

Title : Contestation of Islamic Feminism

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The West such as America and Europe are known to uphold democratic values by acknowledging freewill thoughts and independent interpretation in any matter, including religion. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Muslim society in the West as the community are generally more conservative, especially when it comes to their faith. This group is considered to be still less receptive on the religious reformation hence why they have always been left behind in the West's social organization. This then led to many Islamic reformist figures who attempt to offer various up-to-date concepts of thought that were considered further modern and alternative, to reform the conservative thinking.

Of what is considered as fascinating is that, these Islamic reformers usually came from Muslim world countries such as the Middle East (Seedat 2016). They studied Islam, be it formally or non-formally, in their country of origin and later on developed their own contemporary concepts and proposed religious-related reform to the society but the Muslims in the Middle East themselves are more dominated by those who find it difficult to accept any kind of reformation in terms of religion. For the conservatives, religious reform is considered taboo because it is feared that it will deviate from the primary teachings of Islam.

2.0 ISLAMIC REFORMATION THRIVE BETTER IN THE WEST

This in turn made the reformists shift their struggle to revolutionize Islam to the Western world. In addition, there are several other factors that made the idea of Islamic reform more successful in the Western world such as:

2.1 ISLAM AS A MINORITY GROUP

The increasing number of believer of Islam in America and Europe has made Islam began to gain a place and to be considered as an influential minority group. These Islamic reformist groups view America as the 'land of mission', a land of strive to perceive Islam as a religion of peace and to diminish the fact that it is not as extreme as people ought it to be (Cesari 2004). To carry out this mission to real life, Islam is needed to adapt to the West context. This is what makes the Islamic reform movement obtain a spot in the hearts of Muslim Americans.

2.2 RECOGNITION OF SECULARISM

America is a secular state, which means one's religious affairs are a private matter of a person, and the state definitely should not interfere on that. This situation is yet contradicts from the one in Middle East, where Islam is regarded as the state religion. In America, freedom of religion is guaranteed and protected by the constitution (Cesari 2004). The concept of secularism also encourage the development of various concepts, ideologies and ways to reform religion so the followers of a religion, say Muslim, to remain devoted and committed to their faith.

2.3 HUMAN RIGHTS

Religion is a human right of every individual protected in the American Constitution or better known as the first amendment of the Bill of Rights (Cesari 2004). Every citizen has the right to feel safe and protected in all respects, including in terms of protection and a sense of security to embrace the religion they believe in. The guarantee of protection of human rights also enables the Islamic reformist movement to evolve freely and safely in The West.

3.0 REFORMATION OF ISLAM IN THE FEMINISM PERSPECTIVE

The most common claim of feminist is that throughout the history, women have always struggled to gain equality, respect and the same rights as men because of the existence of patriarchy, an ideology in which men are superior to women and have the right to rule women (Holmes & Meyerhoff 2003). This ideology has deeply ingrained the social structure of society throughout the world and as a result, even in the new millenium, women are still fighting for rights that most men take for granted. The

struggle, however, was even more tough for women of colour as not only were they dealing with issues of sexism, but also racism hence in order to fight patriarchy, feminism theory was born (Wadud 2006)

The term feminism was derived in the late 1880s in France in Hubertine Auclert's journal as '*La Citoyenne*', to criticize male predominance making claims for woman's rights and emancipation promised by the French Revolution and since then, it

became the blueprint and has been put to diverse uses to inspire many movements (Badran 2011). Feminism, at initial, can be described as a philosophy in which women and their contributions are valued in order to seek for social, political and economical equality (Mukhetdinov 2020). It can also be described as a movement or a revolution from anyone in the population, be it women or men who wish the world to be equal without boundaries. These boundaries are more known as discrimination or bias against gender, age, marital status and economic status hence why they wish to see the gender gap and the idea that men are superior to women declined, and further, abolished in time.

3.1 AMINA WADUD: WHEN ISLAM AND FEMINISM CONVERGE

Islamic feminism is a discourse and practice of a feminist articulated within an Islamic paradigm where Muslim women bring their own point of view, experience and questions when it comes to read the Qur'an and Sunnah because they claim the interpretation of these two major sources of the religion of Islam was solely based on the male-centric experiences and the overall influence of the patriarchal society in which they lived until to this day. The concept "Islamic feminism" is used for the first time in the 1990s in the growing western literature on women and Islam hence why this essay focuses on analysing the methodology of one of the most prominent representatives on Islamic feminism, the infamous Amina Wadud.

Amina Wadud is a reformist figure of Islamic thought in America who offers a feminist perspective in her own reflective. Amina Wadud is an African-American and a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Virginia. Wadud has written several books on her thoughts on Islam and gender, including the Qur'an and Woman (1992) and Inside the Gender Jihad (2006). In her analysis of gender in the Qur'an, Wadud adopts the direct method of interpreting the Qur'an by focusing on the historical

meaning of the Qur'anic verses' context and also people's views on the verses. From her reasonings, Wadud found that the Qur'an did write down some differences between women and men, but these differences were not significant, at least to her own comprehension.

In her book titled *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006), Amina Wadud discussed the role of women in Islam by relating to her story when she visited South Africa to attend the conference of 'Islam and Civil Society in South Africa' in the previous year. Wadud was invited to the conference and considered to be in line with the representation of African-American Muslim women who are successful in their careers and have succeeded in introducing the change on a new gender perspective in understanding Islam. Wadud emphasised that the role and discussion of the issue of women's involvement in international conferences usually revolves around the issue of how to dress or the involvement and contribution of women in the household. On the other hand, very little has been discussed about women and their association to religion. In this regard, women are almost entirely excluded from leadership roles, from grassroots level on mosque committees to further up the ladder in wider-scale national committees.

One of the most controversial concepts of Wadud's thoughts is consisting of women as *imam* (prayer leader) for women and men. According to her, the thought came forth when she visited South Africa as at that time, was very progressive regarding the discussion of gender equality as an aspect of social justice in Islam. Amina Wadud's visit to South Africa was also an important moment, where for the first time a woman was the one who give a *khutbah* (sermon) during Friday prayers. Began from the conference member's questions regarding the concept of women as *imam* and *khatib* in Islam, Wadud then became interested in discussing and studying the concept of regarding matters in depth. Some of Amina Wadud's arguments which are used as a basis for gender equality in terms of prayer priests and female khatibs include;

3.1.1 THE CONCEPT OF *TAUHID*

According to Wadud, gender equality should cover all aspects both in terms of function and role in the family, political, and spiritual environment. Wadud considered that the reflection of *tauhid*— the oneness of Allah refers to the

relationship between three parties, namely Allah as the creator, a human being and another human being. As claimed by Wadud, in the context of the three-party relationship, the relationship between humans and other humans is an equal mutual relationship. This is on the contrary from the relationship between humans and Allah as it is between the creator and the created one. This concept shows that all human beings are equal and have the same potential to develop themselves in social, political, economic and religious aspects. Therefore, the idea of that only men can be preachers and imams in prayer is found trying to defeat the whole concept of tauhid itself.

3.1.2 THE IRONY OF MOSQUE'S ROLE AMONG THE SOCIETY

Amina Wadud also highlighted that the mosque is considered as a good example to illustrate the conflict in gender relations in *ibadah* (worship). This is because mosque is not only a place of worshipping but is also a witness to the journey and development of Islam in a place. Therefore, the mosque has become an important institution to indicate transitions and changes in the Muslim community. According to Wadud, gender segregation in mosques is part of a social construct that generates various ideologies and understandings regarding the role separation of men and women. What is considered ironic to her, is that in the Qur'an itself, there is actually no explanation regarding the gender separation and it shows that men dominate women, which indirectly shows the absence of equality among fellow religious communities.

3.1.3 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER ROLES

According to Amina Wadud, the majority of Muslim groups who think that gender segregation in *ibadah* is obligatory are groups that use the foundation of an ancient and obsolete *fiqh*. These groups that support gender segregation in worshipping are also seen by Wadud as those who misinterpret the religious teachings of Islam. In the Qur'an, however, it is not found there is a single verse which indicates that there is a need to separate men and women in prayer. The phenomenon of gender segregation in worship is only a man-made social construct and cannot be separated from the

profound history of the development of Islam in Arab, especially during the 7-th century (Ahmed 2009).

4.0 CRITICISM OF AMINA WADUD'S THOUGHTS

In the book *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006), Amina Wadud often compares the condition of Muslims in South Africa with America. Amina Wadud also gave several statements regarding the condition of Muslim women, which according to her, do not have a notable position as policy makers, especially in community mosques. Unfortunately, Amina Wadud's argument is rather felt one-sided as she only takes into account the isolated cases from several mosques and Muslim communities in South Africa and America that she has went, but the judgement is applied as if the majority of Muslim women around the world do not get the same opportunity. Whereas in the history of Islam itself there are many success stories of female figures in various fields such as Siti Khadijah who was successful as a trader, Fatima al-Fihri as the first Muslim female figure to establish a university, or Razia Sultana, a female Sultanah from Delhi, India (Bahlul 2009). In the chapter on *Ritual Leadership and Gender Inclusiveness* (2006), Amina Wadud's fallacy is proven by only emphasising the oppression experienced by Muslim women who are forbidden from becoming *imams* and preachers while questioning several times regarding which Qur'anic verses which state that women are prohibited from becoming *imams* and *khatibs* and totally turn a blind eye when it comes to the stories of women in Islam who become successful because they get the same opportunities as men.

Another criticism regarding Amina Wadud is as for the approach of her to interpret the Qur'an by using the hermeneutic method she developed herself to understand the context of the Qur'anic verse (Mernessi 1993). However, this method is full with the element of subjectivity because Wadud has used her own point of view and tend to judge a certain verses which according to her is often misunderstood by the Muslim community. Wadud's personal racial and gender identities are the biggest determinants of her own interpretation of the Qur'an. This can be seen in her book, Wadud (2006) mentions her racial and gender identities several times as if to illustrate that her personal figure alone is adequate enough to describe minority groups in

American society: Black, women, Muslims, widows, who later succeed as the sole breadwinner for her family.

Amina Wadud's hermeneutic interpretation practice is also very similar to the method used by Christian feminists to interpret the Bible (Adkins 2004). The interpretation of the Qur'an and the Bible is needless to say, different because as it is believed by Muslims, the Qur'an is Allah's revelation and there is no human intervention in it. This is different from the Bible where almost no Christian believes that the Bible is purely God's revelation. Amina Wadud also stated that the context of the Qur'an is definitive, depending on the context of the time. The context of interpretation like this is certainly thick with the prejudice of a person who interprets the Qur'an based on the person's psychological and social conditions. It is however very crucial to keep in mind that not all verses of the Qur'an can be interpreted using logic alone because of the nature of the Qur'an which is God's revelation (Adkins 2004). That way, understanding the meaning contained in the Qur'an is not as easy as translating the Qur'an into English.

This is what is often ignored by Islamic reformist groups who only interpret religious teachings based on logical knowledge and the concept of mundane human values meanwhile the context being dissected is a religion that came down from God Himself which cannot be simply explained with a merely straightforward logic understanding.

5.0 FEMINISM AND ISLAM CANNOT COEXIST

The 'Islam' we embrace today is the product of men's misinterpretation and manipulation of the Qur'an and hadiths, as what considered by Islamic feminists and they are fighting for each and every day to re-interpret and refreshing Islamic theology, qur'anic readings and Muslim narratives to be more egalitarian. However, no matter how much one try to make Islam feministic, both of those cancel each other out. With that being said, if feminism is right, Islam is wrong. If Islam is right, feminism is wrong.

Islam is, however patriarchal to begin with (Seedat 2016). There is no room for religion in real feminism especially a religion that is led by male prophets, that prescribes men as women's leaders, that says women cannot lead men in prayers, that instructs wives to obey husbands, that requires men to be the default provider of his family. That is why many well educated Muslims can only partially agree with western feminism because like it or not, Islam remains patriarchal as we can agree to abolish cultural patriarchy but never, Islamic patriarchy; women cannot lead in a prayer, men inherit more possessions than women in *'faraid'* (the division of the property of a Muslim who has died and did not leave a will before his or her death). On the other hand, cultural patriarchy is women are denied an equal chance of education compared to men.

Yasmin Mogahed (2018), a Muslim scholar specialised in psychology and personal development, gave her insight on this matter where the problem with feminism is that whatever men do is considered as the standard. Even if Islam hypothetically said women are the leaders of men, feminists would still question why does Islam burden them so much. That is where Islam teaches both genders have a standard of their own, or also known as equity (Seedat 2016). Women are given certain privileges provided they have to give up another certain rights to something and vice versa. Then how do we quantify who's "winning"? That is too qualitative where we can list down all exclusively men and women's rights and responsibilities according to Islam but we can never know the weightage of each. Each of them cannot simply be counted and treated as +1 or -1. Maybe it is +1 but -3. Nevertheless, human experiences are multidimensional.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Throughout the process of an attempt to give a succinct overview of the contemporary Muslim discourse, I am of the opinion that, the cry for an Islamic reform indeed raises few questions. Can Islam itself be reformed? If Islam we referring is Allah's command to us, then the answer is no. There is a perfection in Allah that is changelessly good, therefore not needful of reform but if Islam refers to our response to Him, the changeless perfection, then the answer is yes. If Islam refers to we Muslims, then reform is possible and necessary, always (Farhan Shah 2018).

We, regardless of any gender, can fight for women for all we want but we shall never cross the boundary. We all want to fight for better social experience for every woman, for gender discrimination to be stopped but everything must be done according to Islam. If feminism contradicts Islam, feminism is wrong. We should not let our adopted ideology overrides our faith by thinking that we can be selective in choosing the fights to pursue in life. All in all, I hereby, ending my essay with a quote from a 13th-century Persian poet and Islamic scholar, Rumi (2008);

"What is justice? To put [a thing] in its [right] place.

What is injustice? To put it in its wrong place.

What is justice? Giving water to trees.

What is injustice? To give water to thorns."

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