
Islamic Ethics and Islamic Feminism: The Compatibility Thesis

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Abstract:

Islamic ethics is the ethical system formed on the basis of the Holy Quran and Hadith. In Islam, ethics and religion are interlinked. Islamic society reveals a strong tie up between ethics and religion. Hence ethico-religious base of Islamic way of life is a strong determinant of the status enjoyed by women in the same society. In Islamic society, both male and female are given equal rights and opportunities in different aspects of life. But this framework of ethical and religious guidelines visualizing and regulating equality of men and women in the Islamic Universe are bound to create tremendous unease and alarm in the society that falls under the purview of Shariah law because these ethical and religious guidelines are opposed to working with the specific list of Islamic legal prescriptions. The present paper attempts to discuss on Islamic Ethics from the perspective of Islamic Feminism. The paper will also try to address the question whether Islamic Ethics and Feminism are compatible with each other or not

Key words: Islam, Ethics, Feminism, Compatibility

1.Introduction:

Islamic ethics is the ethical system formed by the teachings of the Holy Quran and explained by the Prophet Muhammad through his words and deeds. The primary sources of Islamic ethics are the Holy Quran and the Hadith (Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad). While the Quran lays the foundation of the ethical concepts and standards, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad contains the actual practices of these concepts. In Islam ethics and religion are interlinked. In the verse 4:78 the Quran equates ethics and religion, while in the verse 30:30 the Quran likens human nature to religion. Religion and ethics are part of the human primordial disposition. In Islam, having good morality is seen as a reflection of religious faith, while lack of good morality is a sign of weak religious faith. Hence proper personality is a rudimentary part of faith in Islam.

2.Islamic feminism

Islamic feminism is a contemporary variety of feminism developed within the framework of Islamic religion. It concerns with the rights, roles and liberations of women in Islam. The nomenclature of 'Islamic Feminism' is of recent origin, familiarised first time in the decade

of 1990s. As we see the genesis of the concept in the writings of historian cum Islamic feminist Margot Badran:

In the early 1990s when Muslim secular feminists- scholars, journalists, and writers – from various countries in Africa and Asia observed the process begun by some Muslim women to explicate gender equality and social justice grounded in re-readings of the Quran and other religious texts, they immediately recognised this as a new form of feminism and called it ‘Islamic Feminism’.ⁱ

In her book *Feminism in Islam* Prof. Margot Badran defines ‘Islamic Feminism’ as:

A feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm, Islamic Feminism, which derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran, seeks rights and justice for women and also for men, in the totality of their existence.ⁱⁱ

The ethical project of Islamic Feminism shares the central ideals and values of Islam like that of justice, equity, egalitarianism, compassion and tolerance. By questioning the patriarchal authority or the legitimacy of reading and interpreting the religious scriptures in a patriarchal manner, and also the production of male-biased (religious) knowledge, Islamic feminism, these days, is at the forefront of the contemporary reformist movement. Quite a few Muslim thinkers and activists, both with or without the reservations for the label of feminism, have significantly contributed to the formulation of a pro-woman Islamic movement bearing implications for the well-being of the entire human kingdom. The ideals of this emerging trend have been captured and well-pursued by different groups of people right from the women rights activists, academicians, like the historians, sociologists, anthropologists, hermeneuticists etc., legal practitioners or experts to the devout Islamic women and even the non-believer Muslim feminists. Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Margot Badran, Asma Nomani, Asma Lamrabet, Fatema Marnissi, Ziba Mir-Hosseini and quite a few more are conferring upon themselves the authority to challenge the monopoly of traditional interpreters of the Quran and Hadith literature. Many of them are putting efforts in revisiting Islamic texts thereby promoting what has been briefly termed as ‘Democratisation of *ijtihad*’ (to strive for). Working within Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic feminists familiarise the use of an interpretive methodology -- *ijtihad*, to dynamically re-interpret foundational Quranic principles in order to bring forth equal rights and justice for women. As Margot Badran says:

Islamic feminism is speaking for justice to women as Islam stands for. It is a tool to remind people what Islam is for women. It is not more Islam or more feminism. It is an idea of awareness preaching that men and women have equal rights based on re-reading the Quran, re-examining the religious texts and telling people to practice it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Islamic feminists are taking serious note of the fact that the tradition of pushing women into the realm of invisibility in various respects is a tactics in use of patriarchy. The act of undermining the role of women as the originator and interpreter of oral texts in case of Islam conforms to the same mechanism. At a certain point of time in history under the overpowering influence of patriarchy scriptural literature came to be controlled and regulated by men who imbibed their own prejudiced view points and understanding of gender relations there in. This had been the case with all the major religions of the world. Islam is also not an exception in this regard. The impact of this phenomenon is visible in the value loaded interpretations not only of the primary religious texts but also in the secondary ones (like the legal literature) that are derived from the primary sets. The narrowing down of the open dimensions of the religion and using the same for gratifying the requirements of certain sections of the community are identified, by the feminists, to be the prime reasons behind the corruptness of the practicing aspects of the religion as experienced today. The practice of inculcating masculine values everywhere is found to be responsible for the deteriorating status of the egalitarian ethos of Islam and the endless victimisations of women. Thus an Islamic feminist project is proposed to be based squarely upon an Islamic framework, within which an ethically correlated gender paradigm bearing implications for the protection and promotion of all rights of women, inclusive of the legal ones, will be at work.

The Islamic feminists have a deep conviction that whatever discriminations against women are caused by the wrong enforcement of textual pronouncements can be dispensed only with proper decipherment of the original meaning of the Quranic verses along with the reformation of the Islamic Law. The feminists, thus, are utilizing the notion of *Ijtihad* to reinterpret the religious texts which is expected to form the basis for a liberatory agenda for the establishment of gender equality. Therefore, it can be said that the project of Islamic feminism epitomizes the vision of a post-patriarchal Islam which guarantees women's legal and social rights equal to men. Islamic Feminists think that this ideal state can be materialized provided the ill impact of the male-bias or that of the cultural prejudices of the male-dominated Islam on the religious scriptures are duly neutralised.

The Islamic feminists' attempts for revival of sex or gender neutral Islamic values and reformation of Islamic Law and jurisprudence justifiably follow three lines of a transformative strategy. Liberating the holy text Quran from the influence of patriarchy is the first prime agenda. Secondly, according to them, the available versions of Hadith, that is, the words and deeds of Muhammad, as collected and recorded mainly by the male *muhaddessin* or the specialists in the science of Hadith, also do reveal male bias. The incorporation of subjective elements in the text narration is an undeniable reality of this literature. The character of the narrator, the social system where from the person hailed, the person's intellectual capacity or ideological position regarding women -- all are required to be examined in drawing the essence of Hadith. That is to say, there is necessity for digging out the core essence of the preaching of the prophet by going beneath the lines. Thirdly, there is urgent requirement for making Shariah free from the gender bias. While some feminists like Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan and Fatema Naseef have taken up the task of re-interpreting and re-reading of the Quran,^{iv} other feminists like Aziza al-Hibri, Shaheen Sardan Ali have engaged themselves in scrutinizing the formulations of Sharia-based laws. The third group has the members like Fatima Mernissi, Hidayat Tuksal etc., who have taken up their engagements with re-examination of the Hadith literature.^v

The Islamic feminist discourse does not withdraw from or disregard the ethico-religious base of Islam. But what it vehemently opposes is the prevalent male bias of the readings and interpretations of the primary and the secondary texts of the religion. The Quran, in reality, gives equal rights to men and women as it is clearly mentioned in the verse 2:228 and implied in quite a few more places (4:1, 4:124, 16:97). So, the feminists argue that only by interpreting the Quran from a gender perspective, the rights assigned to women by the Quran can be recovered. The feminists have strongly argued that whenever the question of the protection of women's right is brought under consideration the prevalent tendency of the male-biased society is to make secondary the primordial values of the Quran, like justice, equality etc. Attempts are made to blur the original message of Islam in order to allow the misogynist practices to continue with. The matter has necessitated appropriate highlighting of the gender free implications of the textual messages. The task has already been undertaken by quite a few scholars. Laleh Bakhtiar, an Islamic feminist, has translated the Quran in to English from a feminist perspective. Maulavi Mumtaz Ali khan^{vi}, an Islamic scholar and defender of women's rights from India also has interpreted Quran from gender perspective. His book '*Huquq-e-Niswan*' was published in early

1890s. He has advocated gender equality in the light of the traditional sources, that is, Quran and Hadith. *Huquq-e-Niswan* is like charter of the rights of Muslim women. In this book, Mumtaz Ali Khan proves from Quran, through his interpretation of the relevant verses that men and women are spoken of there as having equal rights. As against the usual belief of the average Muslims, Quran has not sanctioned any special authority of men over women. By formulating several arguments he not only has refuted the alleged male supremacy thesis of Quran but also has defended equal rights for women and men. It has been pointed out by Asghar Ali Engineer^{vii} that Mumtaz Ali Khan's book provides us with an alternative interpretation of Quranic verses as far as women's rights are concerned. And that it can be considered as the first feminist interpretation of the Quran as early as nineteenth century.

3. Islamic Ethics and Feminism: The Compatibility Thesis

The question 'whether Islamic Ethics is compatible with the feminist position or not' forms a part of the broader discourse of the compatibility issue of Islam and Feminism. Both the issues, either taken as a whole, or in part are much discussed and debated. While elimination of all sorts of discriminations against women on sex/gender grounds is the attempted goal of all the varieties of feminism, diverse theoretical positions have been pleaded for by the Muslim Feminist scholars and activists on this question. Bifurcation of them in to two major groups is visible. According to the first group, Islamic ethics and feminism are not compatible with each other. Since like other religions this group takes Islam too as inherently patriarchal. What is stated, therefore, is this that on being influenced by patriarchy Islam has pronounced inequality between men and women as divinely ordained. This group of feminists has challenged and critiqued the very theological base of Islam. Shahzad Mijab, Haiddeh Moghissi and Safia Iqbal belong to this first group. The second group largely engages them in developing progressive readings of the Quran and Hadith along with Sharia to uncover the authentic configuration of women's rights in Islam. This includes the scholars like Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan, Asma Lamrabet, Margot Badran and others who take upon them the task of reinterpreting or re-reading the religious texts from gender egalitarian perspective. The arguments put forth by each group require to be examined at length.

Those who have strongly contested the thesis of compatibility between Islam and feminism Haiddeh Moghissi is one among them. She doubts the feasibility of developing any unbiased or gender neutral ethics within the theological framework of Islam since she considers this religion

as strongly antithetical to the notion of gender equality. What she points out is that the core essence of feminism does not match with the core message of the Islam as a religion. The feminists object to the translation of biological differences in to an unequal valuation of women's and men's experience. What is contended thus is that biology should not lead to any differences in the legal status or privilege one section over the other. But such contention is diametrically opposite to the basic principles of Islam.^{viii} Though there are significant differences between different interpretations of the Quran and the Islamic law and instructions, yet, Islam, like other religions and ideologies, has a contingent character and no amount of twisting and bending can reconcile the Quranic injunctions and instructions about women's rights and obligations with the idea of gender equality.^{ix} Moghissi is also convinced that regardless of the scopes for multifarious interpretations of the Quran and the Shariah, if the Quranic instructions are taken literally, Islamic individuals and societies cannot favour equal rights for women in the family or in certain specific areas of social life.^x She points out that though it is repeatedly cited by the progressive supporters of Islam that the Quran makes men and women equal in the eye of God^{xi}, but such has never been a reality in the practical domains of women's lives.^{xii}

Besides this, Moghissi further observes that the Shariah distinguishes between the rights of human beings on the basis of their biological sex and has used this difference as the ground for furthering discriminations against women. So, if the principles of Shariah are to be maintained in their prevalent forms, women can hardly be treated fairly at par with men. What is contended thus is that the Shariah is not compatible with the principle of human equality^{xiii} because Shariah maintains that women and non-Muslims must be accorded an inferior status.^{xiv} Moghissi thus comes to justify her view on the incompatibility of Islamism and feminism in consideration of the fact that the notion of gender equality is differently conceived in the feminist discourse which has no parallel in the Quranic version of equality.^{xv}

Moghissi seriously raises the question that how can a religion like Islam which is based on gender hierarchy can be adopted as the framework of struggle for gender democracy and gender equality with men? She also raises the question that if Islam and Feminism are compatible, which one has to operate within the framework of the other? ^{xvi}

Quite contrary to the earlier position, the second group of the Islamic feminists defends the compatibility thesis. The (Islamic) feminist cum historian, Margot Badran argues that the

contention of considering Islam and feminism as mutually opposed to each other owes its origin in lack of proper knowledge of both Islam and feminism. Such contention has been utilized for defaming or discrediting the activities and scholarly efforts of the theologically oriented Muslim women willing to bring gender reforms in the society.^{xvii} For her, Islam and feminism are allies - - as Islamic Feminism is anchored in the discourse of Islam with the Quran as its central text and exegesis as its methodology.^{xviii} Lamrabet also supports the view that Islam and Feminism are not incompatible.^{xix} What she argues out is that the Islamic teachings are more sympathetic to women than what they are usually taken for. For her, though the Quran is the word of God, the teachings of it are decipherable only in the light of the experienced reality with in a specific social and political context.

The theological feminists claim that the Quran has not used the biological differences between men and women as base for gender discriminations. It has neither privileged men over women nor treated men as 'self' and women as 'other' or viewed men and women as binary opposites. Thus, contrary to the popular belief that men are ontologically superior to women, the Quran designates men and women as complementary to each other and pleads for establishing love and mutuality as the basis of marriage.^{xx} Moreover, in Islam, sexual equality is ontological as it is clearly mentioned in the Quran^{xxi} that God created human beings from a single self. The Quran does not privilege the man's creation or endows him with attributes not given to women. Quran never defines men and women as opposites or portray women as lesser or defective or the two sexes as unequal. In fact, it does not even associate sex with gender. Thus, while the Quran recognizes only the biological differences of men and women, it does not assign between them any gender difference, so, it is unjustified to derive a theory of gender inequality from its teachings. The Quran also does not link women and men to specific gender roles. There is not a single verse that suggests that women's gender roles are a function of their biology, or that biological differences between men and women make them unequal.

Against the backdrop of what has been said and done it becomes equally pertinent to ask why the holy text entertains lots of problematic utterances which seem to differentiate between men and women in quite a few respects. Those conflicting pronouncements, however, are claimed by the believing feminists to be undoubtedly pro-women and as according full dignity to women. The task of resolving those conflicts in ideas is a challenging one and the feminists have wilfully accepted the responsibility of churning out the essence of the sayings. Beginning with the hermeneutic of suspicion thus the feminists purport to come back to the defence of their original

faith position. The task has been accomplished in two major ways: by concentrating on the contextual aspects of the genesis of the verses and by exploring the possibility of alternative explanations and interpretations of the text import. The Quranic principle of human equality and its consideration of women as full human beings have remained the most unarguable part of the feminist faith tradition. As Katrina Daly observes:

The idea that women are full human beings is an important theme of the Quran, so, feminism is just a human means for demanding what Islam has already ordained to women.^{xxii}

In order to justify the question of compatibility issue we need to critically analyse some of the verses of Quran. There are certain problematic verses in the Quran which if taken in isolation would suggest that God favours men over women. The following one may be considered for example:

Your wives are as a tilth unto you. So approach your tilth when or how you will. But do some good act for your souls beforehand. And fear Allah and know that you are to meet Him (hereafter) and give (these) good tidings to those who believe.^{xxiii}

It is usually contended that this verse goes against the dignity of women as women are compared with ploughing field and as per the dictate men can approach to this field whenever they wish. This verse has given rise to lot of controversy. But the believing feminists have tried to decode the meaning of it in relation to the other adjacent verse. Read along with the preceding verse it goes like this:

They ask thee concerning women's courses. Say they are a hurt and a pollution. So, keep away from women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clear. But when they have purified themselves, you may approach them in any manner, time or place ordained for you by Allah. For Allah loves those who turn to Him constantly and He loves those who keep themselves pure and clean.^{xxiv}

Read together the verses signify something else. Men are prohibited by the text to go near their wives when the latter are undergoing their menstrual period. The text equally instructs men to approach their wives respecting their dignity as Allah has commanded. And secondly, women are compared to fields because it is women only who conceive and rear children once men's

seeds are implanted to their womb. In many religious traditions earth is compared with mother as earth grows food to sustain human beings. Similarly women are likened to ploughing field as they conceive and produce children to perpetuate human species. It in no way detracts woman from her dignity.

Another controversial verse (4:34) which according to some feminist questions the dignity and respect of women. This verse is controversial in the sense that it has been grossly misunderstood. It seems to imply that women are subordinate to men. The word *quwwam* has been variously translated: it means authority, ruler etc. But in the context the word is used in the sense of one who maintains or looks after. It is a functional term, not a term of superiority as usually made out by the orthodox *ulemas*. A wife who maintains her husband and runs the household can also be called *quwwam*. If both spouses earn and run the household together both will be *quwwam*.

Beside these verses, there are many other verses in the Quran which clearly show that women are full human beings like their male counterparts and there is absolutely no difference between men and women as far as their relationship to God is concerned, as both are promised the same reward for good conduct and the same punishment for evil conduct, as it is expressed in the following verses of the Quran:

Whoever work righteousness, men or women and has faith, verily, to him will we give a new life, and life that is good and pure and we will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions.^{xxv}

And

The men and the women of adultery or fornication-flog each of them with a hundred stripes.^{xxvi}

4. Conclusion

So, on intensive gender-sensitized reading of the different verses of the Quran (belonging to the normative category or the verses in which are laid down the different principles and values of the religion) one can see that women are treated as full human beings in the text. They are endowed with full rights to lead a respectable life – a life of dignity. Islamic ethics truly advocates certain values which are in deep consonance with the gender egalitarian goals of feminist ethics and feminism. In view of the miserable oblivion (of the said facts) to which the

institutionalized religions of any variety, including Islam have become subjected to, it is urgently required to justify the re-reading and re-interpretation of the original text resources which are otherwise used for centuries to subjugate women in the societies. This subjugation in case of Islam, according to the believing feminists, is more cultural and patriarchal than Islamic or Quranic. Therefore, the entire set of laws and principles of Islam relating to women, as prevalent now, need to be seriously reviewed in the light of the original Quranic sanctions. The feminists are trying to do this to win the rights that Quran has given to women but denied by men. So, Islam and feminism are not only compatible but fundamentally linked. Islam as a lived practice -- as a social justice movement gets strengthened through the feminist agenda. Claiming that feminism and Islam are incompatible leaves both feminists and Muslims without the means to fight against the injustices that threaten Muslim-women all over the world.

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