Islamic Feminism: Unveiling the Western Stigma

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Any discussion of the Muslim woman provokes responses urging liberation. The picture of a Muslim woman is directly linked despite our goals to live harmoniously in our idealistic notion of the pluralistic and diverse society we have resisted the acceptance of the mystical, mysterious, and often misunderstood religion of Islam as it enters the realm of modernity and western secularization. The single most contentious issue is the oppression of women that is associated with Islam. Our post 9/11 society has forced a necessary re-examination of Islam. The picture is dismal. Through our western lens we see an oppressed, weakened woman, stripped of her “equal rights”, forced to “veil” her sexuality, and mandated as inferior by the tenets of Islamic principle. We seek justifications through liberal interpretations of the Qu’ran, the holy book of the Muslims yet still find ourselves unable to reconcile the conflicts. The historical background, social setting, the cultural context, and the normative paradigms are too simplistically transcended by the demands of a “feminist agenda”. A push for a reform is demanded by the Western feministic powers that both influence and control the fate of the Muslim woman’s reputation, both in Muslim societies as well as in the Western world. It is a militant and mechanical feminism that falls prey to the belief that “Islam is deeply anti-woman” and that it is the “fundamental cause of the repression of women”. This view is perpetuated and fueled and as a consequence denies any other
reality for the Muslim woman. This is not to imply that a movement that urges social justice in all spheres of life is not of grave concern; but this so called “feminist” movement has become less about pushing true liberation of Muslim women but rather a concerted effort to justify, if not defend, true Islamic tradition.

The question that I pose and attempt to uncover is whether or not a mechanical, rigid, modern understanding of “feminism” can be used as a crutch to illustrate the oppression of women in Islamic tradition. Can such feminism be used to advocate absolute equality for Muslim women without an understanding of what Islamic tradition truly encompasses? Acclaimed feminist scholar, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, answers no. She notes, “the Western feminist movement seem[s] to require a single movement, a single definition, the same life for all women, a universalistic ideology”. Fernea’s observations are poignant. The effort on the part of the “Western feminists” fails in its very own social context, let alone at the universal level. Although the movement has accomplished enormous reform, in terms of equal protection laws and basic rights granted to the Western woman, it has clearly fallen short in application. The examples are endless. The Western woman still faces challenges of living in a misogynistic society. The woman of the Western world has not attained the “elevation” from the patriarchal dominance. The examples of this are rampant. The Western woman works, she can make “free” choices, she can vote, participate in politics, she has the protection of the laws, but what is of greater significance is what these rights truly give her. Does she struggle to be seen as a person as opposed to a “sex object”? Can she rely on justice in the cases of rape to come to her rescue? Does our media and pop culture, which is an output of social and cultural expectations, wants, desires, and demands, depict her militant equality? How do the cultural and social demands on the Western woman affect her status, her “equality”? I argue that her status is greatly affected. The Western woman’s struggles for equality are directly connected to the social and cultural norms of her society that confine her. Although the “equality” is facially

5 Id at pg. 175 of text.
delineated, the inequality is prevalent. Thus, the goals of Western feminism are necessarily different although clearly just as complex. What Fernea points out, but does not elaborate on is that the “feminism” that would be pushed upon women within the Islamic traditions would run counter to their specific cultural context and their particular social goals. What type of “feminism” then is needed in order to describe, justify, and explain the goals of the Muslim women? Is such a movement, clearly adopted from the western ideology, necessary? Can such a movement indeed relieve the actual suppression that so many Muslim women suffer? If so, can it also end the “perceived” oppression of Muslim women? And lastly, should the norm of a Muslim woman’s freedom be dictated by the demands of a Western feministic ideology, itself inherently problematic and challenging?

There is no clear answer to these questions. It has been suggested that women’s rights are so severely repressed by Islamic tradition that the push for reform is necessary. There has been much scholarly discourse regarding the new wave of Muslim feminism or as Fernea labeled it: “Islamic Feminism”. Fernea purposely labels it as such to include the specific religious, cultural, and social contexts from which the Muslim woman views her position. It becomes so difficult to justify or explain within the confines of the “Western” ideal since the goals are inherently different: “they [do] not subscribe to feminists tenets of equality between men and women...a far cry from western feminist beliefs”. The fact a Muslim woman from a Muslim society does not subscribe to the same type equality is not indicative of a “religious” oppression per se. Rather, I suggest that it is a

6 Fernea, supra note 4, discussion of Fernea’s position on Islamic feminism as articulated in her book.
7 Id.
8 Id.
9 Fernea, supra note 6, cultural and social contexts examined through her travels to various Muslim societies and interviews with Muslim women who view themselves as “Muslim feminists” at page, 178 of text.
misconception of the Islamic tenets and a socio-cultural consequence. It is not that Muslim women do not "fight" for equality nor is it the case that the Muslim woman succumbs to subservience because it is mandated by her oppressive religion. Instead, the Muslim woman does "fight". Her Islamic feminism does not fault Islam as a religion for her inequality, and rather argues that the Qu’ran is in full support of male-female equity. The evidence of this fact is clear. The Qu’ran states: “For Women who submit to God and for Women who submit to God, for Believing Women, for devout men, for devout Women, for truthful men, for truthful women, for humble men and humble women.... for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty reward”. This is not to say that the Qur’an does not contain verses that imply “inequity” between men and women. But as many Muslim scholars argue, this “inequity” is not to advocate placing the Woman beneath a Man. Rather, it is to illustrate inherent differences between the sexes that are factually indisputable and to account for every possibility within social and cultural contexts. Dr. Azizah al-Hibri, a Muslim feminist living in the United States postulates that in order to see the full rights ordained to women, you have to go to the whole Qu’ran...[this] is because the Qu’ran is a seamless web. You cannot understand one part of it...because there is a whole picture which is interconnected and each part supports the other. So if you take only one part of it, the picture will be unbalanced. So I am advocating that [we] go back to the Qu’ran...[which

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12 Tahrike Tarsile, The Qu’ran, (Murtaza Bandali/ALIF International, 1995), at surah 33:35.

may have a] necessarily cultural interpretation, which may have been patriarchal.\textsuperscript{14}

In order to do this, it is necessary to understand and accept the given cultural, social, and political historical background from which the Qu’ran was and is still interpreted.\textsuperscript{15} In doing this it would be difficult to refute the fact that much of human history has been patriarchal. In fact Biblical tradition grounds itself in the deprivation of women’s rights and positively advocates inequality between the sexes.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, it becomes less about a divine ordainment and more of a political agenda. Fatima Mernissi observes, “it is neither because of the Qu’ran…nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because [women’s] rights conflict with the interests of a male elite…Not only have the sacred texts always been manipulated, but the manipulation of them is a structural characteristic of the practice of power…”\textsuperscript{17}

If we accept these propositions we must account for how and why there are obvious differences between the Western women’s fight for equality and the Muslim women’s struggle to be seen as free. First, the social and cultural contexts are plainly different. While Western feminism preaches a mechanical equality between the sexes and allows for no distinction between the sexes, Islamic feminism, as Fernea would call it, accepts the metaphysical equality that is ordained by the Qu’ran. What the Muslim woman argues is that such equality and demand for justice is not only established by a “simple parity between the principles in society”.\textsuperscript{18} There are gender spheres whether accepted or not. This is true not only in the Islamic tradition but in the Western one as well. Patriarchal Society dictates it but the practice may vary from culture to culture. Absolute parity is itself an untouchable,
metaphysical goal that is almost impossible to attain. This does not mean that "equality" in the practical sense is not necessary or possible. Leila Ahmed, another noted Muslim feminist notes that there are two competing notions in the Qu’ran that seem incompatible at first glance, “an ethical egalitarian voice and a pragmatic perspective that acknowledges societal patriarchy.”

For example, the veiling of Muslim women is a controversial and highly disputed issue in any discourse on women’s rights in Islam; however, one has yet to find a single verse in the Qu’ran that mandates forced veiling of women. How can such an issue become so distorted? The answer is once again simple. We neglect to account for the social, political, and cultural forces at work. Forced veiling is not advocated by the Islamic tradition, but by the patriarchal societies that create law. Furthermore, the culture in which women freely choose to veil must be acknowledged in order to be understood just as elements within culture must be examined to understand the context. Western culture cannot be taken into account in an attempt to impose their feminist ideology upon the Muslim women. In fact, “feminism in the Western society, has generally denied any [gender] differentiation.” What is ironic that Western pop culture illustrates otherwise. The examples are prevalent. Women are not viewed in a “simple parity” to the male in Western culture. The images of women are an excellent example. Western society faces a laundry list of obstacles to her absolute equality. And so similarly does the Muslim woman struggle to overcome her obstacles, which are purely the result of an “alien, ideological intrusion”. If the goal of Western feminism is to uncover the evil that perpetrates and stigmatizes the Muslim woman she should look to the social, political, and cultural roots that perpetuate such injustices rather than distort the faith that grants her equality. If Western feminism is truly moved by the

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20 Supra note 19.
21 Supra note 11.
22 Id.
Muslim woman’s goals she should accept the ideological, philosophical, and cultural differences that the Muslim woman brings. Lastly, if the goal of Western feminism is a universal one, it should recognize the burden it places by imposing its values upon the goals of another.