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The Origin, Development and Diversity of Islamic Feminism: A Historical Review

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ABSTRACT

This article surveys the feminist movement in Islam by delving into its origin, development and diversities within the Islamic tradition. The article starts its survey from the very beginning of the Islamic religion to the time after the demise of the Prophet and the modern and contemporary periods. Using the historical and analytical methods, the paper looks at the spectrums of the Muslim women struggle for their rights and the different dimensions that this struggle has taken at different times in the historical progression of the Islamic religion and the result of this on the religion itself. The submission of the paper is that, just as in other feminist movements from other traditions, the Islamic feminist movement is diverse and varied in its approach to the issue of claiming the rights of Muslim women. There are those who advocate for the reinterpretation and restructuring of the religion to meet modern day demands and views of women and because of their feeling of a strong sense of rejection and they hold that the Islamic religion should abdicate talking it views about women and embrace modern reforms concerning the rights of women in the society. On the other hand, there are others who want the religion to remain as it is while the rights of women are respected and given due regards as was the case during the time of the Prophet. Thus, all these points to the diversity of the discourse in the Islamic Tradition and speak of the fact that women's right is a very important issue in the contemporary Muslim societies which needs serious attention from Muslim scholars and leaders alike.

Keywords: Islam, Feminism, Islamic Feminism, Insider, Outsider,

INTRODUCTION

Islam as a religion came as a revolution in the Arabian Peninsula against all forms of immoralities, exploitations and oppressions. One of the very first groups of people that the Islamic religion emancipated from oppression and cruelty in the hands of men and the society was the female sex who was so hated that once her birth is announced, the husband became unhappy and, in extreme cases, the new baby is killed or buried alive. In case where she was allowed to live, she became a property of her father, brother(s) and finally husband after marriage. She was not given any right of inheritance in the event of her father's or husband's death and she was passed to any of her husband's relative as inheritance even against her wish.[1]

[1] See Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, (trans. from Arabic by Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi), (New Delhi, India: Crescent Publishing Co., 1976); Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi, *Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam*, (New Delhi, India: Markazi Maktaba Islami, 1998) & Zakaria Bashier, *The Meccan crucible*, (U. K.: FOSIS, 1978).

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In other words, in the pre-Islamic Arabia, the female sex amounts to nothing and she has no right whatsoever in her home and in the society and this was also true in other parts of the world.[2]

However, with the advent of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) put an end to all these discriminatory and oppressive practices by forbidding female infanticide, granting her the right of inheritance, protecting her honor, giving her the right to choose who to marry and in the event of her husband's death, she has the right to reject being inherited by any of his relatives and she can chose to marry outside his family whoever she wants to marry.[3] To give weight to these revolutions in improving the status of women, they were all sanctioned by divine revelation[4] and they marked the first step in the emancipation of women in the new Islamic society.

Apart from all these rights granted to the Muslim women, these women also act as equals of men in the new Islamic society both in protecting their faith and in learning about it from the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). Therefore, it could be said that the advent of Islam in the 7th century AD marks the advent of the emancipation of women from oppression and oppressive practices. However, it needed to be said that in as much as this was the case during the time of the Prophet of Islam, the concept of feminism was not known and neither did the Prophet advocated for feminism, at most, the Prophet could be called an advocate of the female rights – which in essence are natural and divine rights as part of the human society.

But, in about a decade after the demise of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and the spread of Islam to many parts of the world, these rights that were guaranteed by the divine book (Qur'an) and the Prophetic *Sunnah* for the Muslim woman began to be eroded – especially with new practices and customs that were coming in contact with Islam where it has spread to. Added to this was the fact that some of the companions of the Prophet too still feels that the Muslim woman should maintain her status according to the old custom of the Arab and not parade herself as an equal of the Muslim man. This in fact explains the many corrections that A'isha, the wife of the Prophet, had to make concerning many false *hadiths* that were being spread about women which portray them as second class human beings and evil. Nevertheless, with the movement of time and the crystallization of the four schools of Islamic law coupled with the closing of the gate of *ijtihad*, the Muslim woman came to be viewed in different lights and her rights were curtailed and, in addition, she came to be confined to her home in the face of many spurious and false *hadiths* and a new interpretation of the divine book, even by reputable scholars, which striped her of all the rights given to her before and the right to contribute meaningfully to her society as was the case during the time of the Prophet.[5]

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[2] See Sayyid Abul A'la Maududi, *Purdah and the Status of Woman in Islam*, 17 – 34.
[3] See Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad* & Zakaria Bashier, *The Meccan Crucible*.
[4] See these Qur'anic chapters and verses 17:31; 6:151; 60:12; 4:7; 4:11 – 14; 4:19; 4:176; 2:228 – 237; 2:240 – 242 etc.
[5] See Norma Kassim, "The Influence of Feminist Movement and Establishment of Women's Rights in Islam" in *The Status of Muslim Women in Contemporary Societies: Realities and Prospects*, (conference proceedings by International Institute for Muslim Unity, International Islamic University Malaysia, Renaissance Hotel, Kuala

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The above and the fact that women were being forced to do things which were not legally binding on them – such as veiling and confinement at home – made women like Sakina bint Husayn the great grand-daughter of the Prophet and A'isha bint Talha 'the daughter of Caliph Abu Bakar through her mother'[6] to rebel against the system and insisted on not veiling while Sakina even goes further to demand, as part of her marriage contract, that her husband (she had five husbands at different times) should neither take a second wife nor keep concubines as was the practice then.[7] Thus, this points to the fact that the renewed fight for women's right in Islam starts right after the demise of the Prophet as a result of the imposition of unnecessary commands on the female folks by the patriarchy society.

Against the backdrop of the above, this paper makes a survey of this feminine condition in the Islamic tradition by first briefly looking at the champions of feminist rights in the pre-modern period in the Muslim societies. Second, it elaborately examines this movement in the modern period because it is this time that the Muslim women came out forcefully to claim their rights as equal members of the Muslim societies although in varied forms as will be seen below. Finally, based on all this survey, the paper draws a conclusion on the issue of feminine rights in the Islamic tradition.

ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN THE PRE-MODERN PERIOD

The condition mentioned above was the situation of the Muslim women after the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and it is difficult to point to any improvement in their situation for a long time after wards as patriarchy became firmly embedded in the Muslim societies. Moreover, the political and social situations of the Muslim societies did not leave much space for the female folks in the religion – except of course in some few instances. However, in the pre-modern period, a remarkable woman who fought for the emancipation and rights of fellow women and is worth mentioning here is Nana Asma'u Fodio, the daughter of Shehu Usman Dan Fodio the jihadist who established the Sokoto caliphate in Nigeria, West Africa. She actively campaigned for the education of women and trained a cadre of women who became preachers and teachers of the Fulani women. Likewise, mention should be made of the Persian poet and martyr Tahirih (born as Fatimih Baraghani) who was the daughter of a Muslim *mujtahid* and who fought for the emancipation of women in Persia. She also rebel against the system by removing her veil in a council of men while saying that "you can kill me as soon as you like but you cannot stop the emancipation of women."[8] She fought for the equality of men and women and eventually lost her life in the process as she was strangled to death in 1852.[9]

Lumpur, 14th – 16th 2007), 409 – 416. Also see Muddathir Abd al-Rahim, *Human Rights and the World's Major Religions*, Vol. 3, The Islamic tradition, (London: Praeger, 2005).

[6] Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*, (London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1996), 115.

[7] Ibid., 114 – 115.

[8] Rachel Woodlock, *Feminism in Islam*, in www.knol.google.com/k/rachel-woodlock/feminism-in-islam/2ikwuhzdlhwn6/3 accessed July 22, 2009.

[9] Ibid.

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Nonetheless, it needed to be said that even during this period, when the female voices had become silenced with few exceptions as given above, these women see themselves as advocates of the female rights within the Islamic religion and not as feminists (in the many senses that the word is understood today) fighting to get out of the religion or change it to something else.

ISLAMIC FEMINISM IN THE MODERN PERIOD

As the Muslim world entered the modern period, the fight for the rights of the female Muslims takes a new turn as Muslim women, following the pattern of the modern western world, start to get together and form associations and movements in order to ask for their rights from the society and particularly from their spouses, fathers, brothers and uncles.

In 1899, the Egyptian jurist, Qasim Amin, who is considered as the father of Egyptian feminism, authored a book called *Women's Liberation* (Tahrir al-Mar'a) in which he compared the rights of the Egyptian – nay Muslim women – with that of the advanced world, specifically France, and called for a new orientation in the treatment of women in the Muslim society. He specifically condemned polygyny or polygamy, veiling and women's confinement and segregation as un-Islamic and contrary to the true spirit of the Islamic religion.[10]

In Lebanon, at about the same time as Qasim Amin, Zaynab al-Fawwaz was putting forth feminist demands and arguments within the Islamic framework, values and norms.[11] In fact, by 1928 another Lebanese woman Nazira Zayn al-Din has taken up the challenge by comparing the progress of the veiling women in the Muslim nations and their non-veiling counterparts in the advanced nations in her book titled *Unveiling and Veiling*. She points out that these non-veiling women are progressive, educated and responsible compare to the veiling illiterates and non-progressive Muslim woman who is kept under confinement and segregated in the society. She claims that veiling was historically framed by the Muslim men who cannot control their gaze as prescribed by the Qur'an for both men and women. But because the Muslim society was a patriarchal one, women were put at the receiving end and made to wear the veil, which she believes is a sign of oppression. She holds that concerning all verses pertaining to the affairs of women, they, that is the women, are more worthy of interpreting them than the men because they, women, are the ones that are directly addressed and, thus, better suited to understanding what the verses are saying and how to implement them.[12]

ISLAMIC FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

[10] Norma Kassim, "The Influence of Feminist Movement and Establishment of Women's Rights in Islam" p. 417.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid. See Nazira Zayn al-Din, *Unveiling and Veiling*, (*Al-sufur wal-hijab*), (Damascus: Dar al-Mada, 1998), p. 82. Also see her, *The Girl and the Shaykhs*, (*Al-fatat waal—shuyuk*), (Damascus: Dar al-Mada, 1998).

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While the above marks some individual efforts on the issue of female rights in Islam, here is a discussion about the coming together of the Muslim women to fight for their right in their societies.

As Ruth Roded observed, the coming together of Muslim women to form a movement can be said to start *pari passu* with the fight for independence from the colonial masters especially in Egypt around 1919 when the Nationalist Movement was established as a political organization for women who are participating in the fight for independent from British.[13] While there were philanthropic organizations for women as early as 1908 in Egypt, it was, however, with the formation of the Nationalist Movement that women came together as one in Egypt and it was from it that the other women organizations in the Islamic world took their clue and emanated. Huda al-Sha'arawi, an upper class politically active woman, was made the leader of this women nationalist movement and in the year 1923 she founded another women association known as Egyptian Feminist Union to cater for the rights of the Egyptian women. In the same year, Huda al-Sha'arawi led a delegation of Egyptian women to a meeting of the International Union of Women in Rome and, upon her return from the meeting, she publically unveil signaling a new era in the fight for women's right in the garb of feminism and feminist movements.[14]

After this event, Huda al-Sha'arawi completely devoted herself to the women issue by resigning from the nationalist party. In the late 1930s the first Arab women conference was organized in Cairo and in 1944 the Arab Feminist Union was founded both in answer to the Palestinian question and the establishment of the Arab League respectively.[15] At the conference in the late 1930s, Huda al-Sha'arawi made the following comments:

> "The Arab woman who is equal to the man in duties and obligations will not accept, in the twentieth century, the distinctions between the sexes that the advanced countries have done away with … The woman also demands with her loudest voice to be restored her political rights, rights granted to her by the *shari'a* and dictated to her by the demands of the present."[16]

With the death of Huda al-Sha'arawi in 1947, Duriya Shafiq came into the picture by founding another women's organization in Egypt called *Bint al-Nil* (Daughters of the Nile) in 1948 which has a wider and broader goals that includes 'combating female illiteracy and acquiring political rights for women.'[17] Like the Feminist Union of Huda al-Sha'arawi before it, the organization was also dedicated to the nationalist struggle as it provides 'paramilitary training for women to participate in the popular movement against the British.'[18]

[13] Ruth Roded, ed., *Women in Islam and the Middle East: A Reader*, (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 1999), p. 226.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., p. 227.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.

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Duriya Shafiq relentlessly fought for the political rights of women by leading women in many demonstrations which included breaking into the parliament during the monarchical period and after the Egyptian revolution leading a hunger strike to demand for the right of women to vote in elections which was granted and included in the new Egyptian constitution of 1956. She also encouraged women to stand as candidates for election and in 1957 two women were elected into parliament. Because of her opposition to the Nassir's regime, she was placed under house arrest.[19]

Another modern Muslim feminist organization was the one founded by Nawal al-Sa'dawi called Arab Women Solidarity Association whose membership cut across Arab women living both in Muslim countries and abroad. Nawal al-Sa'dawi, who is both an activist and an author, says the founding of this association was necessary because 'a group of free thinking Arab women became increasingly aware of and alarmed by the forms of subjugation suffered by Arab women and Arab peoples in general.'[20] Thus, she says:

> "The truth dawned upon us that the liberation of Arab peoples will never be accomplished unless women are liberated, while the liberation of women is by necessity dependent on the liberation of the land as well as liberation from economic, cultural and media domination. We firmly believed that solidarity was the only means to consolidate our power, for right without power is ineffective, weak and easily lost. [Thus, the] solidarity of Arab women became a hope we exchanged whenever we met on any territory. We held a number of preparatory meetings in Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, Tunisia, Syria, Jordan, Morocco, the Sudan, Algeria, Yemen, and so on."[21]

The goals and objectives of the association include: 1) making 'women's active participation in the political, social, economic and cultural life of the Arab society 'a possibility and a prerequisite for the exercise of democracy,' 2) the institution of social justice in the family and in the society at large, 3) the abolishment of all discriminations on the basis of sex, and 4) to improve the work and general quality of life of the Arab women etc.[22]

In South East Asia, precisely in 1987 in Malaysia, some women – professional lawyers, activists, academics and journalists – came together to found a movement that will be responsible for looking into the problems that Muslim women in Malaysia have with the Shari'ah court and ways by which this problems could be overcome. However, by 1988, this movement has crystallized into an association under the name Sisters in Islam (SIS) and it was registered as such in 1993 as a Non-Governmental Organization under the name SIS Forum (Malaysia) Berhad while retaining Sisters in Islam as its authorship name.[23]

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Nawal El-Sa'adawi, "The Arab women's Solidarity Association" in *Women of the Arab World*, edited by Nahid Toubia, (London and New Jersey: Zed, 1988), p. 1.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., p. 2.
[23] See http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=198&Itemid=164 accessed 15 January 2010.

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The main aims and objectives of the association are:

1. To promote and develop a framework of women's rights in Islam, which takes into consideration women's experiences and realities;[24]

2. To eliminate injustice and discrimination against women by changing practices and values that regard women as inferior to men;[25]

3. To create public awareness, and reform laws and policies, on issues of equality, justice, freedom, dignity and democracy in Islam.[26]

In achieving these aims and objectives above, these sisters have set the following mission for themselves and this is, 'to promote an awareness of the true principles of Islam, principles that enshrine the concept of equality between women and men, and to strive towards creating a society that upholds the Islamic principles of equality, justice, freedom and dignity within a democratic state.'[27] Thus, with all these aims in mind, they have been advocating for the rights of the Muslim women in Malaysia as a group and are also involved in carrying out workshops and conferences on the issue of women's right.

The lists of contemporary Islamic feminist movement are of course not exhausted by the ones mentioned above, but suffice to say that these are just few example of their presence in the Muslim societies and they are having a huge impact on the Islamic discourses in the society especially as it concerns them and their fellow women.

ISLAMIC FEMINIST WRITERS AND ACADEMICIANS

Apart from these feminist movements mentioned above, there are many other feminist women in different parts of the Arab and Muslim world who, on individual basis, champions the cause of the Muslim women and the protection of their rights as equal members of the society as their male counterparts.[28] However, as Bouthaina Sha'aban observed, many of these women were only able to project their thought through writing in journals and papers and were thus writers and journalist at the same time because the 'clear dividing line between a journalist and a writer

[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] See Nahid Toubia, ed., *Women of the Arab World*, (London and New Jersey: Zed, 1988); Suha Sabbagh, ed., *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*, (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996); Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, (New York & London: Routledge, 2001) & Mai Yamani, ed., *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

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in the West has always been blurred in the Arab world.'[29] That is, according to Bouthaina Sha'aban, many "Arab journals and papers were launched by writers and educators who considered journalism an extension of other forms of writing and who felt that they had an urgent social and political mission."[30] In other words, those women who penned their thoughts in journals and papers voicing their concern for the emancipation of women and fighting for their rights were also feminist in the broader sense of the word and their contributions cannot be discountenance in this respect. This is, in reality, true when one considered the fact that virtually all the women organizations mentioned above also have their own journals, papers and magazines through which they pass their messages across to society – sometime due to the fact that the mainstream papers usually refused to publish their writings or, when they accepted to publish, they twist and edit their writings thereby distorting the message that they wish to pass to their fellow female folks in the society and the society at large.[31] But, according to Bouthaina Sha'aban, this limitation of not being heard was overcome because:

> "Between 1892 and 1940, Arab women writers concentrated their efforts on printing their own journals, in which they published poetry, fiction, and criticism, as well as essays aimed at promoting women's role in the society. [Therefore, a]ny assessment of Arab (or, for that matter, global) women's literature cannot be done without evaluating the Arab women's press, which was for half a century the major platform for Arab women writers."[32]

In concordance with the above and in what is considered to be a major progress in the feminist discourse in Islam, from the 1980s downward, the discourse on Islamic feminism witnesses a legion of writings by Muslim women, especially in the academics. They want to improve on the gains of the Muslim feminist movement and therefore took a step forward by insisting on doing a reinterpretation of some of the Qur'anic verses that have led to the oppression and downgrading of the Muslim woman as second class human beings as a result of their interpretation from the patriarchal point of view by Muslim men exegetes. In this regard, many of these Muslim women scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, Assia Djebar, Nawal al-Sa'adawi, Benazir Bhutto etc. hold that it is not the Holy Book that is biased against women rather it is the case that Muslim men, being dominant in the exegesis of the Qur'an, view many of the verses that address women from a patriarchal perspective and thus misinterpreted them or intentionally interpreted them in ways which suit their patriarchal society. Thus, since women have now come of age, there is a need to reinterpret these verses from a feminine point of view. Likewise the same thing goes to the *Sunnah* or *hadiths* of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.),

[29] Bouthaina Sha'aban, "The Hidden History of Arab Feminism" in *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*, edited by Suha Sabbagh, (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996), p. 250.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Nawal El-Sa'adawi, "The Arab women's Solidarity Association" in *Women of the Arab World*, edited by Nahid Toubia, p. 7.
[32] Bouthaina Sha'aban, "The Hidden History of Arab Feminism", p. 250.

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especially those that have portrayed women as been incapable of governing the society and as inherently evil.[33]

Taking up this challenge of reinterpreting the Islamic holy book (the Qur'an), the sayings (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) and the Islamic religious heritage generally (*thuras al-Islami*) from a feminine perspective, the Moroccan sociologist, Fatima Mernissi, set about to refute the *hadith* which says a woman cannot lead her nation. In the course of her investigation, she found out that the narrator of the *hadith* was not a trustworthy person according to the set rules and regulations of *hadith* collectors and she queried the rationale behind the acceptance of the *hadith* when its narrator did not meet the laid down rules and regulations. She further points to other *hadiths* about women which were refuted and corrected by Ai'sha, the wife of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), but which have become accepted as true *hadiths* thus leading to the oppression and downgrading of the Muslim woman. She criticizes the writings of some earlier Muslim scholars about women, especially Imam al-Ghazali and Ibn Saad, and points out that many of their views about women were a result of Greek philosophers influence and Israelites and Christians practices brought into Islam by these men. Likewise, concerning the taking of many wives and concubines by Muslim men in the early Islamic period, she explains that a thorough reading of the Islamic history will point to the fact that most of those women who form these harems were not aristocrat Arab women whom the men run away from and prefer not to marry because of their intelligence, beauty and rebellious nature which the Arab men could not stand. She asserts that most of these women were foreign women from conquered lands and that from the history of these women, it is clear that they control most of the Muslim rulers – even though they pretend to submit to them and do their biddings. Thus, for Fatima Mernissi, this construction of Muslim social order which looks down on women were latter additions to the religion after the demise of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and she emphasized that they needed to be removed from the religion. She is against fundamentalism and Islamists and she wants a new Islamic community which is true to the principles of the founding community of the Prophet's time but she does not want an Islamic state.[34]

The Algerian novelist and historian, Assia Djebar, is another feminist writer who scanned through the Muslim historical heritage to look at the roles of women and how they were empowered by Islam against the pre-Islamic tradition which oppresses them. Sieving through classical works of men like al-Tabari, Ibn Hisham and Ibn Saad, first she looks at the story of a Yemeni queen whose husband, the king, had falsely professed Islam but who continued to practice paganism. The woman helped the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) in killing the king and bringing his people back to the fold of Islam. But instead of her being praised for this effort, Djebar says, she was crucified by the historian, al-Tabari, who used her action in describing the savagery nature

[33] See Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, (trans. by Mary Jo Lakeland), (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1991); Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*

[34] See Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*; Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion and Islamic Memory*; Fatimah Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1994) & Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, (trans. by Mary Jo Lakeland), (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1992).

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of Bedouin women, the false love that they usually profess and the way they used their matrimonial bed of lovemaking and childbirth for slaughter. Djebar condemned this attitude of al-Tabari and by extension that of other historians who always portray women in bad light even when they have done things to help the religion. Instead of them being counted among the heroes of the religion, they were treated as cruel, wicked and savagery whose actions are insignificant and thus dumped at the periphery of Islamic history and only mentioned in passing.[35]

Second, Djebar also examines the roles of the Prophet's wives, as counselors, advisers and comforter to the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and as women who were important to the new religion and community and not as some harem secluded and dumped in some corner of the house. She points to the important role of Khadija as the first believer and supporter of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and how her death changed the situation and condition of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.). Likewise A'isha, from whom the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) asked the Muslims to take half of the knowledge of their religion and who was always there during revelation and when the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) discuss important issues with his companions. So also Djebar points out how some of these wives converted while the male folks of their families refused to convert, thus, facing severe punishment and even death.[36]

The story of Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and the lesson of her fight for her rights after the death of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) also came under her scrutiny. According to her, while she was always portrayed as an obedient wife and mother by historians, Djebar sees her as a daughter who vigorously fought for her rights after the Prophet's death and one who decries the way she was being treated after the death of her father by his companions.[37]

Another interesting thing about the story of Fatima which Djebar told was that, had she, that is, Fatima, been a son, the succession problem which arises shortly after the death of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) would not have arisen. This is so because according to her, "when Muhammad was on his deathbed he called for a scribe to record his wishes, presumably in connection with his succession. His wives brought their fathers. Muhammad said nothing. Had Fatima been a son, … Muhammad would have dictated the course the new community should take and there would not have occurred, the dissension that followed."[38]

In all these stories, what Djebar seeks to stretch is the fact that women were deliberately portrayed as bad, savagery and mischievous by Muslim historians and, thus, mistreated by society after they have been given rights under the Islamic religion – rights which the society later took away after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.). She also opines that Muslim historians deliberately portrayed the negativity about the first Muslim women while

[35] Miriam Cooke, *Women claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, p. 64 – 70. Also see some of Assia Djebar works like *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1985); *A Sister to Scheherezade*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1992); *Loin de Medine: Filles d'Ismael*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991); *Vaste est la Prison*, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., p. 68.

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hiding their contributions to the growth of the religion or giving it an insignificant treatment in their works.[39]

Another modern feminist writer is the Egytian Nawal El Sa'adawi whose organization and activities had been explained above. For El Sa'adawi, the political and ideological use of religion is wrong and she sees writing as a weapon of carrying this message across because writing to her "draws its authority from the autocratic power exercised by the ruler of the state, and that of the father or the husband in the family … [and it thus] became an act of rebellion against injustice exercised in the name of religion, or morals, or love."[40]

El Sa'adawi was a controversial figure and some people do not even considered her to be an Islamic feminist. But Miriam Cooke argued that since she is also concern about the condition of Muslim women and women generally, she cannot be denied the categorization as an Islamic feminist.[41] Moreover, according to Cooke, El Sa'adawi was not writing against Islam but writing against the dichotomous depiction of Devil and God and the perception that the female sex represents devil while the male represents God. And, thus, the male, being God, has the right to do whatever he likes, including rape, in the manner of a God like all powerful being who is above mistakes and can therefore not be query by anyone concerning what he does.[42]

Through her writings, and her major works which earn her a death sentence, El Sa'adawi depicts a battle between the devil and God. In it, she points to how Muslims and adherents of the Abrahamic faith portrayed women as the devil. However, she went on to show how the devil eventually exposes and overcome God and thus prove his innocence from all evil deeds – a thing which enraged many believers and eventually leads to her condemnation.[43] In other words, El Sa'adawi seeks a reinterpretation of the religious notion of the dichotomous devil-god perception of all believers by pointing out that the line of demarcation could be blur at times. For her, one should not seek to know God through His opposite and no one should impose rules, roles and rights in the name of God beyond what the Qur'an demands. Each one should seek to know God as depicted in the Qur'an and not beyond it. She decries the portrayal of women as being inherently evil and savagery.[44]

Amina Wadud is another Islamic feminist academician who seeks a rereading and a gender reinterpretation of the Qur'an without using the *hadith* or Sunnah of the Prophet as a guiding principle in the interpretation of the holy text. This does not mean that she did not accept the role of the Prophet as the conveyer of the revelation and the development of the Islamic law on the basis of his practice or Sunnah, rather she places greater importance on the Qur'an

[39] Ibid.
[40] Nawal El Sa'adawi, *Daughter of Isis*, (London: Zed, 1999), p. 292.
[41] Miriam Cooke, *Women claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, p. 76 – 80.
[42] Ibid.
[43] See Nawal El Sa'adawi, *Innocence of the Devil*, (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994). Also see her other works like *The Hidden Face of Eve*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1980) & *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, (London: Women's Press, 1986).
[44] Ibid. & Miriam Cooke, *Women claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, 78 – 80.

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because it is in 'congruent with the orthodox understanding of the inerrancy of Qur'anic preservation versus historical contradictions within *hadith* literature.'[45]

According to Wadud, there is a need to examine the "words in the Qur'an in the light of Qur'anic *Weltanschauung*"[46] since it addresses people irrespective of time and gender. She says although the Qur'an was revealed in the 7th century Arabia but being a universal guidance there is a need to examine the dynamics between Qur'anic universal and particulars. Therefore, the task of later generation of Muslims must be to reconsider how the text was restricted by the particulars of that time. Moreover, she says, this is more important because the Qur'an is a revelation that transcend gender but since it is expressed in gender terms according to the Arabic language which is a language expressed in gender term there is a need for a rereading in the light of a universal language which is not gender restricted. Thus, she believes that by so doing, this will remove all the biases against women and this is best done by not resorting to the Sunnah which is historically speaking liable to error and controversies.[47]

Asma Barlas, another Islamic feminist, followed the same concept as that of Amina Wadud above. In her work, *Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, she questions the 'legitimacy of Qur'an's patriarchal readings, on the basis of a distinction in Muslim theology, between what God says and what we understand God to be saying.'[48] In the case of the latter, that is, 'what we understand God to be saying', she questions the implicit claim that confuses the Qur'an with its patriarchal interpretation which portrays that only male, and conservative male for that matter, knows what God is saying or what He really means. She argues that the Qur'an is anti-patriarchal and that it promotes egalitarianism. She says, "whatever ideas Muslims may have of women and their bodies, of sex and sexual differentiation, the Qur'an itself does not suggest that sex or sexual differences are a determinant of moral personality, gender roles or inequality."[49] She also rejects using the *hadith* as a yardstick in explaining and interpreting what the Qur'an says because of its infiltration by corrupt narrations. She holds that Tafsir was a politically motivated endeavor which hopes to reshape the past by the infusion of the real and imaginary. She hopes that by unreading the patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an it will lay bare the true message of the Qur'an and its position as a promoter of egalitarianism.[50]

Among so many other Islamic feminist writers, mention should be made of the Pakistani poet, writer and playwright Riffat Hassan and the Iranian legal anthropologist, gender development expert and film director Ziba Mir-Hosseini.

Ziba Mir-Hosseini is concern with striking a balance between modern trends and the traditional view of the older generations in Iran as she is a supporter of the revolution. In pursuit

[45] Amina Wadud, *Qur'Én and Woman*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 37.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Quoted from Norma Kassim, "The Influence of Feminist Movement and Establishment of Women's Rights in Islam" in *The Status of Muslim Women in Contemporary Societies: Realities and Prospects*, p. 420.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

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of her endeavor, she has written on feminism and produced films to showcase the struggle of the Iranian woman and how the patriarchal society in which they live in have curtailed their rights. But at the same time she showcases how this issue could be resolved amicably through a rereading of the holy text in a feminine context and with compromise on the part of the people, the young seeking modern life style, freedom and democracy and the old who are accustomed to their own old ways, in the society. She staunchly believes that 'a 'feminist' re-reading of the *shari'a* is possible – even becomes inevitable – [especially] when Islam is no longer part of the oppositional discourse in national politics.'[51]

Riffat Hassan on her part is a human right campaigner who is against the patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'an as the only interpretation possible. She holds that the Qur'an being 'the word of God, words [that] can have different meanings, so there are theoretically countless possible meanings of the Qur'an.' She posits that 'the meaning of the Qur'an should be determined through hermeneutics, examination of what its words meant at the time it was written. She also speaks of an 'ethical criterion' that rejects the use of the Qur'an to perpetrate injustice, because the God of Islam is just.'[52] According to her, Muslim men always claim that the Qur'an has given women their fundamental rights more than any other religion. However, she says, this is true as far as the 'Qur'anic Islam' is concern, but, the reality on the ground in the Muslim societies is the exact opposite of these well talked about rights. She says, to quote her extensively:

> "A review of Muslim history and culture brings to light many areas in which - Qur'anic teaching notwithstanding - women continued to be subjected to diverse forms of oppression and injustice, often in the name of Islam, while the Qur'an because of its protective attitude toward all downtrodden and oppressed classes of people, appears to be weighted in many ways in favor of women, many of its women-related teachings have been used in patriarchal Muslim societies against, rather than for, women. Muslim societies, in general, appear to be far more concerned with trying to control women's bodies and sexuality than with their human rights. Many Muslims when they speak of human rights, either do not speak of women's rights at all, or are mainly concerned with how a women's chastity may be protected. (They are apparently not worried about protecting men's chastity)."[53]

Furthermore she points out that:

> "Although the Qur'an presents the idea of what we today call a "no-fault" divorce and does not make any adverse judgements about divorce, Muslim societies have made divorce extremely difficult for women, both legally and through social penalties. Although the Qur'an states clearly that the divorced parents of a minor child must decide by mutual consultation how the child is to be raised and that they must not use the child to hurt or exploit each other, in most Muslim societies, women are deprived both of their sons (generally at age 7) and their daughters (generally at age 12). It is

[51] Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari'a in Post-Khomeini Iran" in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, edited by Mai Yamani, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 285.
[52] Ibid.
[53] http://www.religiousconsultation.org/hassan2.htm accessed 28 December, 2009.

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> difficult to imagine an act of greater cruelty than depriving a mother of her children simply because she is divorced. Although polygamy was intended by the Qur'an to be for the protection of orphans and widows, in practice Muslims have made it the Sword of Damocles which keeps women under constant threat. Although the Qur'an gave women the right to receive an inheritance not only on the death of a close relative, but also to receive other bequests or gifts during the lifetime of a benevolent caretaker, Muslim societies have disapproved greatly of the idea of giving wealth to a woman in preference to a man, even when her need or circumstances warrant it. Although the purpose of the Qur'anic legislation dealing with women's dress and conduct, was to make it safe for women to go about their daily business (since they have the right to engage in gainful activity as witnessed by Surah 4: An-Nisa' :32 without fear of sexual harassment or molestation, Muslim societies have put many of them behind veils and shrouds and locked doors on the pretext of protecting their chastity, forgetting that according to the Qur'an, confinement to their homes was not a normal way of life for chaste women but a punishment for 'unchastity'."[54]

On equality she has this to say:

> "Woman and man, created equal by God and standing equal in the sight of God, have become very unequal in Muslim societies. The Qur'anic description of man and woman in marriage: "They are your garments/ And you are their garments" (Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 187) implies closeness, mutuality, and equality. However, Muslim culture has reduced many, if not most, women to the position of puppets on a string, to slave-like creatures whose only purpose in life is to cater to the needs and pleasures of men. Not only this, it has also had the audacity and the arrogance to deny women direct access to God. It is one of Islam's cardinal beliefs that each person -man or woman- is responsible and accountable for his or her individual actions. How, then, can the husband become the wife's gateway to heaven or hell? How, then, can he become the arbiter not only of what happens to her in this world but also of her ultimate destiny? Such questions are now being articulated by an increasing number of Muslim women and they are bound to threaten the existing balance of power in the domain of family relationships in most Muslim societies."[55]

Finally, Riffat supports abortion rights and access to contraceptives for Muslim women, because, in her view, the Qur'an does not directly address contraceptives, but that Islam's religious and ethical framework leads to the conclusion that family planning should be a fundamental right. She points out that a reading of Muslim jurisprudence shows that abortion is considered to be acceptable within the first 120 days of pregnancy, when the foetus has not yet been ensouled. She founded The International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan in February 1999 and the organisation works and campaign against honour killings. She argues that honour killings are a distortion of Islam as it has no basis in the religion. According to her, the whole idea of women being inferior, which serves as the foundation for discrimination against women, is a result of the incorrect belief among Muslims that Eve was created from Adam's rib; in fact, in the Islamic creation story, they were created at the same time.

[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.

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THE ISLAMIC INSIDER AND OUTSIDER DICHOTOMY

All the Islamic feminists discussed above are not the only one fighting for the rights of women in the Muslim society in modern and post-modern time and their position is not the only position on this issue of Islamic feminism. In fact, if one is to use the insider – outsider dichotomy in feminist discourse in another sense within the Islamic feminist discourse,[56] all the above could be considered as the Islamic outsider approach – that is those who seek to change the system totally in order to conform to their point of view. But it should be noted that the change they envisage is not one that will lead to the abandonment or destruction of the Islamic religion, society and family as in the second wave feminism, hence our use of Islamic in qualifying the word outsider.

Nonetheless, there are others whose approach could be considered as the *Islamic insider* approach in the sense that they accepted the status quo and continue to work as Islamists in order to help women regain their rights. In other words, they do not seek a reinterpretation or a feminist reading of the Qur'an, *hadith* and Islamic heritage as the ones discussed above seek to do; rather, they accepted the readings as they are but seeks to explore this readings and interpretations in demanding for their female rights as daughters, mothers and wives. Among this pack, one could mention the Egyptian Islamist Zaynab al-Ghazali as a role model for others in the modern and post-modern time.

Zaynab al-Ghazali, as Miriam Cooke rightly observed may not be accepted by many Islamic feminist as a feminist in their mode of definition of what feminism is all about. This is so because, compare to all those discussed above, she advocates a strict adherence to the scriptural norms, Qur'an and *hadith*, as interpreted and understood over time. She preaches adherence to the standard moral conduct for women, modesty in all things, being good wife and mother, and proper care of the home which she considered to be the sphere of the women according to tradition. But, Miriam points out, she nonetheless is an Islamic feminist because she has inspired many Muslim women and written on the rights of the Muslim woman as an *insider* or as an Islamist who prefers to stay within the confines of the accepted norms or tradition to claim the rights of women.[57]

Many other women have followed the footstep of Zaynab al-Ghazali and they are making considerable impact both on their society and in the international circle. Their demands are not to re-read and re-interpret the holy text in a feminine manner or perspective and neither have they rejected the *hadith* nor any of the received Islamic heritages; rather they have accepted the age

[56] This point is important because all these discourses of Islamic feminism in the larger sense are insider approach. That is they all seek to remain Muslims while working for reform within the religion of Islam. In other words, they are not calling for the abandonment of religion and societal norms like the outsider approach of the second wave feminism. This explains why we said the terms insider-outsider are used in another sense within the Islamic feminist discourse as *Islamic insider* and *Islamic outsider* approaches. See Ibrahim Olatunde Uthman, *Feminist Insiders-Outsiders: Muslim Women in Nigeria and the Contemporary Feminist Movement*, (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).
[57] Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, 83 – 106.

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old norms and tradition of the Islamic religion and through this are demanding their God given rights within this tradition and social set-up.[58]

CONCLUSION

All the above showcase the trend and the diverse discourse that make up Islamic feminism discourse. As is apparent above, the discourse is not monolithic and its diversity shows the diversity of the understanding of the Islamic religion among the Muslim female folks. While some are contented with what they have and the age old traditional ways of the Muslim societies in which they live but recognized the fact that there are rights that they are entitled to and which they are fighting for within the system as it is. Others want a total overhaul of the age old traditional understanding of the holy text and the Muslim society. They want to challenge this understanding by reinterpreting and rereading the holy text through a feminine perspective which they believe will yield a new understanding which is quite and significantly different from the understanding that is known before now – especially concerning the status and rights of women in the religion of Islam. Likewise, others have gone further to form movements in order to fight for their rights as a group and to have a common ground in what they seek to achieve. All these show the diversity of the feminist movement in Islam and the different views on how Muslim women feel that they could reclaim their right in the Muslim society.

Finally, in conclusion, whether fighting as feminist insider or outsider, the truth remains that the existence of these strands of Islamic feminism in the Muslim societies shows that Muslim women are not fully being accorded their rights and all is not well in the Muslim societies concerning the issue of women's emancipation which should be a serious concern to all Muslim male scholars and leaders of good will in the society. All in all, there is a need for a re-evaluation of how the women in the Muslim societies have been faring, what they have been deprived of and what the society needs to give back to them as their God given rights and equal members of the Muslim ummah.

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[58] See Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith, "Women in Islam: "The Mother of All Battles"" in *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint*, edited by Suha Sabbagh, 137 – 150 & Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*.

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