

Tradition and modernity Muslim women caught between crossfire - A study

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Abstract

This paper attempts to religious interpretations with **traditional Muslim** values has given what seems to be convincing justification for the limited role of **modern women**. Through readings from the Quran and the Hadith, the role of the mosque in Islam, and questions the ambivalence about gender equality that has long permeated Islamic society. Does Islam go beyond female veiling, seclusion, dispossession and subordination? Does the public space of the mosque denote exclusion of women from prayers? Does the Quran approve of the independent spiritual existence of women? Does Islam establish religious and ethical equality by granting the right to prayer irrespective of gender? Are men and women spiritually equal? In his insightful and well-documented book, *Women in Masjid: A Quest for Justice*, Ziya Us Salam discusses these questions, which have assumed considerable significance in a world shaped by Islamophobia.

It is widely believed that Islam insists on the separation of male and female activity and the seclusion and subordination of women. The Quranic injunctions and the sayings of the Prophet that extend equality and prohibit discrimination on the grounds of gender hardly absolve Islam of being hegemonic, male-centric and patriarchal. The author examines the role of the mosque as envisaged by Islam and why it blatantly goes against the practice and teachings of the Prophet. He attempts to understand how patriarchy converted a socio-religious centre and site of religious discourse and learning into a habitat of tacit discrimination. He also examines the question of the clergy's insistence on the seclusion of women in their homes, and whether it is reconcilable to what the Prophet exhorted and practised or not, through readings from the Quran and the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet). In India, Islam, which draws profoundly from syncretic traditions, has two distinct manifestations: mosque-based and shrine-based Islam. Mosque-centric Islam denies women access to the mosque. Why does this abominable practice exist? The all-powerful clergy refers to only one Hadith, and as the author spells out: "Again and again, women are reminded of only one Hadith, wherein the Prophet is reported to have said that the best prayer for women is in the inner room of her house. The text is readily aired, but the context almost never applied!" Yes, one Hadith can be a mandatory injunction, but another of the Prophet's decisions relating to women's testimony that challenges patriarchy is brushed off conveniently by the men of the cloth.

Key words: Women, Islam, law, tradition, modernity

Introduction

Islam has always been pilloried for blatant gender inequality as Islamic jurisprudence stipulates that the witness of two women is equivalent to that of one man and that the testimony of one woman may be dismissed summarily. This stands in stark contrast to what the Prophet did when he was requested to resolve a case based on a statement made by a woman, an event narrated by the noted scholar Moulvi Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935) in his seminal book *Huqooq-e-Niswan* (1898).

Mumtaz Ali writes of an event mentioned in “Sahih Bukhari”, the most authentic collection of the Prophet’s sayings: “Sahih Bukhari says that Uqba Bin Haris married a girl, and was informed by a woman that she had breastfed him and his newlywed wife. Uqba pointed out that this had not been mentioned to him before; how could he accept it now? He had a word about it with his in-laws, who also refuted the claim of the woman, but she continued to repeat her assertion.

“At last, Uqba sought the opinion of the Prophet, who found the woman’s submission, though not backed by anyone, admissible, and annulled the marriage, as a wedding cannot be performed between siblings.” The life of the Prophet is replete with many such incidents, which are conveniently ignored by the Ulema in the subcontinent.

The author lists a chronology of events and issues resolved by the Prophet and his companions, with a marked sense of benevolence and evenness towards the dispossessed, the marginalised and the voiceless. He examines Quranic commandments, the Hadith, the practice of the Caliphs and the scholars of the Islamic jurisprudence who codified Islamic laws, to prove that prevalent practice of restricting access to the mosques has nothing to do with what Islam forcefully preaches. In fact, it is similar to the Ulema’s stand on triple talaq.

The author also unravels other popular myths. The second Caliph, Umar ibn Al-Khattab (584-644 C.E.), who introduced several stringent provisions into the Islamic jurisprudence, is said to have been averse to women’s entry into the mosque. The author quotes several instances at variance with this popular image. Here is such an instance: “Women are never told that Caliph Umar appointed a well-known female companion al-Shifa bint Abdullah Al-Adawiyyah as the supervisor of the markets of Medina. She was appointed not because of the dearth of able men but because she was more meritorious, with better leadership skills. She used to go to the Medina markets with a whip in her hand, ready to strike at any indiscretion.”

The book acquaints us with an alternative perspective, featuring facts not discussed in the texts produced by religious scholars. For instance, no one has the power to revoke what was granted by the Prophet, and the Caliphs were no exception. The author quotes from the Sahih Bukhari Hadith: “The wife of Umar used to go to the mosque (Al-Masjid al-Nabwi) for the prayers of the Fajar and Isha. It was said to her, ‘Why do you go out when you know that Umar does not like it?’ She said, ‘What stops him from forbidding me?’ It was said to her, ‘What stops him is the saying of the Prophet who said, “Do not stop the women from the Masajid (mosques) of Allah.””

One can take this as incontrovertible proof that the Caliph did not declare the mosque a no-go zone for women. But then, what went wrong? This calls for a thorough analysis of sociocultural mores of the countries where Islam took root. For the author, the subjugation of women is not linked to the Quran, the Prophet and the Caliph, and owes much to those “ill-informed men drunk on potions of male superiority, a society where men decide and women follow, where men instruct and women obey. Sociocultural mores rather than religious dictates are at play, as is the incomplete and the lopsided knowledge of the scriptures.”

The author seeks to strengthen his case by referring to the noted scholar Dr Israr Ahmad, who held that backward and ignorant Muslims imposed their own self-forged model upon Muslim women. Inexplicably, though, the contours of this model are not spelt out.

Divided into 19 chapters, the book offers a glimpse into the ambivalence concerning gender equality that has long permeated Islamic society and unveils arbitrary interpretations with authority. Since the time of the Prophet until now, the active presence and the forced invisibility of women in various countries where a sizeable number of Muslims live has come in for debate. The author focusses on three versions of Islam—fundamentalist, reformist and syncretic—and delineates how they falter on the count of gender justice as they hardly uphold Islamic teachings. While he discusses shortcomings incisively, he rarely feels the need for radical and structural changes. He is of the view that the majority of vexed issues plaguing Muslims all over the world can be resolved if the original teachings of Islam are sincerely adhered to and that reforms, no matter how urgently required, must come from within.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore **modernization** of Muslim society is the position of its women vis-a-vis men. The more balance the opportunity structure for men. Also the Paradox of tradition and Modernity in Female empowerment in the Islam

Muslim identity gender, ethnicity and social status

Muslim identity, regardless of gender, ethnicity and social status, can only be envisaged or kept alive if the mosque is made its nerve centre. The book attempts to articulate how the mosque can be revitalised as a place of worship and a space of emotional and spiritual solace. Tracing the history of how Islam’s explicit and unequivocal espousal of subliminal and emotional uniformity was circumvented or endured in different countries, the author provides a glimpse into Almasjidul Haram (Makkah) and Masjide Nabwai (Madina). Then he turns his attention to predominantly non-Muslim societies such as India, the United States, the United Kingdom and Muslim countries such as Pakistan and the like, with a marked sense of objectivity.

In “India in the Past: Medieval Mosques Built by Women” and “Women Taking the Lead”, map Muslim women’s contribution to spheres that were considered exclusive male domains. The author reveals that Fatehpuri Begum,

a consort of the Mughal emperor Shahjahan, built the Fatehpuri mosque, one of the prominent mosques of Delhi. As the author remarks: “A woman could build the mosque in 1650, but women cannot pray in the mosque in 2019.”

He provides a list of mosques built by women, including Razia Sultan, Maham Anga, the foster mother of Jalaluddin Akbar; Aziz-un-Nisa Begum, or Akbarabadi Begum, one of the wives of Shahjahan; Mubarak Begum, the wife of British Resident in Delhi General David Ochterlony; and Sultan Jahan Begum, ruler of Bhopal.

In a graphic account of Muslim women who have firsts in religious studies or practices to their credit. Farhat Hashmi, PhD in Islamic Studies from the University of Glasgow, who wrote a commentary of the Quran, is perhaps the first woman scholar to make such an attempt in a society where the clergy’s assertion “A woman’s voice should remain under cover” gained currency. The author also talks about Amina Wadud, an African American who led a mixed gender prayer in New York that generated much heat within the Muslim community. There is also the story of Jamida Beevi, a Kerala-based reformist who became the first woman to lead Friday prayers in India and whose radical interpretation of religious postulates rattled orthodox society. The unrelenting campaign for access to all mosques for Muslim women launched by V.P. Zuhra, the daughter of a Muslim League politician, is also discussed in detail in this chapter.

The two prominent sects of Muslims, Sunni and Shia, differ significantly on several counts. During the sacred pilgrimages, Hajj and Ziyarat, women and men are allowed to pray together inside the mosque, but beyond Makkah, Madina and Karbala, interface is strictly prohibited. The author initiates a judicious debate on this issue. Ziya Us Salam tries to draw a map for making the mosque a living metaphor for women and ensuring that Muslim women will remain faith subservient.

Notwithstanding a premise of equality they promise and widespread reverence they carry, many religious books are now being read through the lens of feminist sensibility. Attempts are afoot to make out revealed texts as the story of women. The widely held view that ‘the scriptures never entail inequality and supremacy of one over the other’ hardly goes well with the radical feminist thinkers, who find these orations a hindrance to efforts for gender parity. For them, some of the venerated tracts seem to act like “texts of terror”. The emotionally resurgent but culturally fragmented world seeks solace from the institutionalised religions; hence, their centrality has come in for scrutiny.

Now the digitally-driven and sex-positive fourth-wave feminism questions the scriptures that reportedly strengthen patriarchy and caste hierarchy and target women with impunity. According to it, the major religions of the world unwittingly idolise gender discrimination, and cultural customs and social convictions make it more oppressive.

The new way of feminist reading hardly recognises the view that men and women are created in the image of God, and the assumption of superiority has no divine sanction. They seem to be unmindful of the biblical declaration: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:2)

Islam, too, has come in for a scathing attack for its alleged insistence on gender-segregated veiling and for not granting women economic, political, social, cultural, educational and spiritual parity with men. The practice of not providing women with an absolute right to offer prayers beside their male counterparts in mosques has added fuel to the fire. Muslim women are perceived as victims of all possible forms of suppression, and people tend to believe that women have an inferior place in Islam.

Undoubtedly, equality is a cherished ideal, but it does not stand for equivalence and sameness as it embraces biological, cultural, social and political diversity. Many commentaries on scriptures do discuss how we celebrate diversity in various domains of life without dividing men and women on the basis of gender. Similar attempts have been made to turn attention to egalitarian Islamic laws enshrined in the Quran. For Tarif Khalidi (who was the Sir Thomas Adams’ Professor of Arabic, Cambridge University, from 1996 to 2002), it is one of the most gender-conscious sacred texts. Contemporary interpretive theology zeroes in on Quranic injunctions, the practice, and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad while discussing the question whether Islam grants equal rights to women.

Women’s rights under Islam

There has been a growing realisation that the basic teachings of Islam do not discriminate much between men and women. However, one feels that the cultural and social ethos of Muslims betrays a slew of apparent and latent multiple inequalities. The status of women continues to generate polemical debate, and a dispassionate and a fine-grained reading grounded in a profound understanding of Islam is still awaited.

Twenty scholars—including eight women belonging to fields such as English, Islamic Studies, Arabic, Wildlife, Women’s Studies, and Clinical Psychology—from Aligarh Muslim University, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad, Islamic University of Science and Technology, Awantipora, Kashmir, Delhi University, and Amity University, Gurgaon, have now tried to supplement what has been missing for long. Their collective analytical sensibility combined with academic rigour has produced an anthology titled *Muslim Women: What Everyone Needs to Know*, which is astutely edited by Dr A.R. Kidwai and Dr Juhi Gupta and published by Viva Books, New Delhi.

The book, running into 233 pages, carries six sections: Muslim Women in the Primary Sources, Muslim Women's Rights and Laws, Muslim Women and Education, Socio-Economic Status of Muslim Women, Muslim Women vis-a-vis Feminism, and Interviews of Contemporary Women's Studies Scholars and Creative Writers.

The elaboration and interpretation of rights of women granted by Islam look weirdly repetitive and inexplicably conflicting and inconsistent as the recent uproarious debate on triple talaq and maintenance money for the divorcee laid bare. Barbed tongues and a marked sense of silliness runs through the enormous literature produced on the topic. Here, one desperately looks for the authentic narration of primary sources and the rational mediation on how they were implemented when the first Islamic state came into being. Does one come across non-discriminatory and forthright policies right from the start? Are the primary texts even-handed and righteous? The first section looks into these questions thoroughly. The seminal texts, shorn of their widely accepted interpretations, are vivid and expressive and unfailingly create a congenial and sprawling space for women.

Noted Islamic scholar Professor Akhtarul Wasey, in his foreword, rightly remarks: "Women do not get their due in Muslim society. They are denied what Allah and His Messenger have granted them. In the blessed era of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the rightly guided caliphs, Muslim women enjoyed an equal standing in society and were entrusted with public duties. They had their say in policymaking, market trends and ensured the supply of provisions to the battlefield, apart from taking care of the wounded soldiers." Wasey has a point here, but again it is a widely uttered assertion that the clergymen and religiosity-centred society made the divine commandments harsher and stringent. Without clouding the issue any more, the well-known scholar of exegetical studies Professor A.R. Kidwai cites several Quranic verses verbatim in his article, "Is the Quran a male-centred text?" For Islam, women and men complement each other, and they are soul mates. However, the concept of gender parity never took firm roots in Islamic society. Kidwai, armed with verses, argues that the Quran discusses gender equality in absolute terms: "Whoever does good—man or woman and is a believer—Allah will grant him a good life. He will certainly reward them for their good actions." (An-Nahl, 16:97) The author justifiably regrets that such explicit Quranic declarations did not quell the misconception that women have an inferior place in Islam. There must have been socio-political reasons and a static mindset for such iconoclasm.

Women in Quran

No Semitic religion explicitly mentions that prophethood was ever conferred upon women. However, the concept of the Goddess does exist in Hinduism. The Quran refers to many women who have had proximity to Allah. In this connection, the author produces a list of such women with the details mentioned in the Quran. Prophet Jesus' mother Maryam (Mary) gets divine adulation, and Quranic description of her looks similar to that of the Messenger of God. Prof. Kidwai elaborates: "She (Maryam) has many outstanding merits: her piety, her chastity, and her single-minded devotion to Allah. Little wonder then that on several occasions angels are found addressing her directly, a distinction otherwise special to the Messenger of Allah. Moreover, the Quranic expression *astafa*

(chosen) is used for her, which is usually employed for the Messengers. Prophet Muhammad's title Al Mustafa is a derivative of the same, signifying that Allah chose him as his Messenger."

Barring Maryam, not much is known about other women who find a mention in the Quran. One can find a vivid and authentic description of the Queen of Sheba (the queen of Yemen during the time of Prophet Sulaiman or Solomon), the Believing wife of Pharaoh (who was the ruler in Prophet Moses' day), Prophet Moses' mother, Prophet Shuyab's daughters, and the Egyptian Aziz's wife in the article. It also meticulously brings together the Quranic commands and Prophet Muhammad's sayings that unfailingly restore gender parity.

There are no apparent traces of male chauvinism in the sacred text, and its clinching proof is provided in the Quran's description of Adam and Eve. Prof. Kidwai makes a pertinent point here: "Unlike the Bible, it (the Quran) holds both Adam and Eve equally guilty of defying the divine command about not approaching the forbidden tree. The Quranic Eve is not some temptress or the source of all evil."

The theoretical framework and interpretation of highly revered texts that shaped both the modern and the post-modern world owe a lot to women scholars, but seldom does any Muslim woman scholar feature here. A young scholar, Mohd Yunus Kumar, zeroes in on three prominent Muslim women academicians whose perceptive readings of Islamic thoughts make it clear that Islam is not averse to female aspirations and sensibilities. Their isolation is given a religious gloss by the self-righteous maulvis who sided with the rulers who were the voice of patriarchy. Yunus focusses on the writings of Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud and Asma Afsaruddin. They brilliantly explore the connotative and denotative implications of Islamic teachings in the backdrop of gender justice.

Conclusion

In Islam, men and women are moral equals in God's sight and are expected to fulfill the same duties of worship, prayer, faith, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage to Mecca. Islam generally improved the status of women compared to earlier Arab cultures, prohibiting female infanticide and recognizing women's full personhood. Islamic law emphasizes the contractual nature of marriage, requiring that a dowry be paid to the woman rather than to her family, and guaranteeing women's rights of inheritance and to own and manage property. Women were also granted the right to live in the matrimonial home and receive financial maintenance during marriage and a waiting period following death and divorce.

The historical record shows that Muhammad consulted women and weighed their opinions seriously. At least one woman, Umm Waraqah, was appointed imam over her household by Muhammad. Women contributed significantly to the canonization of the *Quran*. A woman is known to have corrected the authoritative ruling of Caliph Umar

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