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Islamic Feminism: An Overview

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Abstract. In the past few years, Islamic feminism has emerged as a powerful voice against the patriarchal nature of Muslim society. Islam and Feminism, these two words and the concepts they imply, are contradictory to each other, so their very combination is surprising to many intellectuals. Traditions of creating literature in the light of opposition to patriarchy in Muslim society and religious matters exist in every language. Islamic feminism is largely confined to intellectual discourses that have been around for the past two decades. In this sense, it is a breath of fresh air whose effects are not yet fully apparent. The present paper covers the study of the causes and effects, side by side, of the factors that have transformed these sayings into such an effective voice, the echo of which is now being felt in world literature.

Keywords. Islamic Feminism, Islam, religion, Feminism, Feminist Studies, Qurʾān

Feminism manifests in various forms across the globe, and the feminist principles from one region do not necessarily influence those of another. Historically, feminism has often challenged organized religious institutions. However, with the emergence of diverse feminist movements, a paradigm known as Islamic feminism has been recognized as an extension of the broader feminist discourse. In recent years, Islamic feminism has surfaced as a compelling counter to the patriarchal structures within Muslim societies. This movement involves reinterpreting the Holy Qurʾān, hadiths, and Sharia laws to challenge traditional patriarchal readings. A crucial aspect of Islamic feminism is examining the relationship between Islam and femininity—whether they are compatible or at odds. Much of the scholarship on Islamic Feminism has originated in Iran, a predominantly Shiite nation where the concept of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) plays a significant role in Shiite Islam.

Iran's unique historical context saw women actively participating in the Islamic Revolution. Yet, after its success, the new Islamic Republic enacted

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some of the most stringent laws curtailing women's rights. This contradiction prompted Iranian intellectuals to delve into religious texts to seek insights beyond conventional interpretations. Initially, challenging the established Sharia system was fraught with risk, but by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some male religious scholars began to highlight interpretive errors, fostering discussions on human misinterpretation of religious texts. This shift was largely a response to the misconceptions spread by colonial powers regarding Islam and women, which made reevaluation urgent. During the late 19th century, certain scholars began to counter patriarchal narratives in Islamic commentary and jurisprudence through innovative readings of the Qurʾān and fresh recitations of hadiths. Notable figures like Muhammad Ibn Muhammad Ismail Abduh (1849-1905) actively refuted colonial views on women's status in Islam and contested hadith interpretations that expressed bias against women. The first generation of Islamic feminists has prioritized the re-examination of Islamic texts while adhering to contemporary scholarly standards. By the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, there was a surge of scholarly discussions on the intersections of Islam and women's issues. Ultimately, by the close of the 20th century, the status of women in Islam and related theological inquiries had become integral to the field. Islamic feminists have significantly contributed to this dialogue, introducing new scholarly approaches to continue the discourse on women's status within Islam.

By the end of the twentieth century, the status and significance of women in Islam, as well as the teachings regarding women found in the Qurʾān and hadith, became significant topics within theological discussions. Islamic feminists contributed to this discourse by introducing innovative scholarship that built upon established traditions. The majority of these Islamic feminist scholars are affiliated with prominent universities worldwide, leading to a wider acceptance of their theories, which are grounded in scientific methodologies. While the evolution of Islamic feminism is closely linked to Iran, its early development in the 1990s also garnered support from the Arab world and Pakistan. In 1997, Riffat Hassan emphasized the necessity and value of feminist theology. Subsequently, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas provided non-traditional interpretations of the Holy Qurʾān that serve as pivotal references within Islamic feminism rather than as expressions of opposition to religion. As a result, these theories have transcended the Shia-Sunni divide, drawing on foundational sources that serve as guiding principles for the Muslim Ummah. While not all of their arguments may be universally accepted, it is essential to acknowledge their significance in contemporary discourse.

Islamic feminism is intricately linked to religious commentaries. There are primarily two types of interpretations found in Islamic texts: personal opinion and authoritative interpretations. Ash'ar Najmi has articulated the distinctions between these two forms and the associated debates in a clear and logical manner. In one of his articles, he conducted an in-depth analysis of the exegesis of the Holy Qurʾān and the interpretation of hadith.

> Historically, each commentator has produced their commentaries based on their own theological principles. Not only did they argue in favor of their own sect, but they often resorted to interpretations that some might consider distortive. When faced with opposing viewpoints, rather than reflecting on them thoughtfully, they often mocked them and launched attacks on the opposing interpreters (28).

In light of these interpretive discrepancies, Najmi has concluded that they frequently lead to severe divisions among scholars.

> The abundance of Qurʾānic commentaries serves as evidence that no two interpreters fully agree on all aspects. Commentators often felt compelled to write their interpretations because they disagreed with the prevailing narratives. This does not imply that some lacked conviction; rather, it suggests that individual interpretation is paramount, given the Qurʾānic text's profound complexity, richness of meanings, subtlety, and literary elegance, which necessitates interpretation (11).

The calls for the reinterpretation of the Holy Qurʾān by Islamic Feminists stem from this very multiplicity of interpretations. Clearly, the concept of "my interpretation" has been employed in place of a validated interpretation. Aysha Hidayatullah's book critiques the rhetoric of Islamic feminists and female scholars advocating for feminist or non-patriarchal readings of the Holy Qurʾān, including figures like Amina Wadud, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hussain, and Aziza Al-Hibri. Hidayatullah opens her book "The Feminist Edges of the Qurʾān" with a quote from Hasan Mahmud Abd al-Latif Al-Shafi'i of Cairo University:

> This movement seeks to take the Western "hermeneutic" methodology and apply it to the Noble Qurʾān and Islamic religious texts in general, with complete indifference to the principles of Qurʾānic exegesis and rules of interpretation established in our Arabic-Islamic heritage… the dangers of this phenomenon may not be obvious today; but as this "intellectual" output continues, the cultural environment will

> become polluted by its by-products until future generations are left unable to breathe clean air… (1).

Hidayatullah emphasizes the significance of this statement, noting that it recognizes Islamic feminism as a powerful and evolving movement. Al-Shafi'i similarly points out that Islamic feminism has emerged as an intellectual force that must be confronted directly. She reflects on how centuries of patriarchy and colonial narratives have shaped her perception of tradition, suggesting that it focused more on removing rights than granting them.

In response to Western criticism, several Muslim intellectuals educated abroad advocated for interpreting the Qurʾān and hadiths in ways that would earn respect for Muslims and Islam among non-Muslims. Beginning in the 1970s, harsh critiques of Islamic teachings and lifestyles gained traction in the West, leading to a colonial-era interpretation of Islam. During this time, some Muslim leaders and authoritarian regimes attempted to implement a political Islamic framework by intertwining religion and governance, ultimately inflicting harm on the essence of Islam. An example of this is Iran's Ruhollah Musavi Khomeini, who is often cited as having exploited Islam in ways that oppressed women. Throughout history, various Muslim rulers and jurists have long echoed beliefs about Islamic law, family, and women's roles. Concurrently, the Ottoman Empire saw a surge in misogynistic interpretations that distorted authentic Islamic teachings. Political Islam increasingly overshadowed traditional religious practices, leading to a form of Islam that often aimed at the subjugation of women. Essential teachings were neglected, replaced by prejudiced interpretations, misleading commentaries, and skewed applications of Sharia law that ultimately misrepresented the true identity of Islam.

The emergence of Islam during the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties cast a shadow over its portrayal as a faith centered on sexuality and feminism, distorting the moral foundation of original Islam, which fundamentally advocated for human equality. Political Islam, or the state-sanctioned version of Islam, actively sought to misrepresent the original teachings and perpetuated a patriarchal structure. According to Shaheen Sardar Ali, this structure involved gender segregation, fostering a non-Islamic belief in the superiority of men over women. This injustice was often framed as a "natural" order. Nevertheless, the true essence of Islam emphasizes complete gender equality. Although this principle of equality was vigorously championed, the foundational concept was temporarily overlooked. For many Muslim women, however, the transformative spirit of this foundational principle and the respect for human dignity and rights continued to serve as a goal, despite threatening the privileges of the male

elite (21). Who were these male elites whose rights were allegedly compromised? Revolutionary Egyptian feminist writer Nawal El Saadawi provides a compelling explanation. Her insights lay the groundwork for a robust Islamic feminist discourse. She argues that Islamic society is entrenched in patriarchal continuity, dominated by a minority elite who control private property—comprised of merchants, traders, and leaders who owned livestock and wealth. She points out that religious laws and penalties primarily affected the poor—those with minimal resources, marginal artisans, or lower-ranking merchants—who couldn't afford to participate in the same societal privileges as the elite, such as polygamy or the ownership of concubines. These lower-class individuals were often powerless in matters of marriage and divorce, witnessing the sale and trade of maids while harboring jealousy (131). Whether considering figures like Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Moroccan feminist writer Fatema Mernissi, American Islamic scholar Amina Wadud, Kecia Ali, Riffat Hassan, or philosopher and legal scholar Azizah Al-Hibri, their discussions revolve around Islamic literature and exegetical works. Nawal El Saadawi's analysis forms the core of Islamic feminist rhetoric. A deep understanding of this Islamic societal structure uncovers the pervasive mentality that sought to incorporate patriarchal elements into the foundational teachings of Islam.

> The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) was born into a society stratified into masters and slaves. His early teachings actively opposed the class-based structure supported by slavery and defended the rights of the marginalized, including women. Yet, outside a few tribes with lingering matriarchal influences, the patriarchal system reigned strong across the majority of groups. This system, designed for the unchallenged dominance of men, proved enduring and resilient (El Saadawi, 131).

In examining the insights presented by the theorists of Islamic feminism, for example, Kecia Ali and Aysha Hidayatullah, it becomes evident that Nawal Al-Saadawi's assertion highlights a stark reality: the demand for a reformed Islamic system has rendered polygamy a social imperative. Consequently, Islam has conferred a societal endorsement of male sexual freedom, encompassing the rights to multiple marriages and slavery. Historically, it has been affluent individuals, such as slave owners, tribal leaders, and the wealthy, who possessed the means to procure and maintain numerous female companions. In the pre-Islamic period of Arabia, often referred to as *jāhiliyah* (the Age of Ignorance), a tribal order that included slavery, existed. Prisoners of war were treated as property of the victors, with each household permitted to enslave as many captives as

they could manage. Islam did not fundamentally alter this dynamic; it sanctioned sexual relations with enslaved women while not mandating marriage. However, children born from these unions, if acknowledged by their fathers, were granted recognition as free citizens rather than remaining in bondage (El Saadawi, 135).

While Islam granted certain rights to enslaved individuals that had not been previously recognized, it categorically denounced the oppression of slaves, the impoverished, and any form of injustice or corruption. Islamic teachings called upon Arabs to abandon alcohol and drugs, prohibited usury, and yet, they did not explicitly address the hierarchical superiority attributed to men over women. Despite the presence of this gender imbalance, men continued to retain their dominion and leadership roles. Shahnaz Nabi contends that women have been marginalized throughout history. Even when religions have ascribed them a secondary status, language and literature have perpetuated their portrayal as submissive and compliant. A glance at any dictionary reveals a reluctance to accord women equal status or to appreciate their distinct and established identities (20). This deeply entrenched notion is not easily eradicable from societal consciousness. Dictionaries serve not only as linguistic tools but also as reflections of the prevailing attitudes of civilization and religious belief. Nabi's article includes an excerpt from Feroz Sons Limited's *Urdu Encyclopedia*, illustrating the extent of anti-woman sentiment entrenched within societal narratives:

> The term 'woman' is defined in Arabic as a part of the body that requires covering, and it stands as the antonym of 'man.' According to tradition, Eve is said to have been created from Adam's left rib, reinforcing the perspective that man precedes woman and that a woman's cultural position is ostensibly equivalent to that of a man. Moreover, it is asserted in the Holy Qurʾān that men are protectors of women and that men hold superiority over women. Presently, the issue of women's extreme liberty has become contentious. A Hadith states that a nation led by a female Imam cannot attain prosperity, suggesting women's roles as merely advisory. Some men have been labeled as female disciples for delegating responsibilities to women out of negligence (13).

Where does this all stem from? The references to the Qurʾān and Hadith provoke shame if contemporary readers adopt such beliefs. These interpretations, while detrimental to Islam, have led to ridicule towards Muslims globally. In this environment, the subjects of Sharia and family law have emerged as focal points for Islamic feminists. An analysis of legislative

traditions indicates that motivations for crafting various laws against women often stem from deeply ingrained misconceptions.

There is no single, coherent codex of Sharia law to validate such biases. Rather, it has evolved through the contributions of numerous jurists, resulting in diverse interpretations that have never achieved consensus, leading to inconsistencies in application. While Sharia embodies a human effort to interpret the principles enshrined in the Qurʾān, it is crucial to recognize its capability for adaptation, modification, and abrogation—a notion fundamental to the discourses of Islamic feminists. The historic practices of female infanticide, genital mutilation, polygamy, divorce, the institution of Halala, slavery, mistreatment, stringent control of women, torture, sexual harassment, educational deprivation, and denial of inheritance rights have continued to plague Muslim societies worldwide, largely since the Middle Ages. Such violations have often been justified—albeit incorrectly—by interpretations of the Qurʾān and Hadith.

Surprisingly, certain scholars, even in the twentieth century, persist in their antiquated views. Take, for instance, the term *nushūz*, which has generated considerable debate among commentators as well as feminist scholars. According to contemporary Islamic scholar Amin Ahmad Islahi,

> "Nushūz" signifies a woman's stubbornness towards her husband, implying that when faced with rebellion, a man is granted disciplinary authority over her. However, attention must be given to the context specified in the Qurʾān, which allocates such powers only in circumstances of suspected rebellion or disregard for the marital dynamic (292).

This perspective highlights the complexity of marital relationships within Islamic discourse. While feminist theology advocates for non-patriarchal interpretations of the Qurʾān, it is noteworthy that prior to contemporary Islamic feminists, there have been scholars who challenged misinterpretations, although their positions may lack authenticity. The historical commentary traditions should not be erroneously classified as wholly anti-feminist based solely on contested interpretations of particular Qurʾānic verses without widespread consensus. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to acknowledge that certain commentaries are occasionally wielded to support *fatwas* (Islamic legal edict[1]) against women. The discourse

[1] Fatwa (legal edict) is the clarification of Islamic law (legal rulings of God). A fatwa is usually made by a mufti based on evidence (God's ruling) and in response to a question made by a person (an inquirer) on issues of personal or general concern. A fatwa encompasses every aspect of life, such as creed, acts of worship, transactions, the economy, family, politics, governance, arbitration, etc. (iftaa).

surrounding Islamic feminist theology has captivated scholars, particularly regarding the implications of the term *nushūz* (marital discord) which translates to 'to rise'. This terminology is employed within the Qurʾān to describe both men and women, highlighting the mutual responsibilities of husbands and wives. Abuse within marriage, whether from husbands or wives, is unequivocally prohibited. This nuanced understanding of the Qurʾān suggests that the points raised by Islamic feminists have previously been considered by male scholars, demonstrating that their objections are not as novel as posited. However, it must be emphasized that while rhetorical challenges might arise in academic spheres, these debates often fail to reach broader societal impact. It is undeniable that legislation concerning women has typically emerged from patriarchal frameworks, which continue to be influenced by pre-Islamic tribal customs perceived during the initial Muslim generations. The advent of a handful of voices advocating traditional reforms in the late nineteenth century became ensnared in broader discussions of Ijtihad, causing religious hypocrisy to entrench itself further and distorting the Islamic image. The exploitation of religion as a political tool in the Arab world and its far-reaching consequences have left the entire Muslim community grappling with the repercussions. Responsible for perpetuating this dilemma is, in part, the historical ignorance and disinterest of women in both scientific and religious discourses. For a significant duration, Muslim women regarded their husbands as divine figures and viewed religious leaders as mere representatives of a higher power, preventing them from questioning established doctrines. The awakening prompted by thinkers like Qasim Amin and Abduh catalyzed the collective awareness among men and women alike regarding longstanding inequities. This intellectual awakening sparked an eagerness among progressive Muslims, including figures such as Saad Zaghloul Pasha, Huda Sha'arawi, and Malak Hifni Nasif, to advocate for women's rights and challenge societal norms.

However, the latter part of the twentieth century witnessed regressive sexual harassment trends emerge alongside the attempts of various scholars to reinterpret Islamic principles. In countries such as India, drastic consequences ensued, with the misapplication of *fatwa*s leading to women's social ostracization for challenging marital norms. Such extreme authoritarianism over women's lives has produced alarming outcomes. The misinterpretation of the Qurʾān continues to mislead contemporary society about the necessity of *hijab* or *niqab*; however, strict guidelines on sexual conduct persist. In Islam, the institution of marriage remains sacred, delineating the boundaries within which sexual pleasure is permissible. Gendered theories suggesting heightened male sexual appetites and

inherent female satisfaction in monogamous relationships receive no validation in the Qurʾān. The Qurʾānic stance actively encourages monogamy, positioning polygamous arrangements as safety nets for the vulnerable rather than merely satisfying primitive desires. While the feminist reading of Sharia laws has its own implications, the political reality acts as a detriment for the women who are committed to seeking reforms through religious reinterpretation. It is worth mentioning that a poet like Kishwar Naheed summarily rejects male hegemony that sprouted in the guise of Hudood Ordinance, social taboos, various forms of domestic and social violence, sexual abuse to victimize women (Hashmi 12).

The emergence of Islamic feminism has largely stemmed from an intellectual movement centered on the educated classes, fostering scholarly interest for nearly two decades. Its gradual acceptance into academic curricula in Western institutions signals its establishment as a legitimate field of study, though its social implications remain nascent beyond a few progressive enclaves. Historically, feminist initiatives advocating for the elevation of women's status within Islamic frameworks have proliferated since the eighteenth century, although they rarely align with the principles of Islamic feminism as they primarily focus on social reform rather than the intersection of gender within religious contexts. The primary objective of Islamic feminism lies in empowering Muslim women to articulate religious matters concerning their rights and roles, necessitating a deep understanding of related jurisprudence. Their pursuit of religious knowledge has, over time, attracted segments of the Muslim female population worldwide, influencing the dynamics of law and societal norms. Through the proliferation of feminist literature and active engagements, Islamic feminists have stimulated broader conversations surrounding women's rights, echoed in movements like the Women's March in Pakistan and the Arab Spring. Islamic feminism is predicated upon immutable principles of equality, dignity, and respect for women. Despite the Qurʾān's provisions for women's empowerment and equality, practical application has often faced resistance, with numerous fabricated hadiths undermining women's status. Despite the clear directives established in the Qurʾān, patriarchal interpretations have frequently overshadowed true Islamic teachings. This dissonance continues to challenge the Islamic world as it navigates the complexities of faith in contemporary society.

The teachings of the Qurʾān fundamentally reject the promotion of a patriarchal societal structure. Moreover, it emphasizes that moral accountability is not dictated by gender, asserting that both men and women stand equally before Allah, based on their piety. Scholars and *imam*s, historically analyzing the Qurʾān and associated traditions, have often

overlooked women's rights, leading to interpretations that affirm male superiority while maintaining oppressive norms against women. Misinterpretations of polygamy and familial hierarchies have perpetuated the notion of male authority, consequently stigmatizing women's autonomy and societal participation. Though some Islamic feminists strive for coherent reinterpretation and context-driven understanding of the Qurʾān while engaging with traditional commentary, the inherent inequalities within existing family laws and societal norms remain largely intact. Contemporary scholars have emerged, advocating for women's inclusion in legal structures and promoting the need for a holistic, gender-inclusive approach to legislation emanating from Qurʾānic principles. While efforts to reinterpret Islamic texts may not yield immediate transformative changes within a patriarchal framework, they serve as crucial dialogues that demand both recognition and action within the ethical and legal domains of society.

In contrast to the directives outlined in the Holy Qurʾān pertaining to marriage, polygamy, divorce, *ḥalāla*, *kanīz*, and acts of *zinā* and *ḥadd*, various laws have been established that favor men over women. New forms of marriage have emerged, primarily designed for the sexual exploitation of women and to satisfy male desires. Certain commentaries have also drawn upon Jewish and Christian traditions to endorse sexual harassment and gender bias. Deliberate efforts have been made to exercise control over women's sexuality and bodies by men. Over time, measures have been taken to diminish the respect and status that women held during the Prophet's era, influenced by tribal customs, while concurrently reducing their religious, social, and economic roles during that time. Attempts have also been made to redefine divine sexuality, leading to discussions that shaped male and female interactions within the community. Within a few centuries following the passing of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), the tribal identity of the Hijaz deserts evolved into a vast yet intricate and varied empire. From this core of Islam, the Ummah encountered challenges and inquiries that had not arisen during the Prophet's (peace be upon him) lifetime. In their quest for answers, they turned to their own faith. Consequently, discussions commenced regarding the texts and interpretations of the Holy Quran and the hadiths, along with their historical contexts. The empire's resources and the various factions vying for control over faith and belief also came into play. Significant disagreements emerged on numerous topics. One such issue was the status of women. These debates and dialogues led to the emergence of a new class within Islam, known as the '*ulama* or *āyatollahs*. This group positioned itself as the forerunners of religious instruction and subsequently became the spiritual leaders of Muslims. Their access to the Quran and Hadith, the life

of the Prophet (peace be upon him), and Islamic history contributed to this status. However, this resulted in their increasing influence and frequent involvement in Sharia, causing their teachings and Islam to be perceived as synonymous. This small faction continued to delineate what constituted Islam. Yet, with the onset of the twentieth century, significant transformations began to unfold. The widespread awakening to education within the Muslim world led to the emergence, for the first time, of individuals from this community who were not reliant on this traditional scholarly class for guidance in religious and Sharia matters. These individuals began to consult the literary sources of their faith independently and formed their own interpretations, diverging from those of earlier scholars, which gradually eroded Islamic authority. Consequently, a considerable number of women, while asserting their intent to study Islam independently, articulated differing and often conflicting perspectives compared to those prevalent in ninth-century Arabia. Almost all of these women have come to the conclusion that it is not Islam itself, but rather its interpretations, that are accountable for the misconduct occurring under the guise of religion and Sharia. They assert that the present version of Sharia was established without the involvement of women, who have consistently been sidelined throughout the entire development process. Furthermore, these men were part of a society that was intrinsically misogynistic, leading them to infuse patriarchal biases into this belief, which is both fundamentally progressive and distinctly supportive of women's empowerment (Mernissi viii). Additionally, there have been efforts to blur the lines between religious obligations and worldly issues concerning women's rights and privileges within the political context of Islam. Professor Aziza Al-Habri, in her examination of the formative years of Islamic history, has demonstrated how Islam gradually fell victim to a patriarchal society and how the contributions of women were marginalized (208). El-Saadawi (1980, 96) has illustrated, through the instances of Hazrat 'Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) and Hazrat K̲hadija (may Allah be pleased with her), the significant roles they played in the development of Islam during its early period and how Islam emerged as a paradigm for progressive feminism. In the seventh century, Islam encountered the patriarchal tribal system of Arabia, which it introduced alongside the concept of a unified faith, the Ummah. In their analyses of feminine interpretations of the Qurʾān, feminist theology, and Islamic feminism, various scholars have systematically addressed Western prejudices against Islam and Muslims, drawing upon the Holy Qurʾān and theological traditions for support. Some have actively challenged the notion that patriarchy is inherently Arab, clarifying that the intertwining of non-Islamic

customs distorts the authentic teachings of Islam. Consequently, Islamic feminism is increasingly recognized as a global movement appealing to both Muslims and non-Muslims. The non-academic dimensions of Islamic feminism relate to religious considerations, with fundamental propositions including:

1. The inclusion of female scholars in the courts of *Darul Qaza* and *Darul Ifta.*

2. Ensuring women's representation in bodies formulating or revising Sharia laws.

3. Granting women the right to preach and lead religious services.

4. Permitting women to take on leadership roles in mixed-gender environments.

5. Advocating holistic interpretation of the Holy Qurʾān in the development of Sharia laws.

The issues raised in this context are not suitable for a literary research paper and thus cannot be evaluated as wholly correct or incorrect; they are inherently the domain of religious scholars. However, it is evident that these demands pose a potential challenge to the long-established religious framework of Islam, a system that has historically sustained and enriched the faith. Key figures such as Kahina Bahlol from France, Amina Wadud from the United States, Shereen Khankan from Denmark, Li Jungping from China, and Jamida (or Jamda) from Kerala have emerged as leaders advocating for mixed-gender congregational prayers. Numerous scholars have commented on the Sharia implications of this practice. Research conducted in countries like Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, and Malaysia highlights instances where Islamic societies have been managed by clerics and imams lacking a comprehensive understanding of Islamic teachings.

A similar trend is observed in the subcontinent, where there exists a dichotomy between highly educated theologians engaged in scholarly pursuits and those misleading illiterate Muslim populations in villages and towns for personal gain. These Maulvis often possess a flawed understanding of the religion, lacking a proper grasp of Islamic governance. It'd be worth mentioning that the two great Urdu poets of the subcontinent, Muhammad Iqbal and Faiz Ahmad Faiz, articulated critiques regarding religious hypocrisy and the conduct of certain Islamic clerics, or mullahs, albeit with differing methodologies. Iqbal, through his poetic works, for example, in his poem "Mulla aur Bahisht" (The Mulla and Paradise), frequently condemned the uncritical adherence to conventional religious doctrines and the perceived stagnation among some Islamic scholars. In contrast, Faiz, recognized for his socialist inclinations, utilized his poetry to

confront religious conservatism and the perceived subjugation imposed by specific religious authorities. Iqbal made use of satirical poetry to highlight what he perceived as the flaws and hypocrisy of certain religious leaders, especially those regarded as disconnected from the realities of contemporary society. Likewise, the celebrated Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib was recognized for his progressive and non-traditional perspective on religion. He questioned established religious customs and rituals, frequently articulating his thoughts in his poetry and correspondence. His poetry often delved into themes of skepticism, rationality, and the examination of faith, rather than conforming to rigid religious doctrines. As a result, despite the subcontinent's potential as a center for Islamic scholarship, progress has often been stymied.

This middle-class interpretation tends to benefit only those intent on distorting the essence of Islam, rather than aiding ordinary Muslims. Islamic feminist commentators and intellectuals advocating for the reinterpretation of Islamic texts seek to distance their perspectives from traditional exegesis by employing novel interpretive methods that adhere to the principles of Qurʾānic exegesis. For instance, Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, and Rifat Hassan argue that the Qurʾān should be interpreted through itself, a methodology that finds its roots in the teachings of prominent scholars like Allama Ibn Taymiyyah. Indeed, Allama Ibn Kathir emphasized in his *tafsīr* (Qurʾānic exegesis) that the most effective way to understand the Qurʾān is through its own text, advising that if clarity is not found within, one should turn to the Sunnah, which serves as the Qurʾān's elucidation. Barlas, Hassan, and Wadud advocate for a holistic reading of the Qurʾān. They contend that when addressing particular issues such as gender and family dynamics, it is essential to consider all relevant verses rather than isolating a single *āyah* (Qur'ānic verse) Rifat Hassan (254) has emphasized that Muslims should engage with the entirety of what the Qurʾān articulates on any given issue, cautioning against deriving meanings from fragmented selections of verses, as the Qurʾān is both comprehensive and cohesive. In her commentary, Asma Barlas highlights her preference for examining the Qurʾān in her pursuit of women's rights, asserting that one need not identify as an Islamic feminist to recognize that hermeneutics are inherently political. Barlas contends that discussions around women's rights are not simply a secular prerogative but rather a legitimate concern within Islamic discourse, arguing that the exploration of women's status in Islam must be undertaken with an integrated understanding of related textual evidence. She has studied the contributions of major Islamic feminists involved in the feminist interpretation of hadiths, positing that Islamic feminist interpretive strategies require a thorough intertextual analysis that considers the

language, rhetorical style, and terminological nuances of the Holy Qurʾān. This approach resists the fragmentation of texts and promotes a consideration of all verses pertinent to a given topic.

Ash'ar Najmi and Shams-ur Rehman Faruqi arguments that there are two main types of commentary in Islamic texts, self-construed opinion, and authoritative, may be deemed controversial, but it is not fair to dismiss feminist scholars outright; instead, their arguments may be subjected to academic debate. They argue that each commentator wrote his own commentary because he did not fully agree with the prevailing interpretations. This does not mean that there were some among the commentators whose faith was not firm. It simply suggests that since personal discretion is the final decision in interpretation and the Qur'ānic text is unparalleled in its depth, multiplicity of meanings, delicacy and literary beauty, it therefore requires frequent interpretation. Their intellectual approach to reading and writing contains minimal disparagement towards earlier interpretative traditions and should thus be regarded as a contemporary form of Qurʾānic commentary and hadith interpretation that has also influenced literary discourse. One significant outcome of their work is the vigorous reinterpretation of Islamic texts, effectively countering anti-Islamic claims and fostering a renewed understanding of women's roles within Islam in the Western context. This perspective highlights a fundamental rejection of extremism in all its forms, challenging the narratives propagated by terrorist organizations like the Taliban, Boko Haram, and ISIS that misapply Islamic teachings.

The voices of contemporary intellectuals advocating for greater recognition are increasingly prominent, as they highlight how prevailing family laws—shaped by various interpretations—often infringe upon women's rights. These rights are underscored by the principles articulated in the Holy Qurʾān. In this discourse, Sadia Sheikh has provided a supportive interpretation of the Holy Qurʾān and the establishment of Sharia, contextualizing them within the framework of Sufi teachings. Furthermore, her approach is corroborated by historical Islamic exegeses, particularly those found in Tafsir Ashari. Sheikh's perspective thoughtfully incorporates the modern demands of theology and hermeneutics, necessitating a closer examination of her contributions.

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