

## **Feminism as Islamophobia: A review of misogyny charges against Islam**

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**Abstract:** One important feature of Islamophobia is to caricaturize Islam as misogynistic and oppressive to women and thus to advance imperialist hegemony. This “gendered Islamophobia” stigmatizes the religion even though, compared to other world religions, its treatment of women is arguably preferable and more enlightened. Historically, one treasonous use of feminism has been to misappropriate it in order to serve colonial interests and support imperialist wars of occupation that repress subjugated people including women and children. This article argues that ignorance about, and prejudice against, Islam contribute to portraying it as a misogynistic creed. Wrong notions of Islam lead many feminists in Muslim societies to denigrate Islamic teachings and borrow Western ideas to advance women’s causes. Lampooning Islam and replicating Western feminist ideas in Muslim lands have served neither women nor feminism. Such feminist tendencies rather give a bad name to the women’s rights movement and fuel controversy, anger and resentment among Muslims.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, feminism, feminists in Muslim societies, gender justice, women’s rights movement.

**Abstrak:** Satu ciri penting mengenai Islamophobia adalah untuk mengkarikaturkan Islam sebagai membenci dan menindas wanita, dan seterusnya memajukan hegemoni imperialis. “Islamophobia bergender” ini mencela agama Islam, walaupun berbanding dengan agama-agama besar yang lain, perlakuannya terhadap wanita boleh dikatakan dapat diterima ramai dan adalah lebih terbuka. Mengikut sejarah, satu pengkhianatan terhadap feminisme adalah untuk melayani kepentingan penjajah dan demi menyokong peperangan

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imperialis penjajahan yang menindas dan menundukkan penduduk jajahan termasuklah wanita dan kanak-kanak. Artikel ini menghujahkan bahawa kejahilan dan prejudis terhadap Islam menyumbang kepada cara ia dilihat sebagai satu fahaman yang amat membenci wanita. Kesilapan pengertian yang ketara terhadap Islam mengakibatkan ramai feminis dalam masyarakat Islam mengfitnah pengajaran Islam dan meminjam idea-idea Barat bagi memajukan isi-isu wanita. Dengan mengecam Islam dan meniru idea-idea feminis Barat dalam negara Islam tidak dapat memajukan wanita mahupun feminisme. Kecenderungan feminis tersebut sebaliknya hanya memberikan nama yang tidak baik kepada pergerakan hak asasi wanita dan ia juga turut menyemarakkan api perbalahan, kemarahan dan kebencian sesama orang Islam.

**Kata kunci:** Islamophobia, feminisme, feminis dalam masyarakat Islam, keadilan gender, pergerakan hak asasi wanita.

The representation of Muslim women and the debate of women's rights in Islam have always been at the forefront of a cultural battle between the West and the Muslim world, as these two territorial/religious/civilizational blocks share a long history of hostility in the forms of crusades (militarily), colonial/neo-colonial interventions (politically) and persistent denigration (ideologically). In the current academic debate on the prejudicial attitude and misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims, the term Islamophobia is used extensively to capture a wide range of negative sentiments against and misconceptions about the religion and its adherents. The word "Islamophobia" appeared first in an essay written by Orientalist Étienne Dinet in 1922 (Cesari, 2011, p. 11). Edward Said may have been the first to utilize it in English in a 1985 article entitled "Orientalism reconsidered" (Moten, 2012, p. 4). It is now "a useful shorthand way of referring to the dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to the fear or dislike of all or most Muslims. Such dread and dislike have existed in Western countries and cultures for several centuries" (Runnymede Trust, 1997, p. 1).

Since the Runnymede Trust in Britain published *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All* (1997), the issue has received renewed attention politically, intellectually, religiously and culturally. For instance, since January 2008, the Cultural & Social Affairs Department of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), formerly known as the Organization of the Islamic Conference has been publishing a monthly

bulletin on Islamophobia, and has been bringing out a regular yearly, *OIC Observatory on Islamophobia*. On 7 December 2004, the United Nations organized a seminar on “Confronting Islamophobia: Education for Tolerance and Understanding” in New York. In his address there, the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan reiterated the contention of the Runnymede Trust report that Islamophobia is an old trend. Annan (2004) states: “The word seems to have emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But the phenomenon dates back centuries.” Abbas (2004, p. 28) concurs with this and argues:

Although the term is of relatively recent coinage, the idea is a well-established tradition in history. Since the genesis of Islam in 622, Europe’s awareness of Muslims has been overwhelmingly negative. During this long contact, the established European powers have found it convenient to portray Islam and Muslims in the worst possible light, so as to prevent conversion and to encourage European resistance to Muslim forces on the borders.

In the context of Islam’s intellectual encounter with the West, Islamophobia signifies the latter’s “constant deprecation” of the former (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008, p. 2). Thus, “enacted by Westerners and perceived by Muslims,” Islamophobia “plays a critically central role in convincing many that a civilizational clash will be inevitable and all-consuming by establishing the ‘fact’ of an essential and irreconcilable difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’” (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008, p. 3).

This article focuses on one specific aspect of Islamophobia – gendered Islamophobia – and argues that it is widespread in the writings of a section of feminist scholars. Many in the West denigrate and stereotype Islamic teachings and brand them as oppressive to women in order to establish “an essentialist bifurcation of ‘egalitarian West’ versus ‘oppressive Islam’” (Ho, 2007, p. 290). It contests such misconceptions which are results of ignorance, prejudice and the overbearing effects of colonial adventures. Many feminist scholars of Muslim societies follow the colonial discourse of feminism, characterizing Islam as misogynistic and gender oppressive. They tend to replicate Western feminist universalism to ameliorate women’s condition there. It concludes this discussion by proposing that deprecating Islamic teachings for the service of feminism and imitating Western feminist movements may not be the correct approach to address gender oppression in Muslim

societies. Both feminist and Islamically-inclined scholars should engage in dialogues to understand one another and emphasize the primordial Islamic principle of justice, in general and gender egalitarian aspects of Islam, in particular, to establish women's rights.

### **Gendered Islamophobia**

The cover page of Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg's *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy* (2008) carries a cartoon image of a veiled Muslim woman. This, perhaps, suggests a link between Islamophobia and the woman's position in Islam. A key element of the broader notion of Islamophobia is "Islam's alleged oppression of women", which is based on "a discourse of protecting women's rights" which enables "Islam to be portrayed as inherently misogynistic" (Ho, 2007, pp. 296-290). Zine (2004, p. 117) uses the term "gendered Islamophobia" to describe the discourse of representing Islam as inherently gender oppressive, and Muslim women as miserably oppressed by the religion. Ho (2007, p. 290) argues that such a discursive act of negatively representing Islam is "part of a broader history of colonial feminism that legitimated Western supremacy through arguing that colonial societies oppressed 'their women' and were thus unfit for self-governance."

One relatively recent example of gendered Islamophobia would be pertinent here. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks on New York in 2001 and in the context of the West's subsequent war and invasion of Afghanistan, the most prominent representation of the country and its people (especially in the Western media) was the inferior condition of its women. In this regard, Rawi (2004) argues: "When the US began bombing Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, the oppression of Afghan women was used as a justification for overthrowing the Taliban regime." The American government also seems to have justified its imperialistic war on Afghanistan on the plea of women's status in the country. As America's then first lady stated triumphantly: "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" (as cited in Rawi, 2004).

Thus, the usual (and often absolute) embodiment of Muslim culture and stereotypes are this: Muslim men are polygamous (read polygynous) and abusive, and Muslim women are "veiled, shackled, and secluded"

(Hasan, 2005, p. 27) and forced into marriage and caged in the *hijāb*; after all, Muslim women are positively represented as perhaps the most pitiable people on earth and as victims of a patriarchal and oppressive religion: Islam.

This obsession with the Muslim women's plight to assert the supposed moral ascendancy of the West and to create an artificial urgency to save brown women from brown men is generally associated with "colonial feminism" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 163). It maintains a "clandestine project of globalizing the West's hegemonic culture and provincializing eastern-Islamic cultural practices," which in turn "artificially creates a desire among" a section of Muslim society "to emulate the dominant Western culture, deemed to be true for all" (Hasan, 2005, p. 50). Such feminist universalist assumptions homogenize Muslim women and Islamic traditions and tend to establish Western cultural hegemony.

The tendency to see Muslim cultures as monolithic is the foremost feature of Islamophobia (Abbas, 2004, p. 29). As Allen (2001, p. 3) states, "the most dangerous aspect of Islamophobia" is to caricature Islam as "entirely uni-dimensional and monolithic without any internal differentiation or opinion." Scholars from both the East and West now widely acknowledge that a complicity between a section of Western feminism and the colonizers/neo-colonizers, who steal "feminist rhetoric" (Viner, 2002) to advance colonial interests and to support imperialist wars of occupation, has played a role in buttressing these cultural assumptions. The negative representation of the "Islamic East" portrays Muslim women as in need of help from the "civilized" West for emancipation from patriarchy. And this, in turn, facilitates the introduction of Western feminist models and concepts of women's rights in Muslim societies, which is evaluated, interrogated and contested in this paper.

### **Ignorance of and prejudice against Islam**

The demonization of Islam and the construction of Muslim men as religiously and culturally misogynists and Muslim women as passive, powerless and quintessential victims of "Islamic patriarchy" arise from ignorance and prejudice (granted that ignorance breeds prejudice and hence in most cases both overlap and are interrelated). However, the element of prejudice seems more prominent, as Islam is generally singled out to be associated with women's inferior position and

oppression. Perhaps, compared to Islam, other world religions may not “come clean” on the question of women’s status. For example, according to Hindu laws promulgated by Manu, “in childhood, a female must be subjected to her father, in youth to her husband; when her lord [husband] is dead to her sons, a woman must never be independent” and the “duty of the wife on the other hand is to worship the master (Pati [husband]) as her first God for only then can she hope to attain any spiritual gains” (Seneviratne & Currie, 2001, p. 205). What is more, previously in Hinduism “the custom of Sati or the burning of widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands began to be practised ... [which] liberated her from a miserable, hated, unloved, and lonely life in the house of her father-in-law” (Seneviratne & Currie, 2001, p. 205). However, despite such misogynistic elements and the dreadful status of women in Hindu scriptures, as Fernea contends, “the same stereotypes are not found in Western representations of Hindu women whose official legal status falls far below that of Muslim women” (cited in Allegretto-Diulio, 2007, p. 24). The scope of this study does not allow to extensively discuss women’s position in other world religions, but it is necessary to convey some glimpses here.

Concerning women’s status in Judaism, Swidler (1976, p. 167) concludes that “in the formative period of Judaism the status of women was not one of equality with men, but rather, severe inferiority, and that even intense misogyny was not infrequently present.” Discussing the ideological basis of the inferior condition of women in “classical Christianity from the second century onward (in contrast with early Christianity in its first decades)”, Martos and Hégy (1998, p. 10) state:

Religious intellectuals developed an ideology that justified the low social position of women... One key element in this ideology was the idea that woman was created after man. Another element was the belief that a woman committed the first sin. These two concepts were repeated over and over by male Christian writers from the second century on.

It is obvious that women do not fare very well in the doctrinal teachings of other world religions such as Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity. However, these religious traditions are not at the forefront of media hype or academic debate when women’s inferiorized status in religion is discussed. Conversely, in academia and mass media, Islam is routinely regarded as the deviant “Other” and essentialised in a quintessentially

Orientalist manner. Incidents of gender violence in Muslim societies are broadcasted and “[s]weeping generalizations are then made about all Muslims, in ways which would not happen in the case of, for example, all Roman Catholics, or all Germans, or all Londoners” (Runnymede Trust, 1997, p. 5).

Surprisingly, Islam is now condemned for not giving women their rights, but in the past it was blamed for a totally opposite reason. Riffat Hassan (2007, p. 162) argues that “propaganda against Islam and Muslims is nothing new in the West. It is as old as the first chapter of Islamic history, when the new faith began to move into territories largely occupied by Christians.” Europeans always constructed Islam as a civilizational adversary and the religion, an antithesis of European values. Accordingly, during the medieval period, when women in Europe were denied many basic human rights which Muslim women had enjoyed since the seventh century, Islam was denigrated for being gender egalitarian. Previously in the West, women did not have property, inheritance and many other basic rights. In places such as Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi in the US, women’s property rights were restricted up until the 1960s and 1970s. Interestingly, the first American states “to grant women inheritance rights were Texas, California, Arizona and New Mexico, all of which were once under Spanish control,” for which Fernea (2000) credits the Islamic influences on Spain. Parliament in Malta passed divorce laws only on 25 July 2011 (“MPs in Catholic Malta”). In other words, until recently, Maltese men and women have been barred from seeking divorce in the Catholic country. In Britain, women did not have the right of equal pay to equal work until the enactment of the Equal Pay Act of 1970 (enforced in 1975 and amended in 1984). The elite club of Britain’s Conservative Party, the Carlton Club, was established in 1832 and barred women from becoming full members and from attending or voting at general meetings until May 2008, although in 1975 it granted “honorary” membership to Margaret Thatcher (“Carlton Club,” 2008). Conversely, to be fair to the religion, Islam has granted women rights to inheritance, ownership, equal pay, engagement in public life and to initiating divorce since the seventh century. The Qur’ān declares: “Men shall have the benefit of what they earn and women shall have the benefit of what they earn” (4:32) and “From what is left by parents and by those nearest related there is a share for men and a share for women” (4:7). Furthermore, the very reason of women’s economic empowerment in Islam caused



the Christian medieval world to wonder: “What kind of religion would allow women to inherit?” (Fernea, 2000). This amazement is identical to what the Arabs had exclaimed following the Qur’ānic revelation regarding women’s right to inheritance. Some of them rushed to the Prophet and asked: “O Messenger of God! Are women really entitled to half of the property though they can neither ride horses nor defend themselves?” (Rahman, 2008, p. 32).

The denigration of Islam in medieval Europe was because of the absence of women’s fundamental rights in its social structure. Berkey (2003, p. 122) states:

The status and position of women in early and medieval Islamic societies is an especially complex topic, due in part to the multiple layers of cultural and religious suspicion through which Western observers have historically contemplated and criticized Islam ... Islamic law accorded women a number of rights and privileges ... which eclipsed those held by women in many (including Western) pre-modern societies.

Weeramantry (1997, p. 129) extensively substantiates this notion, as he argues that Islamic influences on the European legal system rescued it from “an extended medievalism” and lists “a number of basic Islamic legal ideas” that helped “fertilize universal thinking in the field of human rights” in Europe. The notion of women’s rights in Islam is one of the thirty ideas that, according to Weeramantry, influenced European human rights laws. He observes:

Islamic writings on each of these topics have concepts that are surprisingly modern and in the case of some of them, these ideas percolated through to the European world by various routes of entry including the intellectual traffic that took place during the Crusades, the radiating of knowledge to Europe from Islamic Spain, and the entry from Sicily to the great Italian schools of Salerno, Otranto, Rossano and Monte Cassino (Weeramantry, 1997, p. 130).

However, in the wake of the industrial revolution in Europe, women fought a fierce battle, both intellectually and on the streets, for gender equality. They have thus far achieved many of their rights. Perhaps, due to the Western women’s impressive success in realizing many of their feminist agenda in recent history, they are generally projected as role models for women of other cultures. Hence, feminists of non-Western



societies tend to privilege, emulate and import Western feminist concerns.

Interestingly, the Islamic position of women may corroborate many rights such as, the rights to education, employment, property, equal payment, independent personhood, political representation and the initiation and dissolving of marriage, among others, which women enjoy in today's West. However, that fondness does not seem to ensure any check on the rise of gendered Islamophobia in the West, especially in the post 9/11 era. This confirms Werbner's (2005, p. 8) argument that, "like other phobias and racisms," Islamophobia is "an incapacity to cope not only with difference but with resemblance." If charges of misogyny against Islam are true, the religion resembles medieval Europe; and if the charges are unfounded and based on misapprehension of the religion, and if Islam is proved to be gender egalitarian, then to a great extent there exist commonalities between its treatment of women and women's independence in today's West. Despite these supposed resemblances, Islamophobia in the West has continued unabated. Perhaps, these supposed resemblances engender a civilizational rivalry and provoke the West to dread and caricaturize Islam, which is now known as Islamophobia.

Ignorance about women's actual status in Islam is quite widespread. As Ahmed (1982, p. 522) states:

Just as Americans 'know,' that Arabs are backward, they know also with the same flawless certainty that Muslim women are terribly oppressed and degraded. And they know this not because they know that women everywhere in the world are oppressed, but because they believe that, specifically, Islam monstrously oppresses women.

In the same way, Bullock (2002, pp. xv-xvi) argues that many "sophisticated" feminist scholars – Muslims and non-Muslims alike – believe that "Islam, like any patriarchal religion, subordinates women." Such negative portrayals of Islam underpin Islamophobic clichés and are predicated upon a common notion that "human rights can exist only within a secular context and not within the framework of religion" (Hassan, 1996, p. 363). This doctrine of antithesis of Islam and women's rights is a result of inadequate knowledge about Islam. The following discussion shows the extent of ignorance about Islam in the West.

Butler (1960, pp. 16-17) mentions a number of interesting responses by “educated” Americans to two questions: “What is Islam?” and “Who was the Prophet Mohammad?” Some answers to the first question read: “a game of chance, similar to bridge,” as well as, “a mysterious sect founded in the South by the Ku Klux Klan,” and, “an organization of American masons who dress in strange costumes.” To the second question, one said that Muhammad was the man who “wrote *The Arabian Nights*”, another said that he was “an American Negro minister who was in competition with Father Divine in New York City”, another said “Mohammad had something to do with a mountain. He either went to the mountain, or it came to him.” In a recent survey, Gottschalk and Greenberg (2008, p. 3) asked a sample of Americans what “names, places, events, ideas, practices, and objects” they associate with “Islam” and “Muslims.” Their findings show:

The names and events they think of tend to be associated with violence (e.g., Osama bin Laden, the 9/11 tragedies, Palestinian suicide bombers), the ideas and practices associated with oppression... and the places limited to the Middle East (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran)... When asked about these answers, many Americans respond that, unfortunate as such associations may be, Muslims and Islam feature prominently in many of the world’s conflicts and injustices. And this, they often conclude, reflects something inherent about the religion and its associated cultures (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008, p. 3).

The above mentioned two surveys have a gap of at least 50 years, which shows that, in terms of ignorance about Islam, little has changed. However, while the earlier survey suggests pure ignorance, the latter one points to a combination of negativity and hostility.

Mistaken notions of Islam inevitably lead a section of Western feminist scholars to caricature Muslim society. While spreading misconceptions about women’s status in Islam, they try to project “the secular, Western path” (Bullock, 2004) as the only way to liberate women. Needless to say, many secular feminist intellectuals in Muslim countries uncritically subscribe to such views. Because of the proliferation of Western feminist ideas, many in the Muslim world believe that emulating the West uncritically and discarding Islamic practices is the only way to emancipate women.

### **Following the footsteps of the West and blaming Islam: Some examples**

While some governments in the Muslim world have attempted to emulate the Western model of modernity, especially through undermining gender-related Islamic laws, feminist scholars there have promoted a wholesale replication of Western ideas in their pursuance of women's liberation. For example, under the influence of the British colonial administration on early Egyptian feminism, Qasim Amin (1863 – 1908) and Huda Sha'rawi (1879 – 1947) advanced Western culture in the name of Muslim women's emancipation. Upon arriving in Rome in 1923, to attend the International Women's Conference, Sha'rawi proclaimed: "We would follow in the footsteps of the women in Europe in the awakening of our women so that we could take our land to its rightful place among the advanced nations" (as cited in El Guindi, 2003, p. 598). Thus, the founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union, Huda Sha'rawi propagated a Westward-looking feminist philosophy in a Muslim society. According to Badran (1995, pp. 11-12), "Huda Sha'rawi's father, Sultan Pasha was implicated in assisting the British intervention" in Egypt. Remarkably, this colonial connection may have had a bearing upon Sha'rawi's feminist thoughts and ideas. She was more conversant with French than with Arabic, which renders her sense of belonging to Egyptian culture dubitable. As El Guindi (2003, p. 592) argues: "Despite her prominence as an [Egyptian] feminist leader, she was distanced from her native language and therefore not a complete insider in her own culture." Obviously this did not facilitate a better understanding of Islam, and, in turn, may have inclined her towards Western culture.

The example of the French-educated Egyptian lawyer Qasim Amin, widely regarded as the founding father of Arab feminism, is not very propitious either. Amin came to prominence when his *Tahrir al-Mar'ah* (Liberation of Women) was published in 1899. However, his instant prominence was not due to any significant breakthrough in women's rights or due to his contributions in removing any women's legal disabilities. A campaign for women's education and empowerment in Egypt had existed far before Amin's book, as such:

issues had been proposed in the 1870s and 1880s and perhaps even earlier by Muslim intellectuals, who had argued for women's education and called for reforms in matters of

polygyny and divorce... By the 1890's the issue of educating women beyond the primary level was uncontroversial and girls' schools were established (El Guindi, 2003, pp. 593-94).

What made Amin an iconic figure of Arab feminism, especially in the eyes of Western commentators, was his somewhat controversial arguments in his book “for a fundamental social and cultural change for Egypt and other Muslim countries, a Europeanization of Arab culture as it were, in which women’s issues were embedded” (El Guindi, 2003, p. 594). As such, Amin followed the Western model to promote women’s causes and sadly replicated the colonial agenda of undermining indigenous Arab-Islamic traditions and value systems. Unfortunately, and logically, the ideas inherent in *Tahrīr al-Mar’ah* did not help advance women’s causes, rather fuelled controversy, anger and a resentment of the Egyptian people. A study of other Muslim societies may prove that the uncritical imitation of Western ideas and the mimicry of Western modernity never ameliorated the condition of women. As AbuSulayman (1993, p. 10) and Moten (2011, p. 4) argue, in general, the replication of the Western framework of modernity is not known to have made any positive impact on any Muslim country.

Amin’s obvious colonial agendum was influenced by the Victorian imperialist and Edwardian Proconsul Lord Cromer (1841 – 1917) who was the British Consul-General in Egypt from 1883 to 1907. Cromer critiqued local Egyptian customs and utilized the gender issues as means to persuade the Egyptians to do away with their cultural values. As Bailey Jones (2011, p. 148) argues:

[The] treatment of women is one area of Cromer’s critique which... adds to his overall mission of saving the Egyptians from themselves. He lists two issues of ‘degradation’ of women that he feels are of utmost importance for the overall civilizing mission: veiling and seclusion, and polygamy.

Apparently, Cromer seemed to have been deeply concerned for the plight of Egyptian women. However, surprisingly, although he “seemed to champion the emancipation of Egyptian women,” he nonetheless condemned, “women suffragists back home in England” (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 14). After he had left Egypt, the very same Cromer “founded and presided over the Men’s League for Opposing Women’s Suffrage,

which tried by any means possible, to stop women getting the vote” (Viner, 2002).

Ahmed (1992, p. 54) interprets Cromer’s paradox of “supporting” women’s causes in Egypt thus: “Whether in the hands of patriarchal men or feminists, the ideas of Western feminism essentially functioned to morally justify the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe.” Although Cromer was opposed to the idea of women’s empowerment in Britain, his supposed concerns for women’s rights in Egypt had a different dimension and a corresponding driveshaft while being interwoven with his colonial assignment in the country. So, as Bullock (2002, p. 21) argues, Amin and Cromer’s “concern for the status of women was hardly a concern for women.” Hassan (1996, p. 368) comments on this artificial love of the West for Muslim women thus:

In the midst of so much hatred and aversion toward Islam and Muslims in general, the out-pouring of so much sympathy, in and by the West, toward Muslim women appears, at a surface level, to be an amazing contradiction. For are Muslim women also not adherents of Islam? And are Muslim women also not victims of ‘Muslim-bashing’? Few Muslims can forget the brutal burning of Turkish Muslim girls by German gangsters or the ruthless rape of Bosnian Muslim women by Serbian soldiers.

During the colonial period, and even more so in postcolonial times, the West has largely been hostile to Islam and to its adherents. In the post 9/11 era that has witnessed an extraordinary, dramatic backlash against Muslims around the globe, such Islamophobic tendencies are a common feature of most Western media and governments. However, despite this palpable antagonism against Muslims, there seems to have been a perennial “feminist” concern for Muslim women, which may not be for their emancipation from patriarchy or from a supposedly repressive religion. It is rather a project of Westernizing Muslim cultures and of distancing Muslims from Islam, which eventually facilitates imperial intervention and domination. In the long run, such ideas only create confusion and division in Muslim society, while the underprivileged and subjugated women continue to be a pawn in this cultural battle fought in their names. Needless to say, in such colonial feminist propaganda, Islamic practices are always painted most negatively.

The wave of Westernization and modernization of Muslim regions in the name of women's liberation does not necessarily reflect a careful analysis or adequate knowledge of Islamic teachings, but a blind imitation of the West. Due to the West's distinctive experience with Christianity, "religious belief is marginalized in Western academic circles; which have a secular orientation. Even less surprising is the traditional feminist disdain for religious beliefs, given historic associations between religion and misogyny" (Bullock, 2002, p. xxx). However, it will be difficult to justify such an attitude towards Islam, given cultural specificities and the variant religious experiences of Muslim society. According to Muhammad Qutb (1993, p. 96), there are no "historical, geographical, economical [*sic*], ideological and legal conditions" in Muslim society that would require it to discard Islam or to imitate the Western brand of feminism for the empowerment and socio-economic upliftment of women. Attempts to reject Islam and apply Western models for the amelioration of women's status are bound to fail in Muslim societies and may prove counterproductive. This is shown the discussion that follows.

A number of contemporary feminist intellectuals follow the path of deprecating Islam in the service of feminism, and demonstrate tendencies of "gendered Islamophobia." The Egyptian feminist writer Nawal Saadawi (1931-) blames all religions, especially Islam, for almost all social problems, including gender inequalities. As she emphatically states, "I am very critical of all religions. We, as women, are oppressed by all these religions" (as cited in Khaleeli, 2010). According to her, "the rise of religion is holding back progress with regards to issues such as female circumcision, especially in Egypt" (Khaleeli, 2010). Genital mutilation is a cultural practice that goes across religious divides or national borders in Arab-African societies; but Saadawi tends to describe it as a singularly Islamic one. Regarding a woman's right to choose her husband, she says:

The Arab family being highly patriarchal, both socially and legally, the authority of the father over his daughters is absolute. In the name of a good marriage young girls are given to old decrepit husbands just because they can pay a big price (Saadawi, 1980, p. 71).

Nowhere in her book, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, does Saadawi bother to mention that in Islam a parent has no

right to force their daughter to marry someone. Thus, she leaves her less informed readers at an uncertain zone of the intersection of Arab cultural practices and Islamic teachings. Much like Saadawi, most feminists who castigate Islam for gender oppression are flawed with confounding true Islamic teachings and Muslim cultural practices.

The Canadian journalist and self-proclaimed “Muslim” lesbian feminist writer Irshad Manji (1968-), and the Muslim-turned-atheist and Somali-born former Dutch lawmaker Ayaan Hirsi Ali (1969-), “are firm and unyielding in their support for the West” (Gewen, 2008), and in their denigration of Islam in the question of women’s rights. Irshad Manji “is a harsh critic of Islam in newspaper articles, books, and lectures” and proposes to “reform” the religion (Hirsi Ali, 2006, pp. 71-72). She seems to command huge support among Western intellectuals and even among those who are generally hostile to the concept of “multiculturalism” and to Muslims’ presence in the West.

Hirsi Ali’s Islamophobia is more blatant and obvious. Her criticism of Islam with regard to gender issues are clearly described in the script of the short film *Submission* (2004) that she wrote for the filmmaker Theo van Gogh. Hirsi Ali (2006, p. 23) believes: “Many Muslim girls are brought up according to the Koran and the example of the Prophet Muhammad, to live subserviently submissively. It is very difficult for them to liberate themselves from this cage when they are older.” Such over-generalized statements about Islam and Muslim women are seen in most of her writings, and her irreverence to Islam’s holy symbols are unabashed; hence, she is rightly dubbed “a feminist counterpart to Salman Rushdie” (Grimes, 2007).

The Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasrin (1962-) adopts the same feminist approach and strategy as Saadawi, Manji and Hirsi Ali, blaming all religions, especially Islam, for gender oppression. Many of her remarks on Islam, God, the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur’ān and Muslims go beyond acceptable bounds of critiquing a particular faith or belief system. There is no dearth of materials in her writing that obviously hurt people’s religious (Islamic) sentiment. Nasrin (2003, p. 45) uses the metaphor of the black cobra to describe Islam and recommends sweeping it with a broom. In a BBC TV interview, Taslima Nasrin was once shown “smoking a cigarette while she handled the Qur’ān and openly criticized it” (Deen, 1999, 53), which is



unacceptable in Muslim societies. She composed a poem titled “Makka – Madina” where the eponymous characters are two girls who are raped by a man returning from masjid with a rosary in the hand. Apparently, the rapist, sex-maniac in Taslima’s world has to be a religious, devout Muslim. Moreover, it is common knowledge that these two places rank religiously very high in Muslims’ consciousness. Nasrin largely depends on unreliable materials when denigrating Islamic teachings. As Shafiq Rehman states:

Now as far as religion and [Nasrin] went, there was a credibility gap, for she was never known to be a philosopher or a learned scholar... But what she used to do, and I saw it a number of times, she’d go to the library and get particular books, not good books but third-rate commentaries written by uneducated mullahs (cited in Deen, 2006, p. 128).

So ignorance is not the only reason for the Islamophobic statements of feminist writers like Nasrin. Highlighting the issue of ignorance may run the risk of overlooking other not-so-innocent elements. As Zine (2004, p. 113) argues, “Islamophobic attitudes are, in fact, part of a rational system of power and domination...” and the idea of ignorance allows people engaged in Islamophobic practices “to claim a space of innocence.” All the Islamophobic feminist writers mentioned above belong to a power structure and a system of values and domination. So it may be naïve to base their deprecation of Islam on pure ignorance, as the element of prejudice and disdain towards Islam and Muslims are predominant in their treatment of the religion.

Such feminist writers largely promote the concept of sexual revolution and their feminist ideas have created social unrest and augured the constant threat of backlashes. By following such a trajectory, they may have received accolades from the regional and Western establishments, but their feminism has done nothing towards ameliorating women’s position in Muslim societies. As a Bangladeshi women’s rights activist comments on Nasrin’s feminist strategy: “Nasrin went for the jugular, and we’re not ready for that. There’s simply too much at stake. You have to learn how to deal with the situation.... And that is something Nasrin never understood” (cited in Hashmi, 2000, p. 203). Perhaps, this statement is true with all other Islamophobic feminist scholars whose persistent criticism of Islam have not been very helpful for women.

### **The way forward**

Going against Islam or blaming culture for women's oppression and then seeking solutions in a secular, foreign ideology takes Muslim societies nowhere. It would be far better received and more effective if Muslim men were reminded of the teachings of Islam that obligate them to be just and compassionate to women. As such, feminist scholars in Muslim societies should insist on "a feminism that is indigenous" (Bullock, 2002, p. xxii) and interpret or reinterpret the Qur'ān and Prophetic traditions through the prism of gender justice. As an American Muslim woman said to Fernea (1998, p. 378), "The basis of egalitarianism is there in the Qur'ān. What different cultures have done with it is another matter" (378). Feminist intellectuals in Muslim societies need to distinguish between Islam as a revealed message and Islam as culturally enacted practices. They should further bear in mind that justice is the primordial principle of the Islamic belief system. An unequivocal emphasis on justice is the crux of the message of Qur'ān and Prophetic Sunnah and very much includes gender egalitarianism.

Secular feminists and Islamic feminists in Muslim societies may disagree on certain issues. However, if they can agree on promoting "justice" and preventing an "oppressive attitude" in the broader sense, then, the gates are opened to a wide range of areas where they may cooperate and work together; including but not limited to "education, spousal abuse, humane treatment for women and so on" (Bullock, 2002, p. xxviii). They may also unite against the capitalist maneuvering of the female body, as a shared campaign to stop "the use of women's bodies for selling commodities, the competition amongst women to be beautiful to attract men's attention" which would appeal "to secular leftists, feminists, and religious scholars alike" (Bullock, 2002, p. 90). As a woman in Turkey declared to Fernea (1998, p. 217): "What secular and religious women need to do is stand together. We'll all be stronger for learning about each other. But cutting each other down weakens us all."

Denigrating Islamic principles (and that, without proper study and understanding) is not only unwise and disrespectful to Islam and Muslims, but also fruitless and disruptive. It causes unnecessary troubles in society and gives a bad name to the noble efforts of numerous scholars and activists who struggle for gender justice. Consider "the killings of

two teenage boys during the height of the anti-Taslima Nasrin campaign in Bangladesh in 1994 and of two more people in the Indian state of Karnataka in early March 2010” (Hasan, 2010, p. 549). All these were brought about as a result of Taslima Nasrin’s irresponsible statements, attacking Islam and Muslims’ religious sentiments’, all presumably in the service of feminism.

Unfortunately, with regards to the question of women’s rights, “Islamists” and secularists in Muslim societies have become so hostile to one another’s views that a dialogue between them seems rather impossible. Women’s rights activists of both secular and Islamic orientations had a chance to discuss gender issues at the Beijing Global Women’s Conference in 1995. Sadly, their sharp disagreements and debates turned their discussion groups into, to use Wadud’s (2002) capturing words, “screaming sessions.” The fact of the matter, however, remains that if feminists are passionate about promoting women’s rights (and not merely importing foreign ideas in the name of feminism), and if Islamists believe in the primordial, historical Islamic principle of justice, then there should be innumerable avenues for both groups to work together in synergy, as mentioned before. Such sanity, however, seems very farfetched in most Muslim countries. The reason for this is perhaps that both Islamic and secular forces believe that Islam is essentially anti-feminist. Hence, regarding women’s rights, secularists keep themselves distanced from Islam and the Muslims from feminism. A hope for reconciliation between the two camps may, nonetheless, not be logically impossible or simply wishful thinking if the two parties can communicate and understand each other. While “Islamists” need to appreciate the legitimate feminist concerns and should not dismiss feminism simply because it originates in the West, secular feminists should review some of their ideas for compatibility checks against cultural specificities and should appreciate and highlight aspects of gender egalitarianism in Islam. Rigidity in feminist work is not very helpful because feminism’s “worst enemies have been those who have treated “feminism” like a new religion with dogmas that can allow for only one possible interpretation” (Marks, et al., 1990, p. 73).

There is also a need to differentiate between different branches and phases of Western feminism. Until the 1960s, the feminist movement in the West was largely fighting for women’s legitimate, fundamental

human rights, and there is not much contradiction between Islam and those feminist concerns. However, Islam is opposed to some second wave Western feminist ideas, such as, “the right to sexual self-determination and the so-called sexual liberation of the 1960s” which Muslims may regard as, “the false emancipation of Western women, exploited and sexualized in Western consumer society” (Lewis & Mills, 2003, p. 18).

For many centuries in the West, women did not have the very basic human rights which Muslim women had been enjoying since the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) established Islam in Arabia. Equal education, employment, political representation, ownership of property, the right to divorce, and many other rights were alien to Western women until the twentieth century. So a strong feminist movement was badly needed there. Owing largely to cultural specificities, the feminist movement did not see an equal momentum in the Muslim world, as gender relations were different there. In actuality, with Muslims a true revolution occurred in the seventh century. As Wadud (2002) puts it:

Islam brought radical changes regarding women and society, despite the deeply entrenched patriarchy of seventh-century Arabia. The Qur’ān provides women with explicit rights to inheritance, independent property, divorce and the right to testify in a court of law. It prohibits wanton violence towards women and girls and is against duress in marriage and community affairs. Women and men equally are required to fulfill all religious duties, and are equally eligible for punishment for misdemeanors.

Such a glorious account of women’s empowerment and gender equity in Islam should not lead Muslims to be complacent, or to believe that Muslim societies are free from gender prejudices and discriminations, or to avoid undertaking important reforms. A few generations after the Prophet (SAW) passed away, Islamic teachings began to be interpreted with an increasingly anti-woman bias. Moreover, with the spectacular spread of Islam to other cultures, such as the Persians, Byzantines and Greeks, Muslims began to borrow and follow some misogynistic practices from those societies. This caused many foreign cultural practices to become embedded in the social matrices of many Muslim countries, and thus in the mindsets and behaviour of people. Islamic scholars should address such issues without further delay.

## Conclusion

Feminism, meaning the pursuit of gender justice, is a noble movement that battles inequities and has contributed significantly to establishing the dignity and independence of women. Conversely, Islamophobia, similar to anti-Semitism or any other religious prejudices, depicts religious hatred and is a form of racism. These two ideas – feminism and Islamophobia – are sharply opposed to each other, as their ideological bases are totally different. So appropriating feminism to fuel Islamophobia is not only inappropriate, but a deep affront to all women who have been suffering from male oppression in various corners of the world, including all those people who have been battling the patriarchal social apparatus in order to remove gender injustices. This essay has intended to create awareness among feminist activists and scholars so that they may play a pivotal role in resisting Islamophobic tendencies in feminist discourses.

The aim is not to tarnish other religious traditions or to debase their followers. What is attempted here is to show the double standards some feminist scholars maintain while talking about women in Islam, as they seem to have singled out the religion as particularly misogynistic. While many Western scholars have begun to appreciate the emancipatory and gender egalitarian aspects of Islam, the caricaturing of religion has gone unabated and is simply overwhelming. Feminist concerns for Muslim women should equate respect to what they believe. Deprecating their religion while struggling for their rights may not bring any good for them.

While discussing Western feminism, the intention has not been to make sweeping generalizations about it, rather has been to refer to a damaging propensity among a section of feminist scholars that seek to undermine the religion of Islam. Muslims may have reservations about some elements of Western feminism, but what they must admit is that it has brought the issue of women's oppression to the forefront of everybody's mind; which has also influenced the women's rights movements in the Islamic countries. The question now before Muslims is: What framework should be followed – the Western or the Islamic? This article has argued that contrary to how it is represented, Islam is very much gender egalitarian and has the potential to ameliorate women's condition in Muslim societies. Hence, only the Islamic framework is

practicable and can make positive changes in Muslim women's status. Furthermore, following the Islamic framework means going back to the Qur'ān and authentic Prophetic traditions and interpreting them in the light of modern complexities, but at the same time not swerving from fundamental Islamic principles such as justice. Following the negative strategy of denigrating Islam to establish women's rights in Muslim societies has not rendered any good service to women or to feminism.

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