

Muslim feminist and re-reading of the Quranic text: Reading of Asma Barlas

Although feminist ideas had existed in the Middle East and elsewhere long before the emergence of colonialism and nationalism, they first gained currency in Egyptian society through male reformers within the context of modernist movements and nation building projects. Qasim Amin, for example, used his reform project for women's liberation to emphasize women's education and their participation in the public sphere. He points out that since women are indispensable for the progress of any given nation, educating them and improving their condition has become necessary¹. For a nation to face and withstand the challenges of colonization, Amin argues, it must be "concerned with the structure of its families"; woman is the foundation of the household, therefore educating her is crucial for the nation's progress.² By following the legacy of Amin, liberal nationalists have helped women to achieve their national rights.³

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Muhammad Ali began to involve women in his project of economic and technological reform by creating employment and educational opportunities for them.⁴ This paved the way for upper-class women to engage in significant debates and discourse which were largely instrumental in defining their identity in the post-colonial era. The role and status of women in society were among the major topics of this discourse. To develop their identities and validate their demands for change, Muslim feminists adopted the crucial strategy of self-renaming through alternative reinterpretation of the Quran. This, however, began new trends in contemporary Quranic interpretation and in the interrelationship with contemporary Islamic paradigms on gender issues. "By redressing the paradigmatic basis of Islam", as Amina Wadud points out, "alternative interpretations succeed in

¹ Qasim Amin, *The Liberation of Women: A Document in the History of Egyptian Feminism*, trans. by Samiha Sidom Peterson (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1995), p. 6.

² Ibid, p. 72.

³ Omnia Shakri, 'Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in turn off the Century Egypt', in *Remaking Women :Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. by Lila Abu Lughod (Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 126-170 (p.131).

⁴ Margot Badran, 'Competing Agenda: Feminist, Islam, and the State in Nineteenth- and -Twentieth-Century Egypt', in *Women, Islam and the State*, ed. by Deniz Kandiyoti (London: Macmillan Press, 1991), pp. 201-236, (p. 203).

developing an autonomous and authentic Islamic identity”⁵. This identity was defined after feminists became actively involved in providing a practical scholarly guide for critiquing and correcting what they considered social injustices and gender inequalities which were more or less products of a patriarchal interpretation of the Quranic text. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is not only to critically analyse the role of feminist reinterpretation of the Quranic text in the discourse of women’s liberation, but also to examine to what extent they did in fact break with the patriarchal tradition in Quranic interpretation.

Islamic feminism and the politics of identity

In Egypt, the notion of feminism was initiated by men.⁶ This idea was born out of the belief that educating women and elevating their status was part, and perhaps even the major part, of a fundamental process of transformation that society must undergo for the nation to be advanced.⁷ Further, education was seen as the only “effective means to national maturity and real independence”.⁸ Egypt under the reign of Muhammad Ali became one of the most developed countries outside Europe, as a result of his project of reform and modernization. Ali dispatched a number of missions to Europe to acquire western thought and heritage. It was this openness to western culture that inspired those students to become reformists and advocates of feminism in the subsequent years. Feminist discourse later became ‘grounded’ in Egyptian society with the support of a leading religious reformist, Muhammad Abduh. Using his independent method of inquiry by examining religious sources, Abduh “espoused a process of reinterpretation that adapted traditional concepts and institutions to modern realities, resulting in a transformation of their meaning to accommodate and legitimate change”.⁹

⁵ Amina Wadud, ‘Alternative Quranic Interpretation and the Status of Muslim Women’, in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women’s Scholarship and Activism*, ed. by Gisela Webb (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), pp. 3-21, (p.3).

⁶ *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, ed. by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John Esposito (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), p. xiv.

⁷ Kandiyoti, p. 3.

⁸ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1789-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.181-182.

⁹ Haddad, p. xiv.

Nations, seen as imagined communities, often use women as a decisive figure in creating their notions of themselves.¹⁰ For this reason, some Arab nationalists like Qasim Amin, for example, used women to imagine their communities as modern. He argued that it was in the interests of the nation to educate women, recruit them and incorporate them into the political process as symbols of modernity.¹¹ Amin's famous work *Tahrir al-Mar'ah (The Liberation of Women, 1899)* initiated the discourse on women's education and emphasized the moral upbringing of children. He went on to explain, however, that the backwardness of Egyptian women stemmed from their being deprived of legitimate rights granted to them by Islam. For a woman to manage her household effectively, she should attain "a certain amount of intellectual and cultural knowledge", because any woman who "lacks this upbringing will be unable adequately to carry out her role in society or in the family".¹² In response to widespread criticism and storm of protest generated by his pro-feminist discourse, Amin published his second book, *Al-Mar'ah al Jadidah (The New Woman)*, in 1900.¹³ These two books formed the basis of feminism not only in Egypt but in the Arab world.

Political treatises, manuals and literature of the earliest nineteenth-century Middle Eastern nation-building projects portray domesticated woman upholding the sacred family as the authentic core of the nation.¹⁴ This is clearly demonstrated in Aisha Taymur's narration of marital miseries in the upper-class families of that period. Taymur emerged as the leading progressive agent of change by offering "ideological formulations and developing an alternative perspective to the concept of gender roles in society".¹⁵ Despite the fact that she was not from the ruling class, her father's support and her resistance to her mother's opposition helped her to receive a western

¹⁰ Anderson Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 2.

¹¹ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 144 ; Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), pp. 112-113.

¹² Amin, p. 12; Afsaneh Najmabadi, 'Crafting an Educated House Wife', in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. by Lila Abu Lughod (Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), p.102.

¹³ Amin, p. xiii.

¹⁴ Najmabadi, *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Marvet Hatem, 'Aisha Taymur's Tears and the Critique of the Modernist and the Feminist Discourses on Nineteenth-Century Egypt', in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. by Lila Abu Lughod (Princeton and New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp.73-87, (p. 85).

education. This equipped her with the necessary skills of poetry, a tool she later used in her feminist discourse. Taymur's historical background was more or less identical to that of her contemporaries in the subsequent decades.

Despite the fact that advocacy of female emancipation was initiated by men, it was not long before Muslim women joined the trend and started demanding religious, educational, and social reforms through various women's organizations. In 1919, for example, the wives of some prominent nationalists, like Huda Sha'arawi, led hundreds of women on a march in solidarity with the anti-colonial struggle of the nationalists. This development was seen as the first political involvement of women in the course of national reform.¹⁶ This active participation paved the way for them to advocate their rights in subsequent years. Later, in 1922, Sha'arawi and her exponents formed the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU), a movement which was to become their major vehicle towards women's emancipation in the next few decades.¹⁷ 1923 was a benchmark in Egyptian feminist history. Believing that the veil and seclusion were the most powerful signifiers of woman's oppression and relegation to the private world, Sha'arawi removed her veil after the Rome conference to indicate her objection to its 'imposition'. She situated her feminist discourse within the Islamic paradigm, which includes "a broad agenda of claims for political, social, economic, and legal rights" for women.¹⁸ On the other hand, Malak Hifni Nassef consolidated Egyptian feminist discourse by making it accessible to a wider audience through her writings.¹⁹

Later, feminism gained the support of the upper-class men of the Ummah Party. However, some middle-class nationalists, like Mustafa Kamil of the *Watani* party, were opposed to the feminist struggle, having perceived it as a threat because it would encourage western influence.²⁰ Moreover, members of the *Watani* party were conservative in favouring a caliphate system of government. It was within this context that nationalists positioned their views concerning the role of women in society and their own responses towards feminism. In these circumstances, feminist ideas continued to enjoy a supportive environment, despite the prevalence of liberal

¹⁶ Leila Ahmed, 'Early Feminist Movement in the Middle East; Turkey and Egypt', in *Muslim Women*, ed. by Freda Husain (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 111-123, (p.114).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Badran, p. 208.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 205.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 206.

nationalism.²¹ Thus, the active involvement of Egyptian women in the course of their anti-colonial nationalist struggle helped them to construct their identity as the ‘mothers of the nation’.²² It should be noted that in the colonial era, men’s approach to feminism was often more radical than women’s. Amin, for example, called for the elimination of veiling, a philosophical position which female feminists compromised.²³ In the post-colonial era, however, women’s liberal feminism became more radical after male feminist rhetoric had disappeared. Further, the intersection of colonial and nationalist projects with gender-related issues necessitated the contextualization of the Egyptian discussion of motherhood within the paradigm of the colonial-nationalist discourse on modernity.²⁴ For this reason, nationalist discourse “sought to uphold women as a source of cultural integrity”, believing that “the advancement of the nation in the material fields of law [and] administration” was contextualized “in such a way that progress for the ummah, or community, could not be achieved independently of progress in the domain of women, and more specifically mothers.”²⁵ In response to the political reverberations and anti-feminist polemic of the early twentieth century, Muslim feminists changed their discourse towards a definition of identity to defend their legitimacy and validate their demand for change.²⁶ This new discourse opened up a debate over the definition of identity in feminist circles which has continued up to the present time.

Since the end of colonialism, Muslim feminists have been engaged in a significant process of identification, self-renaming in light of modernity and a global community. Thus, they adopted a crucial strategy of alternative interpretation of the Quran to develop their identity. Early Muslim scholars interpreted the Quran to reflect their socio-economic and political settings. However, this exegesis “is faulted for its atomistic methodology and lack of recognition of the Quran’s structure of thematic unity” and the reason for this fault is that “all traditional Quran interpretations were written by men”²⁷. In Iran, for example, feminists began reinterpreting canonical

²¹ Ibid.

²² Shakri, p. 131.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 127.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 130.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Amina Wadud, *Quran and Women: Re-reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajr Bakt Sdn, 1992), p. 4.

theological texts after the promulgation of Khomeini's doctrine of jurisprudential rule, which grossly violates women's right.²⁸ Every 'reading' of the Quranic text reflects the perspectives, circumstances and background of the person who makes the reading. That is to say, "it is not the text or its principles that change, but the capacity and particularity of the understanding and reflection of the principles of the text within a community of people".²⁹ Within this paradigm, Asma Barlas began her context-focused rereading of the Quran.

Barlas is Professor of Politics and Director of the Centre of for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity at Ithaca College, New York. She attended the University of Pakistan, where she obtained a BA in English literature and philosophy, going on to receive an MA and a PhD in international studies from the University of Denver in Colorado. Barlas is a feminist who has focused her research on Islam and how Muslims interpret and live it. Further, she has proposed a 'Quranic hermeneutics' that permits Muslims to argue in favour of gender equality and patriarchal mentality within an Islamic framework. In her recent work, she analyses Muslims' methodology in their interpretation of religious text, especially patriarchal exegesis of the Quran, a topic she has explored in her book "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran* (2002). Her other works include: *Islam, Muslims, and the U.S.: Essays on Religion and Politics* (2004) and *Democracy, Nationalism, and Communalism: The Colonial Legacy in South Asia* (1995).³⁰

Barlas sets out to examine the patriarchal nature of medieval interpretations concerning gender-related verses and to provide alternative interpretations that respond to modern challenges, in order to liberate women from the prevailing patriarchal mentality. Beginning with a historical analysis of religious authority, Barlas shows how cultural influence, patriarchal and social settings affect to a larger extent the mode of Quranic interpretation, adding that any interpretation of a sacred

²⁸ Najmabadi, Ibid.

²⁹ Asma Barlas, "*Believing Women*" in *Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 5.

³⁰ 'Asma Barlas', in *Bio/CV online* <<http://www.asmabarlas.com/cv.html>> [updated 21 April 2007, accessed 25 April 2007]

text necessarily reflects the viewpoint of the interpreters.³¹ Her central argument is not only that the Quran is not patriarchal, but also that “the teachings of the Quran are radically egalitarian and even antipatriarchal”.³² “As many recent studies reveal”, Balas observes, “women’s status and roles in Muslim societies, as well as patriarchal structures and gender relationships, are a function of multiple purposes most of which have nothing to do with religion.”³³ She then goes on to analyse the Quran’s position on a wide variety of gender issues in order to argue that patriarchy has no support of any kind in the teachings of the Quran. In what follows, Barlas’s exegetic methodology is pursued through an examination of her different readings of some gender issues.

The concept of gender justice

Gender justice entails addressing and ending the problems of inequalities that exist between women and men, and which lead to women’s oppression in society. These inequalities “may be in the distribution of resources and opportunities that enable individuals to build human, social, economic and political capital”; they also involve “the conceptions of human dignity, personal autonomy and rights that deny women physical integrity and the capacity to make choices about how to live their lives”.³⁴ Further, gender discourse demands the prevention and sanctioning of all actions that limit women’s access to the public sphere on the grounds of their gender. The Islamic religion has a very fundamental concern for justice and equity, and thereby enjoins the internationalization of these norms among its adherents. For this reason, the Quran destroys all hierarchical structures by promoting gender equality. As Barlas points out, the Quran clearly explains that “humans, though biologically different, are ontologically and ethically-morally the same/similar inasmuch as both women and men originated in a single self, have been endowed with the same natures, and make up two halves of a single pair”. The fact that both men and women originated from a single ‘self’ destroys any claim of gender superiority. “Male and female thus are not only inseparable in the Quran but they also are ontologically the same, hence

³¹ Ibid, p. xi.

³² Ibid, p. 93.

³³ Ibid, p. 2.

³⁴ Jamail A. Kamlan, ‘Islam, Women and Gender Justice: A Discourse on the Traditional Islamic Practices among the Tausug in Southern Philippines’, *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights*, 2 (2005), 1-35, (p.6).

equal.”³⁵ However, “Muslims continue to view them as binary opposites and as unequal...”³⁶ The concept of sexual hierarchy is supported by the traditional belief that woman was created from man and is hence inferior to him.³⁷

In support of this, Yvonne Y. Haddad maintains that “in the broader scope of Islamic tradition... the image of Eve became altered, often to the point where she alone was seen as responsible for the downfall of her mate.”³⁸ The Quran does not in fact make any reference to the name of Adam’s partner or her creation, yet patriarchal interpreters “continue to voice the traditional view that Eve is responsible for Adam’s fall”.³⁹ Thus, the traditional interpretations of Eve were used to create women’s culpability, thereby justifying her sexual inferiority and her oppression. On the other hand, Wadud concisely argued that recontextualization of the Quran through new modes of reading and methods of interpretation is not only desirable but also necessary. Since Quranic knowledge is eternally evolving, the Quran must therefore be continually interpreted by formulation of a “hermeneutical model which derives basic ethical principles for further developments and legal considerations by giving precedence to general statements rather than particulars”.⁴⁰ To critique patriarchal interpretations that have justified the gender inequality, Wadud concentrates on verses that have been misinterpreted and assimilated into societal patterns as indicating the superiority of man over woman. Using her hermeneutical methodology, she analyses the traditional interpretations of gender-related verses from linguistic, theological and juridical perspectives. She further presents alternative interpretations that will conform both to a Quranic egalitarian awareness and to modern perceptions of the impact of culture and context on the development of religion. Concerning the narrative of Adam’s creation upon which the theory of women’s inferiority is based, Wadud argues that the Quran “does not consider woman a type of man in the presentation of its themes”. The Quran explains that “man and woman are two

³⁵ Barlas, p. 134.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 135.

³⁸ Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, ‘Eve: Islamic Image of Woman’, in *Women in Islam*, ed. by Azizah al-Hibri (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), 135-144, (p.135).

³⁹ Ibid, p. 142.

⁴⁰ Wadud, p. 30.

categories of the human species given the same or equal consideration and endowed with the same or equal potential.”⁴¹

However, the above arguments suffer from some limitations, as Barlas makes no attempt to differentiate between the major sources of Islam and the opinion of Quranic interpreters. The understanding of the configuration of the roles of men and women in Islamic society would have to be based on the teachings of primary sources of Islam (Quran and sound Sunnah) and the proper methodology of interpretation. The Quran is the major criterion to be used in judging Muslims' actions, rather than a mere set of theories. Further, “*Tafsir* is (hu)man-made and, therefore, subject to human nuances, peculiarities, and limitations”.⁴² Accordingly, the opinion of any scholar, jurist or interpreter, however learned he appears to be, must not in any way be equated with the Quran or sound Sunnah, since only Muhammad is infallible. Indeed, erroneous interpretation of the Quran comes as a result of lack of contextualization of its rulings, misunderstanding of the circumstances surrounding the revelation of a particular verse, or lack of familiarity with hadith literature (or ignoring a hadith related to a particular verse) and relying on lexical and literal meaning of the text.⁴³

Further, the universalism of Quranic doctrine entails recognising the historical context and specificity of its teaching, since the Quran, as Fazlur Rahman acknowledges, “provides, either explicitly or implicitly, the rationales behind solutions and rulings, from which one can deduce general principles”.⁴⁴ However, critical scholarship involves favouring the formulation of hermeneutic principles of reinterpretation of the Quran and adopting a thematic-historical method in its contextualization. For Rahman, this methodology is necessary, since “all interpretations are historically and geographically contextualized”; therefore, “Muslims must exert every effort to understand those contexts in order to be able to distinguish the essential from the contingent.”⁴⁵ In light of this position, Barlas would appear to be over-ambitious in

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 15.

⁴² Wadud, Ibid.

⁴³ Jamal Badawi, ‘Status of Women in Islam’, *Al-Ittihad*, 8 (1971), 24-45 (p. 25).

⁴⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 133.

⁴⁵ Tamara Sonn, *Interpreting Islam: Bandali Jawzi's Islamic Intellectual History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 65.

her claims. Her conclusions would have been more persuasive if she had discussed how modern (male) interpreters contextualised the Quran to reflect the socio-political settings of their time. For example, Abduh, despite his familiarity with medieval tafsir, still gave particular attention to the contextualization of the Quran. He banned polygyny when he realised that people had started abusing the institution.⁴⁶ As regards the narratives of Adam and Eve, the Quran, of course, does not blame woman alone for eating from the forbidden tree: both are held responsible for the sin.⁴⁷ As Aisha Abdu al-Rahman observes,

“the truth is that in the Book of Islam there is no reference to Satan deceiving Hawwa first or to her beguiling her husband into eating of the forbidden tree which caused his deportation from the Garden. Rather, in the Noble Quran she is responsible, even as he is...”⁴⁸

Veiling and Seclusion

Recent developments in the discourse of Islamic feminism have heightened the need to re-examine the concept of veiling and seclusion within the Islamic paradigm. In the Islamic tradition, the concept of veiling involves “keeping women confined within the home and covering them in veils whenever they venture outside of the home”,⁴⁹ while in a wider context, it refers to the restriction of women’s participation in the public arena, confining them to certain tasks in society.⁵⁰ While seclusion and veiling have become major practices in many Muslim countries, though to varying degrees, it is interesting to note that they predate Islam. Archaeological evidence confirms that veiling and seclusion originated from the urban centres of the pre-Islamic Middle East, where women suffered all kinds of oppression. For example, women were excluded from participation in public spheres and their sexuality was designated as men’s property. In these circumstances, the veil was used as a major yardstick for judging women’s decency and determining their respectability. For this reason,

⁴⁶ Barbara Stowasser, ‘Gender Issues and Contemporary Quran Interpretation’, in *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, ed. by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John Esposito (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), p. 30-44, (p. 32).

⁴⁷ Quran 7:19-27.

⁴⁸ Aisha Abdu al- Rahman, Bint al-Shati, *Tarajim Sayyidat Bayt al-Nubuwwa* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-arabi, 1984), p. 43.

⁴⁹ S. Rozario, *Purity and Communal Boundaries: Women and Social Change in a Bangladeshi Village* (London: Zed, 1992), p. 88.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

veiling was regarded as one of those cultural traditions and alien social structures incorporated into Islam after its expansion in the post-conquest era.⁵¹

In modern times, however, Muslim feminists have continued to challenge the imposition of the veil on Muslim women within the discourse of an Islamic worldview. Mernissi, for example, considers the veil as a 'device' tactically imposed on women not only "to relegate them to an easily controllable terrain, the home", but also "to highlight their illegal position on male territory by means of a mask."⁵² Thus, the patriarchal construction of the veil is aimed at distancing women from the site of power and the public domain. In support of this, Barlas concisely argues that veiling and seclusion were enforced only on the wives of the prophet. Since it is clearly depicted in the Quran that the wives of the prophet were unlike other women, it may be said that these injunctions "are not a universal mandate for all Muslim men to force women to comply with them".⁵³ If the exclusion of women from public life is encouraged in Islam, she argues, then the Quranic rulings which enjoin women to avert their gaze when they come across people who are not their relations would be unnecessary.⁵⁴ Barlas goes on to explain, however, that the reference in the verses in question is clearly made to the *jilbab* (cloak) and *khumur* (shawl) which "cover the bosom (*jujub*) and neck, not the face, head, hands or feet".⁵⁵ For Barlas, the veil was imposed "on the grounds that women's bodies are pudenda, hence sexually corrupting to those who see them"; in these circumstances it is "necessary to shield Muslim men from viewing women's bodies by concealing them".⁵⁶ Accordingly, the veil was imposed to protect Muslim women from the molestation of "a slave-owning *jahili* society" where "sexual abuse" prevailed.⁵⁷ Conservative exegetes, she argues, then distorted the meaning of the verses by generalizing and de-historicizing their concepts, simply to satisfy their motives of making the veil the hallmark of an Islamic society, thereby secluding women from public sphere.⁵⁸ For Sa'adawi, veiling is more or less a product of pre-Islamic myth, where women are seen to be the origin of all the

⁵¹ Stowasser, p. 92.

⁵² Fatima Mernissi, 'Virginity and Patriarchy', in *Women in Islam*, ed. by Azizah al-Hibri (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), 183-191, (p. 189).

⁵³ Barlas, p. 55.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 158.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 54.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 55-56.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 55.

evils of humanity, hence need to be covered.⁵⁹ In adhering to this belief, Deniz Kandiyoti advocates that seclusion and veiling are detrimental to the nation's progress. In addition, they violate woman's rights, because they "created ignorant mothers, shallow and scheming partners, unstable marital unions, and lazy and productive members of the society".⁶⁰

However, Barlas makes no attempt to differentiate between what Muslims practice as individuals or as communities and what Islam teaches as a religion. She tends to perceive Islam as a monolithic religion where all Muslims practice its every detail in almost the same way. Of course, there are some major issues which unite all Muslims; yet there still exists cultural diversity on the basis of society, nation or race. Thus, not everything that prevails in Muslim countries or cultures is necessarily Islamic. In Iran, for example, the condition of women was largely affected by political paradigms and the transition period in the post-revolution era.⁶¹ Iranian women participated actively with all their resources to make the Iranian revolution possible. Thereafter, they became socially involved in the public sphere and occupied several positions. However, when the power was consolidated, strict rules were imposed and harsh policies were targeted towards women. These rules and policies included "annulment of many laws seen as un-Islamic, elimination of women from the judiciary, segregation of women in public places... and the campaign to impose [the] veil".⁶² This is of course an injustice against women by an Iranian regime that has no connection of any kind with Islam. Islamic history confirms that women were not caged behind iron bars or regarded as worthless creatures, as was the case during the pre-Islamic era. On the contrary, at the time of the Prophet Muhammad women were found to be enjoying considerable freedoms, including access to public spheres. For example, early Muslim women used to attend congregational prayers like Friday, Eid

⁵⁹ Nawal el Saadawi 'Woman and Islam', in *Women in Islam*, ed. by Azizah al-Hibri (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), 193-206, (p. 202).

⁶⁰ Kandiyoti, p. 10.

⁶¹ Afsaneh Najmabadeh, 'Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran', in *Women, Islam and the State*, ed. by Deniz Kandiyoti (London: Macmillan Press, 1991), 48-76, (p. 52).

⁶² Ibid.

and the lessons of the prophet.⁶³ Further, they used to fight in the Muslim armies, nurse the wounded, prepare supplies and serve the warriors, as Anas narrates: “on the day of Uhud, Aisha and Um Salim, their sleeves rolled up, would carry water in skin bags on their backs and empty the contents into the soldiers’ open mouths.”⁶⁴

Further, it is not correct to say that seclusion is an impediment to the nation’s progress. Historical records show how Taimur continued her struggle after her marriage by reconciling “domestic and non-domestic preoccupations”.⁶⁵ On the other hand, Kandiyoti would appear to be over-ambitious in his claim that seclusion of women is secluding their minds. A serious weakness with this argument is that Kandiyoti fails to take Taimur’s childhood experience into account. Aisha’s veiled mother, for example, had compromised and used her intelligence to facilitate Aisha’s willingness to pursue her new learning, despite her opposition to it. If she had wished, she could have undermined the efforts of her husband and daughter towards achieving that dream.⁶⁶ An additional limitation of Barlas’ argument is that it does not explain why ‘conservatives’ impose sexual segregation in favour of free mixing. It is concisely argued that free mixing of men and women has its moral and social consequences. For example, it leads to the disintegration of morality, the loss of any sense of chastity and shyness. Further, high rates of rape, illegitimate births and divorce, a reduction in the number of marriages, the destruction of family life and the spread of lethal diseases are some of the bitter fruits of the dissolution of barriers separating men and women as a result of sexual freedom.

An important question that needs to be asked is whether or not the veil was indeed imposed only on the wives of the prophet. It is clearly stated in verse 24:31 that women “*should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers... sons ...*” and other relatives. Another relevant verse reads:

O Prophet tell thy wives and daughters and the believing women that they should cast their outer garments over their persons [when abroad]; that is

⁶³ Muslim Ibn al-Hajjaj, *Sahih Muslim*, trans. by A.H. Siddiqi, 4 vol (Lahore: Ashraf, 1993), *The Prayers of the Two Eids. hadith no 1932-34.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, hadith no 1811.

⁶⁵ Hatem, p. 80.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 78.

most convenient that they should be known [as such] and not be molested... 33:59

A renowned Quranic commentator, Abdallah Yusuf Ali, comments: “This is for all Muslim women, those of the prophet’s household, as well as the others. They were asked to cover themselves with outer garments when walking out of doors.”⁶⁷ He further defines *jalabeeb* (the term used in this passage): “An outer garment; a long gown covering the whole body, or a cloak covering the neck and bosom”.⁶⁸ Further, by wearing the veil, a woman feels more secure, respected, modest and dignified. While concealing her sexuality, she is at the same time revealing her identity and femininity.⁶⁹ Of course, there are some extremists who, based on their understanding, have gone so far as to claim that the face should be covered. This interpretation has no support from the Quran or authentic Sunnah. The fact remains, however, that veiling is enjoined not to degrade women but to protect their modesty and sexuality; women wear the hijab not because they are under certain constraints, but to fulfil their religious commitment.

Polygyny

One of the most significant current discussions in the discourse on gender equality is the institution of polygamy, in the form of polygyny. This tradition is probably the most misunderstood and vehemently condemned by feminists and non-Muslims alike. According to Muslim tradition, a man has the right to marry up to four wives at any given time. In her attempt to challenge the institution of polygamy, Ahmad traces its origin and points out that it was institutionalised as a result of ‘intermingling’ with Judaic and Zoroastrian socio-religious systems brought about by Islamic conquests.⁷⁰ She further explains that the Abbasid dynasty (749-1258) appears to have been the worst regime in terms of women’s oppression. It engaged excessively in polygamy and concubinage, while secluding women from public and social life.⁷¹ In support of

⁶⁷ Abdallah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran: Text, Translation and Commentary*, 2 vols (Lahore: Ripon Printing Press, 1947), II, p.1126. (footnote 3764)

⁶⁸ Ibid, (footnote 3765).

⁶⁹ May Seikaly, ‘Women and Religion in Bahrain: An Emerging Identity’, in *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, ed. by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John Esposito (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), 169-189, (p.182).

⁷⁰ Ahmed, p. 62.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 83.

this, Mernissi concisely argues that sexual inequality is evident in the deep-rooted traditional Muslim family that “condemns women alone to monogamy and the control of sexual instinct”, while men are given the right to have “four legal wives” and to take “as many concubines” as their “purchasing power permits”.⁷² In adhering to this belief, al-Hibri asserts, “it seems rather evident that the whole issue of polygamy is the result of patriarchal attempts to distort the Quran in the male’s favour.”⁷³ The pertinent verse in the Quran that has been used to justify polygyny is:

Marry women of your choice, two or three or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one... 4: 3.

According to al-Hibri, those who are determined to practice polygyny tend to overlook another relevant Quranic passage that reads:

You are never able to be fair and just among women, even if you tried hard ... 4:129

This justice lies in the practical impossibility of sharing love equally in a relationship involving more than one wife. Barlas shares this view, contending that since a man is emotionally incapable of loving more than one wife equally, polygyny is illegal.⁷⁴

One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether polygamy is the rule or an exception. The Quran clearly explains that polygyny is an exception, not the rule, given that the only direct reference to polygyny is in passage 4:3, which stipulates its conditional permissibility. It is clear from the verse in question that polygyny was legalized to address the contingencies of the Battle of Uhud, where dozens of Muslims died, leaving a number of widows and orphans behind. As a result of this imbalance, polygyny was permitted to provide a moral, financial and practical solution to their problems. The main weakness of the arguments is the failure to contextualise the endorsement of polygyny in some Middle Eastern countries. In Egypt, for example, polygyny was endorsed when women started demanding their equal right to divorce in the 1960s.⁷⁵ Some have argued that polygyny is an obstacle

⁷² Mernissi, p. 187.

⁷³ Azizah al-Hibri, ‘A Study of Islamic History’, in *Women in Islam*, ed. by Azizah al-Hibri (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1982), 207-219, (p. 217).

⁷⁴ Barlas, p. 191.

⁷⁵ Hatem, *Ibid.*

to the progress of a nation. A serious weakness with this argument, however, is that there is no link between polygyny and the degree of civilization of a nation, as this practice has been in existence everywhere over the centuries.⁷⁶ Further, the institution of polygyny is supported by way of three arguments. Firstly, while ensuring progeny through a second young wife, the system compassionately protects the older, sick, or barren wife against divorce.⁷⁷ Secondly, polygyny is an effective way of addressing demographic problems created by wars.⁷⁸ Thirdly, polygyny is far better than the type of monogamy practiced in some countries, which permits extramarital sexual relationships and consequently leads to social hypocrisy.⁷⁹

Conclusion

This study has shown that the emergence of feminism in the Middle East coincided with the struggle of anti-imperialist and nationalist movements in the early nineteenth century. In the process of transformation of Egyptian society, two different schools of thought were formulated: one reformist and the other conservative. While modernists believed in reconciling Islam with modernity to effect their agenda of reform, conservatives viewed such moves as a threat. Furthermore, the debate on women's status became a hotly contested ideological terrain that created a dichotomy between upper-middle-class and bourgeois intellectuals. While the former appeared to be supporting the emancipation of women, the latter become more or less sceptical about the project and consequently rejected the notion. As a result, women were manipulated by a secularist elite as symbols of progressive aspirations or cultural authenticity. This development formed the basis of women's struggle for identity within the Islamic paradigm. By creating a new atmosphere for dialogue between Muslim and secular feminists, Islamic feminism destroys the hostility that existed between secular and religious thought. The basic argument of Islamic feminists is that the principles of equality of all human beings are enshrined in the Quran, but that

⁷⁶ Hatem, *Ibid.* p. 13.

⁷⁷ Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, *Abqariyyat Muhammad* (Beirut: Dar al Kitab al-Lubnani, 1974), p.119.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Bint al-Shati, p. 206; Yvonee Yazbeck Haddad, 'Islam and Gender: Dilemmas in the Changing Arab World', in *Islam, Gender and Social Change*, ed. by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John Esposito (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), 3-29, (p. 13).

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practicing this equality has been impeded by patriarchal interpretations. Gender issues have continued to hold centre stage in the increasingly ardent modernist-feminist debate over reconciling an authentic modernity with an authentic Quran-centred Islam. The extent to which textual approaches and concomitant scripture-based paradigms vary on women's issues reflects the pluralism that characterizes contemporary Islamic thought.

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