

Islamic Feminism Fully Exposed: Amina Wadud And Margot Badran vis-à-vis ‘Allama Yūsuf Al-Qaraḍāwī And Jamāl Badawī On Women’s Issues

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Abstract

Discourses on Islamic feminism are traced back to the 1980s but within three decades, it has spread globally and attracted many Muslim scholars from all over the world. However, since its inception, Islamic feminism has remained controversial, due to its term, agenda and stance on several issues on women, which are never accepted by several eminent Islamic scholars of contemporary times. This article discusses the views of Islamic feminists—the renowned scholar Amina Wadud, and the strong advocate, Margot Badran—and contemporary Islamic scholars—‘Allama Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī and Jamāl Badawī. Both the Islamic feminists and Islamic scholars are shown to ‘share’ their views on certain issues, somehow ‘bear’ each other on some others with some difference, yet ‘tear’ the views of each other on certain others due to diametrical differences. This raised a few questions on Islamic feminism which fully expose that the term ‘Islamic

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feminism’ has less of Islam but more of feminism and that it is not created to present the Islamic stand on women’s issues, but rather to promote feminism globally.

Keywords

Islamic feminism, equality, equity, complementarity, patriarchy, LGBTQI, imāmah of woman for a mixed congregation in public place.

Introduction

According to Margot Badran, an expert and a staunch protagonist of the so-called Islamic Feminism, discourses on Islamic Feminism may be traced back to the 1980s and 1990s. She writes: ‘In the 1980s and early 90s, a major paradigm shift in Muslim gender thinking—what would eventually become known as ‘Islamic feminism’—was underway.’¹ For the last three decades, Islamic feminism has spread globally producing vast literature with an ever increasing number of Islamic feminist scholars and activists. Badran observes: ‘Islamic feminism is a global phenomenon. It is not a product of East or West. Indeed, it transcends East and West. As already hinted, Islamic feminism is being produced at diverse sites around the world by women inside their own countries, whether they be from countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities.’² However, from its inception, the term ‘Islamic Feminism’ and its agenda remain debatable and contested.

This article discusses the views of Islamic feminism, as propounded by Amina Wadud, a well-known writer and speaker on women’s issues and Margot Badran, a strong supporter of Islamic feminism vis-à-vis highly reputed contemporary Islamic scholars, ‘Allama Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī and Jamāl Badawī, on the crucial issues of women. The two Islamic scholars have presented

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1. Margot Badran, “Replacing Islamic feminism”, online in *Sciences Po*, 12 November 2010, <http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceci>.
 2. Margot Badran, “Islamic feminism: what's in a name”, online in *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 7-23 January 2002 Issue No. 569. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu1.htm>.

their reflections and views on several contemporary and controversial issues. Compared to the towering Islamic scholars, the reputations of the Islamic feminists are far less. Furthermore, a gender difference exists between the Islamic scholars and the Islamic feminists due to an on-going direct Islamic critique by Muslim women scholars on Islamic feminism which requires time to come to the fore. Even al-Qaraḍāwī and Badawī have yet to present their critique on Islamic feminism as such on all its aspects. But their views on the concerned issues on women are referred to as Islamic stance to show the similarities and differences between them and the Islamic feminists. Moreover, an analysis of the views of the Islamic scholars on the given issues has yet to be made, thus, due to space constraints, only their views are presented. Hence, this part of the article should be taken only as a presentation of the views of Islamic scholars and Islamic feminists on certain women's issues rather than as a comparative analysis between them for all the above reasons.

This article comprises three parts with three sections to Part One.

In Part One, certain issues and concepts concerning women are 'shared' by both Islamic feminists and Islamic scholars, showing compatibility with each other. Yet, for certain other issues on women, they somehow 'bear' each other on some principles but differ on certain aspects. Nevertheless, they differ diametrically from each other on certain other issues and concepts, thus 'tearing' the views of each other. In the discussions, it becomes quite evident that the similarities between the Islamic scholars and the Islamic feminists are far less than the differences between them on certain crucial issues concerning women in Islam. This gives rise to two pertinent questions among many Muslim men and women scholars: Is Islamic feminism really Islamic or only about feminism? Is such Islamic feminism necessary for Muslim women to regain their rights and social justice for their development, when the Qur'ān and the Sunnah and the early Islamic history are more than sufficient for them to articulate and struggle for their rights?

Part Two highlights the contentious and problematic approach adopted by Amina Wadud to understand and interpret the Qur'ān on women's issues. Wadud tends to approach the

Qurʾān on a given issue or concept to see how far the Qurʾān can be interpreted in line with the present level of human understanding exerting hermeneutics. It is argued in the article that this is a kind of a reverse approach to the Qurʾān because the holy book should be a criterion as the Divine Guidance to judge human understanding and improve it, rather than vice versa. Such an approach is the main cause of the confusions in her overall understanding of the position and the rights of women.

Part three presents several important reasons to show that the term ‘Islamic feminism’ should not be used to defend and promote the rights of women in Islam and that Islamic sources are more than sufficient to launch a movement for women’s rights in Islam. Finally, a brief conclusion is presented.

Part One:

Islamic Scholars and Islamic Feminists Share, Bear and Tear Views of Each Other on Issues on Women

Section One: Sharing of views

On the creation of Ādam and Eve, Wadud in her work, *Qurʾān and Woman: Re-Reading the Text from a Woman’s Perspective*, rejects the well-known story that Eve was made from the rib of Ādam on the grounds that it gives rise to the superior and inferior images of men and women respectively. She points out that due to the lack of details in the Islamic sources on the issue of creation, perhaps, al-Zamakhsharī relied on the Biblical account of the creation that Eve was created from the rib of Ādam.³ Wadud’s elaborations of the words ‘*āyah*’, ‘*nafs*’, ‘*mīn*’ and ‘*zawj*’ are quite detailed.⁴ She then presents her opinion on the issue as follows: ‘In the Qurʾānic account of creation, Allāh never planned to begin the creation of humankind with a male person: or does it ever refer to the origins of the human race with Ādam.’⁵ Wadud asserts that Allāh has

3. Amina Wadud, *Qurʾān and Woman: Re-Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 20.

4. Ibid., 17-20.

5. Ibid., 19-20.

clearly mentioned in the Qurʾān that He has created everything in pairs.⁶

In relation to this, similarly, Jamāl Badawī refers to the following Qurʾānic verse:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allāh is (one who is) the most righteous of you. And Allāh has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).⁷

Badawī presents his views on the above verse:

The verse states that all human beings are created *min dhakarīn wa untha*, which can be translated literally as “of male and female.” This means in pairs, as the Qurʾān explicitly mentions elsewhere (e.g. 78: 8). Each component of the pair is as necessary and as important as the other and hence is equal to him or her. The wording of this verse has been commonly translated also as “from a (single pair of) a male and a female,” referring to Ādam and Eve.⁸

As far as the term *Qawwāmīn* is concerned, its meaning has implications on other terms such as equality, complementarity and patriarchy which shall be discussed later. Readers are invited to take note of the negative interpretation of the term by some scholars which is rejected by Wadud. Indeed, Wadud rightly asserts that some scholars interpret the word in terms of superiority and inferiority of men and women respectively.⁹ Firstly, she points out that the meaning of the verse is not restricted to family alone, but extends to society at large. Secondly, she asserts that the verse does not show the inherent superiority of men. She writes: ‘I apply this verse to society at large—but not on the basis of inherent superiority of men over women or of Allāh’s preference of men

6. Ibid., 21.

7. *al-Hujurāt* (49):13.

8. Jamāl Badawī, *Gender Equity in Islam: Basic Principles* (Halifax, Canada: The Islamic Information Foundation, 1999), p. 4.

9. Amina Wadud, *Qurʾān and Woman*, 71.

over women.¹⁰ She finds in the verse the functional relationship between husband and wife which Sayyid Qutb proposed, because she considers the importance of the responsibility of women of bearing children. Wadud writes: ‘The Qur’ān establishes his responsibility as *qiyāmah*: seeing to it that the woman is not burdened with additional responsibilities which jeopardize that primary demanding responsibility that only she can fulfill.’¹¹

Badawī also takes a very positive stand on the term, *Qawwāmūn*, as follows:

Nowhere does the Qur’ān state that one gender is superior to the other. Some interpreters of the Qur’ān mistakenly translate the Arabic word *qiyāmah* (responsibility for the family) with the English word “superiority.” The Qur’ān makes it clear that the sole basis for the superiority of any person over another is piety and righteousness, not gender, colour or nationality.¹²

Thus, quite clearly, the discussions in this section show the views of Islamic feminists and Islamic scholars are compatible with each other on certain issues.

Section Two: Both bear each other on certain principles but differ on certain aspects

On the issue of headship of woman of state, Wadud refers to Bilqīs, the Queen of Sheba, and asserts that she has demonstrated excellent abilities of leadership position as a Queen. She points out that although the Qur’ān discusses Bilqīs, and her method of consultation and all her other political abilities, Muslim scholars generally hold that women are not allowed to be political leaders in Islam. Wadud writes: ‘The Qur’ān uses no terms that imply the position of ruler is inappropriate for a woman. On the contrary, the Quranic story of Bilqīs celebrates both her political and

10. Ibid., 72.

11. Ibid., 73. As for the view of Sayyid Qutb on the subject, she referred to Sayyid Qutb, *Fī Zūlāl al-Qur’ān*, 6 Volumes, (Cairo: Dār al Shurūq, 1980), Vol. II, p. 650.

12. Jamāl Badawī, *Gender Equity*, p. 4. No doubt, the term, *Qawwāmūn*, is highly controversial among Muslim scholars. We have given here the views of Badawī since we are discussing his views in this article.

religious practices.¹³ In fact, Wadud points out how the Qurʾān highlights her capability of taking independent judgments which were better than the prevalent norms during that time and remarks: ‘This demonstration of pure wisdom established in the Qurʾān by a woman can hopefully be exhibited by a man as well.’¹⁴ Badran also writes: ‘Islamic feminism argues that women may be heads of state, leaders of congregational prayer, judges, and muftīs... Thus, Islamic feminism stands to benefit us all, Muslims of both sexes, as well as non-Muslims living side by side with Muslims everywhere.’¹⁵

On the same issue, Islamic scholar, ‘Allama Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī contends that the headship position is too heavy for a woman due to her physical disposition. However, according to him, this does not mean that a woman should not be allowed to take up the position because there can be a few exceptional cases. He writes:

This does not exhaust all possibilities since we are aware that some women could be even more capable than some men. One such example is the Queen of Sheba whose story is told by Allāh in the Qurʾān. She led her nation to happiness and well-being in this and the other life and submitted herself with Prophet Solomon to Allāh, Controller of the Worlds.¹⁶

Indeed, al-Qaraḍāwī does not totally reject the headship of woman, rather he reminds us of the fact that biological differences between men and women should be kept in due consideration.

On this issue, Jamāl Badawī writes: ‘There is no evidence from the Quran to preclude women from the headship of state.’¹⁷ He points out that some may refer to the Qurʾān (*al-Nisāʾ* [4]:34) which implies that men are the protectors and maintainers of women and may argue that the responsibility of men as

13. Amina Wadud, *Qurʾān and Woman*, 40.

14. *Ibid.*, 42.

15. Margot Badran, Islamic Feminism: What’s in Name?, *Al-Ahram*, online, 7-23 January, 2002, Issue no. 569, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/569/cu1.htm>.

16. ‘Allama Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *The Status of Woman in Islam*. <http://www.jannah.org/sisters/qaradawistatus.html>

17. Jamāl Badawī, *Gender Equity*, 13.

qawwāmūn includes family and state. Badawī says that *qiyāmah* deals with the particularity of family life, rather than the state.¹⁸ In relation to this, he refers to one of the oft-quoted Prophetic tradition narrated by Abū Bakrah:

During the battle of al-Jamal (in which ‘Ā’isha, the Prophet’s widow, led an army in opposition to ‘Alī, the fourth Caliph), Allāh benefitted me with a word. When the Prophet heard the news that the people of Persia had made the daughter of Khosrau their queen (ruler), he said, “Never will such a nation succeed as makes a woman their ruler.”¹⁹

Commenting on the ḥadīth, Badawī writes:

While this ḥadīth has been commonly interpreted to exclude women from the headship of state, other scholars do not agree with that interpretation. The Persian rulers at the time of the Prophet (P) showed enmity toward the Prophet (P) and toward his messenger to them. The Prophet’s response to this news may have been a statement about the impending doom of that unjust empire, which did take place later, and not about the issue of gender as it relates to headship of the state in itself.²⁰

However, the only point that Badawī raised similar to al-Qaraḍāwī is the physical and mental burden of the headship of state and the physical disposition of women which are not commensurate with the position. For instance, he points out the responsibilities of the head of State in Islam to lead the public prayers, socialise and travel, etc.²¹ In short, it can be said that according to Badawī, there is no objection from the Qur’ān and ḥadīth as such for the female headship of state except for the physical factor which is not commensurate with the state headship position. Thus, Islamic scholars, al-Qaraḍāwī and Badawī, hold similar views with the Islamic feminists that the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth do not present any

18. Ibid., 13.

19. Ibid., 14.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

objection for woman headship, but unlike Islamic feminists, they consider the physical differences between men and women.

Section Three: They tear their views of each other

‘Equality’ is often distinguished from ‘equity’ and often discussed in opposition to ‘compatibility’ and ‘patriarchy’. In this relation, it seems important to point out that earlier, Wadud is quite comfortable with the concept of ‘compatibility’ in Islam. She acknowledges that certain biological differences exist between male and female and that the Qur’ān points out such differences and the subsequent functional differences between men and women in certain areas of work. This can be understood from some of her views on *qawwāmīn* as discussed earlier.²²

However, Wadud subsequently changes her stance on compatibility and gives an amusing analogy. She declares: “We have to look for equality. We cannot get confused. Equity means to the complementary. It is like a man who wears an unfinished dress.”²³ Furthermore, in her first book, *Qur’ān and Woman* in 1999, Wadud asserts that the Qur’ān remains neutral to social and marital patriarchy. She writes: ‘With regard to some practices, the Qur’ān seems to have remained neutral: social patriarchy, marital patriarchy, economic hierarchy, the division of labor between males and females within a particular family.’²⁴ Later, in 2009, she said: ‘Patriarchy got us out of the caves but it can now be retired in favor of equality and compassion.’²⁵ What Wadud implies in the above statements can be understood better from Badran’s reply to Yoginder Sikand when he asked on her stance taken by the secular feminists on gender equality as follows:

Islamic Feminists who advanced a stringent critique of the notion of complementary gender roles in the family

22. Wadūd, *Qur’ān and Woman*, 8.

23. Wadūd, An interview by Azzurra Meringolo, “Portrait of a Muslim feminist”, in *Reset Dialogues on Civilizations*, Monday, 21 January 2013. <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000022177>.

24. Wadūd, *Qur’ān and Woman*, 9.

25. Trisha Sertori, “Dr. Amina Wadud: For a Progressive Islam”, Contributor, *Ubud, Life*, Thurs., 19 Nov. 2009, 10:33 AM JP/J.B. Djwan. <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/11/19/dr-amina-Wadūd-for-a-progressive-islam.html>

in favor of an egalitarian model of the family backed by strong arguments grounded in their re-readings of the Qur^ʿān.... It was the new interpretive work of the Islamic feminists that produced the idea of full gender equality within the context of the family—a gender equality that accounted for gender difference—as in keeping with Islam.²⁶

What do the Islamic feminists mean by ‘full gender equality’, and why do they reject complementarity and the term ‘equity’ as a package of patriarchy? Acceptance of full gender equality and rejection of complementarity and ‘equity’ imply enjoyment of the same rights as men in all aspects of life in family and society while neglecting the biological differences between men and women and their resultant functional differences in some areas of work. But the Islamic Feminists claim that they believe in gender equality while also accepting the gender difference and rejecting complementarity. This is self-contradiction. Acceptance of gender difference implies acceptance of certain gender roles through which men and women complement each other. In such an arrangement, no gender invades the equality and identity of another. Acceptance of complementarity does not mean inequality; rather it means true equality where the full identity of each gender with one’s own individuality and equality is fully recognised.

It is the reason that Islamic scholars either talk about equality with gender difference or they simply use the term, equity. Badawī writes:

The term “equity” is used instead of the more common expression “equality,” which is sometimes misunderstood to mean absolute equality in each and every detailed item of comparison rather than overall equality. Equity is used here to mean justice and overall equality in the totality of rights and responsibilities of both genders and allows for the possibility of variations in specific items within the

26. Natasha Latiff, *Profile & Interview by Yoginder Sikand: Margot Badran*, 25 October 2010. <https://natashalatiff.wordpress.com/2010/10/25/profile-interview-margot-badran/>

overall balance and equality.... It should be added that from an Islamic perspective, the roles of men and women are complementary and cooperative rather than competitive.²⁷

This shows that the problem lies in the Islamic Feminists who are confused and tried to join equality and identity together and describe it as full gender equality and look at complementarity as inequality. Thus, in this instance, Islamic scholars and Islamic feminists tear the opinions of each other on very important concepts – ‘equality’, ‘equity’ and ‘complementarity’.

On the *imāmah* of woman of mixed congregational prayers in the mosque, Wadud strongly asserts that Muslim women possess all rights to lead mixed congregational prayers, and to present the Friday sermon in the mosque. She declares that she seeks to reaffirm the role of women as spiritual leaders. On 18 March 2005, Wadud led Friday prayers in New York City at Synod House at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, an Episcopal church in Manhattan.²⁸

‘Allama Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī rejected and denounced the mixed congregational prayers led by Wadud in New York. However, he made it clear that he did not find any specific verdict in the Islamic texts which forbid woman leading mixed prayers. He writes: ‘...though if we review the religious texts pertaining to the rulings of Prayer, we will not find a text that states point blank that women are not permitted to lead people in prayer or deliver the Friday sermon.’²⁹ Nevertheless, he presents a few points which is preferably arranged in the following for further discussions. Firstly, a Prophetic tradition cited by al-Qaraḍāwī is about the best and the worst places for men and women in congregational prayers in the mosque: ‘The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) was reported to have said, “The women’s best rows (in Prayer) are the last ones, and the worst of theirs are the first ones, while the men’s best rows (in Prayer) are the first

27. Jamāl Badawī, *Gender Equality*, 18.

28. Pluralism Project at Harvard University: Research Report, The Woman-Led Prayer that Catalyzed Controversy. <http://www.pluralism.org/reports/view/111>.

29. Ibid.

ones and the worst of theirs are the last ones.”³⁰ The tradition, according to al-Qaraḍāwī, in no way supports the issue of women leading mixed congregational prayers. Secondly, according to al-Qaraḍāwī, no jurist seems to have agreed with the woman’s leading people in the Friday Prayer or delivering its sermon...’ Thirdly, he asserts that the body movements of a woman in front of men would distract their attention and this would disturb the men’s prayers. Certainly, this would hardly look appropriate and acceptable from the Islamic point of view.³¹

Badawī refers to a Prophetic tradition in which the Prophet allowed a woman companion to lead a congregational prayer which comprised her family members including a young boy and a muezzin (one who calls for prayers). He remarks: ‘Even the matter of whether women may lead prayer is not without exception.’³² However, Badawī like al-Qaraḍāwī holds the opinion that *imāmah* of woman for mixed congregations would not be appropriate given ‘the format of Muslim prayers.’ As prayers in Islam require several acts of bowing, it is deemed hardly appropriate for a woman to be doing that while leading the prayers by standing in front of men, because this would expose her body in various positions. Thus, Badawī contends that women can lead women-only congregational prayer.³³

On the promotion of the rights of sexual orientation, Wadud openly says that she is an ally of LGBTQI. She writes: ‘Thus it should come as no surprise when matters moved forward to where I could act as an ally to the LBGTQI Muslims who have only in the past few decades begun to form organizations focused on the right to self-proclaim both their sexual and Muslim identities.’³⁴ Indeed, this is one of the most hotly debated controversial issues of the contemporary times given that such

30. Ibid.

31. See Aluma Dankowitz, First Mixed Friday Prayers Led by a Woman, in *FrontPageMagazine.com* | Friday, 24 June 2005. <http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=8144>.

32. Jamāl Badawī, *Gender Equity*, 14.

33. Ibid., 14.

34. Amina Wadud, “LGBTQI Muslims and International Movements for Empowerment”, in *Feminism and Religion.com.*, 20 September 2014 (6). <http://feminismandreligion.com/2014/09/20/lgbtqi-muslims-and-international-movements-for-empowerment-by-amina-wadud/>

issues are openly discussed while some societies celebrate and recognise same-sex marriages. Wadud herself was contacted to officiate one such marriage which she accepted and performed. She writes:

I have been asked to officiate over one of them for two longtime friends who already enjoy civil contract in their home in Canada but wanted to include the Islamic *Nikāh* or ritual marriage ceremony. It will be my first time, so I am both excited and nervous. More than anything I wish them and the other participants the same as I would wish every human being: a life confirmed in faith, dedicated to justice and enhanced by joy and love.³⁵

In an interview with Al Jazeera, al-Qaraḏāwī referred to such people as ‘sexual perverts’ who should be punished. According to him, jurists disagreed among themselves on the kind of punishments that should be meted to such people. He considered it a calamity that some people even in the Arab world debated on such an issue.³⁶ Badawī also rejected and condemned the move in Canada for the acceptance and promotion of LGBTQI. He said: “What the Qur’an says clearly, just like the Bible, that homosexuality is not accepted”, and added: “It is not regarded as the norm in terms of the needs of society and the relationship between men and women.”³⁷ Thus, discussions in this section show that the Islamic scholars reject the views of Islamic feminists on very crucial issues of women while the Islamic feminists suffer from lack of clarity, contradiction and confusion.

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35. Amina Wadud, LGBTQI Muslims and International Movements for Empowerment, in *Feminism and Religion.com*, 20 September 2014 (6). <http://feminismandreligion.com/2014/09/20/lgbtqi-muslims-and-international-movements-for-empowerment-by-amina-wadud/>
 36. Al-Qaraḏāwī, Muslim Cleric Backs Gay Burning, in *Pink News*, 16 June 2006. <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2006/06/16/muslim-cleric-backs-gay-burnings/>
 37. Halifax Unity Mosque Suggested for Gay, Transgender Muslims, *CBC News* Posted: 11December 2013 5:55 PM AT Last Updated: 11 December 2013 5:55 PM AT. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/halifax-unity-mosque-suggested-for-gay-transgender-muslims-1.2460407>.

An overall view of the Discussions in ‘Part One’:

On issues such as misinterpretation of the term *Qawwāmīn*, with men being superior to women, not only do the Islamic feminists reject such an interpretation, several Islamic scholars also do not agree to it. Similarly, on the headship of woman issue, both the Islamic feminists and some Islamic scholars agree on it in principle. However, both also bring another argument of physical differences between men and women for consideration. However, on certain other issues such as equality, equity, complementarity, LGBTI etc, the views of Islamic scholars and Islamic feminists clash with each other. The views of the Islamic feminists on these crucial concepts and issues reflect less Islamic content and more impact of feminism, which even give rise to the question whether the so-called Islamic feminism is really Islamic or not?

Part Two:

The Problem of Approach in Understanding and Interpreting the Qur’ān

A highly important point to note is how Wadud approaches the Qur’ān, which appears rather confusing and reversing. First and foremost, in many places in her writings, particularly, in her book, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, Wadud’s use of ‘text’ and what she is referring to is rather opaque. Does she refer to the Qur’ān or to some specific or general interpretations of the Qur’ān when she raised the following question, “What happens when the text actually states something un-meaningful from the perspective of current human developments and understandings?”³⁸

Indeed, what does she mean by ‘text’? Does she mean the Qur’ān or some interpretations of the Qur’ān? If she is referring to some interpretations of the Qur’ān, what does she mean ‘when the text actually states something un-meaningful’? Does she mean that some specific interpretations of some Qur’ānic verses look un-meaningful because she thinks that they do not comply with ‘the current human developments and understandings?’

38. Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2006), 192.

At this point, another question arises: Is she comparing two interpretations – one interpretation is un-meaningful and another interpretation is meaningful because the second interpretation reflects ‘the current human developments and understandings.’ If such is the case, it implies that Wadud is making ‘the current human developments and understandings’ the criterion for the acceptance of any interpretation of the Qur’ān? This can be further supported by her next few sentences in the same paragraph: She writes: ‘Two choices result: either face the particular statement as unacceptable regarding current levels of human competency and understanding, and therefore reconsider textual meaning in light of further interpretive development, or reject the particular text.’³⁹

As evident above, she suggests two alternatives – either reconsider the textual meaning or reject the particular interpretation of the text. Two problems arise: Firstly, what would be the criterion on the basis of which we should either reconsider the textual meaning or reject the text? Secondly, why again ‘text’ is used instead of an ‘un-meaningful interpretation’? Such questions are too serious to be ignored when we see that Wadud herself states that these alternatives might be misunderstood as ‘heresy’. She writes: ‘Both choices are often misunderstood as one and the same. To stand up against textual particulars is therefore to be charged with heresy – an ever-present threat in the background to assuage our progress toward gender justice.’⁴⁰

Firstly, we understand that Wadud should have made a clear-cut distinction between the ‘text’ as the Qur’ān and ‘the interpretation of the text’. Secondly, we argue that ‘the current human developments and understandings’ cannot be made a criterion for judging a particular interpretation of the Qur’ān to be meaningful or un-meaningful.

Our argument becomes stronger particularly when we read the following lines from her same book:

Since we live in the time when at least the conceptualization of women’s complete human agency and equality between women and men is conceivable, then we must dance the delicate dance between text and agency to assert a movement of complete gender

39. Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 192.

40. *Ibid.*

equality. I have already argued that significantly that the text can be interpreted with egalitarianism in mind; I now propose one step that some consider as beyond even that.⁴¹

Clearly from the above, by the present human development and understanding, Wadud meant ‘complete human agency and equality between women and men’ and ‘egalitarianism.’ What does she understand by ‘complete equality between men and women’? To understand such a notion, let us recap Wadud’s views on ‘equality’, ‘equity’ and ‘complementarity’ already discussed earlier. Suffice to state that Wadud believes in complete equality between men and women and makes light of ‘equity’ and complementarity’, because she regards ‘equity’ and ‘complementary relationship between men and women’ deny the complete equality between men and women.

Furthermore, at different places in her book, *Inside the Gender Justice*, Wadud asserts that ‘gender equality’ requires a movement and a revolutionary contribution. She writes: ‘This points to the need for a more radical synthesis of strategies and struggles toward the end of gender equality’.⁴² What needs synthesis in this context? By ‘synthesis’ she means ‘...it is important that intelligent consideration of Muslim women make clear correlations between this legacy (intellectual legacy of 14 hundred years of Islam) and the areas of gender studies as developed in the west, especially as it has spread to become a global phenomenon in modernity.’⁴³

A crucial question arises here: Are the epistemological foundations of Islamic intellectual legacy similar to the Western concept of modernity? If not, how can the two traditions be synthesised? It is hardly an issue for Wadud, as she believes she is pro-faith and pro-feminist. She writes: “It is no longer possible to construct Third World and all other specified articulations and philosophical developments of feminism without due reference to the Western origins of feminism. That is why I still describe my position as pro-faith, pro-feminist.”⁴⁴

41. Ibid, 204.

42. Ibid., 188.

43. Ibid., 78.

44. Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 79.

Even so, by no means do we deny any connection between a pro-faith and a pro-feminist. Nevertheless, there is hardly any justification in Wadud's assertion that a given interpretation of a Qur'ānic verse on women's issues would be meaningful only if it also echoes a current human understanding and theories including feminism. This brings the question—what are we doing with the Qur'ānic text? Are we trying to get the message from the Qur'ān on any given issue and make the necessary improvements in our human understanding in the light of the message of the Qur'ān or, are we playing with the hermeneutics to attribute the particular meaning to the Qur'ānic text which we have developed on our human experiences and our own human concept of social justice without any recourse to the Qur'ān? Understandably, Wadud wishes to attempt the following:

We are the makers of textual meaning. The results of our meaning-making are the reality we establish from those meanings to human experiences and social justice. We need to make the text mean more for women's full human dignity than it has been conceived to do or applied toward at any other time in Muslim history.⁴⁵

Yet, is she not doing vice-versa? Should we understand woman's full human dignity from the Qur'ān or should we see whether the Qur'ān is giving us the meaning of full human dignity of woman similar to our understanding of 'modernity' in 'feminism'?

Clearly, Wadud's arguments show that her approach to the Qur'ān is problematic. She has reversed the whole approach to the Qur'ān and its purpose. Instead of approaching the Qur'ān to correct human understanding, Wadud tries to determine the meaning of the Qur'ān on the basis of current human understanding exerting hermeneutics. More importantly to note is that even a great classical Muslim thinker like al-Ghazzālī also emphasises the need for hermeneutics for a proper interpretation of the message of the Qur'ān.⁴⁶ Hence, the need for hermeneutics

45. Ibid., 204.

46. See Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī, *Mishkāt al-Anwār (The Niche of Lights)* (translated by David Buchman) (Utah: Brigham Young University Press,

to come to a true and appropriate interpretation of the Qurʾān on various issues of life can be hardly ignored. Needless to say, hermeneutics particularly for the interpretation of several Qurʾānic verses and Prophetic traditions on women’s issues is not only necessary and demanding, but also urgent and challenging due to various reasons. Generally, a good number of Muslim scholars try to present their interpretations of several Qurʾānic verses inter-playing with the dominating biased cultural norms and traditions on women. Hence, their interpretations of the Islamic texts reflect biased cultural norms on women and hide the most reasonable and holistic message of the Qurʾān on women’s issues. In such a relation, the views of a known scholar on women’s issues, Asma Berlas, is worth mentioning. Berlas points out that some Muslim scholars, particularly many Muslim feminists, assert that the Qurʾān is patriarchal, that it gives more privileges to men and makes women subservient to men. Berlas elaborates the whole issue of patriarchy and asserts that the Qurʾān is not patriarchal in any sense. Most importantly, she contends that interpretation of the given Qurʾānic verses at times depends on one’s own reading and understanding of the holy book.⁴⁷ By implication, the problem does not lie in the Qurʾān, rather, its biased interpretation based on one’s biased understanding.

Emphatically, by the same token, the Qurʾān is the last and authentic revelation from Allāh Who possesses absolute and comprehensive knowledge about men, women and everything else. Indeed, Allāh is the Fountain of Justice and Peace and the Prophet Mohammad had implemented the injunctions of the Qurʾān in all aspects of life, including relationships between men and women in all dimensions from the private life to the public. As such, assertions that the Qurʾānic message of family and men—women relationship in the family and society based on patriarchy, male domination of women and children are unwarranted. Indeed, a patriarchal vision of family and society as depicted by

1998). See also Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī, *Jawāhar al-Qurʾān wa duraruhu li hujjat al-Islām*, edited by Khadija Mohammad Kamil (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub wa-l-Wathāiq al-Qaumiyya, 2011).

47. See Asma Barlas, “Qurʾānic hermeneutics and women’s liberation”, *International Congress on Islamic Feminism, Barcelona*, Spain, 29 October 2005. See <http://www.asma-barlas.com/TALKS/Barcelona.pdf>

some Muslim scholars is solely based on their biased rather than pure and true interpretations of the Qurʾān.

As such, hermeneutics should not be dabbled with so just to interpret the Qurʾān according to one's own understanding or in accordance with the current dominant understanding of the given issue or concept. Rather, the Qurʾān is revealed to man so that he should guide his God-given intellectual faculty and sense perceptions in accordance to the spirit and message of the Qurʾān. Should he develop his own understanding on any given issue or subject by his own power of reasoning and experiences without any recourse to the Qurʾān, then he would definitely be at a loss. By the same token, if man takes pain in interpreting the Qurʾān based on the dominant human understanding which is otherwise not guided by the Qurʾān, then again he would be at a great loss, because the main epistemic sources of knowledge and guidance are the Qurʾān and the Sunnah (the authentic sayings and practices of the last Prophet, Mohammad, rather than the unguided man-made paradigms, whether dominating or globalising).

Nevertheless, Islamic feminists as shown by Wadud above are convinced exerting hermeneutics to present the interpretations of the Qurʾān complying with the present level of human competency.

Such a view as Wadud's is common among Islamic feminists and presented in a variety of ways. For instance, similar views of Ziba Mir Hussaini is as follows:

In brief, there are two schools of theology and thought. The dominant Ash'ari school holds that our notion of justice is contingent on religious texts; whatever they say is just and not open to question. The Mu'tazili school, on the other hand, argues that the value of justice exists independent of religious texts; our sense and definition of justice is shaped by sources outside religion, is innate, and has a rational basis. I adhere to the second position, as developed by Abdol Karim Soroush, the Iranian reformist philosopher. According to Soroush, we accept religion because it is just, and any religious texts or laws that defy our contemporary sense of justice or its definition should be reinterpreted in the light of an ethical critique of their religious

roots. In other words, religion and the interpretation of religious texts are not above justice and ethics.⁴⁸

In simple terms, reinterpretation of religious texts should be carried out on the basis of the current concepts of justice and ethics. This begs the question, had we taken the big task of defining justice, ethics, complete equality of men and women etc., all on our own, then why should we even take any pain to look into the religious texts as to what they pronounce on these concepts? For such a reason, perhaps, the once world-known poet of Islam, ‘Allama Iqbal, sagely noted in one of his poetic verses that some scholars try to change the very meaning of the Qur’ān instead of changing themselves in accordance to it.⁴⁹

Indeed, if hermeneutics is purposefully exerted to change the meaning of the Qur’ān so as to comply with the dominant understandings, hermeneutics is thus merely transformed into ‘gymnastics’ where the contemporary interpreter would turn the meaning of the Qur’ān over taking all due considerations that the given interpretation should be perfectly ‘fitting’ to the contemporary understanding and utmost friendly to the dominant culture. This is a kind of reversed approach to the Qur’ān just so to sanctify the contemporary definitions of justice, ethics, equality etc.

Indeed some of Wadud’s views based on the ‘reversed approach’ show her close association with what is known as Progressive Islam. In an interview, she describes who the Progressive Islam intellectuals are: There are thinkers who will intentionally grapple with the complexity of preserving the integrity of the Islamic tradition ... combining it in a dynamic way with what it means to encounter all of these complexities of modernity or postmodernity. I consider these people to be progressive intellectuals...⁵⁰ Notedly, Margot Badran explicitly

48. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Muslim Women’s quest for equality: Between Islamic law and feminism”, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Summer, 2006), 633. See <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/508085>. Accessed on 04/01/2011 16:24.

49. Allama Mohammad Iqbal, *Ijtihad in Zarb-e-Kaleem*. <http://iqbalurdu.blogspot.my/2011/04/zarb-e-kaleem-012-ijtihad.html>

50. Amina Wadud, Interview, Frontline, March, 2002. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/muslims/interviews/wadud.html>

shows the ideological connections between Progressive Islam and Islamic Feminism. She writes: 'Islamic feminism is also part of the philosophy and politics of the movement of Progressive Islam. The term Progressive Islam first appeared in South Africa in the 1990s.'⁵¹ Equally important to note is Wadud's self-proclamation as a postmodernist: '... I myself am a postmodernist, so I tend to say this is a postmodernist resurgence...'⁵² who believes that the Progressive Muslims try to present Islam while combining the complexities of modernity and post-modernity. The question is how far and on what issues, are modernity and post-modernity are compatible with Islam? Moreover, are not the epistemic foundations of modernity and post-modernity different from the epistemology of Islam?

Part Three:

Few Crucial Questions that Emerge on the Term Islamic Feminism

Generally, critical reflections on the above discussion give rise to few pertinent questions on the term, Islamic feminism:

What kind of Islamic Feminism, whose proponents assert that the Qurʾān remains neutral to the patriarchy of the time?

As discussed above, Amina Wadud believes so.

What kind of Islamic feminists are they who claim to believe in the equality of men and women acknowledging the gender differences, but mock at the concept of complementarity in gender roles.

As evident from the discussions, Islamic feminists believe that complementarity of gender roles implies inequality.

Where is Islam in Islamic feminism which finds no objection in promoting the rights of LGBTQI, when the Qurʾān outwardly denounces them?

51. Margot Badran, *Islamic Feminism Revisited*, 10 February, 2006, Countercurrents.org
<http://www.countercurrents.org/gen-badran100206.htm>.

52. Wadud, *Interview, Frontline*, March 2002.

In the article cited earlier, Wadud brazenly describes herself as an ally to LGBTQI.

How, can the injunctions in the Qur’ān be judged and interpreted on the basis of current human competency?

Evidently, it can as far as Wadud is concerned as shown in the article discussion on the approach she adopts in understanding and interpreting the Qur’ān.

Thus, the stand taken by the Islamic feminists on the above raised questions fully exposes that there is actually less of Islam but much more of feminism in ‘Islamic feminism’. Indeed, this shows that Islamic feminism is, in reality, a misnomer, a pseudonym, and far from being evolved to serve the interest of Islam and Muslim women. The next question that arises is why all pain is taken to construct a theory mainly based on Western values and culture with Islamic labelling? One of the important reasons could be found in the Western intellectual and cultural imperialism. As a part of Western imperialism, the non-Western cultures, particularly the Muslim culture, is conveyed to believe that the modern Western ideologies are the only solutions to all the problems of humanity, whether social, cultural, political or others. The non-Western cultures are coerced in different ways to find that their own epistemic sources are weak and that they badly need Western secular concepts and theories to re-construct and develop their societies. For instance, love and service to one’s nation is also emphasised in Islam. It does not mean that Islam should accept nationalism for this purpose. Islam has its own theory of nation-building and nation-serving.⁵³ Similarly, Islam puts great emphasis on the political participation of people and their civil liberties. But it does not mean that Islam should accept Western definition of democracy and Western definition of human rights. Islam has its own theory of political participation of people and human rights.⁵⁴ In the same way, Islam has blessed all genuine rights and responsibilities on to women. It does not mean that Islam should accept feminism with some sort of apparent decorations as the only tool to defend the rights of

53. See Zeenath Kausar, *Islam and Nationalism: An Analysis of the Ideas of Azad, Iqbal and Mawdūdī*, 2nd rev. ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Thinker’s Library, 2008).

54. See Zeenath Kausar, *Democratization and the Contemporary Islamic Resurgence: Democracy versus Shuracracy*, (Kuala Lumpur: Thinker’s Library, 2008).

Muslim women. Islam has its own theory of women's rights and responsibilities in family and in society.⁵⁵

Hence, it seems better to accept the reality of the diversity of the world that it is multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-religious and multi-civilisational in its composition. Furthermore, we should also accept the fact that the world is also multi-epistemological, multi-intellectual and hence, multi-definitional. This being the nature of the world, people can enjoy freedom, justice and peace only if they follow the policy of non-interference, non-imposition and non-hegemonisation. It would be self-contradictory if we talk about freedom, human rights and dignity of man and woman, but we do not allow others to express their own definitions of all these from their own perspectives with no external manipulations and manoeuvrings.

Conclusion

It should no way be concluded from the above discussion that Muslim women do not face any problem for their rights and development. Indeed, women in Muslim societies are facing complex and crucial problems, but not because of Islam, rather for other reasons. Some of these reasons include biased norms and biased ethno-cultural traditions prevalent in Muslim societies against women and some biased interpretations of Islamic texts by some Muslim scholars. Yet, this does not mean that Muslim women need feminism or the kind of Islamic feminism as discussed to regain their rights and position. The Qur'an, the Sunnah and the early historical examples of the lives of the *Ummahātul Mu'minīn* and Muslim women companions (may Allāh be pleased with them) are more than sufficient for Muslim women to get inspired and organise an Islamic movement for women's rights or to establish an Islamic Think-Tank on women's studies and work for their rights and position in family and in society. Neither do they have to depend on nor add feminism to Islamic teachings to get their rights back.⁵⁶ Such a point is quite evident in

55. See Zeenath Kausar, *Politicization of Sex and Family Devaluation in Feminism: An Islamic Alternative* (Kuala Lumpur: Ilmiah Publishers, 2003).

56. See "Zeenath Kausar's critique of feminism and her reflections on co-vicegerency", in Zeenath Kausar, *Modern Western Political Ideologies: An Islamic Critique*, 2nd Ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Pearson Malaysia, 2014), pp.177-212.

the first part of the article that when a little Islamic content tends to be applied to feminism, then the whole of feminism it fails to be Islamised and what turned out as 'Islamic feminism' becomes a misnomer. Hence, if we add more Islam to feminism, then feminism would definitely fly off from it, and what eventually be left out would be nothing but Islam. Then why not we leave the two on their own at the multi-cultural and multi-civilisational platform of this world and we stand in our own places giving all freedom to people to follow whatever they want, while ~~not~~ neither compelling nor manipulating them.

Furthermore, accepting the term 'Islamic feminism' entails broadly many things: Firstly, it would show as though Islam is incapable of speaking for the rights of women and for that reason, Muslim women need feminism as an intellectual tool to analyse the problems of women and to resolve them. Whereas, the case seems to be the other way round. Neither the Bible nor Western thought, particularly, Western political thought and not even Western societies as late as the early 20th century offered genuine rights to women in family and in society. It was the reason that feminism was evolved in the 18th century to attain women's rights and their position in family and society. However, importantly to note that a study of earliest arguments of feminists in general show that although they strongly advocated for the rights of women for education and suffrage and other genuine rights, they were careful with the differences between equality and identity and they paid due importance to marriage and institution of family and did not create a gender-war when compared to the modern and the post-modern trends in feminism. In any case, centuries before the origin and the development of feminism, Islam already offered all genuine rights to women in family and in society.

Secondly, acceptance of the term 'Islamic feminism' also means a denial of self-determination to Muslim women to protect and promote their rights and their definitions of development and empowerment based on their own faith and civilisation. Diversity of cultures and civilisations should be respected and should not be suspected.

Thirdly, acceptance of the term would also mean a sort of intellectual submission of Muslim women to the intellectual

and cultural Western imperialism. Any sort of support and submission to any cultural imperialism cannot be justified, because imperialism first smashes the inner dignity, individuality and identity of other cultures and then, it either talks in terms of ‘the end of history’ or ‘the clash with other cultures and civilizations’, whereas Islam believes in peaceful co-existence of all civilisations, as it propounds – ‘no compulsion in religion’.⁵⁷

Despite these, importantly is that Muslim scholars who are not comfortable with the term ‘Islamic feminism’ have also expressed their own arguments on the problematique of the term. For instance, Asmā Berlas does not agree with the imperialising tendency of feminism. She writes: ‘In a sense, then, it is the very inclusivity of feminism—its attempt, as a meta and master narrative, to subsume and assimilate all conversations about equality—that I find both imperializing and reductive.’⁵⁸ Similarly, Fātima Seedat who finds the term Islamic feminism inadequate also expressed the fact that it closes the opportunities of non-Western alternative paradigms. She writes:

I argue that Islamic feminism may appear to be the inevitable result of the convergence of Islam and feminism yet it is also inadequate to concerns for sex equality in Islam. Not only do some scholars resist the naming but, as an analytic construct, Islamic feminism precludes new understandings of sex difference originating in non-Western and anti-colonial cultural paradigms.⁵⁹

Finally, in assertion, if Islamic feminists still insist on following their own perspectives based on their own interpretations of the Qur’ān, nobody can nor want to force them to stop their work as there is no compulsion in Islam. But, in opinion, the Islamic feminists should at least detest

57. *al-Baqarah* (2): 256.

58. Asmā Berlas, ‘Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provincializing feminism as a master narrative’, in Anitta Kynsilehto, *Islamic Feminism: Current Perspectives* (Tampere, Finland: Tampere Peace Research Institute, 2008), p. 22.

59. Fātima Seedat, ‘Islam, feminism, and Islamic feminism: Between inadequacy and inevitability’, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Fall 2013), p.25.

from imposing their views and their terms, ‘Islamic feminism’ and ‘Islamic feminists’, on those who neither accept the terms nor their views, and they should refrain from creating a tug-of-war among scholars promoting such divisive and intriguing terms such as ‘Egalitarian Islam’, ‘Patriarchal Islam’, ‘Islamic feminism’ and ‘Muslim detractors’ etc. Nevertheless, Islamic feminists have been practising such as evident from Badran’s statements:

As egalitarian Islam gains ground it is increasingly being assailed by Muslim conservatives whether they are religious leaders, self-appointed community spokesmen, or followers of political Islam (Islamism). This is happening in both old Muslim societies in Africa and Asia and in the new communities in the west by those who perpetuate a patriarchal version of Islam which they claim to be the true Islam.⁶⁰

Elsewhere, she also writes: ‘Muslim detractors allege that “the West” has foisted feminism, first secular and now Islamic, upon Muslims to the detriment of Islam and society.’⁶¹ Let the readers reflect upon this article whether it is an allegation against Islamic feminism or a reality.

60. Margot Badran, “Islam’s other half: What does Islamic feminism have to offer? Where does it come from? Where is it going?” in *Theguardian.com*, Sunday 9 November 2008 10.00 GMT. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2008/nov/09/islam-women>

61. Margot Badran, “Islamic feminism revisited”, 10 February, 2006, *Countercurrents.org* <http://www.countercurrents.org/gen-badran100206.htm>.