

# Islamic Feminism and Social Change: A Conceptual Framework

Aurangzaib Alamgir<sup>1</sup>

Zafarullah<sup>2</sup>

Muhammad Zakir<sup>3</sup>

Corresponding Author: [alamgeer84@hotmail.com](mailto:alamgeer84@hotmail.com)

## Abstract

*Does religion motivate social change? How Islamic feminists use Islam as a source of social change and gender equality. Can Islamic feminist discourses be translated and located into the local cultures of Muslim societies? To elaborate on these questions, a comprehensive debate on the discourses and strategies of Islamic feminists is discussed in this paper. It contributes to a thought that Islamic feminism and its fundamentals are negotiable and located within the framework of Islam.*

### **Religion and Social Change**

Religion is an uncertain expression which suffers from a comprehensive vocabulary. For instance, as an inclusive term, religion can be defined as a conviction that unites a society/community, a structured collective of people with the same belief and a set of standard actions and practices (Taylor, 1996). In contrast, the exclusive view of religion is that of a belief in God which recognizes religion as a subject of study and a potential force of generating social change. The connection between religion and social change is not permanent and may differ depending on the character of a particular religion, the society in which it is practiced, and the kind of social structures at any particular time and place. Anthony Giddens also argues that a social construct and structure influences a particular society in many ways; therefore, the argument of whether or not religion brings about social change or not is not conclusive because the relationship between religion and social change is a two-way street (Giddens, 1984).

Among feminists there is a diversity of views towards religion and social change. For instance, Anderson (1998) offers a valuable scholarship on feminist understanding of religion. She argues that feminist understanding of religion is an informed perspective based on the experiences of women who have been oppressed and exploited. Feminist discourses on religion evolve from the fact that women are oppressed by certain monotheistic sacred dogmata. In this particular sense, feminist philosophy on religion and social change is significant as it emphasizes an exceptional consideration of sacred practices – often stimulating gender characters.

### **Islamic Feminism and Social Change**

In the context of Social change, Islamic feminists involve in dialogues concerning the dilemma of interpretation, the Arab Muslim culture, and modern Muslim society that is facing global challenges and demands change. Islamic feminists engage in discourses that portrays Muslim women's equal rights. They do so by advancing a modern understanding of religion – one that disapprovingly scrutinizes outdated clarifications of the text. As they believe it delineates a partial attitude

towards Muslim women (Mohsen-Byadsi, 2009). From a rather Islamic feminist perspective, the problem is not the religion but the traditional interpretation that oppresses Muslim women (Barazangi, 2004; Anwar, 2005). For example, in Islam, the repressive nature of religion towards women was not intended, as issues like forced marriages are not written in the Qur‘an but come from the cultures that Islam was practiced in.

Furthermore, religion contains in it a dimension of the public and this is the reason why research on society and gender has to take this dimension into consideration. Not only that, gender as an analytical tool also provides significant perspectives for analyzing issues pertaining to women’s rights. Therefore, the significance of religion in women’s everyday life has been acknowledged and emphasized in scholarly literature (Sarkar, 2002; Jeffery & Basu, 1998). As noted by Randi Warne, –Gender as an analytical category, and gendering as a social practice, are central to religion, and the naturalization of these phenomena and their subsequent under-investigation have had a deleterious effect on the adequacy of the scholarship that the scientific study of religion has produced (Warne, 2000: 153). In fact, clarity is needed when gender issues are debated in a particular religion as their practice may differ. However, the commonly discussed gender issues which may be the product of religion are values regarding family and sexual norms, as well as beliefs about the gender of divinity and the meaning of the human gender.

Until recently, women in the Third World Countries were all perceived as backward and oppressed while Western women were perceived to be forward, modern and liberated (Lindsay, 1980; Jeffery, 1979). This perception is created by the media and the education system. An example of this is *Not without My Daughter* – a popular film and book which exaggerates the implication of veiling as a fence and how it distinguishes between Muslims and non-Muslims. The movie replicates a different observation of Muslim women against the authenticity of Muslim women’s everyday lives. This is what Said names as –orientalism (Said, 2001; 1979). The discourse of Orientalism shapes an orient – which is discursive and linguistic and not merely practically experienced. This contains in it, dual functions: (1) it asserts the notion of western dominance and (2) describes –West’s normality by attributing the foreign, the forbidden, and the dangerous to the orient (Ibid).

However, such kinds of writings have been criticized. For instance, Chandra Mohanty argues that such scholarship portrays Muslim women as oppressed by characterizing Third World disparities to gender relations. This portrayal is envisaged by a perception that women in the west are open-minded, secular, enlightened and exercise control on their life, which is not the case in the Third World Countries. However, it is apparent that this liberation and secularization is not the case for every women in the west, as not all western women are liberated – just as not – all women in Islamic societies match the preconceived image of the Muslim women (Mohanty, 1988; 2003). Similarly, Islam is not equally perceived by all Muslim women, as the perceptions of Muslim women about Islam is subjective to their educational level, background and position in a particular society. Mohanty further argues that there are many feminist scholars who write and portray Muslim women as immobilized and had their rights subjugated but unfortunately only few researchers engage and explore Muslim women's preferences, liberty, and autonomy. They are agents of change in their respective communities and acquire power and agency within the family and society. Similarly, feminist theory also represents Muslim women as immobilized persons lacking political maturity and therefore can be directed/ guided by Western feminism. In short, it is not fair and impractical to see all Muslim women as a homogenous group and overlooking the historical, economical and geographical dissimilarities between them.

Moreover, the subjugation linked with Muslim women transversely appears not only by –patriarchal doctrines|| but also by religious laws that are disseminated all in the name of culture (Imran, 2013). As a matter of fact, gender relations and feminist issues have always been central to religious and political discourse in the majority of Muslim countries. Undoubtedly, there exists a bulk of literature on gender roles in Islam and most importantly women's rights in Islam. However, the said literature is paradoxically altered with a fundamental thought as interpretation the only source and cause of women oppression (Barlas, 2006; Wadud, 2005, 1999) However, it should be noted that gender and Islam are vast and deep topics of discussion, both subject to multiple discourses with wide perspectives.

### **Islamic Articulated way of Social Change**

In this context, an important approach is of Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman's that Islamic societies are facing multi-dimensional crises – encompassing education, economic, political and social dimensions (Sulayman: 1982). Following his approach, I would argue that the above mentioned crises have anticipated a pessimistic thought about Islam in the Western world. As a result, there is a sense of understanding that Islam is a religion that opposes social change and that causes the backwardness of Islamic societies. This view mainly comes from orientalist who may not be familiar with the ways social change is fortified in Islam. That is the reason, Islam is regarded as a -tradition-bound system (Walters & Timothy, 2005; Cook, 2011). Max Weber is one of the scholars who argues that -Islam with its thoroughly traditionalistic ethic directed in the conduct of life into paths whose effect was plainly opposite to methodical control of life found among puritans (Weber, 1968: 627). What is missing in Weber's analysis is the realization that Islam in reality shows flexibility and provides guidance to transform the social formation of a society if necessary. Its teaching and revelations are aimed at employing and modifying change in society. Therefore, social change and transformation should take place within the parameters of Islamic laws particularly *Shari,ah* laws. *Shari,ah* laws can be categorized into two: (1) fundamental principles, not subject to change in any circumstances such as the inheritance laws, (2) supplementary principles subject to change based on the need and progress of the society. These laws work in tandem with our lives. In such circumstances, *Ijtihād* (independent reasoning) is used as a method in decision making (Jameelah, 1981: 153). Based on the definite nature and rules of Islam it can be concluded that there may be other reasons for the backwardness of Muslim women and not only attributed to the religion per se. (Ibid).

Islam's way of change is linked with the essential and everlasting concept of *Tawhid* (doctrine of oneness of Allah). This suggests that the philosophy of social change is conditional in Islam and therefore grounded by *Tawhid* (Mohamed & Baqutayan, 2011). Parts from *Tawhid*, there are also other concepts in Islam like *tajdid* (renewal) and *Islāh* (reform).

While explaining the Islamic way of social change, it is important to make some clarifications that sometimes the cultural obstacles to social change are also associated with religion, even though they are not Islamic. Therefore, there is a need to recognize tangible norms and customs that

shape religious perceptions. For instance, pre-existing social structures and power relations are important factors in formulating social and religious practices. As a result, social practices not associated with religion are probably in disagreement with the religious text but often justified as religious norms. Therefore, religion as an ideology has not only the potential to legitimize existing structures and power relations but can also be used to challenge them.

From the above discussion, we assume that Islam encourages social change but within a specific framework namely, the foundation of *Tawhid* is maintained and the change is driven from the Qur'an. Both these essentials are demonstrated in the philosophy of Islamic feminists who use the primary source of Islam namely, the Qur'an to argue for women's rights. For instance, Islamic feminists draw support from the Qur'anic verse -- Al-Quran, Surah an-Nur, 24: 30-31 – on the subject of modesty. This particular verse instructs Muslim men to protect their modesty by lowering their gaze. This implies that preventing immorality is the equal responsibility of both men and women (Neo, 2003).

Islamic feminists employ a contextual reading of the Qur'anic verses that uphold the principle of justice in Islam. They believe that while Islam allows polygamy, but at the same time discourages it because the condition of justice seems almost impossible. They also believe that the practice of polygamy can be reduced through education and awareness. Therefore, they educate women on the inclusion of non-polygamy clause in their marriage contracts by referring to the example of Prophet's granddaughter – who included a non-polygamy clause in her marriage contract. By referring to examples from the Qur'an and the *hadith*, Islamic feminists have shown that support can be drawn for Muslim women from the Islamic text and this is what they call an Islamic framework.

## **Conclusion**

It is apparent that contextualizing Muslim women's rights in Islam is of utmost importance. During the course of writing this paper, we engaged in a sort of discussion that outlines the problems and complications faced by activists in promoting and advancing the very cause of women oppression by religion. In conclusion, we have reached to a finding that the women's rights in Islam are notable and in some way

analogous with universal human rights. In addition, we are also convinced that Islamic text renders maximum rights for Muslim women but the male-controlled clarifications make women oppressive. Moreover, the tents of Islamic feminism are passable and open to debate and discourse – therefore making it easy to make consensus on certain issues regarding women and Islam.

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