Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism is a faith-based commitment and field of research that critically engages with the Islamic tradition from a gender-egalitarian perspective. It is part of Muslim women and gender studies that have been developing over the last thirty years from within Islam. Islamic feminists are scholars who come from different backgrounds and claim that women can be active producers of gender equality-based religious knowledge. Their pursuit problematizes gender stereotypes based on misleading interpretations of Islamic sources. It engages with four corpuses: the Qur'an, the Hadith (Prophet Muhammad's narrations), *al–tafsīr* (Qur'anic exegesis) and *al-fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). Through the use of methodological approaches such as hermeneutics, historicity, contextualization, as well as holistic and thematic understanding, Muslim feminist scholars deconstruct unjust and patriarchal practices through the rereading of the Qur'anic verses about relationships between women and men. Islamic ethics, just like *al-'adl* (justice), *al-musāwāh* (equality) and *al-karāmah al-insāniyyah* (human dignity), are at the core of their views on gender relations and understanding of sacred texts.

Origin of the name

There have been lengthy debates regarding the term "Islamic feminism." In particular, scholars have discussed its origin and its oxymoronic aspect. Some hold that the term was created by Western scholars to describe "a new trend of feminism in Muslim societies" (Abou-Bakr 2001: 1). The American historian Margot Badran is thought to be among the first to use it. However, Badran herself states that the term occasionally appeared in women's discourse as well as in some newspapers, journals and popular Media in various countries (Iran, Turkey, and Egypt) (Badran 2013: 221). Others believe that the first one to use the expression "Islamic feminists" was the Iranian scholar Haleh Afshar to refer to a group of women who, after the Iranian Islamic Revolution, engaged in a rereading of *Shi'i* jurisprudence to extract female legal rights such as the right of *wilāyah* (child custody) in the light of Islamic teachings.

Some Muslim women active in this field of studies refuse the label "Islamic feminists" and prefer a more Islamic terminology such as "Muslim activists" or "Muslim scholars." One reason for this rejection is that they resent the Western origin of feminist thought. They also resent how Western colonization had used women's questions at the beginning of the 20th century in order to subjugate Muslim majority societies (see Feminism-Arab). Others have no problems with the term and do not see it alien. Still others (like Omaima Abou-Bakr) accept the naming but see it merely as "a necessary qualification in our present time, to clarify that the concern over women's conditions, rights, and roles is in the context of *our* cultures and their social, historical, and religious backgrounds" (Abou-Bakr 2001: 2).

Another important debate revolves around the "oxymoronic aspect" of the name. For some, Islamic feminism seems an oxymoron because monotheistic religions are patriarchal and anti-women. Consequently, Islamic teachings and feminist principles cannot meet. However, Muslims who adopt feminism from within Islam do not perceive this contradiction in terms. Important are respective definitions of both feminism and Islam. For Muslims who adopt feminism, feminism signifies women's awareness of their conditions, problems and rights in society. They analyze those problems through the paradigm of Islam. Consequently, an Islamic feminist is a scholar who does not only criticize the Islamic tradition and its sources but also engages with it and finds alternatives from within.

Some renowned scholars and Islamic feminists

Some of the scholars mentioned in this section have criticized the term Islamic feminism. However, once they noted that the label had stuck to their work, they started using it (Barlas 2016: 112). Amina Wadud is an Afro-American scholar who has become an iconic figure for feminist Muslim scholars. Some consider her "heaven-sent" (Anwar and Ismail 2012: 65). Wadud's scholarly work (e.g. *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* [1999] and *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* [2006]) has become referential. Wadud locates the concept of *al-tawḥīd* (The Unity of God) as an interpretive paradigm to read the Qur'an and thus claims ontological gender equality. Asma Barlas is a Pakistani-American scholar who, in 2002, published a cardinal work: *"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. Through a historical analysis of traditional religious knowledge, Barlas highlights the "*anti*-patriarchal" nature of the Qur'an. For her, male-based readings of the text have produced patriarchal interpretations reflecting the interpreter's cultural and historical circumstances. Ziba Mir-Hosseini is an Iranian scholar and legal anthropologist who defines herself as a "feminist" and

a "believer." Her distinction between *sharia* and *fiqh* is important for today's Muslim activists' campaign for modifying Muslim family laws. Mir-Hosseini explains that *sharia*, literally "the way," is "the totality of God's will as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad." *Fiqh*, which literally means "understanding," is "the science of jurisprudence […]. [It] is the process of human endeavor to discern and extract legal rules from the sacred sources of Islam— that is, the Koran and the Sunna" (Mir-Hosseini 2006: 632). Another important Islamic feminist is the Egyptian Omaima Abou-Bakr. She works basically on the exegetical corpus of the Qur'an in order to underline how some juridical concepts such as *al-qawāmah* (male prominence) have been constructed over the centuries. Mulki al-Sharmani is another Egyptian scholar who maps Islamic feminist movements, and has recently become personally engaged in this knowledge production. Al-Sharmani and Abou-Bakr are developing an Islamic ethics-based approach to read Qur'anic verses related to divorce from a feminist perspective. The most important achievement of Islamic feminist scholars is that they have shifted the attention from the few Qur'anic verses apparently directed against women towards those underlining moral and ontological equality between women and men.

Many Islamic feminists collaborate together within national and transnational networks and NGOs, such as Women and Memory Forum (Egypt), Association of Women and Civilization (Egypt), Sisters in Islam (Malaysia), and *Musawah* Global Movement (Malaysia).

Nesma Elsakaan

Selected Bibliography

Abou-Bakr, Omaima. 2001, *Islamic feminism? What's in a name? Preliminary Reflections*, in *Middle East Women's Studies Review*, vol. 15, no: 4, pp. 1–4.

Abou-Bakr, Omaima (ed.). 2013, *Feminism and Islamic Perspectives: New Horizons of Knowledge and Reform*, Cairo: WMF, DEDI, KVINFO.

Al-Sharmani, Mulki. 2014, *Islamic Feminism: Transnational and National Reflections*, in *Approaching Religion*, vol. 4, no: 2, pp. 83–94.

Anwar, Zainah and Rose Ismail. 2012, *Amina Wadud and Sisters in Islam – A Journey Towards Empowerment*, in Ali, Kecia *et al.* (eds.), *A Jihad for Justice; Honoring the Work and Life of Amina Wadud*, USA.

Badran, Margot. 2013, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences in Islam*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

Barlas, Asma. 2016, *Secular and Feminist Critiques of the Qur'an: Anti-Hermeneutics as Liberation?*, in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 32, no: 2, pp. 111–121.

Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. 2006, *Muslim Women's Quest for Equality: Between Islamic Law and Feminism*, in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 32, no: 4, pp. 629–645.

Mir-Hosseini, Ziba. 2011, *Beyond 'Islam' vs. 'Feminism'*, in *IDS Bulletin*, vol. 42, no: 1, pp. 67–77.

Tohidi, Nayereh. 2003, *"Islamic Feminism:" Perils and Promises*, in *Middle Eastern Women on the Move: Openings for and the Constraints on Women's Political Participation in the Middle East*, Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

Internet Sources

Association of Women and Civilization www.aswic.net

Musawah Global Movement www.musawah.org

Sisters in Islam www.sistersinislam.org

Women and Memory Forum www.wmf.org.eg