



Understanding the Evolution and Contributions of Islamic Feminists Across Borders

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Abstract:

A belief which establishes economic, social, and political equalities between both the sexes is defined as feminism. While the evolution of feminism goes deep, 19th and 20th century, in particular, witnessed a rising influence of the women's suffrage movement. Overtime feminist activists have campaigned for several women's issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment, contraception and prenatal care, workplace rights, maternity leaves, equal pay, property and voting rights, etc. The purpose of this paper is to understand the concept of Islamic feminism and explore the contribution made by it internationally.

Keywords: *Feminism, Islam, movement, women writers, empowerment*

Briefly, the feminist history can be divided into three different phases – the first wave which occurred between 19th and 20th century (majorly concerned towards women's right for voting); second wave between the 1960s and 1970s (women's liberation movement for equality in legal and social rights); and the third wave at the beginning of 1990s (continuation of a reaction to the second-wave feminism).ⁱ

Mary Wollstonecraft with her 'A Vindication of Rights of Women' challenged the theories postulated by Rousseau. Her phenomenal contributions to the field of feminist literature earned her a respectable position in the world. Simon de Beauvoir with her 'The Second Sex' and Betty Friedan with her 'The Feminine Mystique' challenged the deep-rooted patriarchal systems and fought for uplifting the women's rights which ensured their legacy in their respective fields. Germaine Greer (The Female Eunuch), Bell Hooks (Feminism is for Everybody), Naomi Wolf (The Beauty Myth), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (The Declaration of Sentiments), etc. were other noteworthy names that went deep down the history of feminism with their bold writings.ⁱⁱ

Early feminist reforms under Islam began in the seventh century, which adversely affected women with their rights about inheritance, marriage, and divorce. It was only during the pre-modern period where the world witnessed the rise of several prominent figures to stand for Islamic feminism. Many medieval philosophers stepped out to promote both the literacy rate and educational importance amongst Muslim women. Other prominent females contributed their efforts in the establishments of various Islamic educational institutions worldwide.

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of a nascent modern era of women's movement which was majorly directed towards uplifting the educational power of the female sect, eliminating the evil socio-cultural practises such as purdah system, and raising the age of marriage of the female Muslim sect. Several Islamic

feminist writers and educationalist have put forth their views in this context, some of which are described as follows –

International Authors -

Amina Wadud –

Amina Wadud, an American Muslim philosopher, is internationally known for her phenomenal literature contributions towards Islam and gender. She is one of those few scholars who combined her academics with gentle spirituality and a strong piece of activism. ‘Quran and Woman Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective’ (1999) and ‘Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam’ are two of her extraordinary contributions to the Islamic world (2006).

Amina Wadud, with her contemporary writings, helped her readers in establishing a Quranic basis for gender equality. She raised questions about the people’s perspective of reading the Quranic literature from the patriarchal mindset. Wadud wants her readers to understand why she quotes the Quran as a principle of modesty. Through her several pieces of writing, she tried her best in establishing Quranic literature as universal moral guidance and not according to the people’s interpretation. Wadud counters that silencing women’s voice prevents both the genders from understanding the holistic meaning of what it means to be a Muslim. Her critiques for the traditional ‘tafsir’ reveals the misinterpretation of the flaws generated through the patriarchal reading of the Quranic literature. She emphasized her readers to understand the importance of including women in the process of knowledge generation. She was of the firm opinion that this will assist the Muslim women in generating a robust and authentic identity for herself and will inculcate the new meaning of understanding the unbiased human involvement in religious matters.ⁱⁱⁱ

In her popular text named ‘Quran and Woman’, Amina Wadud provides a basis for a first interpretive reading of the sacred Quran from the perspectives of a Muslim woman. She aims to validate the voice of Muslim female which remained under the covers for ages. She went down a long way to argue that rather than the religion itself, it has always been the patriarchal interpretation and implementation of the Quranic literature that suppressed the voice of their women overtime. Quran and woman provide for a ‘gap bridging’ between the gender-inclusive readings and the fundamental disciplines which forms the basis of Islamic thoughts. Her analysis provides a conformational basis for the concept of women’s equality. It constitutes legitimate grounds for leveraging the unequal and injustice that was served in Muslim women’s platter for ages.^{iv}

Fatima Mernissi –

Fatima Mernissi was a renowned Arab-Muslim feminist for extending her sphere of influence beyond the narrow circle of intellectuals. She was famous for her women’s issues and her participation in the various public debates for the global promotion of independence and empowerment of Muslim women. ‘Beyond the Veil’ (1975), ‘Women’s Rebellion and Islamic Memory’ (1993), and ‘Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World’ (2002) are some of her extraordinary contributions.

Her work majorly focuses on establishing a relationship between the concepts of gender identity, sexual ideology, socio-political organization, and Islamic women’s status. As a feminist, her work has always remained dedicated to attacking both the political and ideological systems contributing towards silencing and oppressing the voice of Muslim women. This is quite evidently illustrated in all her works in two different ways. On the one hand, she targets the dominating Muslim males; while on the other hand, she gives a voice to the Muslim women to break off her silence.

Her work named Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society focuses on critically examining the classical and unjust ideology of the religious-juristic texts and reinterpreting them from a feminine perspective. According to her, the false Muslim doctrine of ‘silent, passive, and oppressive women’ prevailing in society today has nothing to do with the Islamic context.^v

She not only confined her feminist ideology against the mistreatments of the Islamic world but criticized the Western world to the same extent. She believed that the western cultural ideas about harem were totally different from what she learnt about it. She thought that the sufferings of the modern Arab women were never restricted to the ideology of harem as promoted by Western Culture. Lack of awareness about the concepts of democracy and

gender equality were responsible for the massive sufferings of modern Arab women. Throughout her life, she used her words as a shield to fight against this injustice and the wrong perception of 'harem' that the world has imbibed due to Western ideology.^{vi}

She suggested that the significant difference for women's struggle for liberation amongst Arab Muslims and that with the Western World can be widely attributed to the different understanding of the sexuality concept. While the Western patriarchy acknowledged female sexuality as passive and inferior, the Islamic thought accepts it both as dangerous and active.^{vii}

Fatima Aliye Hanım –

As described by some historians, Fatima Aliye Hanım was a first famous Muslim novelist belonging to the Ottoman Empire. Renowned amongst the most productive writers of that era, Fatima Aliye Hanım's writings were evaluations of the inside and outside topics of the society through a female's eye. 'Muhazarat' (1892), 'Udi' (1899), and 'Hayal ve Hakikat' (1894) are some of her valuable contributions.

She stood firm with women-centric issues such as polygamy arranged marriages, women's education and empowerment. Rather than adopting traditional Islamic interpretation, she criticised it. Nevertheless, she stood in favour of women's equal status in her marriage and her right to seek divorce.

She tried her best in illustrating the lives of pioneer Muslim women through her contemporary articles. Unlike Fatima Mernissi, Fatima Aliye raised her sharp criticism against the seizure of the women's rights by her male counterparts.

The female characters that she raised in her novels were both strong and standing. The miserable women's stories were quite evidently visible through her writings. What made her narration stand unique was the depiction of the strong reasons for analysing their situation.

In one of her biographical fictions named 'Udi', she narrates the real-life story of an upper-class girl named Bedia who through her education, fought for her moral existence. On the other hand, the mistress of Bedia's husband, Helvila opts, for an immoral way of earning money as is mostly accomplished by uneducated women. Fatima Aliye here justifies her narration by stating that blindly trusting men is not always a wise option for women; however, education is a vital parameter for women to lead an ethical life. Fatima presents a strong piece of her opinion here that every woman should be well-educated to live a life full of dignity and honour, in case she has been highly disappointed by her husband.^{viii}

Alifa Rifaat –

Alifa Rifaat confined her space amongst the Islamic feminist writers by the mid of the 20th century. She dared to speak about the secret feminist desires in a time when the society was utterly patriarchal. Her writings were deeply rooted and intertwined with the Arabian and Islamic traditions. 'Distant View of a Minaret' (2014) is a key contribution of Alifa Rifaat.

She is considered a powerful Arab women voice in the history who critically challenged both the indigenous and external views of what and how Islamic women should think and how. She emphasized on the use of candid events for portraying both the domestic inequalities and their normalization. Her stories challenged the Western descriptions of Muslim women who were treated as silenced, abject, complicit, and helpless. Turning a blind eye to the reductive image of the Muslim women as posed in the Western depictions, Alifa Rifaat portrayed their private realm. The women characters visualized through her writings turned mentally rebellious against all those hands who touched their bodies in unaccepted ways. In fact, she preferred to raise awareness amongst Muslim women to establish their dominance over their own bodies and voice.^{ix}

Alifa Rifaat's women-centric writings originated mostly in provincial Egypt, where she touched the silent plight of the Muslim women. These stories revolved in and around the women-centric themes related to sex, death, marriage, clitoridectomy, masturbation, teenage pregnancy, widowhood, and love. Muslim women in that era were merely considered as a purely sexual being. Alifa illustrated the same sexual oppression of Muslim women through her writings. However, she never tried to advocate the rise of Muslim females against the patriarchal norms prevailing in the Muslim society.^x

Zainah Anwar –

Zainah Anwar, a prominent NGO leader from Malaysia and a Muslim feminist, is a widely renowned face of Malaysia. She is the founder of an organization named ‘Sisters in Islam’ which is backed by its prime objective of promoting and developing a framework for securing the Islamic women’s rights. Her organization works by considering the experiences and realities of women, eliminating their injustices and discriminations against them. ‘Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia’ (1987), ‘Islam and Family Planning’ (2001), and ‘Legacy of Honor’ (2011) are Zainah Anwar’s key contributions to Islam.

Zainah Anwar believes that wherever Islam is a source both for law and public policy, every one person owes a right to speak about his/her interpretation of Islam. While justifying her statement, Zainah argues that she and her friends being Muslim were compelled to follow the Islam blindly where a Muslim man has a right of marrying more than one woman. She is of the firm opinion that all the Muslim females have a right to debate, question and challenge the blind beliefs of Islam prevailing in the society. While speaking about the Islamophobia, Zainah states that non-Muslim are of the staunch belief that Islam contributes to promoting violence, terrorism, and discrimination against women. She justifies herself by saying that neither of the genders is created with an inferior status to others.^{xi}

In this way, many authors have timely put forth their views and opinions about Islamic feminism and will continue to do so. By evaluating their influential spheres, it can be said that the Islamic feminism is a process of evolution which insists on re-structuring the hierarchy of women, their socio-cultural and economic positions in the society. In future, Islamic feminism may witness the rise of more influential social institutions and resources supporting women worldwide. More emphasis is required on developing organizations, legislations, and stringent efforts to emancipate women from the clutters of patriarchal oppression. This requires a collective effort from education, healthcare, and the economy.

ⁱ - <http://www.ohiohumanities.org/betty-friedan-the-three-waves-of-feminism/>).

ⁱⁱ <https://www.hanxofficial.com/blogs/naked-truths/the-15-most-famous-feminists-throughout-history>).

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https://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr=&id=hMhel464IYUC&oi=fnd&pg=PA97&dq=amina+wadud&ots=fJo3GOMTal&sig=waKqj0Hec_cCICsVonXWcJHxnI0&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=amina%20wadud&f=false).

^{iv} - <https://www.questia.com/library/7404016/quran-and-woman-rereading-the-sacred-text-from-a>).

^v <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0527>).

^{vi} <https://en.qantara.de/content/obituary-fatima-mernissi-icon-of-arab-feminism>).

^{vii} https://encountersmissionjournal.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/missiological_implications_of_islamic_feminism_27.pdf).

^{viii} <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/162235281.pdf>).

^{ix} <http://dangerouswomenproject.org/2016/04/30/alifa-rifaat/>).

^x https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alifa_Rifaat).

^{xi} <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2011.00203.x>).