

Notes

Islamic Feminism

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Often people object to the term ‘feminism’ as being a western terminology. One maulana, when invited to speak in a workshop of this title refused to come as feminism is un-Islamic. Is the use of this terminology objectionable from Islamic viewpoint? Not at all. In fact Islam is the first religion which systematically empowered women when women was considered as totally subservient to man. There was no concept of her being an independent entity and enjoying equal right with dignity.

What is feminism? Nothing but women’s movement to empower her and to consider her full human being and not mere second sex as ‘Simon de Bouire called her. Thus we see in western countries until early part of twentieth century she did not enjoy an independent status. It was only after thirties of twentieth century that she won equal status legally and various western countries passed the laws to this effect. Yet patriarchy is looming large on her in these countries.

Though Qur’an empowered her and gave equal status but Muslims were far from ready to accept gender equality. The Arab culture was too patriarchal to accept equality. Many ahadith were readied to scale down her status and she, in most of the Islamic societies became dependent entity and Qur’anic formulations were so interpreted as to make her subordinate to men. One hadith even said that if *sajdah* (prostration) were permitted before human beings, she would have been asked to prostrate before husband.

This is totally contradictory to the Qur’an but who cares. It is patriarchy which influences our laws, not Qur’an. In fact when it comes to patriarchy it prevails over the Qur’an. Either Qur’anic formulations were disregarded or so interpreted as to conform them to patriarchy. Now time has come to understand the real spirit of the Qur’an. But

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Islamic world still does not seem to be ready. What is worse due to poverty and ignorance Muslim women themselves are not aware of their Qur'anic rights. A campaign has to be launched to make women aware of these rights.

Another important question is what is the difference between Islamic and western feminism or is there any difference at all. If we go by definition of feminism as an ideology of empowerment of women, there is no difference. However, historically speaking Muslim women lost the rights they had due, mainly, to feudalization of Islam dominated by patriarchal values. In the West, on the other hand, women had no rights and but won through great deal of struggle and this struggle came to be known as 'feminism' i.e. women's empowerment.

But there are significant differences also between Islamic and western feminism. Islamic feminism is based on certain non-negotiable values i.e. equality with honour and dignity. Freedom has certain Islamic responsibility whereas in the West freedom tends to degenerate into licentiousness, though not in law but certainly in social and cultural practices. In western culture sexual freedom has become a matter of women's right and sex has become matter of enjoyment and lost its sanctity as an instrument of procreation.

Though Qur'an does not prescribe *hijab* or *niqab* (covering whole body with a loose garment and face as well) as generally thought but does lay down certain strict norms for sexual behavior. Both man woman have right to sexual gratification (a woman has as much right to sexual gratification as man) but within marital frame-work. There is no concept of freedom for extramarital sex in any form. Sex is permissible only with marital framework. Sex, as far as Islam is concerned, is not mere enjoyment but an act for procreations and hence has sanctity.

It is important here to emphasize that in a patriarchal society men decided the norms of sexual behavior. It was theorized that man has greater urge for sex and hence he needs multiple wives and woman tends to be passive and hence has to be content with one. This is not true as far as Qur'an is concerned. Qur'an's approach is very different. It is not greater or lesser degree of sexual urge which necessitates multiple or monogamous marriage.

Whole emphasis is on monogamous marriage (in both the Qur'anic verses i.e. 4:3 and 4:129). Multiple marriages were permitted only to take care of widows and orphans and not for greater sexual urge and the verse 4:129 gives the norm of monogamy and not to leave first wife in suspense or neglected. Thus as far as Qur'an is concerned sexual gratification is a non-negotiable right for both man woman. And hence a

divorcee and a widow are also permitted to marry and gratify their sexual urge.

Also, in western capitalist countries women's dignity has been compromised and she has been reduced to a commodity to be exploited. Her semi-naked postures and her sexuality is exploited commercially unabashedly. It is totally against the concept of woman's honour and dignity. Unfortunately western feminists do not consider this as objectionable but accept it as part of woman's freedom. Some (though not many) even advocate prostitution as woman's right to earn her bread.

This is against the concept of Islamic feminism as while sanctioning sexual gratification as much right of woman as that of man, it prohibits extra-marital sexual liaison and on one hand upholds dignity and honour of woman and on the other, exalts sex on the level of sanctity and restricts it for procreation. Thus it would be seen that discourse of Islamic feminism, while having something in common with modern western feminism, it also significantly differs from it. Islamic feminists have to observe certain norms which modern western feminists are not obliged to.