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Raise the Sail and Lift the Veil: Islam and Woman's Rights in the Writings of Iqbalunnisa Hussain

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During the late 1980s I took a group of students to Morocco for a summer program. After we had been in Marrakesh for a few days, I asked them what they thought about the women. One student blurted out, "They are veiled." Others nodded in acquiescence. Astonished, I took them out into the street and asked them to look again as women sauntered past in all varieties of clothes. One or two were veiled. (Cooke, p.126)

> So let us raise the sail and lift the veil-the sails of the memory -ship. But first let us lift the veils with which our contemporaries disguise the past in order to dim our present. (Mernissi, p. 11)

In the preface to her translation of Fatima Mernissi's epoch-making work *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry,* Mary Joe Lakeland has started her argument with one direct question , " Is Islam opposed to women's rights?" and goes on to assert that, " We Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights …stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition". (Mernissi, p. viii). The question is certainly central to the Islamic culture as there is an increasingly visible demand for personal expression of individual rights and when this demand refers to women it results into a heated and varied response. Fatima Mernissi herself has recounted one such episode in which her question

regarding the possibility of a woman leading the Muslims has been received with shock and disbelief by her listeners including her trusted grocer and a teacher, well-versed in the matters of *Hadith.* Fatima was "silenced, defeated and furious" (Mernissi, p. 2) This popular notion that Islam and the rights of women are oxymoronic ideas is deeply entrenched in the greater design of misinterpretation of Islam and its culture. This dominant discourse of Western origin tends to view all of Islam as a senseless juggernaut that has engaged itself in a mindless renunciation of disengagement from the modern world of progress. It is not unexpected that an author like V. S .Naipul would clearly assert that the world of the Muslims actually exist beyond the realm of their faith.

> The life that had come to Islam had not come from within. It had come from outside events and circumstances, the spread of universal civilization. It was the late twentieth century that had made Islam revolutionary, given new meaning to old Islamic ideas of equality and union. It was the late twentieth century –and not the faith –that could supply the answers-in institutions, legislations economic systems. (Naipaul, 398-99)

When Gavin Hambly points out that, "there seems to be no limit to the West's capacity to misunderstand and misrepresent the world of Islam and both history and literature have been enlisted in that service", he seems to be close to the truth regarding the attempt of the West in building a fully homogenized and absolutely hierarchized world defined by polarities like modern and the primitive, secular and the fanatic. (Hambly, p.50) The homogenized image of Islam can clearly be seen in the reaction of Miriam Cooke's student to one or two veiled woman that she has seen in the streets of Marrakesh. No less murky are the arguments of ''clash of civilization'' proponents who envision groups of infuriated Muslims, angry that Western technology, commerce, and culture have left them behind. This hard edged, black and white picture of Islam, the product of such scholars as Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis, has provided the informing vision of Islam for an audience much larger than the Western military and defense establishment officials. Frantz Fanon, from his postcolonial perspective had delineated the experience of being looked at by the colonizer and devalued in the process with a beautiful metaphor: "I am being dissected under white eyes. I am fixed". (Fanon, p.116) The metaphor is no less true for the ordinary Muslims in the postcolonial world. Under the western eyes they continue to feel confused with their own sense of impotence in shaping reality around themselves. The western perception of Muslims as fanatics over the

Quran prompts frustration, anger and cynicism among them. The religion itself, "from the time of the Crusades, has been seen as barbarous, licentious, the enemy of Christianity; in our age, in addition it is seen as anarchic and monolithic". (Akbar S Ahmed, p 3) This had only compounded the problem of the encounter between the West and the Muslims.[1] The woman's question in Islamic society thus remains a part of the deliberate incomprehension and manipulation by the Western world. It is not surprising that western feminists, part of the privileged, white and first world intellectual world would always find Islam lacking in tolerance for its female members. So, Western intellectuals like Jacques Ellul can confidently express strong views on the broader topic of the place of women in Islamic societies:

> Yet one can go so far as to say that nowhere have women been more fully subject than on Muslim territory. Marriages are arranged for young girls, women are reduced to being the slaves of men in poor families and are put in the harems of the wealthy; women have no rights, having no property-all this is beyond dispute"(Ellul, 109)

However, Muslims themselves have often seemed to be reluctant to return the gaze from the West. In this regard one can mention the example of the Haideh Moghissi's arguments against the compatibility between Islam and woman's rights. An acclaimed scholar on Islamic theology, she raises the question of Islam's incompatibility with the idea of gender equality and woman's rights: "How could a religion which is based on gender hierarchy be adopted as the framework for struggle for gender democracy and women's equality with men?" She continues her argument to show that Quran is unequivocally opposed to gender equality:

> This means that there are many different ways that Islam can be adopted. But no amount of twisting and bending can reconcile the Quranic injunctions and instructions about women's rights and obligations with the idea of gender equality (Moghissi, p.126)

So, what seemed "beyond dispute" to the Western eyes of Ellul is echoed in the words of a female Muslim scholar and we are offered a vision which, in spite of being incomplete, distorted and devoid of clear understanding is accepted as the dominant discourse on the topic of woman's right in Islam and woman's place in the Islamic society. In a situation like this, the wider world decides to blame the Islamic society of Egypt when El Saadwi speaks out about the horrifying practice of cliterodectomy but remains conveniently blind to the same practice done in

England and America as late as 1890.

However, the hope of an alternative vision looks increasingly bright as a relatively new discourse has made its presence felt in the last two decades of 20th century in the area of scholarship on Islam and its relation with the broader question of the status of women. The emergence of this new development was first properly recognized in 1990 when a group of international scholars, mainly women, gathered in Helsinki for a Roundtable on Identity Politics and Women at the United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics (WIDER) in Helsinki. The goal was to examine women and identity politics and one important stage on the discussion was to compare ways identity politics shaped and controlled women in different cultures, communities and countries. It was in this context, tells Margot Badran, one of the leading women scholars present on the occasion, "that some of us reported that Muslim women were subverting the patriarchal Islamist project through what appeared to be a new form of feminism-in-the-making which Muslim women in different parts of the world would soon call Islamic feminism." (Badran, 2008, p.26) Whether these attempts to protest against male hegemony in the production of official Islamic knowledge can be called Islamic feminism is matter for conjecture but there had certainly been other earlier occasions when scholars challenging patriarchal readings of the Quran and the Hadith have demonstrated that it is not the texts themselves but rather their interpretations that have allowed for patriarchal traditions to persist. The Quran contains principles of gender equality and wider issues of social justice, thus laying grounds for challenging patriarchal traditions. At the end of the 19th century, women like Zaynab al-Fawwaz , from Lebanon were formulating feminist demands and arguments within Islamic norms and principles in order to deflect criticism that their inspirations and goals were Western. By the 1920s, feminism as a discourse and a practice was becoming visible in Egypt and Lebanon, with men and women, well informed on theology debating the extent to which Muslim scripture and law allowed women to participate with men in the public domain. In 1923, Huda Shaarawi, the founder and president of the Egyptian Feminist Union made one big leap when she staged a public demonstration in the Cairo railway station by taking off her veil in front of a crowd. The demand to unread the patriarchal interpretation of the sacred texts was closely related to the question the limited right conferred on women by Islamic societies. The challenge was not confined within the domain of activism as literary works were also produced in favour of the demand. The Lebanese Nazira

Zayn al-Din (1908–1976), daughter of a Muslim authority, argues in her *Unveiling and Veiling* (1928) that Muslim prescription for women, particularly concerning issues like veiling and polygamy, have been historically structured by men. She firmly restates her right as a good Muslim woman, daughter of a good Muslim father—a self-identification that helps her in achieving a multiple speaking position—to investigate her religion and culture without constriction. This tradition, often dormant, reappeared in the later years of the 1980s and the early years of 1990s to accentuate a growing trend of Muslim women's demand of equal access to scriptural truth . Writers in *Zanan* (est. 1992) in Iran offered Islamic readings of gender equality and justice. Fatima Mernissi published *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Inquiry* (1991) exposing and focusing on the complex relation between the words of the Prophet, their interpretation contained in the *Hadith* and fraudulent re-reading of the *Hadith by* the Ulema. Amina Wadud published *Quran and Woman: Reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (1992, 1999) explicating the message of gender equality and social justice found in the scripture. This discourse on women and gender, located within an egalitarian reading of Islam makes attempts to bring together the basics of the scripture with the issues related to woman's rights in the modern times. For this project some of these women scholars have gone "back into the shadows of the past":

> Ample historical evidence portrays women in the Prophet's Medina raising their heads from slavery and violence to claim their right to join as equal participants in the making of their Arab history. Women fled aristocratic tribal Mecca by the thousands to enter Medina, the Prophet's city in the seventh century, because Islam promised equality and dignity for all, for men and women, masters and servants. (Lakeland, p. viii)

The practical means by which the practitioners of the discourse try to find answers to a wide range of questions is not a new one and its source can be found in the age-old tradition of Islamic culture. The practice of *ijtihad* and *tafsir,* has been central to the project of Islamic modernism of late 19th and early 20th century and these have been appropriated by this discourse. *Ijtihad* or independent critical examination of religious texts assists individuals and society to be both modern and Muslim; it helps Muslims shape the dynamics of change within a renewed understanding of Islam. For Muslim women under the dominion of patriarchal restrictions imposed in the name of religious prescription, the insights coming through

the practice of *Ijtihad* worked as an effective tool to expose the patriarchal intrusions into Islam and their own lives. These scholars have the advantage of training and education needed for direct examination of religious sources. They are well equipped and can feel the urgency to engage in their own *Ijtihad* and to conduct their own *tafsir* (Qur'anic interpretation) in an atmosphere of the resurgence of patriarchal Islam turning itself overtly political.

Though the discourse works with a frame of mind that highlights the role of gender in understanding the organization of society, some of its practitioners are reluctant to embrace the identity of a feminist. Amina Wadud writes in the 1999 preface of *Qur'an and Woman*:

> The two names most consistently hurled at me are "Western" and "feminist." "Western" could mean that I can only be who I am: a daughter of the West, born and raised American of African descent. It is reduced however to mean anti-Islam. "Feminist" is used in a similar reductionist manner. No reference is ever made to the definition of feminism as the radical notion that women are human beings. (Wadud, 1999 p ix)

Asma Barlas is unhappy at being referred to as an feminist. For her, Feminism is imperializing and embracing it is an act of betrayal to her own particular mode of resistance.

Particularly at a time when a self-defined West has unleashed such bloodshed against Muslims everywhere there is some comfort in such seemingly small acts of individual resistance. Of course, as Ashis Nandy says, the West is now "everywhere, in structures and in minds," and there is simply no escaping it, but I still seek to protect my sense of self from parts of the West by refusing to speak some common languages. (Barlas, p.20)

This desire to distance oneself from the Western notion of feminism is probably a conscious defense against the attempts by Islamic clerics to portray the practitioner of the discourse as traitor, a lackey of the west, an outsider conveniently ignoring the fact that the entire discourse is rooted in the scriptures. However, Miriam Cooke chose to be more inclusive: "Whenever Muslim women offer a critique of some aspect of Islamic history or hermeneutics, and they do so with and/or on behalf of all Muslim women and their right to enjoy with men full participation in a just community, I call them Islamic feminists." (Cooke, p.61).There have been many attempts throughout the twentieth century by women scholars of

Islamic world to find alternative terminology. However, whether they name themselves *unthawiyat, nassawiyat , womanists* , or *remakers of women* the desired connotation have never been reached. [2] Under whatever banner they operate, they see the causes and cures for the situation to be too complex to be reductively rendered by ideological firebrands not well informed of the social, historical, and cultural contexts involved. So, the basic aim of enabling Muslims to bring forward alternative understanding of Islam, especially regarding the question of woman's right to set beside the meanings crafted by the *Ulema* remains same and touches the lives of millions of Muslim women including those belonging to the Indian subcontinent.

If one major preoccupation of the discourse is to unmake the patriarchal meaning projected onto Islam through *ijtihad* and *tafsir*, then no less important is the unearthing of such texts, primarily fictional works which question and subvert the same project. Mention can be made of such authors as Mena Abdullah, Farhana Sheikh and Zaynab Alkai. From the Indian subcontinent mention should be made of women writers of Urdu fictions. Nazar Sajjad Hyder, Hijab Imtiaz Ali and Rashid Jehan had all developed independent feminist voices. Ismat Chughtai known for her indomitable spirit and a fierce feminist ideology has explored feminine sexuality and other evolving conflicts of the modern Muslim world. M. Asaduddin, is of the opinion that though Chughtai "operated largely within the parameters of Indian patriarchy, she offered subtle critiques of its dominant assumptions through her writings". (Asaduddin, xi) But, surprisingly in the early years of 20th century emerged authors like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Iqbalunnisa Hussain and Zeenuth Futehally who, in spite of writing in English made serious attempts to bring together the question of woman's rights with the words from the scriptures. These authors are pioneers in conveying the specificity of their experiences as women and as Muslims in a language that is alien to their culture. Their pride in the culture of Islam and their rejection of both patriarchal practices and Western hegemonic feminisms make their discourses complex and challenging.

Among them, Iqbalunnisa Hussain published *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* in the year 1944. According to Amin Malak this is the first novel in English written by a Muslim woman.(Malak, p.31) Iqbalaunnisa also wrote earlier a collection of essays entitled *Changing India*: *A Muslim woman Speaks* in the year 1940. *Purdah and Polygamy* is an episodic novel that depicts the drama of three generations of an upper-class Muslim family in the late 1930s.

The novel represents the practice of polygamy, whereby financially able men are allowed to marry up to four wives, as a fact of life in the specific privileged milieu depicted, with its rationale critically questioned. In the foreword C. R. Reddy, the then vice-chancellor of Andhra University refers to Iqbalunnisa Hussain as "the Jane Austen of India" and also quotes a faculty member from his university's English department who "wrote after reading the book at [Reddy's] instance—'In this book, almost for the first time, true *Purdah* life is depicted with utter realism'" (Hussain, 1944, p.1-4) The novel can easily be compared with Rokeya Hossain's *Avarodhbasini* which is a piece of non-fictional writing derived from actual events that shows the brutality of child marriages, the meaninglessness of purdah practices, and the injustice of keeping women uneducated. *Avarodhbasini* comes to a close with Rokeya Hossain's cry of anguish on behalf of women prisoners of purdah:

"Oh, why did I come to this miserable world,

Why was I born in a purdah country!" (Hossain, p.81)

Rokeya Hossain's work and Iqbalunnisa Hussain's novel deal with the same issue of the injustice done to Muslim women in the name of religion but Iqbalunnisa offers her critique in an entirely different manner. Iqbalunnisa is mild and subtle, resorting often to irony. The opening of the novel's fifth chapter has clear resemblance with that of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*:

> It is a well-known fact that man is superior to women in every respect. He is a representative of God on earth and being born with His light in him deserves the respect and obedience that he demands. He is not expected to show his gratitude or even a kind word of appreciation to a woman: it is his birthright to get everything from her... A woman as a wife should be subservient in everything to man's comfort and exist for him and for him alone. She should have no particular liking to anything. Her work should as a matter of course begin and end with him. (Hussain, 1944, p.49)

Irony is the most potent weapon used by the author in the novel. The narratorial remarks and the dialogues between the characters are often laced with ironies. In the very first chapter, in the description of the house *Dilkhusa*, the authorial comment makes the imprisoned status of the women in the patriarchal Muslim society visible: "Its high blind walls made a stranger take it for an unguarded jail, and it literally was for its women folks". (Hussain, 1944, p. 1) Actually the

entire society works as a prison for a Muslim woman who is , " supposed to live under any circumstances. Her only needs are food, clothing and decoration." (Hussain, 1944,p.30) The way cultural articulation of patriarchy is justified by reference to Islam and Islamic doctrine is presented in the same ironic tone so that the reader can easily understand the disparity between the claims made by the clerics and the truth found in the sacred book.

His polygamous nature has an excuse: a man doing brave deeds needs every sacrifice by others. A woman who does not show the proper spirit of gulping down ready-made beliefs is condemned by the rest as douzakhi. (Hussain,1944, p. 49)

The sarcasm easily draws the attention of the reader to the manipulation that has been done by the society in their misreading of the sacred texts and the words of the prophet. Pointing in a lighter vein at such strategic misreading, Iqbalunnisa can expect the reader to read the sacred texts by himself to do his own *ijtihad* and *tafsir.* Interestingly, the non-fictional work of Iqbalunnisa *Changing India*: *A Muslim woman Speaks* is itself a good example of her own *ijtihad* and *tafsir* and provides the reader with a perspective to situate his reading of the scriptures. Iqbalunnisa's non-fictional work contained essays with such titles as *There is No Polygamy in Islam, The Psychological Treatment of Man in Islam, Mohammed, The Most Modern Thinker.* The essays seem to be the fruits of Iqbalunnisa's personal *jihad,* to quote Miriam Cooke "against religious interpretations and histories that they consider to be harmful to Muslim women." *(*Cooke, p.57) In one of the essays, she explains the socio-religious background at a particular moment in the history of Islamic civilization when polygamy was accepted as a practice. Quoting from the holy book she asserts that Muslims should reinterpret the words in the light of the present civilization: "We have to appreciate the real spirit of the reformer who had to rule the wild and the lawless people of that dark age. It is high time for them to make a study of the harmful consequences resulting from the plurality of the wives…" (Hussain, 1940, p. 31) In an essay entitled *the position of Woman in Islam,* quoting and analyzing lines from *The Quran* Iqbalunnisa has shown that , " Islam is the one of the religions of the world that has given equal rights to woman in material matters. A woman can earn her living or she can earn to help her husband financially". (Hussain, 1940, p.37) These words uttered with absolute clarity is what Leila Ahmad calls, "the Islam of women" that "stresses moral conduct and emphasizes Islam as a broad ethos and ethical code and as a way of understanding and reflecting on the meaning of one's life and of human life

more generally". (Leila Ahmad, p.126) Eunice De Souza in her short introduction to Iqbalunnisa's *Purdah and Polygamy* has quoted from Teresa Hubel's essay *The Missing Muslim woman in Anglo Indian literature* to show that , "…Hussain's unwillingness to traffic in Islamic religious authority is tied up with her attempt to demonstrate that Muslim ideology regarding women , far from being divinely sanctioned , is, in fact , man-made. Again and again in the novel, through such techniques as narratorial comment, irony and dialogue, Hussain suggests that the social system that confines women, physically and symbolically, is the product of male dominance." (De Souza, p.390) The same idea has been asserted firmly in the *ijtihad* and *tafsir* mode in her collection of essays. Iqbalunnisa's works in general, remaining true to the Islamic framework try to present, in words of Miriam Cooke, " what it means to have a difficult double commitment : on the one hand, to a faith position, and on the other hand , to woman's rights both inside the home and outside." (Cooke, p.59)This complex self-positioning that celebrates multiple belongings, offers what Cooke terms," Multiple Critique". It is not a fixed authorizing means but a fluid discursive strategy taken up from multiple speaking positions. It formulates a strategy for conversations with many interlocutors on many different topics. These different speaking positions are not contradictory to each other and can be used to present a critique of a particular system from different perspectives. Thus, the servant girl Munira in Iqbalunnisa's novel is quite happy that her husband is concerned only with her service and she tries to trace justification of her beast-like existence from the traditional interpretation of Islam. On the other hand Maghbool, the third wife of Kabeer , talented singer and an educated girl is critical of her husband on that very account which makes Munira happy. Both these women are true to their faith-positions but are offering critique of the social practices that are justified in the name of their religion. In this way, apparently contradictory voices may emerge but the goal of the individual voice is to remain in the community out of which she is speaking, even when she criticizes its problems. It is through such variable speaking positions within the framework of Islam that Iqbalunnisa hopes to lift the veil with which, (coming back to Mary Joe Lakeland) "contemporaries disguise the past in order to dim our present."

Notes:

3. Frederick Quinn in *The Sum of All Heresies: The Image of Islam in Western Thought* has given a detailed account of the misrepresentation of Islam in the Western thought from the early days of both the civilizations when Prophet

Muhammad was considered to be the Lucifer till the post 9/11 paranoia of Islamic terror.

ii. The different names adopted by the practitioners of the discourse are discussed in detail by Miriam Cooke in *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Islam*, page vii-viii.

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