Islamic Feminism and Misconception about Women in the Muslim World

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Abstract

This article examines scholarship delineating, defining, and assessing Islamic feminism, emphasizing Quranic exegesis and jurisprudence (Fiqh) as foundational to its conceptualization. Accurate interpretations of these sources are deemed vital for advancing Islamic feminism within Muslim societies. Quran-focused approaches prioritize justice in divine-human and human relations, challenging patriarchal structures as incompatible with tawhid (divine oneness). Islamic feminists confront external misconceptions, notably Western media and policy-making's "good/bad" Muslim woman binary, which perpetuates stereotypes and ideological narratives affecting gender relations. Simultaneously, they counter patriarchal interpretations rooted in classical Fiqh's four jurists, opposing gender-sensitive family law reforms. This dual resistance addresses internal and external oppression, offering theoretical support for Muslim women's pursuit of equality within an Islamic framework. The article also explores Western feminism's influence on Islamic feminism's evolution, highlighting its role in shaping contemporary discourses while navigating juristic challenges and external stereotypes. By challenging both entrenched patriarchal norms and externally imposed binaries, Islamic feminism carves a path for gender justice grounded in Islamic principles.

Keywords: Islam, Feminism, Social Justice, Muslim Women, Islamic Jurisprudence, Muslim World

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Introduction:

Across several areas where religious resuscitation is on the upsurge, secular rights and empowerment structures have struggled to offer meaningful responses to social questions. This is particularly evident in the case of secular feminism within Muslim-majority states. Recognizing the need to tackle social issues such as patriarchal gender roles, crime, and poverty through an Islamic perspective, a better understanding of Muslim women's involvement in these contexts has encouraged them to pursue independent, comprehensive Islamic education. As a result, local women's study groups are flourishing in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority states, where women are gaining Islamic knowledge (Anna, 2013). Research suggests that women frequently evade male authority by establishing and occupying their own spaces (Falah and Nagel, 2005).

At the dawn of Islam, women held a pivotal role as both early believers and defenders of faith. Khadija, the wife of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), was not only the first to embrace Islam but also a successful businesswoman. Similarly, Aisha, another of his wives, actively participated in military affairs, even leading a battle against Ali ibn Abi Talib. However, following the Prophet's passing, Muslim women faced centuries of oppression as male-dominated interpretations and legislation deprived them of their divine rights. During the 18th, 19th, and much of the 20th centuries, Muslims remained conscious of the distinctions between their society and the Western world. The disparity in women's roles was undeniably among the most pronounced contrasts between Christian and Muslim practices, frequently noted by travelers in both directions (Bernard, 2002). Christianity, across its various churches and denominations, forbids polygamy and concubinage. Conversely, Muslim Fiqh allows both polygamy and concubinage. Evliya Celebi, a renowned Turkish writer of his era, who visited Vienna in 1665 as part of an Ottoman diplomatic mission, vividly described a 'most extraordinary spectacle' he witnessed (Bernard, 2002, p.720):

"In this land, I witnessed an extraordinary sight. Whenever the Emperor encounters a woman on the street, he halts his horse if he is riding, allowing her to pass. If the Emperor is walking, he stops and assumes a respectful stance. The woman acknowledges the Emperor with a greeting, to which he responds by removing his hat as a gesture of respect. Once the woman has moved on, the Emperor resumes his path. It is truly an impressive spectacle. Women hold significant influence in this country and, broadly speaking, in the lands of non-believers. They are revered and honored, inspired by the veneration of Mother Mary."

Evliya Celebi conveyed a typical Muslim world response to the Austrian Emperor's customary courtesy towards women, emphasizing that he would have deemed the account unbelievable had he not witnessed it firsthand. His depiction of the exceptional respect shown to women in Christendom—honored and revered "out of love for Mother Mary"—reflects a deeply ingrained religious and moral code rooted in the tradition of the Trinity. This observation starkly contrasted with the practices in the Muslim world, where Celebi had never seen such reverence for women. Despite the presence of influential figures like Sara, Hager, Khadija, Fatimah, and Aisha within Islam, a harem system prevailed, limiting similar honors.

The first notable example of a principled argument for women's rights in the Muslim world is found in an article by Namik Kemal, a prominent 19th-century Ottoman writer and leader of the Young Ottoman movement, published in the newspaper "*Tasvir-i-Efkar*" in 1867.

> *"Our women are currently perceived as contributing little to humanity beyond bearing children; they are regarded merely as sources of pleasure, akin to musical instruments or precious ornaments."*

According to Islamic law and tradition, three groups historically did not fully benefit from the application of the general Muslim principle of legal and religious equality: non-believers, enslaved individuals, and women. In one significant respect, the woman was obviously the worst-placed of the

three. The enslaved individual could attain freedom through their master's will; the nonbeliever had the option to convert to faith and overcome their inferiority. Yet, the woman was condemned to forever remain in her predetermined state.

The fight for women's emancipation saw some progress in the more socially and economically developed regions of the Muslim world. It became a central focus for various ideological movements, especially militant Islamic revival. Consequently, the status of women remains perhaps the most profound distinction between Christian and Muslim societies.

Since Muslim women have been at the center of ideological debates, often depicted in polarized narratives, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: How are Muslim women discursively represented in Western media and policymaking? What misconceptions arise from these representations, and how do Islamic feminists respond to these misconceptions? Recent scholarship on Islamic feminism, including works by Pakistani feminists such as Afiya Shehrbano Zia and Rubina Saigol, has challenged both Western and patriarchal Muslim narratives. This paper incorporates their perspectives to provide a more comprehensive analysis.

Methodology:

This study applied a qualitative discourse analysis method to examine a wide range of textual and verbal interpretations. The data sample includes media portrayals, policy documents, and online discussions from Western and Muslim-majority contexts. Discourses were selected based on their influence and recurrence in shaping public perceptions. The analysis follows a thematic approach, identifying patterns in how Muslim women are framed and examining the counter-narratives proposed by Islamic feminists. It focuses on identifying the themes, narratives, and rhetoric used to discuss women's roles, rights, and identities within Islamic contexts.

By examining how language shapes and reflects societal attitudes and misconceptions, the study aims to uncover the underlying power dynamics and cultural influences that impact perceptions of women in the Muslim world. This approach enables a robust understanding of Islamic feminism and challenges prevailing stereotypes, providing a comprehensive view of the discourse surrounding women's issues in the Muslim context. Discourse analysis is a valuable method for studying Islamic feminism and misconceptions about women in the Muslim world. By analyzing textual and verbal communications, such as religious texts, academic literature, media articles, and social media content, researchers can identify the themes, narratives, and rhetoric used to discuss women's roles and rights. This method allows for a holistic understanding of how language shapes and reflects societal attitudes and misconceptions.

Discourses on Islamic Feminism:

Islamic feminism is an academic discourse mainly shaped in English and benefited from a tutorial and professional audience. Furthermore, the knowledge generated by activist movements influenced by Islamic feminism takes shape through policy briefs, newsletters, pamphlets, and workshops targeting diverse audiences, including policymakers, the general public, and the international community. This knowledge employs a blend of religious-based advocacy and references to the normative authority of international conventions and modern constitutions. Islamic feminism, while deeply rooted in Islamic tradition and drawing strength from it, redefines the foundational criteria of Islamic religious understanding—its creation, purpose, and participants. Consequently, a systematic and consistent engagement with the historical approaches, knowledge frameworks, and socio-political contexts of Islamic religious understanding is a crucial element of Islamic feminism's inclusive and epistemologically rigorous interpretative endeavor (Mulki, 2011, p.5).

Islamic feminism's significance lies not only in its critical examination of traditional religious concepts that perpetuate gender discrimination and oppression but also in its creation of compelling new interpretive insights that advocate for gender equality within an Islamic framework. Its strength is reflected in understanding how certain methodologies, reasoning approaches, and core philosophical assumptions underpinning the knowledge-production processes of classical Islamic jurisprudence and Quranic exegesis have facilitated the emergence of religious narratives that justify sexism and inequality against Muslim women under Muslim family law (Mulki, 2011, p.6).

Azam Teleghani, the editor of Payame-Hajar, was once a great supporter of the Islamic Revolution (1978-1981) but, like many other women, was disillusioned by the new policies formed under the Sharia law in Iran. In her magazine, she illustrated the question of women's rights in Islam and deconstructed various Quranic verses that are generally used to push women aside. In 1997, she challenged the Sharia Article 115 of the Iranian constitution, which defines the qualification of the presidential candidate as a religious and political *rejal* (man). She pointed out that the word in Persian means humanity, which also includes women. Although she was not allowed to run for the presidency, her move was symbolic for Islamic feminists, as she was the first woman in Iran to openly challenge the misinterpretation of some essential terms (Keller, 2010).

In the 1980s, Fatna al Sabbah embraced her newfound ability to reinterpret cultural heritage and correct the record. She expressed:

> "*As a woman from Muslim society with access to literacy, I am relishing the profound joy of rewriting cultural heritage—a subversive and bold act of the highest order. By 'rewriting,' I mean engaging in active reading, a process of decoding the heritage while reassembling it in a different way. I will take elements organized by religious authorities and philosophers in a*

specific structure, deconstruct them, and reorganize them according to a pattern imagined by myself" (Fatna, 1984, p.6).

Zin al-Din, a Lebanese conservative Sunni Muslim scholar, highlights the vital role women played during the early days of Islam and emphasizes their continued right to follow this course: "…women are entitled to partake in public governance and have a clear right to engage in the interpretation and explanation of Qur'anic teachings. Women are better suited than men to interpret Qur'anic verses concerning their rights and responsibilities, as individuals are inherently better equipped to comprehend their own rights and duties" (Zin al-Din, 1929, p.75). She claimed that male interpretations had unfairly resulted in excluding women from the mainstream. Moreover, she preserved and outlined the critical and widening gap among male scholars and their different forms of opposition to women's freedom and entitlement to rights. She stated, *"While preparing my defense of women, I examined the writings of interpreters and legislators but discovered no consensus among them on the matter; instead, each time I encountered a viewpoint, I found other perspectives that differed or even contradicted it"* (Zin al-D, 1929, p.37).

Nazira Zin al-Din critically examined the practice of veiling and the seclusion of Muslim women. In her 1928 book, *"Unveiling and Veiling: Lectures and Views on the Liberation of the Woman and the Social Renewal in the Arab World,"* she argued that the veil was un-Islamic and an affront to civilized societies. She contended that Islam did not mandate the veil for women; rather, it was imposed by the patriarchal traditions of the community. Zin al-Din described the veil as a symbol and evidence of men's desire to control women and their distrust of women's character.

She raised questions like how a woman who lives under the shade of suspicion and without a right over her own body could be expected to bring up cultured and confident children. She suggested that

women take their men to court instead of silently obeying their orders. Apart from advocating co-education and freedom for women to mix socially with men and participate in politics, her book also distinguished between sacred sources and the process of human interpretation. She asserted that women need to approach the Quran and Sunnah directly to find the answers to their questions. She discoursed that the male jurists and ulema who interpreted religious texts held varying views on the issue of women's status in Islam, as a result of which women suffer within their societies. This book caused a massive controversy in her native country and some other Muslim countries, such as Syria. She was accused of apostasy by many Muftis (Islamic scholars) who argued that she (she was very young when she wrote the book) was not intellectually in a position to challenge the established system of Quranic interpretation or to pass any verdicts against the veil. However, despite all the harsh criticism lashed out against her, Zin al-Din's book served as an inspiration for Islamic feminists.

Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan Islamic feminist often referred to as the godmother of Islamic feminism, authored "*Woman and Islam: A Historical and Theological Enquiry*" in 1991. In this book, she challenged the long-standing methods of Quranic interpretation and questioned the authenticity of certain religious narrations. Mernissi argued that women in the Islamic world once held significant power but were later marginalized as Islamic laws were manipulated and historical facts distorted to establish male dominance. She elaborated on this idea in her 1992 work, "*The Veil and the Male Elite*," asserting that some Hadiths were falsely attributed to the Prophet. For instance, she called for a reexamination of the Hadith narrated by Abu Bakra, where the Prophet Muhammad allegedly stated, "Those who assign their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity" (Fatima, 1992).

According to Mernissi, the Prophet marked these words only when he heard that the Persians, after the death of their king *Kisra*, elected his daughter as their new ruler. She argues that the Prophet said this for the state of Persia, which was caught in a phase anxious with instability, violence, and wars, and not

for a nation led by a woman ruler. However, male jurists over the centuries used this saying, which she calls a misogynistic Hadith, as a weapon against women. She stresses the need to investigate these sayings and also to deconstruct the patriarchal reading of the Quran. The book also focuses on the influence of pre-Islamic customs and practices on the Islamic tradition. Apart from all this, Mernissi highlights the cordial attitude of the Prophet Muhammad towards women and his views on the position of women in the family and society. She discusses at length the egalitarian ideals of the Prophet Muhammad, who always respected women and disapproved of men who humiliated their women or deprived them of their rights.

According to Mernissi, various changes that Islam brought, especially in granting equal rights to women, made many men, particularly the men of Makkah, uncomfortable. According to her, these men, even after their conversion to Islam, were still under the influence of the pre-Islamic tradition and were reluctant to give women equal status. Therefore, these men supported the view that the changes brought by Islam should be restricted only to religious life, and public and private life should remain unaffected by these changes. She opines that these men were perturbed by the shifting role of the women, who were allowed to participate in the public realms and were given the right to speak and protest, the right to choose their life partners, the right to divorce, the right to inherit property and, above all, directly to attain freedom. These men wanted to continue with the restrictions on their women. However, the Quranic verses and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad contradicted their chauvinistic ideas. In her book, "*The Forgotten Queens of Islam*" (1993), Fatima Mernissi deliberates on the distinguished contribution made by Muslim women for the betterment of society. The book challenges the view that Muslim women have never held positions of power. It reveals the names of almost sixteen women who had held esteemed positions.

Fatima Mernissi, who initially used the pseudonym Sabbah during her early career, asserted: *"If women's rights pose a challenge for some modern Muslim men, it is neither due to the Quran, the Prophet, nor Islamic tradition, but rather because those rights conflict with the interests of the male elite"* (Fatima,

1991, p.ix). She further argued that Muslim men had transformed gender differences into a structured social hierarchy. Most male scholars, basing their arguments on legal frameworks, claimed that women were granted distinct and unequal rights compared to men, thereby explicitly excluding them from positions of power (Haleh, 1998, p.7).

Mehrangiz K. (1944), through her articles, openly expressed her uncertainty regarding the Islamic jurisprudence system in Iran, which she held responsible for the marginality of women in Iranian society. As a secularist, she promoted the separation of the mosque and the state (separation of faith and politics) and also stressed critical thinking and reinvestigation of the Islamic sources of knowledge (Keller, 2010). Zaynab Radwan focuses on Muslim women's civil and legal rights in her works. She, like other Islamic feminists, calls for the contextual and historical reading of the Quranic verses. Fatima Zohra Imalayen, known in the literary world as Assia Djebar, in her novel *Far From Medina* (1991), questioned the reliability of the male reading of the sacred texts by portraying female narrators of the Hadiths. Nawal El Saadawi raised issues that fall in the domain of Islamic Feminism but refused their association with the movement. In 1983, when the ideas of Islamic Feminism were gaining recognition in literary circles, Nawal El Saadawi wrote a novel titled *Women at Point Zero*, which shed light on the issue of genital mutilation and prostitution in Egypt. These issues were considered very sensitive and controversial in Muslim societies and were very rarely discussed in Arab literature. Saadawi, through her novel, brought out these issues and initiated a never-ending discussion process. In her other novel, *The Fall of Imam* (1988), Saadawi took the issue of Islamic punishments and how men use strict Islamic laws as weapons against women. The novel uncovers the brutal face of a patriarchal society where women are punished for the wrongs committed by men.

Seyyed Mohsen Saidzadeh, an Islamic cleric, is actively involved in the Muslim women's movement for equal rights. In his articles for "*Zanaan*" and other journals, he stressed the need to

reinterpret the philosophy of Islam from a gender-equal perspective, claiming that Islam as a religion is open to different interpretations. Through his writings, he propounded that the male-crafted Islamic laws are biased and, thus, deprive women of their rights. He also highlighted the issue of women's blood money, arguing that *"the blood money of women and men in the loss of life or a body part is equal"* (Mojab, 2001, p. 138). He openly challenged the Sharia law (of Iran) and called it discriminatory for considering the worth of a woman's blood less than a man's (in 2008, the act of blood money was changed in Iran, granting women an equal share in cases involving life insurance). For his thought-provoking proclamations and articles exposing the dire conditions of Muslim women in his country, he was arrested in the year 1998 for a few months.

Leila Ahmad, an Egyptian writer and theologian, also engaged herself in the task of researching the Islamic feminist paradigm. In the book titled "*Women and Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*" (1992), adopting a history-based approach, she analyzed the patrilineal tradition in the Arab world and how Islam elevated the general conditions of women. The book elucidated the vital role played by women in Islamic history. It also added new perspectives to the issue of veiling by tracing the roots of this practice in the East. According to her, the practice of veiling existed even in pre-Islamic times and was not introduced by Islam. She stated that in pre-Islamic societies, the veil symbolized the social status of a woman. To validate her argument, she provides an example of the Sumerian civilization in which the women of honorable families and married women needed to cover themselves with the veil.

In contrast, the enslaved women and prostitutes were forbidden to wear it. Ahmad further states that veiling is not mentioned in the Quran. The Quranic verses, which are used to justify the veil, only instruct women to dress modestly and not to reveal their body parts. According to her, during Prophet Muhammad's time, veiling was only practiced by his wives, and the expression "she took the veil" was used for a woman who married the Prophet Muhammad.

Amina Wadud, in her 1992 book "*Quran and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective,"* critiqued the male-centric interpretation of the Quran and emphasized the importance of considering the context surrounding each verse. She examined various topics addressed in the Quran, including polygamy, divorce, and inheritance rights.

Before the emergence of Islamic Feminism, the Quran and Sunnah were generally interpreted using a literal reading method. However, Islamic feminists initiated contextual and historical reading methods to explain religion. They read every Quranic verse in the historical context as they argued that to understand the meaning of a particular verse, the reader should also know the situation in which that verse was revealed. In this book, Wadud provided a rereading of many Quranic verses, which the Islamic feminists believe are generally used to suppress Muslim women.

Asma Barlas's book *"Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Quran"* (2002) contests the male reading of the Quran and the hypothesis that Islam sanctions the subjugation of women. She analyses religious knowledge and understanding, and how the social and political phenomena shape it. She nullifies that the Quran supports patriarchy or legalizes the inferior status or seclusion of women. According to her, the problem lies with the text and interpretation. She discourses that it is mentioned in the Quran that men and women were created from a single *nafs* (self). This itself negates the question of racial or gender hierarchy. She states, "*Male and female are not only indivisible in the Quran, but they also are ontologically as same, hence equal*" (Barlas, 2002, p.141). She accepts the Quran as the word of God and the divinity of Sunnah, but what concerns her is the role of societal forces in shaping the meaning of language and the way people confuse a particular interpretation of the sacred text with the text itself. She believes that the interpretation of the Quran has undergone various changes throughout history and has become more rigid as far as the question of women's status is concerned. Barlas, while she is sure about the gender-equality aspect of the Quran, believes that various

Hadiths are, to a large extent, responsible for the present debased position of Muslim women within their societies. Hadiths, she points out, need to be deeply investigated as they were compiled by a human, mostly men, and only some were close to the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him). She raises doubts about the nature of various Hadiths, which she believes are used by men to justify their claims of superior position.

Hidayet Sevkati Tuksal, a Turkish theologian and Islamic feminist, also shares the belief that several Hadiths need proper investigation. Her writings' skepticism regarding the authenticity of some religious narrations is a recurrent theme.

Iranian women supported Islamic feminism and harbingered what has become recognized as "feminist fundamentalism" (Hoffman, 1985; Ahmed, 1992; Afshar, 1994, 1996). Much research on Islamic feminism has been done, mainly in the form of highlighting the Quran's interpretations and revealing patriarchal patterns, with many accounts concluding that feminist re-readings are needed. Nevertheless, there appears to be a research gap concerning Muslim women, their Formation of identity, and the impacts of those interpretations in daily life, particularly in a Western country (McGinty 2007, p.475). Islamic feminism ends over a century-long critical rendezvous by Islamist women with Western liberal and Marxist feminist perspectives (Haleh, 1998, p.16).

Muslim feminist interpretations of Quranic verses by scholars such as Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Azizah al-Hibri, and others have offered critical insights and alternative readings for Muslims seeking gender-equitable understandings of the Quran and Islamic traditions. However, their constrained modernist approach and framework effectively instrumentalize the foundational Muslim text, albeit with the valid aim of challenging the misogynistic and oppressive applications to which the text has been subjected (Fatima, 2016, p.142).

After the historical analysis, the Quranic exegesis, and the re-examination of Hadiths, Islamic feminists also called for a study of the Islamic laws. According to them, these laws are primarily based on the patriarchal reading of the Quran and Islamic principles and philosophy. Therefore, these laws (or the legal system based on these laws) lack values of tolerance, justice, and equality, which are intrinsic to Islam. Muslims use these laws (Sharia) as an ideology; therefore, whatever the Sharia law permits becomes legal for them. In many Muslim countries, for example, Sharia law gives the husband full authority in marriage. The husband has the right to divorce his wife without having to base his case on dangerous grounds.

The representation of the dire conditions of Muslim women has also been one of the major concerns in the writings of the 1988 Nobel Prize-winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006). Known for his Cairo Trilogy, which includes Palace Walk (initially published in Arabic in 1956 and English in 1990), *Palace of Desire* (1957), and *Sugar Street* (1957), Mahfouz shares the Islamic feminist belief that women in early Islamic period were equal to men but with passing time religion came under the control of men and women lost all their power (Mourad, 2011).

Recent scholarship on Islamic feminism has expanded the scope of analysis by addressing both internal patriarchal structures within Muslim societies and external orientalist portrayals in the West. Scholars such as Afiya Shehrbano Zia and Rubina Saigol have been pivotal in critiquing the limitations of Islamic feminism, particularly within the South Asian context.

Zia (2018) argues that Islamic feminism, while valuable in challenging certain gender biases within Islamic jurisprudence, often becomes constrained by its dependence on religious texts for validation, limiting its transformative potential. She posits that a more secular feminist framework is necessary to fully dismantle patriarchal structures embedded within both religious and cultural institutions (Zia, 2018). This critique is particularly relevant in Pakistan, where legal reforms rooted in Islamic principles

frequently fall short of ensuring women's rights due to conservative interpretations and socio-political pressures.

Similarly, Saigol (2016) analyzes the historical evolution of feminist thought in Pakistan, highlighting the tension between religious and secular feminist movements. She underscores how state-backed Islamization policies in the 1980s reinforced gender inequalities under the guise of religious morality. Saigol emphasizes the need for a feminist discourse that not only revisits Islamic texts but also engages critically with the political uses of religion in shaping gender relations (Saigol, 2016).

Western Misconception about Women in the Arab World:

In 1843, Edward William Lane (1801-1876) wrote an anthology of the Quran. It carried a prelude by way of introduction to Islamic teaching, which, among other things, claimed that "the woman's degradation is the fatal point in Islam" (Edward, 1982). Von Kremer says, "Next to the Romans, there is no other country besides the Arabs which could demand its own system of law so carefully worked out" (As quoted by Iqbal, 1974). Iqbal, in his seminal work "*Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*," opined that it is evident in the groundwork of legal principles in the Quran that the exhaustive breadth of these moralities virtually acts as an awakener of human thought and it does not leave any scope for rational thought and legislative activity (Iqbal, 1974). The claim made by Muslim ulema about the finality of the prestigious schools of Mohammadan Law is inconsistent with the doctrine of the theoretical possibility of a complete *Ijtihad* (Iqbal, 1974). According to Iqbal, equality between men and women at the point of divorce, separation, and inheritance is possible under the Mohammadan Law. Massification of higher education and increased dependence on the Internet have enabled Muslim women that awaken, creating demands that cannot be met without a fresh interpretation of foundational principles. Iqbal reported cases in which Muslim women who wished to get rid of undesirable husbands had been charged with apostasy.

Marriage, according to Mohammadan Law, is a civil contract. At the time of marriage, the wife is at freedom to get the husband's power of divorce delegated to her on stated conditions, thus securing equality of divorce with her husband. From the disparity of their legal shares, it must not be theoretical that the rule assumes the superiority of males over females (Iqbal, 1974). The Quran (2:228) says: "*And for women are rights over men similar to those for men over women.*" The daughter's share is determined not by any inferiority but by her economic opportunities and the place she occupies in the social structure she is part and parcel of. According to the Mohammadan Law, the daughter is held to be the complete owner of the property given to her by the father and the husband at the time of marriage. There is no material difference between the economic position of sons and daughters. Iqbal stated that the truth is that the primary Quranic Law of inheritance, this supremely original branch of Mohammadan Law, as Von Kremer pronounces it, has not yet received from Muslim lawyers the attention they deserve (Iqbal, 1974).

This misconceived assertion gained so much popularity that it was often repeated as if it were a reality. Since then, nearly a century and a half have passed, and that conviction has deepened (Wahiduddin, 1995). Wahiduddin Khan, an Indian Islamic scholar, argues that the interpretation of the Islamic concept of women's principles as "degradation of the woman" is to distort the actual issue (Wahiduddin K., 1995). According to him, Islam has never asserted that women are inferior to men, although it has made the point that woman is differently constituted (Wahiduddin, 1995). The women's liberation movement believes that both men and women are similar in all ways and that equal opportunities should be given to both. This movement first nurtured its head in Britain in the 18th century and then spread across Europe and America. In 1772, Mary Wollstonecraft's publication of the book "*A Vindication of the Rights of Women*" impetus the Western world's women's emancipation movement. Mary Wollstonecraft's book argues that women should accept the same conduct as men in education, work opportunities, and politics, and the same ethical standards should be applied to both sexes.

The Western perspective of the prevalent belief that Muslim women are under oppression is generally defined as not having a voice of their own and needing to be influenced by "Western" principles or even rescued from Islamic structures (Minganti, 2015; Bouachrine, 2014). Besides, the word Muslim woman introduced by Cooke (2008) is an impressionistic illustration describing the stereotypes surrounding Muslim women as victims without an organization, adding that "today's intense concern for Muslim women who veiled and even revealed women is no longer seen as individuals: they are Muslim women collectively" (Cook, 2008).

Some Muslim women writers, such as Rahnavard, challenge the notion of gender equality by drawing on the lived experiences of women. They argue that over a century of struggle for equality has left Western women increasingly isolated, as justice is defined in male-centric terms, requiring women to emulate men. Women who wish to fulfill their domestic responsibilities, particularly motherhood as a sacred and esteemed obligation, inevitably fall short of achieving equality with men in societal roles. They contend that the double burden imposed on women under the guise of equality has been counterproductive, advocating instead for Islamist women to embrace the principle of complementarity. This perspective suggests that Islam grants women a dignified status as wives and mothers while ensuring their access to quality education. If Muslim states can be persuaded to acknowledge their reciprocal duties to women, Islamic women could fulfill their domestic and maternal roles, which are recognized as legitimate work and deserving of remuneration. Moreover, after meeting these responsibilities, women would have the right to participate in public life, equipped with the necessary education and transferable skills developed through their documented domestic duties, seen as natural, complex, and supervisory tasks. This school of thought argues that implementing genuine Islamic ethics of complementarity would lead to respect for women and liberating society from the burdens of sexism and ageism (Haleh, 1998).

Islamic feminists have asserted their right to forge a path toward liberation (Rezayi, 1979; Mernissi, 1995). They argue that revisiting the core principles of Islam allows them to interpret the Quran and the traditions, or *sunna*, of the Prophet in a way that establishes an alternative and rightful course for women (Zin al-D, 1928; Ahmed, 1992; Bouthanian, 1995; Hoffman, 1995). Advocating for gender complementarity rather than equality, they aim to uphold their faith and lead a purposeful life.

Islamic feminists have asserted their right to forge a path toward liberation (Rezayi, 1979; Mernissi, 1995). They argue that revisiting the core principles of Islam allows them to interpret the Quran and the traditions, or *sunna*, of the Prophet in a way that establishes an alternative and rightful course for women (Zin al-D, 1928; Ahmed, 1992; Bouthanian, 1995; Hoffman, 1995). Advocating for gender complementarity rather than equality, they aim to uphold their faith and lead a purposeful life.

Islamic feminists believe that the Quran is a fundamental text, a word of God, revealed to the Messenger of Allah, which commands all Muslims to follow the way of the Prophet. Therefore, the Prophet's life, deeds, and sayings also hold a significant place in Islam. However, the history of his life and actions was compiled after he left this world. This is the point where Islamic feminists raise doubts. They call for rereading some of the Hadiths because they believe various facts have been manipulated. They contend that the Prophet Muhammad never approved of using any violence on women. He disapproved of spousal abuse and beating and always advocated an equal place for women in all domains of life. However, the women's rights he fought for were later, after he left this world, overlooked, and patriarchy again prevailed.

They advocate a believer's reading or re-interpretation, which they believe will expose the anti-patriarchal stance in the Quran and the Hadiths. Islamic feminists, for example, Fatima Mernissi, Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, and others, emphasize mainly the re-interpretation of sacred texts from an egalitarianist hermeneutical viewpoint. Their works are regarded as groundbreaking in female Quranic

exegesis. Other Islamic feminists such as Leila Ahmad and Ziba Mir Hosseini, Zaynab Radwan, and Shaheen Ali work on Islamic history and jurisprudence. Islamic feminists emphasize that Islam demands respect for women and embraces their diverse life choices. It enables them to pursue scholarship, education, and meaningful employment, while also offering esteemed roles to those who choose motherhood, marriage, and homemaking. They argue that, unlike Marxism, capitalism, and much of feminist discourse, Islam acknowledges the significance of women's life cycles, assigning those distinct roles and responsibilities at different stages of life, and valuing and respecting them for their contributions at every phase (Haleh, 1998, p.16). From its inception, Islam provided exemplary role models and outlined a dignified pathway that all could follow. To them, Islam serves as a transformative and redemptive force.

In the 1990s, writers such as Nawal el Saadawi, Naguib Mahfouz, and others brought attention to the subjugation of women in Muslim societies and examined the factors contributing to their poor conditions and low status. By the early 21st century, a new wave of literature emerged from Muslim novelists. These authors supported the Islamic Feminism movement by challenging the colonial portrayal of Islam as inherently patriarchal and Muslim women as passive and submissive. Additionally, they embraced Islamic feminist perspectives on progressive Islam, advocating for it as a viable alternative to fundamentalist interpretations of Islam.

Findings:

The historical context of Islamic feminism is rooted in the broader feminist movement and the specific socio-political conditions in Muslim-majority countries. Scholars such as Fatima Seedat have explored the convergence of Islam and feminism, highlighting the tensions and synergies between these two domains. Seedat argues that Islamic feminism is not a monolithic entity but rather a diverse and evolving field that reflects the complexities of Muslim women's experiences. Islamic feminism addresses

several key themes, including the re-interpretation of religious texts, the role of women in public and private fields, and the impact of colonialism and modernity on gender roles. Scholars like Margot Badran and Asma Barlas have debated the naming and framing of Islamic feminism, with Badran advocating for its recognition as a distinct analytic construct, while Barlas emphasizes the need to avoid conflating it with Western feminism.

One of the primary misconceptions about women in the Muslim world is the belief that Islam is inherently misogynistic. This misconception is often perpetuated by media representations and popular culture, which portray Muslim women as oppressed and subjugated. Islamic feminists challenge these stereotypes by highlighting the egalitarian principles within Islamic teachings and advocating for women's rights based on religious texts. Islamic feminism has made significant contributions to the discourse on women's human rights in Muslim societies. Scholars such as Nayereh Tohidi have highlighted the perils and promises of Islamic feminism, emphasizing its potential to challenge patriarchal structures and promote gender equality. Additionally, works like "Women Claim Islam" by Miriam Cooke explore how literature and intellectual life have shaped Islamic feminism and its influence on women's status in Arab countries.

Incorporating Afiya Shehrbano Zia's and Rubina Saigol's insights, this research finds that Islamic feminism in contemporary Muslim societies operates within a complex matrix of religious interpretation, state politics, and global discourses. While Western narratives often reduce Muslim women to passive victims needing liberation from Islam itself, internal critiques by scholars like Zia and Saigol reveal that the oppression of women in Muslim contexts is less a direct product of Islam and more a result of patriarchal structures justified through selective religious readings.

The findings indicate that meaningful progress for Muslim women requires not only the reinterpretation of religious texts—a central aim of many Islamic feminists—but also the recognition of

socio-political forces that manipulate religion for patriarchal ends. Moreover, as Zia suggests, incorporating secular feminist principles alongside religious reinterpretation provides a stronger platform for advocating women's rights in Muslim-majority societies. Saigol's work further reinforces that the legacy of state-imposed religiosity must be critically addressed to dismantle deeply entrenched gender hierarchies.

Recent contributions offer a nuanced understanding of Islamic feminism that moves beyond simplistic binaries of Western versus Islamic values. By situating Islamic feminism within broader socio-political contexts, these scholars demonstrate how Muslim women's agency is exercised both through reinterpretation of religious texts and through secular feminist activism, allowing for a multifaceted resistance against patriarchy.

In sum, the analysis identifies several misconceptions about Muslim women. One significant misconception is the portrayal of Muslim women as universally oppressed, which ignores their diverse experiences and innate agency. Furthermore, there is a problematic binary classification that views Muslim women as either submissive and pure or as outspoken and immoral, failing to capture the complexities of their identities. Lastly, there is an assumption that Islam is the root of gender inequality, which overlooks the socio-cultural influences that also play a crucial role in shaping women's experiences. Regardless, Islamic feminists challenge these misconceptions by engaging in online and offline activism, reinterpreting religious texts, and advocating for gender justice within an Islamic framework. Digital platforms have enabled Muslim women to discuss gender roles and obligations in Islam beyond male-dominated interpretations, providing alternative, empowering narratives.

Conclusion:

Based on contrasting binaries of good/bad Muslim women, they are broadly represented and structured in the West by the media and policymakers. The binary construction of Muslim women in Western discourses reflects deeper ideological battles over identity, morality, and power. There are also distinctions at work in many Muslim contexts: normative moral orders regulating gender relations are assisted by the representation of women and their bodies as mere carriers of traditional values and, crucially, male family members' "vessels of honor." Jasmin Zine wrote that correctly, the bodies of Muslim women had become part of the battlefield on which ideological wars are fought (Jasmin, 2004).

Women who make informed decisions about their life's sexual dimension and refuse to submit themselves are alleged to be causing social disorder (fitna) and are often punished. The pure, submissive woman is frequently contrasted in patriarchal discourse with the loose, over-spoken woman. A Muslim woman's discursive position, or the use of Cooke's term suggesting an undiscriminating merger of individual personalities into one collective identity as a "Muslim woman," is therefore governed by the binary nature of the pigeonhole, where fantasy is supposed to be "truth" freely mix; as Hall argues, people constrained by these binary discourses must "shuttle endlessly between them, and sometimes [are] represented by both of them at the same time."

Many virtual spaces offer answers to Islamic questions but often reflect mainstream, male-based, and sometimes misogynistic interpretations of the Quran and the hadīth. Many "regular" Muslim women, however, take advantage of the resources provided by the Internet to use social media, write posts, and engage in numerous online community discussions to address gender roles and obligations in Islam. Muslim women's agency is evident in their resistance to these narratives, whether through scholarly re-interpretations, activism, or digital engagement. From an Islamic viewpoint, they find everyday problems without being compromised by misogynistic views. The anonymity of these spaces often enables personal

issues to be addressed with other experienced women in Islamic scriptures, whose guidance is sought more quickly than male scholars.

Islam and Muslims' highly advertised oppression of women is usually due to local customs and traditions. Muslim women have played a very critical role in nation-building efforts. Islam does not authorize abuse against women or force them against their will. Some of the main principles of Islam are to care for widows, orphans, and the sick. Alas, many women are repressed, but this is a global issue, not just Islamic oppression. The prevalence of violence among Muslims is no higher than among non-Muslims. Acknowledging their role in shaping gender discourse is crucial to moving beyond reductive stereotypes and fostering more nuanced understandings of Muslim women's experiences. Therefore, any comprehensive analysis of Islamic feminism must integrate both internal feminist critiques and resistance to external orientalist stereotypes, acknowledging the diversity and agency of Muslim women in shaping their narratives.

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