



Misinterpretation and Misrepresentation of Women's rights in Islam: An Islamic feminist study of Malala's *I Am Malala*

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Abstract— *It is a widely accepted fact that women around the world have been subjugated, dominated and denied their rights in one way or another. But Muslim women in particular have been walking on a double-edged sword of Modernism and Islam. Some Islamic scholars have come to terms to a new branch of feminism: Islamic feminism. Many activists have worked for the rights of women within the frame work of Islam. One such voice is that of Nobel peace laureate Malala Yousafzai.*

Keywords— *Feminism, Islam, Islamic feminism, Malala Yousafzai, Women rights.*

The rights of women in Islam is one of the most controversial topics when it comes to the relevance of Islam in the contemporary era. Since the Qur'an was revealed in ancient Arabic, and it contains some verses that can only be understood in the context of the times they were revealed, it becomes really important to understand the historical background of such revelations. At present, numerous verses have been misunderstood and misinterpreted which has directly impacted the interpretation of the core concepts of Islam or the Quran, and, which in turn has resulted in the continuous discrimination of women against men. That is why feminists in the West consider Islam to be a religion that oppresses women.

However, such ideas of the western feminists have enraged many scholars who have been working for gender equality but considered that the problem was not religion, but rather a misapplication of its ideas in the context of Islam. As a result, Islamic Feminism developed as a new wellspring of feminism. The term Islamic feminism began to surface in the 1990s in various global locations. Iranian scholar and anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini has exposed the rise and use of the term Islamic feminism by some prominent writers, both male and

female, especially those who were writing in the Teheran women's journal *Zanan*, founded by Shahla Sherkat in 1992. After the surfacing of this term, it was used by many Muslim writers and scholars for example Saudi scholar Mai Yamani used the term in her 1996 book *Feminism and Islam*, Nilüfer Göle, in *The Forbidden Modern*, used the term Islamic feminism to describe a new feminist paradigm emerging in Turkey, South African activist Shamima Sheikh has frequently employed the term Islamic feminism in her speeches and articles. By the mid-1990s, Muslims had established and disseminated an increasing amount of evidence of Islamic feminism around the world. As of today, the word is generated in a variety of locales around the world.

The current movement of Islamic feminism emerged in the eighteenth century. Iranian poet Tahiri was the first modern woman to tackle Qur'anic exegesis. In reality, Islamic scholars who were passionate about women's equality in Muslim nations began to research Islam's feminism in Egypt. The rise of nationalism in former colonial countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and others also heightened Islamic intellectuals' awareness of the need to restore lost traditions and bring society back into line with their

religion. These Islamic intellectuals fought not just to increase awareness of their people's nationality, but also to include gender equality within Islam. Egypt's Qasim Amin, a physicist, had fought for equal possibilities in space and the women's revolution. He was a strong advocate of women's rights, particularly the right to education. He believes that women should be educated in order to educate the next generation. His activities inspired more scientists to rethink the practices that have been carried out in the name of Islam and utilized as a tool of oppression against women. Nabawiyya Musa, Malak Hifni, NashifBek, Ashghar Ali Engineer, Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Margot Badran, and others fought alongside Muslim thinkers to establish female equality in Islam.

According to Margot Badran, Islamic feminism emerged out of critique of both patriarchal Islam(ism) as well as of secular feminism. According to the Iranian feminist Ziba Mir-Hosseini who initially supported the Islamic revolution in Iran, Islamic feminism appeared at the time of an accelerating Islamist movement. She, in *Marriage on Trial: Islamic Family Law in Iran and Morocco*, says that the Iranian state, "perhaps unintentionally has created new spaces for debate on women's rights within *Sharia*". She sees the advent of Islamic feminism in Iran as a paradox or as the "unwanted offspring" of Islamic Islamism. With the rise of Islamism, the rights of women under Muslim law were available to dispute in a public debate. Mir-Hosseini claims that as the Islamic Republic of Iran has developed, Muslim female activists have come to the conclusion that patriarchal law has made *Sharia* rules Islamically unfair. Iranian women have begun to question the legitimacy of the state's monopoly on *Sharia* interpretation and application in public and private areas of life. Islamist women in Iran, on the other hand, do not support the government; instead, they try to wring rights from it using the same Quran that the government uses.

Mir-Hosseini in *Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Sharia in Post-Khomeini Iran* asks:

To what degree, and how, may *Sharia* texts renegotiate women's constraints? ... It's possible, perhaps inevitable, that *Sharia* "feminist" will be spoken again... This is because, while in power, *Sharia* guardians must reconcile their objectives and rhetoric, which call for the preservation of the family and the restoration of women's "true and elevated" standing in Islam. The resulting tension – which is inherent in *Sharia* practise but is amplified by its association with the contemporary state – provides the door to new

interpretations of *Sharia* law on a scale never seen before in Islamic law history. (22)

Similar voices came from other Muslim countries who believed that the *Sharia* as imposed by the states is altogether different from the *Sharia* as declared by the Prophet (s.a.w.). Turabi claims in the same booklet, "Women played an important role in the Prophet's public life and were instrumental in the election of the third Caliph. Women were not denied their place in public life until much later, but history was far from ideal." (06) It asks for a "modern Quran interpretation" based on research freedom rather than historical constraints.

The central argument of Islamic feminists is that the Quran upholds the ideal of equal rights and justice for all human beings, but patriarchal attitudes, rituals, and practices in today's Muslim countries contaminate the practice of equality between women and men. They are attempting to interpret religious scriptures from a female perspective, and can be considered interpreters based on Islam's teachings of equality between men and women in both the private and public realms.

The African-American scholar Amina Wadud in her book *Quran and Women: Re-reading the Sacred Texts*, asserts female equality with men at the time of creation and in terms of religious piety or *taqwa*. She concludes that Muslim feminists "adapted" their belief that Islam should be "contextualized" in order to promote gender equality alongside their faith. Both men and women have fought *Sharia* law restrictions affecting women, such as strict covering, separate schooling, isolation, polygamy, and concubinepractice, since the 19th century. In the course of addressing these social problems, Muslim women have begun to urge legal change, construct girls' schools, and criticize cover-up and polygyny.

Malala Yousafzai, the youngest ever Nobel Peace Prize recipient, was born on July 12, 1997, in the northwest district of Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, to a Sunni Muslim family of Pashtun ethnicity. Malalai of Miland is a well-known Pashtun poet and warrior from southern Afghanistan (meaning "grief knocked"). Her last name, Yousafzai, comes from a large Pashtun tribal confederation in Pakistan's Swat Valley, where she grew up.

She attracted the world's attention for her battle for women's rights. Malala was inspired by Mohammed Ali Jinnah and Benazir Bhutto, and aspired to be like her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, a humanitarian and social activist. His daughter was inspired to go to school and advocate for females' educational rights. She spoke freely on the need of girls' education, and even when the Taliban occupation in Swat Valley, Pakistan, had obliterated all

prospect of girls' education, she rallied for their right to attend school. That's why an extreme group shot her on the left side of her skull, critically wounding her. Rather than weakening her, this experience strengthened her, and her commitment to her purpose was strengthened. The goal was to give girl children a free, safe, and high-quality education. She established a charitable organization. Malala took the bullet for girls' education and is hailed as a model of bravery. She is a role model for women refugees and women all over the world.

She has energized and enthused the feminist movement all around the world. She co-authored the story of the girl *Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban* with Christina Lamb in her memoir, and she still works to attain her goals today. The story of Malala is that of power, bravery and victory of good over evil. she has stood up for the rights of women, especially the right to education. But the beauty of her stand is that she has demanded those things within the framework of religion and that is how her approach resonates with that of Islamic Feminists.

The story begins with Malala being shot in her school bus by masked men. She has captured the instances where her father stood up to certain clerics regarding girl's education. When those men pointed out that women are not supposed to receive education, her father quoted from the Quran that both men and women have been asked by the Almighty to educate themselves and learn whatever good they can. Similarly, on another occasion, there arose a conflict regarding her father's school. A mullah named Ghulamullah watched girls coming and going from the school each day. He "called himself a mufti", which meant he was an Islamic scholar and authority on Islamic law. He reached out to the property owner and accused Ziauddin of running a *haram* (forbidden) school. He blamed that the receptionist at the school is a male and that the girls entering the schools should be in *purdah*. He went to the owner and offered him to give the building to him to open a *madrassa*. But the owner refused the offer and told Malala's father to watch out for him. The mufti gathered several elders and influential leaders and brought them to Malala's house. To Malala's father, the man argued, "A girl is so sacred she should be in *purdah*, and so private that there is no lady's name in the Quran, as God doesn't want her to be named". But her father points out that Maryam's (Mary's) name is mentioned in the Quran, to which mufti finds himself speechless. Her father questions his scholarship in Islam by pointing out that he never responds to his greetings. To Ziauddin's surprise, he replies that he thought he was an infidel, but he could notice all the Qurans in his house. Her father finally gives the solution to the mufti's problem by saying that he will have the girls enter from another entrance which appeases

everyone except the mufti, but he leaves. The hypocrisy of it all was that the mufti's niece attended the school.

Conclusion: Malala through her memoir touches the issues of Muslim women not only from Afghanistan, but from all around the world. She talks about the importance of modest dressing, praying five times a day and following the religion but at the same time, she points out the discriminations done to women by the misinterpretation of various verses from the Quran. The solution, therefore, resides in one word: Education. Unless and until women educate themselves and learn what actually the word of God is, they will always be subjugated and exploited by power hungry and dominating patriarchs.

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