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Scholarly feminist versus internet commentator on women issues in Islam

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Abstract

This article discusses two different types of contemporary writings both "scholarly feminists" and "internet commentators" on women in Islam; particularly issues related to gender equality such as women's rights, status and creation. By comparing two different groups of writers, the objective of this paper is to discover whether there are significant differences between them on issues of women in Islam, which shed light on modern Islamic thinking. From a brief investigation of several books as representatives of scholarly feminists, and several websites, which publish many articles on women in Islam, as representatives of Internet commentators, it is clear that both groups seem to have similar attitude on the topic. They tried to clarify a common misperception of women in Islam which is commonly portrayed to be "a second class". Moreover, it is clear that the message of 'Internet commentators' seem to be more effective and more likely to prevail.

Artikel ini membahas dua tipe tulisan-tulisan kontemporer, baik dari kalangan "feminis terpelajar" maupun "komentator internet" mengenai perempuan dalam

Islam; utamanya berkaitan dengan persoalan-persoalan keadilan gender, seperti hak-hak kaum perempuan, status dan penciptaan mereka. Dengan membandingkan dua kelompok penulis ini, tujuan artikel ini adalah untuk menemukan apakah ada perbedaan signifikan antara kedua kelompok ini mengenai masalah-masalah perempuan dalam Islam yang mewarnai pemikiran Islam modern. Dari penelitian singkat atas beberapa karya yang mewakili kaum feminis terpelajar dan beberapa websites yang memublikasikan banyak artikel tentang perempuan dalam Islam, sebagai representasi dari komentator internet, jelas bahwa dua kelompok ini memiliki keserupaan sikap atas topik tersebut. Mereka mencoba menjelaskan kesalahpahaman umum tentang perempuan dalam Islam yang biasanya digambarkan sebagai "kelas kedua". Juga tampak bahwa pesan dari para komentator internet lebih efektif dan berhasil.

Keywords: *Scholaly feminist; Internet commentator; Women in Islam, Gender equality*

Introduction

The world is now at the twenty-first century and different belief systems including Islam are being critically examined by the experts in the field. There is no system of thought or belief which is now not open to examination. In the modern era, according to Afshari, sequent generations of Muslim intellectuals, driven by a sense of political urgency and identity crisis, have felt compelled to write a new version of Islamic history.¹ Furthermore, in recent times many progressive writers, including internet writers, have hoped to modernize Islam. Inserting contemporary concepts (like liberalism and feminism) into the modern Islamic paradigm, these efforts have often reflected the global ideological trends of the day.

¹ Reza Afshari, "Egalitarian Islam and Misogynist Islamic Tradition: A Critique of the Feminist Reinterpretation of Islamic History and Heritage", accessed 11 October 2000 <http://www.secularism.org/women/afshari.html>.

In this era of modern technology, moreover, the controversial issues on women in Islam, such as women's rights, role, status and creation have not only been discussed by "scholarly feminists" — who have written academic books on women in Islam — but have also encouraged "internet commentators" — internet writers on women in Islam— to participate in this debate.²

The debate on controversial issues on gender equality in Islam is not immune from internet debate; thus it is interesting to examine and compare between scholarly feminists' and Internet commentators' opinion on those issues. Besides its intrinsic interest, this study is worth doing because of the importance of the internet as a channel of education. Moreover, as far as I have been able to determine, there is no previous study investigating internet writers' attitudes on women's issues in Islam.

The objective of this study is to examine two different types of contemporary writings on gender equality in Islam in order to discover whether there are significant differences between them which shed light on modern Islamic thinking. The key questions this study specifically proposes to address are: Is there any difference in the range of issues treated by the two groups? Is there any difference in attitude between the groups on topics of common interest? Whose message is being communicated effectively or more likely to prevail?

In the methodology of this study, I have chosen for investigation several books as representatives of scholarly feminists, and several websites, which publish many articles on women in Islam, as representatives of internet commentators. From the chosen materials, issues common to both groups are identified for analysis.

² The terms "scholarly feminists and Internet commentators" will be explained in more detail below.

Before embarking on a comparative analysis of scholarly feminists' and internet commentators' opinion on gender equality in Islam, it is necessary to determine which groups are defined as "scholarly feminists" and "internet commentators" in this study. This will entail examination of representatives of the "scholarly feminists", the Internet websites and materials chosen, and the difference in range of women's issues treated by the two groups.

Defining scholarly feminists and internet commentators

The term 'feminism' is taken from the Latin (*femina* women), and originally meant 'having the qualities of females'. It began to be used in reference to the theory of sexual equality and the movement for women's rights, replacing *womanism* in 1890.³ In the present, there are many individual definitions of feminism, and its fundamental meaning is in dispute. Gerda Lerner argues that feminism must distinguish for itself between women's rights and women's emancipation.⁴ Alison Jaggar identifies feminism with the various social movements dedicated to ending the subordination of women.⁵ Most feminists, according to Valerie Bryson, will agree that feminist theories ultimately are tools designed for understanding women's subordination in order to end it.⁶ In general, feminism is the ideology of women's liberation since intrinsic in all its approaches is the belief that women suffer injustice because of their sex.

As with feminism, there is not a single definition of feminist, since feminists have many differing affinities —of sexual preference, class

³ Lisa Tuttle, *Encyclopedia of Feminism*, London: Arrow Books Limited, 1987, 107.

⁴ Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, New York: Prentice Hall, 1995, 94.

⁵ Alison Jaggar, *Living with Contradictions: Controversies in Feminist Social Ethics*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994, 2.

⁶ Valerie Bryson, *Feminist Debates: Issues of Theory and Political Practice*, London: Macmillan, 1999, 5.

and race. According to Maggie Humm, a feminist is a woman who recognizes herself, and is recognized by others, as a feminist.⁷ In its broadest use, however, the word refers to everyone (male or female) who is aware of and seeking to end women's subordination in any way and for any reason.⁸

In the light of the broadest use of the term feminist above (that feminist refers to everyone who struggles to end women's subordination in any way), scholarly feminist and internet commentators defined here. The term 'scholarly feminist' which is used in this study refers to the academic writers (male or female) who have written academic books on women in Islam. Internet commentator, on the other hand, refers to the internet writers (organizations or individuals) on women in Islam who publish their writings on the internet without following strict academic standards.

The following books have been chosen for investigation as representatives of scholarly feminist opinion because they are written to academic standards by well-known feminists who focus on women in Islam; and furthermore their writings are based on the main sources of the Islamic belief system, namely the Quran and Hadith. Thus some balance in the source materials is gained. The books are as follows:

1. *Women and Islam: A Historical and Theological Enquiry* by Fatima Mernissi (Basil Blackwell Ltd, UK, 1991). Mernissi is a well-known Arab sociologist who has written extensively on the position of women in Islam. She employs a liberal feminist framework to reinterpret the relationship between the two religious texts, the Quran and Hadith, which constitute the source of the present Islamic Law (*Sharia*). The significance of Mernissi's argument in this book, how-

⁷ Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary*, 95.

⁸ Lisa Tuttle, *Encyclopedia*, 108.

ever, lies in the attention given to the Hadith rather than the Quran. Given the Hadith's importance in terms of decoding religious scriptures and illustrating theological interpretations, her focus on the genesis of this text and its political role in shaping the present form of patriarchal Islam is both innovative and interesting.

2. *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* by Fatima Mernissi, (Polity Press, UK, 1993). *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, as the title suggests, demystifies the Islamic mainstream discourse, held by Muslim clergy and conveniently adopted by (male) politicians. An essential part of this discourse contends that women have never played a political role in Islamic history. The author reviews the received wisdom that in all Islamic history no women had ever before led a polity, and then proceeds to explore the forgotten history of women leaders in the Islamic world. Mernissi goes on to demonstrate that though women were evidently excluded from commanding religious authority (that is, they could not act as *caliph* or *imam*), they were not excluded from political authority (and could be *sultans* or queens). The heart of Mernissi's book, however, is a serial narrative of medieval queens of Islam.
3. *Women in the Quran, Traditions and Interpretation*, by Barbara Stowasser (Oxford University Press, New York, 1994). The book, which systematically analyses portrayals of women in the Quran, has relevance for the incipient Islamic feminism. The author examines interpretations of women's rights and role in exegetical works from the medieval period when urban male elites encoded prevailing urban patriarchal institutions into the new jurisprudences they were formulating, and discusses responses to gender roles in modern times when these medieval jurisprudences were either desperately being defended or urgently refigured in a complicated contest of cultural politics.

4. *The Rights of Women in Islam*, by Asghar Ali Engineer (Sterling Publishers Ltd, New Delhi, 1992). In the light of his aim to separate what is contextual from what is normative in the Holy text, the author examines several women's rights in Islam such as sexual equality, marital rights of women, divorce, individual dignity of women, and Muslim personal law. However, to discuss in detail how the Quranic verses treat women, Engineer cites the opinion of Quranic commentators such as Zamakhsyari, al-Razi, al-Tabari, and al-Qurtubhi. In order to know to what extent Islam improves the status of women, Engineer discusses the status of women during the *jahiliya* period (the period of ignorance or pre-Islamic period) in the beginning of his book. The author hopes that his writing will equip Muslim feminists with a powerful weapon in their fight for equal status with men.
5. *The Rights of Women in Islam: An Authentic Approach*, by Haifaa A. Jawad (Macmillan Press Ltd, London, 1998). In writing her book, Jawad is encouraged by two conflicting messages which attack the Islamic belief system on the status of women. First is the attack on Islam launched by secular feminists who declared that the Islamic system is a curse on the status of women under its law, thus portraying Islam as an oppressor rather than as a liberator? The second message is that of fundamentalists, who although emphasizing the importance of Islam and using Islamic rhetoric, nonetheless depicted Muslim women in negative images. Thus, the book aims primarily to investigate some of the issues currently affecting the situation of Muslim women and to develop the proper understanding of the position of women from the Islamic perspective.
6. *Quran and Women; Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* by Amina Wadud (Oxford University Press, New York,

1999). Amina Wadud, an Islamic Studies Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, has received the King Faysal Prize for her academic work *Quran and Women*. She examines key words in the Quran, noting ambiguity of certain prepositions and the distinction between the grammatical genders of the Arabic words for soul or mate and their semantic connotations — seeking thus to neutralize the masculinity of Adam. Wadud argues that fourteen centuries of Islamic thought have produced a legacy of reading of the Quran written almost entirely by men. This means that men and men's experience were included and women and women's experiences were either excluded or interpreted through the male vision, perspective, desire, or need for women. Thus, the purpose of her book is to make a reading of the Quran from within the female experience and without the stereotypes which have been the framework for many of the male interpretations.

7. *Women's Rights in Islam* by Muhammad Sharif Chaudhry (SH. Muhammad Ashraf Publishers, Lahore, 1991). The subject of this book is the rights bestowed by Islam on the woman and the status granted to her. The book focuses on the rights of woman in her role as mother, wife, daughter and sister. Her rights regarding inheritance, ownership of property, marriage, dower, divorce, maintenance, acquisition of education, earning of livelihood and participation in social-political life of the Muslim women have been examined by the author. Controversial issues like polygamy, *purdah*, equality between sexes, women's rights to seek for the post of head of states have also been discussed by the author.
8. *Role of Muslim Woman in Society*, by Afzalur Rahman (Seerah Foundation, London, 1986). The aim of the author in writing his

book is to describe the possible role of Muslim women in modern society in the light of the Quran and of the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. Rahman analyses the Quranic injunctions relating to women and their role in society which are occasionally under criticism both from modern Muslims and from non-Muslims. Many historical examples are given showing the activities of Muslim women in the time of the Prophet and the high respect in which women were held both by the Prophet and by his companions.

9. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* by Leila Ahmad (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1992). Leila Ahmed, Professor of Women's Studies and Director of the Near Eastern Area Studies Program at the University of Massachusetts, develops two central themes that have permanently changed the position of women and minorities in the Middle East: the advent of Islam in the seventh century and its subsequent development, and the rise of the modern West as a colonial and technological power. What is interesting in so many of the accounts concerning women in the contemporary Muslim societies is the evidence of wide ranging permutations both in Islam's territoriality on the one hand and on the other, in attempts at domesticating Western ideas and practices with regard to the separation of church and state and in religion as non-territorial. The national secular state has become the new context in which the drive toward human rights for women and minorities is being staged and is thus perhaps the most enduring Western influence.

The Internet materials as representatives of the internet commentator opinion, on the other hand, are based on articles on women in Islam published on both the organizational websites and personal ones. The following websites have been chosen for investigation as repre-

sentatives of the internet commentators' opinion for several reasons. Firstly, they are selected from almost three hundred websites discussing Islam, which provide many articles on women in Islam. They also represent both organizational and individual websites which focus on women in Islam. Another reason is that they represent websites on women in Islam from several countries such as America, Canada, Pakistan, India and Saudi Arabia. They are as follows.

1. Muslim Women's League Website (<http://www.mwlnusa.org>). This is a non-profit Muslim American Organization working to implement the values of Islam and thereby reclaim the status of women as free, equal and vital contributors to society. This organization accomplishes its mission through: a) cultivating and asserting the relationship of Muslim women with their Creator through spiritual retreats, study groups and dialogue; b) supporting the effort of individuals and organizations working towards similar goals through conferences, symposia and other educational forums; c) informing the American public, Muslim and non-Muslims alike, of the perspective of Muslim women and articulating the concerns to the media and relevant decision-making authorities; d) publishing articles, position papers, and other texts which express organizational understanding of Islam, with careful attention to alternative perspectives on issues of concern to Muslim women; e) networking with grassroots, civil, religious and other organizations, and f) participating in global efforts to improve the lives of women.
2. Sisters Net (<http://www.msa-natl.org/SISTERS>). This is an electronic mailing list which aims to form a support group for Muslim sisters of around the world. Since its inception in 1992, the net has expanded from a small group of students to a worldwide network around four hundred and the numbers keep increasing. Most of

the members are from North America, but there are sisters from Europe, Australia, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Members represent a wide diversity of women from students to professors, doctors, lawyers, mothers, daughters, those who were born into Muslim families, and those who have recently embraced Islam. This reflects a portion of the rainbow of personalities. The goal of this website is to increase women's Islamic knowledge and try to help answer questions that Muslim women may have. The Internet also provides the opportunity to discuss issues, such as polygamy and divorce that some Muslim women would feel uncomfortable in discussing with their male counterparts.

3. View Islam (<http://www.viewislam.com>). This website is located in North America and is maintained by several newly converted Muslims. The first reason this website has been set up is to provide English-speaking non-Muslims and new-Muslims with basic information on Islam. Because recently there has been an ever-growing population of newly converted English-speaking Muslims from Western countries, such as America, Canada and the United Kingdom, as well as Asian countries like the Philippines and Australia, and because the Internet can easily reach this population, the second reason for setting up this website is to provide new Muslims with an accurate source of Islamic information and to answer basic Islamic questions that they may have. This website also publishes many articles on women in Islam to inform accurately on women's status in Islam.
4. Muslim Women's Support Association (<http://www.angelfire.com/mo/MWSA>). This Internet association is an association put together by women of the Dar Al Salam Mosque, located in St. Louis, Missouri. MWSA consists of sisters who are either born Muslim,

Muslim converts interested in becoming Muslim, or women just curious about what the organization does. This association has opened the door to any women regardless of race, creed or color. The goal of this association is to become involved with its community and make a difference with support of each other. Articles concerning women in Islam are published on this website.

5. Islamzine website (<http://www.islamzine.com/women>). This website is based and maintained by a Muslim from Dubai. He proclaims that he is a Muslim and hence a follower of the Quran and Hadith, and he is not part of any sect or faction, nor does he belong to any other group for that matter. He is just a proud Muslim "with no excess baggage" and keeps his title "brother". According to the maintainer of the site, it is the first fully dedicated Islamic website from the United Arab Emirates. The aim of islamzine.com is purely for *da'wa* (spreading Islam) to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Many women's issues are published on this personal website.
6. Muslimah Inspiration website (<http://muslimahinspirations.com/women>). This website is maintained by two Muslim women from Pakistan, Nabeelah Umm and Bilan. The Muslimah Inspiration, founded in September 1999, is a website dedicated to educating others about the importance of the proper use of *hijab* (the veil) according to the Quran and Hadith. One of the priorities of this site is to focus on providing written material that sisters in Islam can carry with them to inform others about the Islamic dress when the situation allows. It is, furthermore, publishing articles on women in Islam in general.
7. Jannah website (<http://www.jannah.org/sisters>). This website is maintained by an Indian Muslim. He is aware that misinformation and misconception about Muslim women proliferate in the world

today among Muslims and non-Muslims. By making the website, the maintainer hopes that instead of falling into the typical stereotypes and cultural propaganda, the information in this site will pique the interest and help the reader to understand the true stance Islam takes on gender issues and the role of women.

8. Muslim Women's Home Page (<http://www.islamunveiled.com/women>). This personal website explains the rights, the status and the elevated position of women in Islam. It clarifies common misconceptions and relates stories of women who embraced Islam.

The range of issues treated

Recent negative stereotypes of Muslim women in Western countries and media have impelled Muslim intellectuals to examine the discourse of the status and rights of women in the Islamic world and explore indigenous models of emancipation for the masses in general and women in particular. Misconceptions that Muslim women are slaves to their husbands, beaten by their husbands, oppressed objects, deprived and suppressed, have encouraged feminist writers who are concerned with women in Islam to examine the status and rights of those women.

These misconceptions have also become a main concern of the scholarly feminist and Internet commentator writings which will be analyzed in this study. For example, Jawad says that her book aims primarily to investigate some of the issues currently affecting the situation of Muslim women and to develop the proper understanding of the position of women from Islamic perspective.⁹ Engineer points out that his book is attempt to set out women's rights in Islam in the true Quranic

⁹ Haifaa. A. Jawad, *The Rights of Women in Islam: An Authentic Approach*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1998, ix.

spirit, for there has been much deviation from this spirit in practice.¹⁰ Mernissi furthermore says that after writing her book she had come to understand that "if women's rights are problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Quran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interest of male elites".¹¹ This argument is also strengthened by Wadud who says that the purpose of her book is to make a rereading of the Quran from within the female experience and without stereotypes which have been the framework for many of the male interpretations.¹²

Internet commentators, it is clear, try to focus on the same issues as scholarly feminists do. For example, the Jannah website, the Muslim Women homepage and the Muslim Women League site concentrate on the misconceptions relating to gender.

The specific issues commonly exercising scholarly feminists and internet commentators, which can lead to the misconceptions about women in Islam, may be listed under the following heads:

Gender equality including women's rights, status and creation. These issues lead to several negative assumptions about women in Islam. It is assumed by many Western commentators that Muslim women have been considered inferior to men; women cannot match the power and competence of man; man must possess and dominate women as Adam was created first. It is often claimed, moreover, that the legal instructions mentioned in the Quran and *Hadith* discriminate against women. This assumption, for example, refers to the Quranic verse

¹⁰ Ali Asghar Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1992, vi.

¹¹ Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: A Historical and Theological Enquiry*, UK: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1991, 8.

¹² Amina Wadud, *Quran and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 3.

which says that men are the protectors and maintainers of women, and hence they are considered inferior to men; another crucial assumption as regards equality is whether a woman in Islam can become a head of state or not.

The issue of marriage and polygamy. These issues can lead to the assumption that Muslim women have been given no independent rights to enter a marital relationship of their own accord as their mental capacity is inferior to that of a man. Furthermore, when the question of Islam and marriage is approached, the first image conjure up in the mind of non-Muslims, is often that Islam is a religion which encourages the sexual indulgence of the male members of the society and the subjugation of its females through this patrimonial system. It is claimed that Islam has introduced and encouraged the practise of polygamy — which is therefore portrayed as a characteristic of Islam.

The veil (hijab). The most immediate and obvious means of separating and excluding Muslim women from the public sphere has been the veil. It is claimed that Muslim women are instructed to cover their bodies from head to toe with the exception of the face and hands, and barred from performing certain social activities and functions.

Due to limited space for a discussion, in this paper I will only discuss gender equality including women's rights, status and creation issues. How do both groups respond to these controversial issues which can lead to misconceptions about women in Islam?

Gender equality in Islam: women's rights, status and creation

Scholarly feminists

The attitude of scholarly feminists regarding the issue of women's equality in Islam is clear. They do not only quote the Quranic verses relating to sexual equality in the normative sense, but also analyze in

more detail the Quranic verses and the Hadith relating to several controversial issues on women's equality in Islam and how these Quranic verses should be interpreted to suit modern conditions. They, for example, analyze the Quranic verses on woman's creation¹³, and men as maintainers of women,¹⁴ and the Hadith that says "those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity". These controversial issues can lead to the assumption that women in Islam are considered inferior to Muslim men.

Is man maintainer of woman?

One of the Quranic verses which can lead to the assumption of women's inferiority in Islam is the following verse: "Men are (*qawwāmūn 'ala*) the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has preferred (*faḍḍala*) some of them over others and because they support them from their means...(QS. Al-Nisā' 4:34)". Commenting on this verse, Wadud, a scholarly feminist, stresses the term "preferred (*faḍḍala*)". For her, *faḍḍala* cannot be unconditional because that verse does not read "they (masculine plural) are preferred over them (feminine plural)". The literal meaning is "some of them over others". The use of "some" (*ba'ḍ*) obviously relates to what has been observed in the human context. All men do not excel over all women in all manners. Some men excel over some women in some manners. Likewise, some women excel over some men in some manners. So, whatever Allah has preferred, it is still not absolute.¹⁵

However, deeper understanding of this distinction requires further explanation of term "*qawwāmūna 'ala*". What does it mean, and what are the parameters of its application? As for the meaning, Yusuf Ali

¹³ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran*, New York: Goodword Books, 2005, (4:1), 46.

¹⁴ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran*, (4:35), 50.

¹⁵ Amina Wadud, *Quran and Women*, 71.

translates this as “protectors and maintainers”.¹⁶ Pikhthall says it means men are “in charge” of women.¹⁷ Then some questions are begged concerning the parameters of application: are all men *qawwāmūna 'ala* of all women? Is it restricted to the family, such that the men of a family are *qawwāmūna 'ala* the women of the family? Or is it even more restricted, to the marital tie, such that only husbands are *qawwāmūna 'ala with respect to wives*?

To answers such questions, Engineer, a male commentator who seems to stand in the feminist camp, argues that when the Quran gives man a slight edge over women, it clarifies that it is not due to any inherent weakness of the female sex, but to the social context. Thus, the *faḍīlah* (preference or superiority) which Allah has given one over the others, or to men over women, is not sexual superiority or excellence. It is due to the social functions that were then performed by the two sexes. Since man earns and spends his wealth on women, he, by virtue of this fact, acquires functional superiority over women.¹⁸

Thus the Quran explicitly recognizes that one must be justly rewarded for what one does. None can be deprived of his or her reward for the work done, much less a woman who is equally entitled to the fruit of her labor. Moreover, men consider themselves superior by virtue of their earning power and spending of their wealth on women.

In addition, Sayid Qutb considers *qawwāmūn* an issue of concern for the family within society.¹⁹ The rationale behind restricting this verse to the context of husband and wife is partly the fact that the remainder of the verse discusses other details concerned with the marital

¹⁶ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran*, 195.

¹⁷ Mohammed Marmaduke Pikhthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran: An Explanatory Translation*, Singapore: Omar Brothers Publications, 1930, 83.

¹⁸ Ali Asghar Engineer, *The Rights of Women*, 45.

¹⁹ Amina Wadud, *Quran and Women*, 72.

relationship.

From the above discussion, we can conclude that the verse also reflects the social situation. It simply says that men are *qawwāmūn* (maintainers or managers of the family affairs) and does not say they should be *qawwām*. This also shows that with changing circumstances and greater consciousness among women, the concept of their rights will change. In this case, the above verse in which man has been declared *qawwāmūn* will have to be read in conjunction with other verses of the Quran which speak of reward for any work done.²⁰ Thus, this verse does not put women as inferior in status to men, as has been portrayed.

Human creation

The Quran considers both sexes as having originated from one living being and hence they enjoy the same status: It says; "O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord who created you from a single (*nafs*) person, created of like nature, his mate (*zawj*), and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women".²¹

The above verse presents the basic elements in the Quranic version of the story of the origins of humankind, that story commonly understood as the creation of Adam and Eve. To aid the understanding of this verse, Wadud tries to analyze certain key words, namely, *nafs* and *zawj*. Wadud argues that grammatically *nafs* is feminine, taking the corresponding feminine adjectival and verbal antecedents. Conceptually, *nafs* is neither masculine nor feminine, forming as it does an essential part of each being, male or female.²² Furthermore, in the

²⁰ For example, see *The Holy Quran* (2:281).

²¹ *The Holy Quran*, 4:1.

²² Amina Wadud, *Quran and Women*, 19.

Quranic account of creation, Allah never planned to begin the creation of humankind with a male person; nor does it ever refer to the origins of the human race with Adam. It does not even state that Allah began the creation of humankind with the *nafs* of Adam, the man. This omission is noteworthy because the Quranic version of the creation of humankind is not expressed in gender terms.

The other term of significance in *Sura* 4 verse 1 above, according to Wadud, is *zawj*. As a common term *zawj* is used in the Quran to mean mate, spouse, or group. This is the term used in referring to the second part in the creation of humankind, whom we have come to accept as Eve, the female of the original parents. However, she points out that grammatically *zawj* is masculine, taking the corresponding masculine adjectival and verbal antecedents. Conceptually, it is also neither masculine nor feminine, and is used in the Quran for plants²³ and animals,²⁴ in addition to humans.²⁵ Based on the two terms analyzed, Wadud concludes that Allah or the Creator defines certain traits universal to all humans and not specific to one particular gender nor to any particular people from any particular place or time.²⁶

Commenting on that verse, Maulana Azad, as quoted by Engineer, also interprets this verse more or less in the same manner. He says that divine wisdom creates all others from one person. He, however, interprets *nafs wāḥida* (one living being) as father. Whether it is one person, one living being or father, Engineer argues that the implication is the same: namely that all have originated from one living being, men and women, and hence enjoy equal status. The Quran, moreover,

²³ *The Holy Quran*, (55:52).

²⁴ *The Holy Quran*, (11:40).

²⁵ Amina Wadud, *Quran and Women*, 20.

²⁶ Amina Wadud, *Quran and Women*, 26.

does not subscribe to the view that Eve was born from the crooked rib of Adam and thus has an inferior status.²⁷

Can a woman become a head of state?

This is a crucial question as regards equality, whether a woman can become a head of state. What is the real position? Is there any Quranic provision, or provision in the Hadith, against a woman becoming a head of state? There is absolutely nothing to this effect in the Quran that forbids women to become the head of state. There is, however, the Hadith on the basis of which the theologians argue that a woman cannot become head of the state. The Hadith is "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity".²⁸

Mernissi, a well-known Muslim feminist, tries to investigate this Hadith by making a double investigation —historical and methodological— of it and its author, and especially of the conditions in which it was first put to use. Mernissi says it is supposed to have been Abu Bakrah who heard the Prophet utter this Hadith. Abu Bakrah reported that the Prophet pronounced this *Hadith* when he learned that the Persian had named a woman to rule them: "When Kisra died, the Prophet, intrigued by the news, asked: And who has replaced him in command? The answer was: 'They have entrusted power to his daughter'. It was at that moment that the Prophet is supposed to have made the observation about women.²⁹ After the investigation, Mernissi concludes that even though that Hadith was collected as *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic) by Bukhari and others, it was hotly contested and debated by many and there were some who used it as an argument for excluding women

²⁷ Ali Asghar Engineer, *The Rights of Women*, 43.

²⁸ Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, 49.

²⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, 50.

from decision-making.³⁰

Mernissi's opinion is almost the same as Engineer's point of view. By quoting Umar Usmani, Engineer argues that this Hadith did exist before the battle of Camel in which Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, participated. Abu Bakrah, the narrator of this Hadith, remembered it only after the battle started and Aisha assumed command of the army against Ali, who was elected as the fourth Caliph. Abu Bakrah did not remember it earlier, which is proof enough of the fact that it was forged in the context of the battle as a political weapon.³¹

In the context of the Battle of Camel, moreover, it is necessary to point out that the Prophet's wife Aisha was in command of the army which had many illustrious companions of the Prophet in it. None of them objected to her being in command, nor did they desert her for that reason. Even the Abu Bakrah, the narrator of the above Hadith did not desert her. Had he been convinced that the Prophet had prohibited women from being leader or head he should have deserted Aisha as soon as he recalled this tradition. How then could it be said that a woman cannot become leader of the government when her leadership was accepted by such eminent companions of the Prophet?

Even if the above Hadith is taken seriously, as Mernissi suggests, we have to look at the conditions in which that Hadith was pronounced by the Prophet. Considering the background of the Hadith, it is clear that it was said by the Prophet to comment on the case in which Kisra's daughter has been chosen as the head of the state. This means that the object of the Prophet's discourse is that it was only Kisra's daughter not women in general whose capability to become the head of state was known to the Prophet. This Hadith, moreover, is

³⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam*, 61.

³¹ Ali Asghar Engineer, *The Rights of Women*, 77.

only a *khabariya* (statement), not a *nahy* (prohibition).

From the above discussion, it is clear that scholarly feminists try to clarify the misunderstanding of sexual equality in Islam by interpreting and explaining in more detail several Quranic verses and *Hadith* which have lead to misconception of women's status, role and rights in Islam.

Internet commentators

The general issue of gender equality and women's rights in Islam, including political, spiritual, social, and education rights, are also very familiar among the Internet commentators. Several articles written on the same themes would indicate that the position and role of women in Islam is lively area of debate. For example, *The Record Set Straight: Women in Islam Have Rights*³² *Rights of Women under Islam*,³³ *Women's Liberation Through Islam*,³⁴ *Women's Islamic Rights Discussed*,³⁵ *Gender Equality in Islam*,³⁶ *A World Where Womanhood Reigns Supreme*,³⁷ *The Status of Women in Islam*,³⁸ *Gender Equity in Islam*,³⁹ *Do Muslim Women Have Rights*,⁴⁰ and *Islam - Elevation of Women's Status*.⁴¹

³² N. Ragab, "The Record Set Straight: Women in Islam Have Rights", (accessed 17 October 2000), <http://www.islamzine.com/womenhr2.html>.

³³ M. Amjad Thariq, "Rights of Women under Islam", (accessed 17 October 2000), <http://www.angelfire.com/mo/MWSA/rights.html>.

³⁴ M. Ali and A. Ali, "Women's Liberation Through Islam", (accessed 17 October 2000) <http://www.islamunveiled.com/women/iiiie21.html>.

³⁵ C. Miles, "Women's Islamic Rights Discussed", (accessed 17 October 2000), <http://www.islamzine.com/women/rihtz.html>

³⁶ Muslim Women's League, "Gender Equality in Islam", (accessed 19 October 2000), http://www.mwlnusa.org/pub_gender.shtml.

³⁷ M. Walker, "A World Where Womanhood Reigns Supreme", (accessed 17 October 2000), <http://muslimahinspirations.com/supreme/html>.

³⁸ H. Abdul-Ati, "The Status of Women in Islam" (accessed 17 October 2000), <http://www.islamzine.com/women/tatus.html>.

³⁹ J.A. Badawi, "Gender Equity in Islam", (accessed 17 October 2000), <http://www.islamzine.com/women/Badewi.html>.

⁴⁰ Jamal A. Badawi, "Do Muslim Women Have Rights", (accessed 17 October 2000), <http://www.islami.org/womenrights.html>.

However, the attitude of internet commentators regarding the issue of women's equality in Islam is different from that of scholarly feminists. If the scholarly feminists analyze and interpret in more detail the Quranic verses and the Hadith relating to issues on women's equality in Islam to suit modern conditions, Internet commentators, on the other hand, much focus on describing how the Quranic verses and the *Hadith* say on the issue in general. It seems that Internet commentators' attitude is the same as what Muslim traditionalists usually do to let the Quranic verses speak for themselves on the issue.

In general, internet commentator writings aim to demonstrate that Muslim women stand on the same level as Muslim men and that they can attain to all those spiritual, economical, social, political rights to which men can attain. To strengthen their opinion, they mostly quote the Quranic verses related to women's equality in Islam. With a proper understanding of what Islam has established for women, there is no need to deplore their plight in the pre-Islamic era or in the modern world of today. The attitude of the Quran and the early Muslims bear witness to the fact that women is as vital as man himself, and that she is not inferior to him nor is she one of the lower species.⁴² According to Mary Ali, an Internet commentator, today people think that women are liberated in the West and that the women's liberation movement began in the twentieth century. Actually, the women's liberation movement was not begun by women but was revealed by God to a man in seventh century by the name of Muhammad, who is known as the last Prophet of Islam.⁴³ Moreover, Badawi, another Internet commenta-

⁴¹ A. Al-Timimi, "Islam - Elevation of Women's Status", (accessed 19 October 2000), <http://www.jannah.org/sisters/tamimi.html>

⁴² Hammuda Abdul-Ati, "The Status of Women in Islam,", (accessed 19 October 2000), http://islamic-world.net/sister/status_of_woman2.htm.

⁴³ M. Ali, *Women's Liberation Through Islam*, 1.

tor, points out that when dealing with the Islamic perspective of any topic, including women, there should be a clear distinction between the normative teaching of Islam and the diverse cultural practices among Muslims, which may or may not be consistent with them.⁴⁴ This means that in identifying what is "Islamic", it is necessary to make a distinction between the primary source of Islam (the Quran and Hadith) and legal opinions of scholars on specific issues, which may vary and be influenced by their times, circumstances, and cultures.

In the light of their ethos stressing that the Quran and Hadith provide the basic source of authentication for any position or view which is attributed to Islam, internet commentator writings on gender equality in Islam are very focused on the attitude of the Quran and Hadith with regard to women's rights. Thus, an attempt will be made in the following paragraph to sum up the attitude of the Quran and the Hadith — as interpreted by the internet commentators — with regard to woman.

Woman is recognized by Islam as a full and equal partner of man in the procreation of human kind. He is the father; she is the mother and both are essential for life. Her role is not less vital than his. By this partnership she has an equal share in every aspect; she is entitled to equal rights; she undertakes equal responsibilities, and in her there are as many qualities and as much humanity as there are in her partner.⁴⁵ Islam, also, established a woman's equality in her humanity with man. Since men and women both came from the same essence, they are equal in their humanity.⁴⁶ On this equal partnership in the reproduction of human kind God says:

"O mankind! Reverence Your Guardian Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them

⁴⁴ Jamal A. Badawi, *Gender Equity in Islam*, 1.

⁴⁵ Hammuda Abdul-Ati, *The Status of Women in Islam*, 2.

⁴⁶ M. Ali, *Women's Liberation Through Islam*, 2.

twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women" (QS. Al-Nisā' 4:1).

"It is he who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her (in love)..." (QS. Al-A`rāf 7:189).

"And Allah has made for you mates (and companions) of your own nature, and made for you, out of them sons and daughters and grandchildren..." (QS. Al-Naḥl 16:72).

"(He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth: he has made for you pairs from among yourselves, and pairs among cattle..." (QS. Al-Shūrā 42:11).

"O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is who is the most righteous of you and Allah has full knowledge and is well-acquainted verily" (QS. Ḥujurāt 49:13).⁴⁷

The Quran is devoid of the stories which denigrate women.⁴⁸ Nowhere in the Quran is found any trace of any notion of blaming Eve for the first mistake or for eating from the forbidden tree. The story is narrated in *Sura 7* verses 19-27, and they speak about both of them doing the fault; both of them are told that both of them disobeyed, both of them discovered the consequences of their disobedience, both of them seek repentance and both of them are forgiven. Nowhere does the Quran say a woman is to be blamed for the fall of man.⁴⁹ Furthermore, when the Quran speaks about the suffering of women

⁴⁷ For translation of the Quran, in this paper, I refer to Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran*, New York: Goodword Books, 2005.

⁴⁸ L.L. Al-Faruqi, "Women in a Quranic Society", (accessed 19 November 2000), <http://www.jannah.org/sisters/womensociety.html>.

⁴⁹ Ikhwan, "The Role of Muslim Women in an Islamic Society", (accessed 19 October 2000), <http://www.jannah.org/sisters/ikhwom.html>.

during the period of pregnancy and childbirth, nowhere does it connect it with the concept of original sin, because there is no concept of original sin in Islam.⁵⁰

The Quran is no less clear in commanding equality for men and women in its directives regarding religious obligations and rewards.⁵¹ In terms of religious obligations, such as the daily prayers, fasting, poor-due, and pilgrimage, women are no different from men. The Quran states categorically that men and women who practise the principles of Islam will receive equal reward for their effort.⁵² The Quran states:

“And their lord hath accepted of them, and answered them: never will suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female, you are members, one of another..” (QS. Ali `Imrān 3:195).

“If any do deeds of righteousness — be they male or female — and have faith, they will enter heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them” (QS. Al-Nisā’ 4:124).

“Whoever works righteousness, man or women, and has faith, verily, to him will we give a new life, and life that is good and pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the best of their actions” (QS. Al-Naḥl 16:97).

“For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for man and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), fro men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah’s praise —for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward” (QS. Al-Aḥzāb 33:35).

“Every soul will be (held) in pledge for its deeds” (QS. 74:38).

⁵⁰ Jamal A, Badawi, *Do Muslim Women have Rights?*, 3.

⁵¹ L.L. Al-Faruqi, *Women in a Quranic Society*, 4.

⁵² See, “Spiritual Status of Women”, <http://www.jamaat.org/islam/WomenSpiritual.html>.

Furthermore, internet commentators believe that a woman is entitled by Islam to freedom of expression as much as a man is. Her sound opinions are taken into consideration and cannot be disregarded just because she happens to belong to the female sex. It is reported in the Quran and history that women in the Prophet era not only expressed their opinion freely but also argued and also participated in serious discussions with the Prophet himself as well as with other Muslim leaders. According to Badawi, the political rights of women in Islam include the rights of election as well as the nomination to political offices. It also includes women's rights to participate in public affairs.⁵³ On any public matter, Mary Ali says, a woman may voice her opinion and participate in politics.⁵⁴ The Quran states:

"O Prophet! When believing women come to you to take the oath of fealty to you, that they will not associate in worship any other thing whatever with Allah...then do you receive their fealty, and pray to Allah for the forgiveness, for Allah is oft-forgiving, most merciful" (QS. 60:120).

According to Mary Ali, that verse establishes the right of women to select their leader and publicly declare so.⁵⁵ Furthermore, historical records show that women participated in public life with the early Muslims, especially in times of emergencies. Women used to accompany the Muslim armies engaged in battles to nurse the wounded and prepare supplies.⁵⁶

Islam decreed a right of which woman was deprived both before Islam and after it, the right of independent ownership. Islam also grants women equal rights to contract, to enterprise, to earn and

⁵³ Jamal A. Badawi, *The Status of Women in Islam*, 4.

⁵⁴ M. Ali, *Women's Liberation Through Islam*, 5.

⁵⁵ M. Ali, *Women's Liberation Through Islam*, 6.

⁵⁶ Hammuda Abdul-Ati, *The Status of Women in Islam*, 4.

possess independently. Her life, her property, her honor are as sacred as those of man. This right undergoes no change whether she is single or married. She retains her full rights to buy, sell, mortgage or lease any or all of her properties. The Quran states:

“O you who believe! The law of equality is prescribing to you in case of murder. the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the women for the women. But if any remission is made by the brother of the slain, then grant any reasonable demand, and compensate him with handsome gratitude...” (QS. Al-Baqarah 2:178).

“And give the women (on marriage) their dower as a free gift; but if they of their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, take it and enjoy it with right good cheer” (QS. Al-Nisā’4: 4).

“From what is left by parents and those nearest related. There is share for men and a share for women whether the property be small or large —a determinant share” (QS. Al-Nisā’ 4:70).

Internet commentators argue that in Islam a woman is equal to man in pursuit of education and knowledge.⁵⁷ When Islam enjoins the seeking of knowledge upon Muslims, it makes no distinction between men and women. The Prophet said “seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim”. Although the more specific commands for the equal rights of women and men to pursue education can be found in the Hadith literature, according to Al-Faruqi, another internet commentator, the Quran does imply the pursuit of knowledge by all Muslims regardless of their sex.⁵⁸ For example, it repeatedly commands all readers to read, to recite, to think, to contemplate, as well as to learn from the signs of Allah in nature. In fact, the very first revelation to the Prophet Muhammad was concerned with knowledge.

⁵⁷Hammuda Abdul-Ati, *The Status of Women in Islam*, 5.

⁵⁸ L.L. Al-Faruqi, *Women in a Quranic Society*, 6.

From the above examples, it is clear that the internet commentators are very concerned with women's status, rights and equality in Islam. Furthermore, to strengthen their argument, they mostly refer to the Quranic verses related to the issues that they are concerned with. It seems, however, that they do not interpret and give detailed analyses and explanation of the Quranic verses which they refer to; conversely they only quote and cite those verses and let the Quranic verses speak for themselves on the issue. This can be understood because the internet commentators, both on individual and organizational websites, take into account the wide range of the readers, both Muslim and non-Muslim and also academics and readers in general. Their aim in publishing their writing on the World Wide Web is also to give a general description of how the Islamic belief system concerns itself with women's issues.

The fact that Internet commentators are mostly concerned with the quoting of Quranic verses on women in Islam is also strengthened by the reality that one of the organizational websites, namely, Muslim's Women League has compiled the Quranic verses regarding women under the title *Quranic References regarding Women*.⁵⁹

Conclusion

From the above discussion of scholarly feminists' and internet commentators' opinion about gender equality in Islam, it is clear that both groups agree that Islam has given the same status to men and women. Both groups also try to dispel the Western misconception that women in Islam are considered inferior to Muslim men.

⁵⁹ For a complete list of the verses discussed in the website, see L. Al-Marayati, "Quranic References regarding Women", (accessed 17 October 2000), http://www.mwlusa.org/pub_quran.shtml.

However, there is a difference in approach between both groups in dealing with the issue. Scholarly feminists, on the one hand, focus their analyses on several Quranic verses and Hadith which lead to misconception. They give a depth interpretation on Quranic verses, for example, the verses on men as maintainers of women, on woman's creation, and Hadith of women as head of state. For them, Quranic verses and Hadith on gender equality should be interpreted contextually, that is, by considering the context in which the Quranic verses were revealed and Hadith were spoken. It seems that scholarly feminists try to set out women's equality in Islam in the true Quranic and Hadith spirits, for there has been much deviation from this spirit in practise. Furthermore, it seems that to suit modern conditions, scholarly feminists invite Muslim scholars to criticise the theologians and jurists of the first century of Islamic opinion in interpreting the Quranic verses, including those on gender equality. Theologians' formulation and interpretation must be seen in the sociological perspective of their time, when women were looked upon as nothing more than instruments of providing one's progeny, bringing up children and providing pleasure for their husbands. This is how the pronouncement of the Quran was misinterpreted.

Internet commentators, on the other hand, believe that the Quran and Hadith provide the basic source of authentication for any position or view which is attributed to Islam. Unfortunately, they only quote and describe what Quranic verses and Hadith speak on the issue of gender equality without wider interpretation. It seems that they only want to give a general description of how the Islamic belief system concerns itself with the gender-equality issue. However, this can be understood because internet commentators take into account the wide range of the readers, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and also academics and

readers in general. Internet commentators are aware that through the Internet they could influence those who never would have encountered Islam or only received their information from the media, orientalists or anti-Islam propagandists. Thus, they publish simple and basic information from the Quran and Hadith on gender equality in Islam.

In terms of effectiveness, there are significant differences between the communities of readers of books written by the scholarly feminists and of internet commentators. In the Internet, debatable issues can be discussed dialogically (two-way communications) between the Internet writers and the readers, for example, by sending e-mails. On the other hand, there is no dialogue between the writers and the books' readers. The dialogue is only between the text (books) and the readers (one-way communication). Moreover, in the Internet, women (the object of the discourses themselves) can speak out and give a comment on the issues.

In addition, the internet can be a tool for sharing information and resources and for providing a space where issues can be discussed and worked through. Anybody can put their information on the Internet for others to read. There is little or no control by the government or media groups. Books (written by the scholarly feminists), on the other hand, sometimes are controlled or even forbidden by the government to be published. Thus, it seems that the Internet commentators' opinions are better suited for some uses than books. As people spend more time working with the new online tools and judging the effectiveness of the actions they take, I think more people will continue to seek each other out to share and learn from each other. The internet, in its role as a communication tool, may be a way to work through Muslim women's issues and build a strong base of supporters.

Just like any other technological tools, the Internet has its advantages and disadvantages. The internet allows groups of people, including Muslim and non-Muslim, to confer with each other across the world at the same time from their computers, regarding women's issues in Islam. The opportunities for discussing and debating are widely available. As in any human endeavor, however, there will be opportunities to abuse the system with pornography and the like.

Finally, as this study is only a brief investigation of several books and websites which publish articles on women in Islam, it is necessary to broaden the study in the future to also analyze a wider range of feminist issues being discussed online. There are mailing lists, forums, and websites on the Internet appealing to both specific and general audiences on the subject of gender in Islamic culture.

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