Feminism: A Discursive Analysis of the Western and Islamic Perspectives

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Abstract-The Qur'an itself is egalitarian. However, it is the West that has generally misunderstood Islam due to their lack of knowledge, ignorance, and misperception between actual Islam and the Arab culture. The main objective of this paper is to analyze how the roles of women in society are construed in the Western and Islamic discourses of feminism and to highlight how the two discourses can be reconciled. The paper focuses particularly on the discourses of multiculturalism, Western feminism, the turban movement, and the inquiry for Islamic feminism. The methodology used in this paper is non-textually-oriented discourse analysis. Having reviewed the argumentative discourses on those themes from a number of voices: philosophers, critical theorists, and feminists from both the Western and Islamic perspectives, the paper concludes with general remarks that feminism and Islam can be reconciled as long as these issues are treated according to the positive Islamic ethics, mutual respect, and fair practices of freedom. Moderate Islamic feminism will prevail, but without clear distinctions between secular and Islamist approaches, it may remain a neoliberal curriculum in universities for another century.

Keywords: *Discourse, feminism, multiculturalism, Turban Movement*

1. Introduction

Discourse is often defined as a particular way of talking about the world—social, material, or even mental world. It is a type of social practice that is constitutive in social reality and constituted by social agents in meaning making that 'contributes to reproducing *knowledge and* society (social identity, social relationships, systems of knowledge and belief) and also contributes to transforming society' (Fairclough, 1992: 65, italic mine). Particular features of the world may be portrayed differently; therefore, we must typically evaluate the interaction between various discourses. Discourses not only depict the world as it is, but they are also projective, imaginaries, representing hypothetical worlds that differ from the real world and are linked to efforts to change the world in certain ways. The interactions between various discourses are one aspect of the relationships between different people or phenomena—they might complement, compete, and even dominate a particular representation of social reality.

Discourses constitute part of the resources which people deploy in relating to one another—keeping separate from one another, cooperating, competing, dominating – and in seeking to change the ways in which they relate to one another (Fairclough, 2003; Foucault, 1984). While mainstream scholars have generally concentrated on the Western approaches to discourse in different fields, such as gender equality and sexuality, discourse analysis of Islamic feminism from a non-Anglican approach is regrettably still a debated issue. For example, Sirri (2022) claims that the discourse on Islamic feminism has been marginalized in the contemporary studies of gender equality across public and private life. Rooted in the discourse of Islam, Sirri's approach to discourse is originated in religious texts, that is, the Qur'an and Hadith.

In the inquiry which follows, I revisit the discourse of feminism as it has been construed by some philosophers, academics, and feminist thinkers. First, I will discuss the critique of strong multiculturalism and deliberative democracy in relation to the concept of cross-cultural dialogue and ethical universalism. Second, I will refer to the critique of Western feminism as it is represented by the later Foucault's concept in relation to the issue of western perspectives on women. I will then provide the discussion about the Turkish turban movement and the French's government ban of veiling. Finally, before I recap the main points of the paper, I will put forward argument about the possibility of Islamic feminism by providing several cases from classical Islam.

2. Deliberative Democracy within Multiculturalism

Some feminist theorists argue that traditional Islam allowed for the independence of practices like Sufism, influencing gender conduct without dominance. Others argue that the classical history of Islam should not be considered in modern life, as it no longer reflects social, political, and economic realities. Still others suggest that modern, secular liberation of women, should focus on moral codes and ethos, with some arguing deliberated reasons should be a better guide in multicultural modern life. In what follows, I will deal particularly with Seyla Benhabib's critiques of multiculturalism, linguistic relativism and her proposal for the interface between multiculturalism and ethical universalism with the expected outcome called deliberative democracy.

Seyla Benhabib in *The Claims of Culture* (2002) criticizes the strong theory of multiculturalism (e.g., Kymlicka, 1996). According to Benhabib, Kymlicka's main problem is that she overestimates what she envisions as 'societal cultures' that provide members with meaningful ways of living in a variety of areas, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both private and public spaces. These cultures tend to be territorially centered and based on a common language (Benhabib, 2002). Benhabib opposes Kymlicka's view. Empirically, what Kymlicka envisions as 'community culture' does not exist. There is an English, French, or Algerian nation, for example, which is administered by the state, but there is no English, French, or Algerian community culture. In fact, the culture of these three nations is a complex of human identities composed of various material and symbolic practices over a specific historical trajectory. Moreover, Kymlicka's assertion that the principle encompasses both private and public spheres is clearly false. The reification of the existence of community culture leads Kymlicka to fail to distinguish between the rights of national minorities and immigrant groups. This understanding leads her to illegitimate 'national' and 'ethno-cultural' identities. Her conception of culture and her defense of external freedoms over internal restrictions will lead to serious conflicts.

Benhabib (2002) claims that strong multiculturalism is unachievable because cultures should not be reified but rather negotiated via cross-cultural discussion, mutual learning, and deliberative democracy. Cultures and civilizations are not holistic, but rather multifaceted, multidimensional, and decentered. She also opposes the idea of linguistic relativism as advocated by Charles Taylor (1989, 2016). The main point is that the emphasis on individuality in the liberal tradition has resulted in the destruction of collectivity, whereas for Taylor the two are inseparable. The destruction of the joints of collectivity will be fatal to the conception of the individual. The problem is that the emphasis on the notion that culture is language leads Taylor to the understanding that those who speak the same language are presupposed to have the same cultural orientation. This understanding is highly problematic. While the argument makes sense, its implications for institutional politics are far from clear. From a normative perspective, what constitutes a 'network of conversations' can be problematic, given the complexity and interdependence of contemporary society, if not accompanied by certain ethical guidelines, which Taylor has overlooked (Benhabib, 2002).

Benhabib's argument is founded on the idea that, while humans are the same everywhere in terms of their needs for food, clothing, and shelter, there are certain principles on which judgment is difficult to make. Robust multiculturalism is therefore at stake. For example, the rights of women, children, and minorities within the majority are violated. This is because people's lives are inextricably linked to their cultures, which cannot be easily characterized as holistic, as many cultural theorists have believed. She contends that much of the argument around multiculturalism, which views cultures as distinct things, is unjustifiable. The belief that strong multiculturalism is conceivable fails to explain 'the complexity of global civilization dialogues and encounters, which are increasingly our lot, and it has encouraged the

binaries of “we” and the other(s)”' (Benhabib, 2002: 25). She instead prefers to approach multiculturalism through deliberative democracy, where reasons are decisive.

Deliberative democracy emphasizes the need for citizens and representatives to justify decisions and laws they impose. Civil society should provide reasons for their decisions. Citizens should be treated as autonomous agents in deliberative democracy, actively participating in societal governance through presenting and responding to reasons to justify laws. These reasons should produce justifiable decisions and express mutual respect. Citizens should not just assert their power through interest-group bargaining or voting, but also justify their actions through reason. If a government's primary reason for war is false or deceptive, it affects both the government's justification and respect for citizens. Deliberative democracy requires citizens to provide accessible reasons for their decisions, ensuring they are comprehensible to all (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). This reciprocity requires the reasons to be public, taking place in public, and producing binding decisions. Deliberative democracy differs from talk shows as participants do not always argue for argument's sake or truth's sake. Deliberative democracy allows for the establishment of intercultural negotiating institutions. As the essential concept of the private realm, the right to self-determination must be regarded as the freedom to interact with society as a whole. As a result, contemporary life should be characterized by mutual learning and tolerance.

Benhabib (2002) agrees with multiculturalists that a commitment to democratic egalitarianism may require accommodating cultural differences within political and legal institutions. she emphasizes that democratic legitimation should drive judgments about cultural accommodation, acknowledging cultural hierarchies and contesting them in the public sphere. However, she emphasizes the moral priority of democracy over cultural preservation. Benhabib opposes the idea of universalism which is conceived as a form of ethnocentrism, namely, “They” have to follow “Us”. Deliberative rationalists do not always see that agreement on truth, values and norms is always universal. Universalistic principles are indeterminate at practice, influenced by ethical or cultural contexts. In cultural pluralism, justice depends on whether law and social practice reflect diverse ethical-cultural communities. Consequently, universalism should not only cover the relative cognitive inquiry, but it also must have moral meaning. Searching for a new paradigm, Benhabib (2002) presents an alternative approach, developing an understanding of cultures as continually creating, recreating and negotiating the undesired boundaries between “Us” and “Them.” She points out that ‘all human beings, regardless of race, gender, sexual preference, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious background, are to be considered moral equals and are therefore to be created as equally entitled to moral respect’ (Benhabib, 2002: 27).

Benhabib criticizes not only linguistic relativism but also universalism, arguing that universalism benefits majority groups but harms minorities, women, and children. She proposes integrating multiculturalism and ethical universalism. She thus presents a model of deliberative democracy, allowing cultural contestation through public sphere and social movements. However, her model seems to be optimistic, because it relies on rational subjects. The paradigm she provides does not appear to be sufficiently cross-cultural enough. She claims that institutional power-sharing, legal pluralism, and flexible citizenship should be compatible with deliberative democracy. For example, when immigrants arrive in a new nation, they are not required to change their names. To live together in deliberative democracy, there are normative principles that need to be obeyed: egalitarian reciprocity, voluntary self-ascription and freedom of exit and association (Benhabib, 2002). Cross-cultural dialogue, intercultural political associations, and regional assemblies must be integrated into national policymaking.

3. Critiques of Western Feminism

Western feminist discourse has generalized the sexual difference in the West, bringing it in line with women in developing nations. As a result, Western feminists fiercely accuse male supremacy of oppressing women in the Third World, including the ability to veil and reproduce Mohanty (1991). Furthermore, Mohanty criticizes Western feminists for viewing women as a unified group regardless of context, claiming that women in the Third World are presented as weak and dependent regardless of the history or geography. As a result, everything is appraised according to Western standards; women should be emancipated, secular, and in charge of their own lives, with the exception of economic injustices such as redistribution. Western feminists often misrepresent Third World women as dependent, uneducated, and oppressed, focusing on Western humanist discourse and criticizing Islamic attitudes on polygamy, female circumcision, and forced marriage while also exercising political and colonial power over the less developed world.

According to Mohanty (1991) Western feminism has naively formed women from the less industrialized globe as monolithic subjects, failing to recognize the milieu in which these women live. Mohanty, writing from traditional Western postmodernism, believes that the historical specific method is superior to the Western model of feminism, which employs ahistorical analysis. Western emancipation provides a homogeneous concept of feminism, which cannot be fully applied to Islam without taking into account the formation of strategic coalitions across races, classes, and national borders. Mohanty claims that the bulk of Western publications on third-world women are part of global colonial discourse because they have progressed beyond the ideal of apolitical feminism, which is applicable to women all around the globe, not only in the West.

In her *The Politics of Piety* (2011), Mahmood explores ethics, agency, embodiment, and identity in the context of the women's mosque movement in Egypt, highlighting the loopholes that feminist discourse often ignores. Mahmood's research reveals a nuanced link between religion and feminism, as the feminist movement's participants work within patriarchal structures rather than rebelling against them. She focuses on the contentious reactions women's participation in Islamist organizations, the women's mosque programs, the relationship between external and internal selves, and agency, gender, and embodiment. She emphasizes that the mosque participants view socially prescribed forms of conduct as potentialities, rather than external social impositions. Mahmood argues that agency is intrinsically related to morals and challenges the concept of performativity of Butler (1997, 1999), who recognizes that body like gender is produced by discourse, which doesn't adequately capture the mosque movement that Mahmood analyzed.

In comparison with Mohanty’s critique of Western feminism for victimizing the third world women, Mahmood (2008, 2011) argument departs slightly different from Mohanty’s in that Mahmood’s standpoint is that a free Western liberalism is a Western product. She suggests that being autonomous should not be limited to the Western humanist political judgment, instead it should be placed in the analytical framework in which agency is *not* linked to Western liberation, but in the context of positive freedom emerging from ‘the capacity for self-mastery and self-government’ (Mahmood, 2011: 11). That is, in order for a woman to be a free individual, she has to determine her own behaviors, which ‘*must* be the consequence of her “own will” rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion’ (Mahmood, 2011: 11, italic in original). It seems that Mahmood does not totally avoid the concept of Western humanism; instead, she proposes a new way of approaching the similar problem, that is, there should be a practice of willingness to evaluate one’s views in the light of others through a mutual learning.

Both Mohanty and Mahmood’s concepts of unraveling the cultural injustice in some Muslim countries such as Egypt are in line with Benhabib’s proposal for cultural dialogue and deliberative democracy, in which everything including culture and even feeling is not reified

but negotiated. This is due to the fact that culture is not fixed but intermingled. Consequently, the philosophical thought of dealing with equality and diversity in this modern era should be derived from mutual learning and cultural dialogue, not from a mere consensus of Western universalism, but from the point of departure of *pluralistic* enlightened ethical universalism, which places the cross-cultural dialogues as a crucial means of managing peaceful life in the modern world.

In her study of the Egyptian women's mosque movement, Mahmood (2008, 2011) refers to Foucault's theory of ethics. According Foucault's analytical framework, there are four components of ethics, which can be applied for conceptualizing agency beyond the confines of the binary of enacting and subverting norms: substance of ethics, mode of subjectivation, techniques of the self and telos. In analyzing the ethics of women's mosque movement, Mahmood implemented the second and third aspects of Foucault's ethics, which recognize the moral obligations through divine law such as the existence of divine arrangements for human life represented in the Qur'an and which deal with the operations one performs on oneself in order to produce ethical subjects, which is philosophically often called "techniques of the self." Figure 1 schematically represents Foucault's concept of ethics.

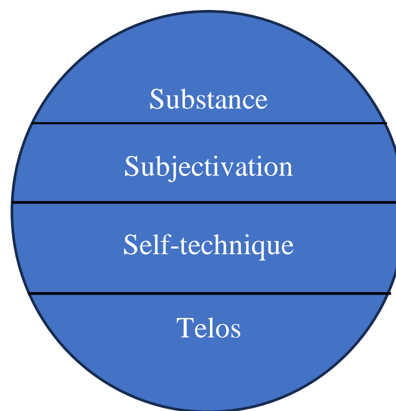

Figure 1: Foucault's elements of ethical system

Women's mosques movement is a non-liberal movement in which self-realization is aimed at 'honing one's rational and emotional capacities so as to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self' (Mahmood, 2011: 31). Mahmood advocates for a fresh understanding of religion's role in agency and its patriarchal normative source within a socio-political framework, highlighting the intersection of ethics, politics, gender, liberalism, and postcolonialism in *The Politics of Piety*. To demonstrate this technique of self-realization, participants were instructed to fulfil their obligations by studying the divine text, interpreting moral codes in accordance with traditional guidelines, and emphasizing the roles of religiosity-ritual practices such as dress and speech. Through ascetic practice, mosque members learn how to study the motions of the body and spirit, therefore balancing the synchronization of inner states and outside acts. Simply put, Mahmood provides examples of how women in the movement interact with secular and non-religious husbands.

Taking the middle path, Vintges (2004) critiques various Western academics, such Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, for their postmodernist notions of treating women, the abnormal, the nonsensical, and "strangers" as discrediting subjects rather than their shared identity as human beings. She contends that the latter Foucault's definition of human subjects and moral system broadly conceptualized in Figure 1 above is more expansive and comprehensive, addressing the subject without binary distinctions. Her interpretation of later Foucault's concept of ethics in dealing with multiculturalism and feminism is based on the

concept of practices of freedom as a means of establishing "the care of the self" through self-management, rather than viewing the "original subject" or "deep self" as autonomous according to the Western standard of rationality.

Vintges (2004) highlights Islamic Sufism as an example of freedom of practices, allowing individuals to live without gender separation and conscience. She also makes references to Foucault's concept of freedom in non-Western beliefs like Zen Buddhism and Christian mysticism, suggesting that a universal normative perspective can be achieved by endorsing freedom practices. Vintges interprets Foucault's ethics as a new way of living because 'it is focused on the ethical-spiritual way of life, which is relatively autonomous in relation to moral codes and metaphysics; and it is new since it is democratic, contrary to the elitism of Greek ethics' (Vintges, 2004: 293). She thus adapts Foucault's concept of ethics but revisits the demarcation between moral code and ethos as Figure 2 below shows.

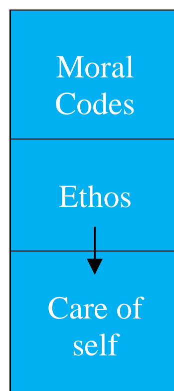

Figure 2: Vintges' proposal of ethics

Vintges (2004) reinterprets Foucault's ethics as the art of living, advocating for a shared ethos and commitment to freedom for women in all cultures, including Western ones. This new ethical concept aims to shape one's entire life, challenging political, economic, and social dominance. She believes this cross-cultural feminism seeks a universal norm through practices of freedom for all as illustrated in Figure 2 above. Foucault's ethics analysis, according to Vintges, can help understand key aspects of life in Muslim society, such as leadership and marriage. In Islam, both men and women are considered leaders, and God asks for their responsibility. The concept of "the care of the self" and "the care of others" is prioritized, with the care of the self for everyone, including women and men. This aligns with Foucault's ethics, which emphasize the importance of self-care and complex relationships with others, promoting a sense of freedom and care for others. Care of the self and freedom are integral aspects of Muslim society, particularly in marriage. For instance, the work of Iranian anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini's documentary *Divorce Iranian Style* showcases Iranian wives' agency in requesting divorce in Islamic courts, demonstrating the implementation of freedom in Islamic society, unlike Western propagandistic ideas.

4. Turkish Turban Movement and French Ban of Veiling

The Turban movement of Turkish politics in 1990s marked the debate between the practice of veiling and the concept of modernity. This section is primarily based on Nilüfer Göle's (1996) *The Forbidden Modern* who claimed that the movement was more a matter of identity construction than on being modern or anti-modern (see also Ozcetin, 2009). The section also briefly highlights the French secular government's ban of veiling.

Göle's (1996) theory of veiling and modernity suggests two modes of action: political Islam and cultural Islam. Political Islam defends Islamic identity against Western imperialism, while

cultural Islam protects Islam's sacredness. The Turkish veiling movement belongs to the cultural movement, as it is nonpolitical and not seizing political power. Göle's study on female university students' attitudes towards veiling in the 1990s suggests that veiling is not a reactionary phenomenon against modernity. Contemporary Turkish women wear veils in big cities, protecting themselves on their own will. Veiling is a modernity phenomenon that distinguishes traditional people from modern Islamic young women. These women are active, self-asserting, and modernist, expressing the visual privilege of men. Veiling shapes the intersection of political ideology and power relations between sexes. It contributes to positioning women in the modern world and serves them with the right identity. The veil protects them against Western abstract hegemony and is for sacredness, not aesthetic or rights. Headscarf-wearing women identify as pious Muslim women to set themselves apart from Islamist groups and secular Muslims in Turkey. This approach to modernity differs from Western modernity:

> which was bred according to the premises of the Enlightenment and industrial civilization, transformed communitarian relations which have been molded by the religious and traditional beliefs and, eventually produced a heterogenous, differentiated, and pluralistic social structure that contributed to the formation of rational and positivist values, *in which the roles of women either can be neglected or are at stake*. The Turkish modernity, on the other hand, refused to recognize autonomous spheres in the market and civil society and was based on the authoritarianism (Göle, 1996: 132, *italic mine*).

Turkish modernity rejects local patterns and values, seeking new codes of behavior. Radical movements emerge with educated Muslims, integrating veiling and modernity. This legitimizes Muslim identity and empowers them as political agents of change, including Muslim women resisting Westernization. Therefore, the veiling movement does not stand against modernity; instead, 'it acts as a compass of life and as a means of management with modern society' (Göle, 1996: 138).

For Göle, veiling is a way for women to escape from conventional life patterns and differ from traditional Muslim women. Islam, as a community religion, supports identity transformation at the individual consciousness level. The contemporary Islamist movement recreates Muslim identity, transforming it into a social actor. The rise of Islamist movements is driven by the upward mobility of new social groups and their increasing participation. This shift is characterized by the formation of educated, urbanized Islamic intellectuals and elites, who influence normative values and social change. The veiled body of Islamic women represents resistance against Western civilization's influence on social manners. Western modernism aims to increase human willpower over the body, making it a symbol of modernity and elitism. According to Göle (1996), the act of veiling women represents a political statement against Western modernism, yet they also accept male domination and confinement to the private sphere. The feminist movement aimed to promote equality and female identity through criticism of essentialist definitions and the struggle for opportunity, occupation, and rights. It operated on twofold grounds: as an action for equality and as a critical action resisting suppression of female identity. The movement seeks a basis for social action and tolerance for differences, aiming to resurrect Islamic culture and counter the homogenizing processes of Western transformation to civilization.

However, in certain Western countries veiling is seen an extremist symbol. For example, the ban of veiling and other religious symbols in public spaces in France have been described as a 'national drama', which is against the idea of multicultural society. It is hard to deny that it arose because of fears of the rise of radical political Islam that threatens not only security but also French identity as formulated in *laicite*—freedom of public institutions from the influence

of religious movements. The French women's position itself was divided into the controversy. Some supported the policy for the same reasons cited by the school and government authorities, while others rejected it on the grounds that it was a violation of freedom of religion and education. It is the case that the French Conseil d'Etat managed to preserve freedom based on their interpretation of the *laicite* principle, but they made Muslim female students the object of surveillance in schools, which raises certain stigmas in French society. This sets a bad precedent not only for the original goal of multiculturalism, but also for the feminist agenda. Furthermore, the practice of exclusion of veiled women in the French public space is rooted in an essentialist view of secularism that has become the normative principle of regulating public space in Western countries, which is taken for granted.

5. Islamic Feminism

Essentially, the Qur'an treats men and women equal. The Qur'an itself is substantially egalitarian as it says:

> 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 men and women who give In charity, for men and women Who fast (and deny themselves), For men and women who Guard their chastity, and For men and women who Engage much in God's praise, For them has God prepared Forgiveness and great reward. (Qur'an 33: 35).

If every Muslim man and woman accepted their roles as stipulated in the verse above, there would be no point talking about feminism, a term which is difficult to define. Feminism is 'a world-wide movement but it can be manifested in different ways in different countries. Even though women's subordination is a world-wide phenomenon, its forms may vary even though there may be many similarities among the countries' (Nurmila, 2011: 33). Due to the lack of a precise, accepted definition of feminism makes it is difficult to define the phrase "Islamic feminism." The most that can be said about this issue is that Islamic movement researchers have not given it the attention it deserves; the phrase is derived from the root word "female" and has certain duties or goals associated with it. It is a method for examining society and the past and for addressing contemporary injustices committed against women. It is also a reformist tactic meant to alter the social structures that are currently in place. According to Grami (2013: 105), Islamic feminism still raises a number of theoretical questions triggering dichotomies between paradigms of feminism which include:

a. Is Islamic feminism a subset of feminism in the West? If Muslim women are the focus of Islamic feminism, does this suggest that the direction of both Arab and Western feminism has changed with its inception?
b. If feminism was fundamentally a political movement with social goals before evolving into a social movement that aimed to prove women's independence, highlight their role in life, and defend their rights, is the portrayal of "Islamic" in "feminism" a way to restrict the movement's actions and try to fit its theoretical framework into Muslim societies? Every Western and Islamic society has a certain kind of feminism that fits their own historical context—one in which fundamentalism has been the norm—and unique features.
c. Islamic Feminism addresses misinterpretation and comprehension issues, addressing the adaptation of Western language to Arab cultural contexts and acknowledging its modifications.
d. If variations in terms have caused ambiguity and misunderstanding, especially in the Arab world, does this imply that variations in terminology also reflect differences in

goals and perspectives based on the current inequalities between society and women activists?

These are among the questions that deserve rigorous answers. However, in the last decade the subject of women in Islam has widely been reinterpreted, but it is admitted that it is still difficult to set up the boundary of the term Islamic feminism *per se*. Sirri (2022: 1), for example, confirms that:

> Islamic feminism is a wide and diverse intellectual and activist movement relevant to the realities of many Muslims around the world. It offers tools for religious interpretation and adds value to their spiritual lives. Despite the diversity within the movement, the different strands of Islamic feminism, or Islamic feminisms, are unified by their opposition to the predominant conservative vision within the Islamic tradition that naturalises and essentialises the constructed differences between women and men.

Islamic feminism is still seen as a movement although the subject has been debated in academia either in the West or in the Muslim world since 1990s. Its orientation still centers around gender equality and sexuality. Some Muslim feminist writers still see the movement as a new emerging idea, an oxymoron, and a feminist exegesis (Sirri, 2022). It is claimed that despite the diversity, the movement is united in challenging the dominant traditional belief and search for changes in equal power relations either in private or in public spheres. According to Nurmila (2011), global Islamic feminism offers Indonesian women an alternative perspective on Islam and gender relationships, challenging the dominant view of men as superior, despite the challenges of accepting new ideas.

Sirri (2022) claims that Islamic feminists use historical contextualization, intra-textual methods, tawhidic ethics, and linguistic analysis to de-essentialize and deconstruct religion, promoting gender equality in Islam. They use tools and methodologies similar to pre-modern and contemporary Islamic scholars to gain legitimacy for their interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunna. Feminist ijtihad decentralizes both religion and feminism, while feminist *tafsir* challenges traditional patriarchal interpretations and finds gender equality and diversity embedded in the Qur'an. Islamic feminism challenges Western feminists' orientalist discourse, arguing that Islam cannot be a neutral observer of gender relations. Islamic feminists argue that all interventions in gender relations are political projects, dealing with power. They highlight that the struggle for gender equality cannot be reduced to individual, cultural, or religious arenas. Islamic feminism's scope is limited by mainstream feminism's view of all forms of resistance to patriarchal oppression as feminist. Islamic feminism challenges the resurgence of fundamentalist Islamic discourse that promotes patriarchal society and state. With global religious fundamentalisms, feminist criticism has become necessary. Islamic feminists aim to renew Islam and change power relations between men and women. They reject being reduced to a response to orientalist western feminist or fundamentalist Islamic discourse. Islamic feminism is a development of Islamic modernist thought.

Islamic feminists approach their work from a position rooted in faith and also from a strategic or scholarly standpoint, aiming to contextualize what are commonly considered Islamic gender norms in order to demonstrate their historical and cultural origins. This approach of Islamic feminism goes beyond simply seeking gender equality and justice in the Qur'an and instead confronts the power dynamics that have allowed men to gain and maintain authority in Muslim societies. This discourse on women and gender highlights the message of gender equality and social justice as being inherent in an egalitarian interpretation of Islam. To work from within an Islamic paradigm means to work from a Muslim perspective, involving adherence to Islamic texts such as the Qur'an and Hadith (Sirri, 2022). Scholars within this

framework aim to challenge the male-dominated interpretation of sacred texts. This Islamic feminist approach to gender equality is more fundamental compared to secular feminism, which advocates for full gender equality in the public sphere, while leaving out the religious aspect, and also contends with the patriarchal structure of the state, accepts the patriarchal structure of the family, and supports the concept of gender complementarity in the private sphere. Islamic feminists, rooted in faith and scholarly positions, challenge traditional gender norms and power structures in Muslim societies. They challenge the Qur'an's egalitarian global ethics and the historical contingency of these norms. Their approach emphasizes gender equality and social justice within an egalitarian interpretation of Islam, identifying as Muslims and working within Islamic texts. Feminist tafsir scholars challenge the male authority of sacred texts, advocating for the full personhood and moral agency of all Muslims within the Qur'an.

In the earlier development of its discourse, Islamic feminism has been explored by Muslim feminists such as Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992), *Feminism and Cross-cultural Inquiry* (2013), and Amina Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman* (1999). Ahmed argues that traditional Arab culture needs to adapt to modernity, particularly in terms of women's treatment in marriage, household responsibilities, and education. Muslim scholars need a reinterpretation of the Qur'an, for example, to address cultural injustices, such as polygamy, which was once practiced by Muhammad. Ahmed (2013) suggests that Muslim scholars need a reinterpretation of Islam's treatment of women to adapt to modern social contexts. The Qur'an which is flexible and contextual should be reinterpreted to reflect ethical principles. For instance, polygamy should be reinterpreted as monogamy, as stated in the Qur'an 4:3 below:

> Marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four, but if ye fear shall not be able to deal justly (with them), the only one, or (a captive) that your rights hand possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice. (Qur'an 4:3).

Other social women issues should be treated from a current viewpoint rather than a historically grounded paradigm. For example, women now enjoy educational equality, allowing them to enter 'all the professions, from teaching and nursing to medicine, law, and engineering' (Ahmed, 1992: 241). Ahmed suggests that the 8th-century Sufi figure Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah who exemplified self-determination should become a model within Muslim culture, advocating for Muslim women to exercise freedom in line with Islamic values and the Qur'an's egalitarian concept of life.

In her *Qur'an and Woman*, Wadud (1999) puts forward feminist and gender-inclusive discourse that confirms Muslim women's voices and provides evidence that they speak from their own realities. It challenges the dominant model of focusing on men's experiences in Qur'anic analysis, challenging patriarchal hegemony. Islamic feminism constructs gender as a category of thought, a concept not seen in feminist analysis before the end of the 20th century. This approach prevents rejection among lay Muslims by drawing from Islamic sources without patriarchal readings. Historically, classical Islamic intellectual traditions followed a patriarchal worldview, claiming that males were superior to women in many spheres of life. Despite the fact that the Qur'an and Prophet(s) advocate for women's complete humanity, this approach reduced their humanity. Patriarchy, built on inherent inequality in human interactions, was justified in Hellenistic thought, in which each individual had a role in society, with some being slaves and others masters.

Islamic feminists question the construction of Islam and its subjectivity, particularly in relation to women's rights. They argue that women are non-negotiable and have the right to assert their integrity. The development of Islamic feminism through Muslim women's movements has challenged these questions and led to policy reforms. This shift has had a

significant impact on law and policy, with Muslim women's advocacy reaching a critical mass. Notwithstanding Qur'anic texts on social fairness for women, gender justice in contemporary society has not followed up with this hallowed beginning. Wadud (1999) discusses the egalitarian nature of the Qur'an, arguing it is gendered-bias-free for both sexes. She advocates for a more accessible reinterpretation that promotes social justice, allowing women full access to economic, intellectual, and political participation, and men fully participating in home and child care.

The oscillating issue thus has been concerned with the feasibility of actual Islamic feminism. My stance is based on the belief that Islam does not view women as inferior individuals. The Qur’an does not contain any references to absolute misogyny. It is possible that certain inequalities have arisen due to the cultures in which Islam has been practiced, making it challenging to distinguish between authentic Islam and cultural practices, such as the approval for women to wear *abbayyas* (floor length veils) in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. Islam does not prescribe cultural dress, but requires women to wear a veil for safety. Abbayyas are often misunderstood and Western experts often misinterpret Arab culture due to hatred and confusion. Western academics frequently misrepresent Islam and Arab culture out of animosity and confusion; in fact, Arabs account for just 20% of the world's 1.7 billion Muslim population.

It is often claimed by some Western media and academics that Islam marginalizes women and denies them power and influence. This perspective fails to recognize the significant role that the Prophet Mohammad played as a reformer for women. In reality, the liberation of women has been a core practice in Islam since the 6th century, which is not fully understood by the West. Islam is possibly the only faith that explicitly upholds and actively protects women's rights. Within Islam, women are granted the freedom to seek education and participate in social, political, and economic activities in their communities. This perspective on women in Islam has been echoed by modern Islamic feminists (Wadud, 1999).

Islam acknowledges gender equality, with Muslim women gaining the right to vote earlier than in Western countries. However, Western scholars and media often overlook this reality, ignoring the fact that several Islamic nations have had female heads of states and women professors in universities receive equal pay in such Muslim countries as Indonesia. Some Western feminists continue to advocate for Islam's oppression, but fail to address the exploitation of women in red light districts in some Western countries, viewing them as social workers rather than individuals. Islam totally eradicates any perspective that distinguishes men and women, particularly in relation to humankind as the Qur’an itself revealed to oppose the practice of pre-Islamic civilization:

> When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the ground? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on. (Qur’an 16: 58–59).

In Qur'an and prophet traditions, both men and women are encouraged to study and seek knowledge, as stated in the Qur’an (96:1) ‘Read in the name of thy Lord and cherisher Who created.’ God rewards all intellectuals, not only men but also women, who remember Him and think of how He creates the earth and the sky, leading them to unravel the secrets of the universe ‘Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female, ye are members, one of another.’ (Qur’an 3:195). This verse presupposes that women can also learn whatever interests them and apply their knowledge for the benefit of humankind.

There are examples in Islamic history demonstrating that Islamic feminism has always been feasible. In fact, gender equality occurred during the ancient Islamic era. Sayyidah Sakinah,

the daughter of Al-Husain bin Ali bin Abi Thalib, and Al-Syaikhah Syuhrah, also known as Fakhr Al-Nisa (the pride of women), were examples of early Islamic feminists. Al-Syaikhah Syuhrah was one of Imam Syafi'i's instructors, the greatest scholar of Islamic law, whose teachings are still followed by the vast majority of Muslims worldwide. In addition, Imam Abu Hayyan mentioned three female professors at that school: Mu'nisat Al-Ayyubiyah, Syamiyat Al-Taimiyah, and Zainab. In Islamic history, there were many other women who were recognized as great scholars such as Al-Khansa' and Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah; the latter has been referred to by several modern feminists (see Ahmed, 1992).

In her examination of feminism as a diverse belonging, Cooke (2001) encompassed a variety of contemporary Islamic feminists, such as Assia Djebar and Fatimah Mernissi. These feminists utilize the opportunities offered by Islam to create multiple self-identities. While they may not strictly identify as Islamic feminists, it is widely agreed that they are feminists because they all advocate for freedom and equality. These women are actively involved in the scientific pursuit of equality; therefore, their perspectives as Islamic feminists can be equated with those of the Egyptian women's mosque movement (Mahmood, 2011). Restricted spaces, such as mosques, are often where they are active and many of them produce scholarly works that are recognized and utilized by others. If we fail to recognize the impact of Muslim female thinkers like Zaynab al-Ghazali and Fatimah Mernissi, who have been advocating for equality through their work, then feminism cannot be considered to be truly global.

There are, of course, additional examples to demonstrate the feasibility of Islamic feminism, but it is necessary to declare that women are Syaqa'iq Al-Rijal (men's siblings); therefore, their roles in the community are equivalent. If there are some specifics that result in a distinction between the two sexes, it is simply a function of their main tasks. For example, women must not pray or fast during their menstruation period which must be admitted, but it does not necessarily imply that men have more freedoms than women.

6. Conclusion

This paper has critically reviewed the discourses of feminism particularly in the context of multiculturalism, Western feminism, the turban movement, and Islamic feminism. I have argued that Islam has much earlier liberated the rights of women. The Qur’an itself is egalitarian. It appears that it is only the West that has often misjudged Islam because of the lack of knowledge, unawareness, and confusion between actual Islam and the Arab culture. The paper has argued that since each society has its own system of truth, multiculturalism, cross-cultural dialogues, and deliberative democracy are less helpful in making decisions unless religious values and wisdoms are taken into account. Any society should be respected for their distinct values.

The Western-influenced Islamic feminism focuses on transforming gender power relations and critically recognizing the structural marginalization of women in society. The ultimate goal is to create a society that upholds the values of human equality, gender justice, and freedom from oppressive structures, thereby facilitating the full potential of every individual both in private sphere and public sphere. The Islamic paradigm of feminism has much been debated in term of changes in the role women should played in society outside the household. Historically, there have been the actual models of Islamic feminism, as evidenced by early Islamic feminists such as Sayyidah Sakinah and Al-Syaikhah Syuhrah, who were influential scholars of Islamic law.

Having reviewed the arguments about feminism from a number of perspectives: philosophers, critical theorists, and feminists from both the Islamic and Western premises, the paper recognizes that Islam and feminism can be reconciled as long as these two tenets are treated according to the positive ethics, mutual learning, and fair practices of appropriate freedom. The answer to the question whether there is or no possibility of Islamic feminism then

depends on how people treat and judge it. If Islamic feminism is steered according to the Western liberation, such as exploiting women by calling them "social workers" as it has long been legalized in some Western countries, the answer is *not* possible. Islam will never accept such an incorrect practice of freedom. However, if feminism is manifested in accordance with acceptable ethics, norms, morals, and fair practices of freedom, the answer is *absolutely* affirmative. Moderate Islamic feminism will prevail, but without clear distinctions between secular and Islamist approaches, it will remain as a neoliberal curriculum in universities for another century.

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