

Feminism in the Middle East:

An Analysis into Western, Islamic, and Secular Feminism

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ABSTRACT: This article showcases the diversity of feminism in the Middle East and its effects on Middle Eastern women, particularly Muslim women. I argue that though Western feminism has provided important conceptual tools for understanding and fighting patriarchal systems, it has ultimately supported the othering of Middle Eastern women. As such, Islamic feminism and secular feminism have played an important role in discrediting Western generalizations. In this paper, I first explain how the logics of Western feminism are inherently rooted in Orientalism, promoting an inaccurate and oppressive image of the Middle East. I then illustrate how Islamic feminism has been used significantly to conceptualize feminism within Islamic traditions and religious beliefs. Lastly, I showcase the prominent discourse between Islamic and secular feminism to prove movements are important to women's liberation and can benefit from joining forces.

KEYWORDS: Middle Eastern Politics, Orientalism, Liberal Feminism, Secular Feminism, Islamic Feminism

Muslim women are unfairly, yet commonly, viewed as impotent victims of their religion, culture, and society (Scharff, 2011, p. 122). This view is largely a product of the West and Western feminism. However, this perspective is being contested through the rise of both secular and Islamic feminism within the Middle East. This paper seeks to showcase how different forms of feminism have affected Middle Eastern women, with a particular focus on Muslim women. I argue that mainstream Western feminism exploits these women as it depicts them as victims of their culture to maintain Western superiority. The prominent roles of Islamic feminism and secular feminism in the Middle East discredit these Western generalizations. This paper will first explain how Western feminism is rooted in Orientalist beliefs, promoting inaccurate and oppressive representations of Muslim women and their experiences. It will then explain how Islamic feminism has been helpful in assisting Muslim women to showcase their agency while still following their religion. Lastly, it will depict the popular discourse between secular and Islamic feminism and ultimately prove that both play an important role in the fight for women's rights in the Middle East and can benefit from working together.

Western Feminism and Muslim Women

Western forms of feminism have been helpful in the fight for women's rights both in the West and, to an extent, the East. However, critiques of Western feminism regarding Muslim women in the Middle East are still valid. Western feminism promotes a very particular point of view - one that is entrenched in Orientalism and colonial beliefs. As Cyra A. Choudhury (2009) explains, Western feminism is injected with liberal beliefs and thus "subconsciously continues traditional liberal political theory's judgements about the 'East'" (p. 154). This also means promoting a particular view of what women's rights and women's liberation should look like (p. 154); a view that does not align with the way most Muslim women choose to live their lives.

A common debate is that of the veil or hijab. Some Western feminists see the hijab as a form of oppression and a representation of patriarchal values, and while this may be true in some cases where women are forced to wear veils according to Sharia law this is not the case for all Muslim women (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 146). Limiting the hijab

to a solely oppressive symbol creates a false narrative of Islam and Muslim women. It also creates a mindset in the West that makes Muslim women out to be victims of their religion and culture who are without agency. Christina Scharff (2011) observed this in their research as female participants from Britain and Germany concluded that they viewed Muslim women as "subordinate" and "passive victims of patriarchal oppression" (p. 122). The study found that many women from Britain and Germany believed that empowered Western women did not need feminism anymore but that Muslim women from the Middle East did (p. 127). These ideas promote the belief that Muslim women do not have agency and their identity is constrained to being "veiled, exotic and oppressed by Islam" (Khan, 2005, as cited in Scharff, 2011, p. 128).

This victim identity encourages the othering of Muslims in the Middle East as it is rooted in Orientalist and colonial beliefs of Western superiority. Edward Said believed that orientalism created a distorted image of the Middle East based on the idea of Middle Eastern exceptionalism. Orientalists uphold the idea that the Middle East is uniquely uncivilized in that it cannot have modernity, democracy, and other liberal ideals; the Middle East is seen as exceptional in its resistance to modern liberal ideologies and freedoms (Said, 1979). The idea of ethnocentric epistemology is useful in this regard because it helps explain why people in the West see themselves in conflict with the Middle East. Said (1979) argues that the West and the Middle East are divided into two monolithic cultures that ignore the diversity within these places. Since the Middle East is generalized to be representative of traditional oppressive philosophy, Muslim women are seen as victims of their culture and religion in need of saving from the West. Scharff (2011) notes that "... the dichotomous construction of the free west [versus] repressive parts of the world (whose boundaries are absolute) essentializes and reifies culture as an all-determining structuring force" (p. 130). Therefore, the distorted image of the Middle East that Orientalism has created is maintained by the idea that the Middle East and Islam cannot change without the help of Western feminism. This creates only one right way to liberation. The East-West dichotomy places "the [Western] subject as the knower" and reduces Middle Eastern Muslim women to individuals that are unknowledgeable and passive (Scharff, 2011, p. 130).

The stereotypes created about the Middle East and Muslim women are thus purposely constructed to maintain Western hegemony or dominance rooted in colonial pasts. These ideas are then used to justify Western intervention, like the war on terror carried out by the United States (Mahmood, 2008). All these factors further isolate the Middle East and Muslim women.

It is important to note that though Western feminism has promoted certain oppressive images of women in the Middle East it is not inherently harmful. Western feminists have provided the terminology and theory to better understand gender oppression (Hesová, 2019). As this essay will explain later on, western feminist thought is used to an extent in Middle Eastern feminist movements.

Islamic Feminism

Though less known of it in the West, Islamic feminism is very prominent in the Middle East in the fight for women's rights. Islamic Feminism is "a feminist discourse or practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm... [and] derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an..." (Badran, 2009, as cited in Hesová, 2019, p. 30). Specifically, Islamic feminism seeks gender equality within Islam grounded in the Qur'an. An important part of Islamic feminism is engaging with religious texts in "attempts at rereading' and 're-appropriation'" (Hesová, 2019, p. 38). This is done to showcase and promote the "legitimacy [of gender equality] in the eyes of believers and the authorities" (p. 38). Islamic feminism works within the religious and cultural framework familiar to Muslim women. It is anti-colonial because it moves beyond the Western and liberal understandings of feminism that are often pushed onto Eastern countries. Instead, Islamic feminism introduces a unique form of feminism that works within the context of the Islamic Middle East, because, although the Middle East is religiously diverse, the vast majority of the population is Muslim and follows some version of the Qur'an. Islamic feminism enables Muslim women to re-read and reinterpret religious texts allowing them not only to change the narrative around women in their respective areas but also to express their religious and social agency.

An important concept within Islamic feminism is that of *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* is a sort of independent reasoning which relies on thinking through the Qur'an logically and personally to re-interpret the principles beyond traditional Islamic theology (Hesová, 2019, p. 38). Specifically, *ijtihad* has been used to investigate the roles of men and women and how the traditional understanding of these roles in the Qur'an is "historically constructed" (Hesová, 2019, p. 39). Demonstrating that these understandings are not rigid helps promote a more egalitarian Islamic society. This is especially important because it illustrates that the religion of Islam and the cultures in the Middle East are not stagnant and do have the capability to be empowering for women without necessitating a change to fit the Western mould. *Ijtihad* also gives power to Muslim women as it illustrates their strength and agency within their own culture and religion: they are not victims of Islam dependent on the West. This is especially prominent when considering Rachel Rinaldo's (2014) theory of pious critical agency. Pious critical agency represents the agency of Muslim women to not only question their religion so they can promote positive change but also to choose to continue following their religion (Rinaldo, 2014, p. 829). They have found a way to follow their religion and simultaneously promote gender equality; an achievement many people in the West do not think is possible. Islamic feminists do not ignore that traditional readings of Islamic religious texts like the Qur'an are based on the male experience and rooted in a patriarchal understanding of the world (Ahmadi, 2006, p. 36); however, they also refuse the notion that their religion is inherently oppressive to women and opposed to modernity.

An interesting case of Islamic feminism in the Middle East is presented in Iran. Feminism in Iran was first constructed in a secular form, but Islamic feminism soon grew out of a need for a type of feminist activism that worked within the religious and societal system of Iran (Ahmadi, 2006, p. 34). This is partially because of the 1979 Islamic revolution that caused a rise in fundamentalism and ultimately Islamophobia (p. 34). Islamic feminists rose to the occasion in hopes to change the situation in Iran while challenging the Orientalist West's views. Iranian women have used *ijtihad* to rethink

gender in novel and radical interpretations. They are critical of the traditional gender roles and status women have in Iran (p. 38). Iranian Islamic feminists have also intelligently employed postmodern concepts to help them in their fight. They have borrowed the ideas of “tolerance, optimism, and the drive for self-knowledge” to promote the idea of “multiple truths, multiple roles, and multiple realities” (Ahmadi, 2006, p. 48). This encourages diversity within Islam, Muslims, and feminists. It speaks to the multiplicity of beliefs in the Middle East and Iran while also rejecting Western generalizations of the Middle East and what feminism can or should be. An important figure in Iranian feminist discourse has been Dr. Abdul Karim Soroush. Dr. Soroush has brought in two important concepts in understanding the Qur’an in a feminist light: *zati* and *arazi*. *Zati* includes the necessary or key components of Islam; if these were to change, Islam would no longer be Islam (Ahmadi, 2006, p. 39). *Arazi*, on the other hand, are components that are not essential but are instead the product of the historical time the text was written (Ahmadi, 2006, p. 39). These terms further demonstrate oppressive gender norms are a product of a specific historical time and not something inherent to Islam or its teachings.

Islamic Feminism vs Secular Feminism

It is important to note that Islamic feminism is not the only type of feminism within the Middle East. Secular forms of feminism are also prominent in the Middle East and the controversy between secular and Islamic feminism is of great importance in feminist discourses. So far, this paper has only outlined the positive views of Islamic feminism; however, secular feminists present important critiques of Islamic feminism. Many believe that Islam and feminism cannot coexist as Islam, like other religions, is intrinsically patriarchal (Ahmadi, 2006). Secular feminists differ from Islamic feminists in that they believe it is important to not create delusions about Islam and the role it may have played in the oppression of women. In the Middle East “Islamic legal institutions and practices [have played an important role] in maintaining, through the ages, the specific patriarchal order which circumscribes women’s lives in Muslim countries” (Moghissi, 2002, as cited in Ahmadi, 2006, p. 35). This is one of the main reasons some feminists within the Middle East choose to be secular instead.

Secular feminism is quite different from Islamic feminism in that it focuses more on “civic equality... in politics/the political sphere, labour rights, and education [for women]” and does not focus on changing Middle Eastern theology (Hesová, 2019, p. 29). Secular feminism uses the same concepts and practices as Western feminism but without the Orientalist views that shape Western feminism. Secular feminism is just as much a product of the Middle East as Islamic feminism. Because of this, many secular feminists understand that though this form of feminism may be secular it does not need to be anti-Islamic. Many secular feminists believe in promoting women’s rights and agency; this includes women having a choice in how and what religion they follow (p. 33). Hesová (2019) notes that secular activists have also helped “promote a consciousness of the diversity of Islamic law and its interpretations” (p. 35), thus helping change the narrative around Islam. Unlike what is expressed in most Western discourses, secular feminism has a long history in the Middle East that reaches back even before decolonization in some countries. For example, Egypt’s secular feminism was born out of a want and need for modernization and better rights for colonized peoples (Hesová, 2019, p.30).

Secular feminism is also more inclusive than Islamic feminism since it is not restricted to a specific religion and is open to a more diverse group of women within the Middle East. However, since Islam is extremely valued in many Middle Eastern countries, secular feminism has failed in ways that Islamic feminism has succeeded. Fereshteh Ahmadi (2006) explains that secular feminists have sometimes found it challenging to provoke change “where fundamentalists hold absolute power over certain state institutions” (p. 34); meaning they have had trouble fighting oppressive gender norms from the outside. As mentioned earlier, Islamic feminists are able to work within the religious framework and thus are more likely to be successful at implementing change (Ahmadi, 2006, p. 34).

Because of the way secular feminism is organized in comparison to Islamic feminism, many people see these two as oppositional. But as Hesová (2019) explains, secular feminism and Islamic feminism can coexist in a space and complement one another (p. 33). For example, many Islamic feminists have borrowed from secular feminism to contest oppressive laws through public

activism (which is drawn from secular feminist practices). Secular feminists in the Middle East have also considered the knowledge and philosophy of Islamic feminism to help them in their own activism (p. 34). It can be said that both movements have influenced each other and are dependent on each other. Islamic feminism employs feminist concepts on gender, sexuality, and power and then applies them within their religious theology (Hesová, 2019, p. 36). This is one way in which Western and secular feminist thought have been helpful to Muslim women (p. 36). Differentiating sex from gender and understanding gender as a social concept has been an important part of feminism; one that the Islamic feminism movement could not do without. Secular feminism is also dependent on Islamic feminism to promote change in places where secular feminism does not have as much influence. This in turn makes it so Middle Eastern Islamic societies are more open to change. It is important to note that although secular and Islamic feminism are employing different tools and strategies, both are fighting for women's rights. If Islamic feminists and secular feminists worked together more often—or at least accepted how important the other's role is—they would be even more successful in their endeavours. Hesová (2019) asserts that "because of the conflation of legal and Islamic argumentation, the need for cooperation between secular and religious approaches has increased" (p. 34).

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed and explained the role different feminisms play in the Middle East. It assessed influences of three different types of feminism in the Middle East: Western feminism, Islamic feminism, and secular feminism. Western feminism has been useful in creating important concepts, like gender, that are borrowed by Islamic and secular feminists in the Middle East. However, it is also rooted in Orientalist and colonialist beliefs that deem the Middle East and Islam as inferior to the West and Western philosophy. Islamic feminism, on the other hand, is unique in that it promotes feminism within the Islamic framework and works efficiently to change gender norms from within the religion rather than disregarding the religion altogether. Lastly, secular feminism uses concepts and philosophies of Western feminism without the same negative generalizations about the Middle East.

Secular feminism proves that it is just as much a part of the Middle East as Islamic feminism. Both Islamic and secular feminism have prominent roles in Middle Eastern countries and should be working together toward the shared goal of women's liberation. A concept that can be explored further is the influence both of these forms of feminism have had globally. This paper focused mainly on feminism within the Middle East, but these forms of feminism have had far reaching impacts just as Western feminism has. Islamic feminism is of particular interest because of its unique and specific take on the Qur'an. Author and historian Margot Badran (2002, as cited in Ahmadi, 2006) explains that Islamic feminism exists globally and "transcends East and West... Islamic feminism is being produced at diverse sites around the world by women inside their own countries, whether they be from countries with Muslim majorities or from old established minority communities" (p. 36). It would be fascinating to research how the Muslim diaspora including immigrants, refugees, and those who have been exiled from their countries has influenced Islamic feminism beyond the Middle East and how Islamic feminism may differ depending on where it is being practiced.

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