supportive argument against woman when it comes to the issue of ordination. Amina Wadud broke the conservative tradition and led a mixed-gender congregation at a mosque in New York. Characterizing her struggle against androcentric religious worldviews as gender jihad, Wadud maintains that Islam does not put any ban on

women to lead prayers and therefore they can't be deprived of such roles in the name of Islam.

Muzammal H. Siddiqi, educated at Nadwatul Ulama as well as Harvard University, declares that Islamic Shariah does not prohibit women from teaching, preaching and guiding both male and female members of society. Persons of both genders cooperate with one another in a matter of virtue. They enjoin what is right and forbid what is evil. He adds that today a number of women are qualified jurists and they issue religious edicts (*fatwa*). Muslims should provide them with generous opportunities to let them participate in Islamic activities as full partners. After exhibiting his liberal attitude towards women, Siddiqi argues that only male imam can lead prayers when there is a mixed-gender congregation and women are not permitted to play this role. Women who challenge such traditional opinions are sometimes simply dubbed as liberals.

Farhat Hashmi, with PhD in Islamic Studies from the University of Glasgow, is quite different from Heba Raouf and Amina Wadud in her approach towards empowerment, education and liberation of womenfolk. Unlike the other two reformers, she entirely veils her face and body. Because of her conservative getup and certain traditional views, her critics denounce her as a fundamentalist and so exclude her from the cohort of Islamic feminist and reformer. However, she enjoys tremendous esteem and reputation among English-speaking educated Pakistani women. She is credited with being the harbinger of Islamic revival among upper-class women in Pakistan.

Farhat Hashmi seems to be caught between a rock and a hard place as her modernist critics fulminate her as a fundamentalist, whereas conservative scholars label her as a modernist and characterize her religious viewpoints as feminist. Additionally, Conservative *ulama* maintain that she is not a really qualified scholar because she has not graduated from any religious seminary (*madrassa*). Her public profile is equally objectionable. They assert that Islam does not allow a woman to perform a public role in propagation of its message. They see the availability of her Islamic lecturer to men as a drastic deviation from orthodox Islam.

In repose to her traditionalist critics, she writes that they are not going to accept her as a qualified scholar until she is trained at their seminaries and adopts their religious worldview. "I do not fear the *Ulama*", she audaciously says. She claims that she is sincerely preaching the wisdom of the Quran and those who object to that are fighting God, not her.

Hashmi's paradigm falls between the reformist and traditionalist approach. She advocates reinterpretation on all issues but restricts the right of interpretation to those who profoundly grasp contemporary issues and possess deep understanding of religion. She maintains that a thousand-year-old interpretation had a different social and historical context and therefore needs to be revised in light of Quranic parameters for resolving modern problems. She posits that the insularity of traditionalist way of thinking has not only suppressed religious growth but also repelled many people from Islam. She criticizes their rigid approach and their insistence on centuries old interpretation as the final word. She believes that Islam has an incredible capacity for growth but the rigidity of conservative religious minds denies the fact and consequently does a great damage to Islam. She lamentably notes that such an approach has turned the young men and women away from Islam. She asserts that religion was supposed to solve problems but the narrow-minded orthodox scholars use it to push humanity back to the dark ages.

Farhat Hashmi privileges the core Islamic values over rigid legalism. She vehemently refuses to implement shariah in an artificial manner. She regrets that such attempts are being made in Pakistan. She says, "I feel it important to first explain the concept to people and give them time to understand, debate and accept it." She rejects any sort of arbitrary imposition.

When it comes to women's education and choice of professions, Hashmi maintains that they are at liberty to choose the type of career and discipline which they think is compatible with their nature and disposition. In spite of her 'liberal' views on issues of women empowerment, she draws pungent criticism from feminists due to her traditional getup and advocacy of gender

segregation. Tariq Fateh looks upon her as a serious threat to liberal Canadian values. He contends that her support for segregation will make it difficult for the South Asian Muslims to integrate into the mainstream Canadian society. Fateh worries that his lectures are brainwashing the educated women to stay at home.

In addition to charges of being advocate of gender segregation, Hashmi is also accused of propagating the legality of polygamy in countries where having multiple wives is illegal. According to Hashmi, Islam does not allow a man to have extramarital relations with women and if he has relations with a woman, Quran order him to marry her. Her followers maintain that Hashmi may have discussed polygamy but she does not persuade them to get a second spouse for their husbands.

Despite the rigidity of conservative Ulama, there are some well-known religious authorities who advocate reinterpretations of old ideas in order to bring about reforms with regard to women's status in Islam. Yusuf Qardhawi (2005), for instance, maintains that the holy Quran enjoins equal moral duties on both sexes. Qardhawi espouses women's right to function in public realm. Based on scriptural paradigm, he argues that women are permitted to get education, choose a job of their choice, cast vote and hold a public office. He maintains that none of these roles is incompatible with the spirit of Shariah.

Qardhwi strongly criticized Afghan Taliban for their bad treatment of women and attributed such maltreatment to their erroneous understanding of Islam. He heavily censured the fact that in the Taliban regime women were locked in their homes and prevented from their workplaces and universities. The reflection of his theological position regarding women education can be observed in his family. He proudly notes that three of his daughters have earned their PhD's from different universities in England and one has done masters at the University of Texas. Moreover, one of his daughters is currently serving as a dean at University of Qatar.

The ideological opponents of Qardhawi condemns him as a religious innovator who leads Muslims away from the original teachings of Islam.

They criticize him as an impious scholar whose religious decrees utterly incongruous with the pristine teachings of Islam. Some salafis reckon his ideas as "instruments of Satan." Qsardhawi has drawn violent criticism for his religious decree (fatwa), validating women's right to become head of state.

His fatwa regarding women's right to become head of state generated a huge controversy among conservative schools of thoughts. Ali Gomaa, the grand mufti of Egypt, supported Qardhawi's views by drawing a distinction between traditional caliph and modern head of state. He does not take exception to the legal opinions of medieval Muslim jurists who posit that woman cannot assume the office of caliph but does argue that the concept of caliph is way too different from the concept of a president in the modern world.

Ali Gomaa, like Sheik Qardhawi, highly values women's right to education and advocates her liberty to choose a profession of her choice. Similarly, Ali Gomaa has explicitly articulated his views on controversial issues like polygamy and female circumcision. According to him, it is erroneous to attribute female circumcision to Islamic law as Islam does not prescribe it as a religious obligation. He maintains that female circumcision has been practiced by non-Muslims in African societies and some Muslim scholars have sanctioned it. But when a young girl died during circumcision surgery, Ali gomaa came up with an unequivocal fatwa: "the harmful tradition of circumcision that is practiced in Egypt in our era is forbidden."

As for as polygamy is concerned, Ali Gomaa maintains that Islam never ordered men to have multiple wives; Islam rather lays down strict condition of justice for those who intend to have more than one wife. The holy Quran clearly stipulates that if you are not capable of dealing justly with your wives, then marry only one. Moreover, polygamy was permitted and practiced in emergency situation when a large number of men died in battles and their widows and children had to be taken care of.

One of the prominent features of Ali Gomaa's neo-traditionalist methodology is to

contrast Islamic position on gender issues with a negative portrayal of women's status in the western society. For instance, he maintains that western critics of polygamy turn a blind eye to the moral degeneration of their society where people enjoy illicit sex with multiple partners. In western society wives are betrayed, female lover are deprived of their legal rights and their children are not acknowledged. Consequently, she has to abort her baby or bear the burden of raising illegal children as a single mother.

Gomaa's views on gender issues are seen as somewhat progressive. About man's right to beat his wife, Gomaa quotes a hadith which prohibits beating of wives and adds to it the example of the prophet (peace be upon him) who never beat his wife. However, his fatwa on this issue draws a rather complex conclusion. He argues that a husband can give light beating to his wife if she commits disobedience (*nushuz*). But he is not allowed to exercise this right before he takes the first requisite two steps: reprimanding her and quitting her bed. He defends his stance on the issue by asserting that in some cultural contexts women expect their spouses to beat them as a symbolic expression of their manliness. He concludes his religious edict apologetically by contending that western people may not have observed such bizarre cultural environments but the holy Quran, as a final word of God for all people and all times, has to take into consideration such cultural diversity.

Farhat Hashmi challenges his views on the following verse of the Holy Quran:

Males are the ones who take care of women since Allah has given men a degree of authority over women and He has assigned men the responsibility of providing for their wives' financial needs. In addition, pious women are devotedly submissive

and, when left alone, they act as guardians of the possessions Allah has given them. And if you notice bad behavior from your wives, first give them advice, then stop them from sharing your beds, but if they keep doing it, then gently discipline them. But if they alter their behavior, do not treat them unfairly. Certainly, Allah is Most High and All-Powerful.

She posits that it is untenable to hold that Quran allows men to beat their wives if they disobey them. The right to hit wives is sanctioned only if they prove unfaithful. Her interpretation has been criticized by conservative ulama as feminist. Sticking to her gun, Hashmi maintains that *nushuz* cannot be construed as not listening to her husband. However, when a wife does not take care of her husband, she disturbs the harmony and peace of home which ultimately eventuates in disintegration of family.

Conclusion

To Sum up, Hibba Raouf, Amina Wadud and Farhat Hashmi argue that Islam's liberating potential will be sufficient to provide Muslim women the rights they want in the socio-economic and political spheres, therefore they don't need to be motivated by Western feminism to struggle for their rights. But at the same time, they critique the rigid methodology of staunchly conservative scholars and their insistence on using a centuries-old interpretation as the last word. They maintain that Islam has a phenomenal ability for progress but the rigidity of orthodox religious minds ignores this truth, which causes Islam immense harm. Regrettably, the inflexibility conservative worldview has driven both young men and women away from Islam.

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