

THE QUESTION OF WOMEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND ISLAMIC SCRIPTURE

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“Among you the most respectful is the one, who respects women and the most disrespectful is one who disrespects women” (al-Hadees)

Abstract

One of the most engaging issues, in the contemporary epoch is the issue concerning women. The feminine, feminist and feminism are the terms which have caught the attention of abundant scholarship. Hence, feminism has emerged as one of the powerful discourses in the modern academia. To question patriarchy and to say 'no' to the gender discrimination is the engagement of this universal cry since the emergence of feministic studies in the last decade of eighteenth century. The same has been gaining currency, more especially in the literary sphere. The egalitarian concerns in terms of education, economy, politics, etc. in relation to women are the preoccupying issues in the twentieth century literary discourse in the form of fiction, i.e. novels, plays, poetry and in non-fiction especially in highly acclaimed essays. On the other hand Islamic tradition has no qualms with such rights and provisions for women instead it does formulate a discourse of its own to voice for the rights, role or status of women to share equal rights with their male counterparts. Under such discourse, Islam does propagate to develop the aptitude to produce good female teachers, doctors, social workers etc.

Therefore, the present paper will try to highlight the status of the women with respect to Islam comparatively with what is claimed in the English literary discourse, to expatiate how Islam stands at par or at times ahead of all these claims, in substantiating the role of women in social fabric, education, health, economy etc.

Keywords:

Woman, Rights, Feminism, Issues, Islam, West, English Literary Tradition

A Comparative Study...

Ever since the dawn of civilizations the women question has been occupying the central stage in the social, cultural and political fabric of the world. In every social or religious order the issue of woman has been viewed within its respective premises. Given the propensity towards the debate one can clearly espouse the fact that there have been the practices in the past in which women were viciously treated as inferior and submissive to the men folk. Myths and superstitions had swallowed the dignity of women and rendered them as subhuman creatures. The consideration of women as

objects of sex has always been a set notion in the ancient and modern societies, across cultures. There are traces in the Egyptian history whereby in their societies, to satiate the ill-formed myths and customs women were used as “customary sacrifice” in order to nurture crops. Thus, historically speaking women have always been marginalized as Beauveir mentions in her seminal essay, “This world has always belonged to males, and none of the reasons given for this have ever seemed sufficient.” ()

Religion, particularly Islam as an institution is the main focus to be considered as a responsible system under which this discrimination has evolved. If on the one hand the secular feminists assess religion and feminism as incompatible but, on the other hand undeniable is the fact that Islam has considered woman as the most respectable rather a divine creature right from its advent. It has always voiced to give her the status and role she has to perform to develop a constructive society. A lot of hassle has been generated owing to the amplifying misconceptions, misrepresentations or most often, the bias of western discourses, under the shade of which the issue of women and Islam is being seen with full suspicion. English literary tradition, be it fiction or non-fiction, from the beginning of this debate has been at the forefront. In the western scholarship, the movements like Women’s Movement of 1960 or proceeding to this the path-breaking feminist movement anticipated itself by *The Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792) by Mary Wollstonecraft and further strengthened by Olive Schreiner’s *Women and Labour* (1911), Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Simon de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and Fredrick Engels’s *The Origin of Family* (1884) comparatively are novel for this cause as they cannot beat the fourteenth century old Islamic Tradition whereby woman occupies a high status. The issue is abundantly sensitive and needs a keen and thorough analysis to penetrate the thick walls of misunderstandings. The dignity she endorses and the conduct, purely based on egalitarian concerns, with which she is treated, is lapsed by sheer misunderstandings and sometimes by sheer prejudice.

Mary Wollstonecraft’s craving for the women rights is a modern phenomenon. She argues that it is now the time to voice for the women rights, “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them the lost dignity...and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world.” (*A Vindication* 53) But, without exaggeration it can be said that right from its advent Islam has been at the forefront to liberate women from the shackles of ill-formed customs, patriarchal dominance, vicious and in-human practices. The outstanding manifestation of its values is the society formed by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) itself. Before the advent of Islam even in Arab societies women were more or less treated as cattle, dishonoured in every respect, treated as mere objects to fulfill the animal instincts of men. Even the birth of a female child was measured ill-omen and to bury the female infants was a prevalent wild custom. But, under the constructive and reformatory teachings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) every such evil

practice which had belittled the women was out rightly eliminated. The Female infanticide and the unequal attitude towards the birth of a female child is categorically repudiated in the Holy Quran in *Surah Nahl, Ch.16, Verse No.58 & 59* as:

And when one of them is given the good news of a female child, his face becomes gloomy and he is choked with grief. [58]

He hides from people because of the (self-presumed) evil of the good news given to him (wondering): Shall he keep it despite the disgrace or put it away into the dust? Beware, evil is what they decide. (Shafi and Shamim, *Ma'arif* 369)

Moreover, glad tidings are given to those who bring up the female child with utter regard to the will of God as mentioned in '*Musnad Ahmed*', The Prophet (pbuh) says. "Anyone who brings up two daughters properly, they will be very close to me on the day of judgment" And again in another Tradition He says, "Anyone who up brings two daughters properly and takes good care and brings them up with love and affection, they will enter Paradise." This is how Islam at the outset eliminated the evils of the Arab society.

It has become a hot-button debate across the globe that women are denied their rights in Islam. But when this matter is seen very keenly in the light of Quran and authentic tradition of Prophet (pbuh) and also in the light of the lives of His companions, a woman in Islam does enjoy a high status.

Quran declares a woman as a 'Mohsina' which means 'fortress' against evil. What can be more substantial aspect to penetrate into the issue than through the Prophet's (pbuh) tradition itself as mentioned in *Ibn-Maja* which means that 'Paradise lies at the feet of the mother'. It is the height of reverence and regard for the female counterpart which is celebrated in the Islamic tradition.

There are certain categories under which the comparison can be generated. These are discussed as following:

i. Degree of Responsibility...

Wollstonecraft quotes Rousseau for his out-right declaration of women as weak in terms of body:

[Rousseau] then proceeds to prove that woman ought to be weak and passive, because she has less bodily strength than man; and hence infers, that she was formed to please and to be subject to him; and that it is her duty to render herself agreeable to her master- this being the grand end of her existence. (*A Vindication* 103-104)

Islam on the other hand does endorse the belief that men have a higher degree over women in terms of bodily strength but it has its own ramifications. In *Surah Baqarah* ch.2, verse no. 228, of the Holy Quran it is mentioned that, "And women have rights

similar to what they owe as recognized, though for men there is a step above them. And Allah is Mighty, Wise.” (Shafi and Shamim, *Ma’arif* 564) But it pertains to any kind of superiority that men have over women as it is further clarified in Surah Nisa, Ch. 4, Verse No.34, “Men stand caretakers of women since Allah has made some of them excel the others, and because they have spent of their wealth.” (Shafi and Shamim, *Ma’arif* 417) Allah (SWT) in this verse has used the word, ‘Kawwam’ in Arabic which according to the commentary of Ibn-Kathir means one degree higher in responsibility, not a higher degree in superiority. The word ‘Kawwam’ is based on the root word ‘Ikamah’ meaning to stand up. So the word ‘Kawwam’ means one degree higher in responsibility not in superiority. (Naik, *Women’s Rights in Islam – Modernized or Outdated* 21) Men are no doubt physically stronger than women to shoulder this higher degree of responsibility but in rest of the aspects they are equal to their female counterparts.

ii. Husband/Wife Relationship...

In most of the societies of the world women were merely treated as objects and commodities in possession of their male counterparts. Even in the recent past they were treated merely as kitchen queens and the objects of sex. Marriage as an institution in the Pre-Islamic Arab was overwhelmingly deteriorated. There were different types of marriages. Safih -Ur- Rahman Mubarakpuri in his prize winning book *The Sealed Nectar* mentions Abu Da’ud’s narration on the authority of Aisha (r.a.) that “there were four types of marriages in pre-Islamic Arab social fabric: First was like that of present Islamic way, the second was *Zawaj-al Istibda* in which after menstruation period, a man used to send his wife to another person to have intercourse with him for conception, after that it wholly depended on the husband that whether he liked to keep her wife or not. Third type of marriage was that a group of men around ten in number would sexually enjoy a woman and after conception that woman to whosoever among that group points to would be declared the father of that child. The fourth one was that a woman would use a flag at her gate to invite people and anyone who liked would enjoy her. The woman after getting pregnant and giving birth would assemble those men and a seeress would be brought to declare whose child it was. (Mubarakpuri, *The Sealed* 43-44)

Thus, the above discussion exudes the deteriorated customary spectrum of Arabic Civilization. In other civilizations also, women were subjected to inhuman treatment. In Babylonian civilization, woman used to get death penalty on behalf of his husband’s killing someone. For Greeks woman was a cause of evil and misfortune and in Egyptian civilization she was a sign of devil in some parts of Eastern Europe and also in India a woman was burnt alive or killed with her husband on his death.

The relationship between a husband and wife has again been a hot-button issue perpetually engaging the literary imagination in the nineteenth and twentieth century literature. Enough has been written to negotiate the sensitivity of this debate. The

unequal treatment towards the women folk, whereby they are merely seen as the commodities dominated under patriarchy is blatantly depicted in different genres. Henrik Ibsen, one of the pioneers of the modern drama is at the forefront by virtue of his superb play *A Doll's House* (1879) wrought with the feminine concern. The play at its best critiques the patriarchy, the system which belittles and undermines the dignity of a woman. Ibsen deflates the male dominance in his typical dramatic texture and deconstructs the established stereotypical notion of man-woman relationship. The play is centered on the relationship of Torvald Helmer and his wife Nora. Ibsen uses Nora as his mouth piece to penetrate the ill-formed society and exhibit the inhuman treatment enforced on women. The play is based on the journey of Nora from a docile housewife dependent on her husband to an independent woman who breaks the shackles of her household dominated by her husband. The title itself clues to the notion of a house of a 'doll'. 'Doll' symbolically suggests the inhuman rendering of the central woman of the play. She is treated as a commodity, a 'doll' possessed by her dominating husband. Thus, the play dramatizes the social issue concerning the woman of the time the playwright Ibsen himself lived.

Ibsen projects the entire scenario of the patriarchal society in which a woman, more or less, is considered a possessed entity. Helmer's construction of his wife under non-human names like 'skylark', 'little squirrel' etc. reveals the wretchedness of the society which frames a woman into a borrowed identity sans any individuality. The text of the plays reads as:

Helmer. (*in his room*) Is that my lark twittering there?

Nora (*busy opening some of her parcels*) Yes, it is!

Helmer. Is it the squirrel frisking about?

Nora. Yes! (Ibsen, *Doll's House* 3)

Helmer is overwhelmingly a domineering figure while Nora is at the receiving end of all the unfair tags and unequal conducts. This is largely the depiction of the inadequate relationship which features a woman in an utter derogatory situation. Ibsen exposes the evil social setup whereby the family relation between a husband and a wife is chaotic devoid of any emotional value.

Mary Wollstonecraft in her path-breaking essay *A Vindication of Rights of Women* (1792) addresses women in this regard:

I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness...Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak

elegancy of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel (Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication* xxxiv)

This concern, however, is incorporated merely around a century ago in English Literature, but, if the same issue is analyzed within the framework of Islamic tradition, Islam has repudiated all the evils governing such an unfair system. Islam constitutes the husband-wife relationship with egalitarian principle. It renders her as a companion of man to establish a complete social setup devoid of gender bias. The base of this relationship is laid by the mutual choice of both the partners irrespective of any stress on the female counterpart.

Marriage in Islam as in *Surah Nisa*, Ch.4, Verse No.21, is remarkably considered as, ‘*misaq un galiza*’ which means ‘a firm sacred agreement’. It is a mutual contract of a man and a woman sans any kind of dominance or privilege of one over the other. Thus, the relationship is not based on patriarchy but on sheer equal conduct. In a tradition of Prophet (pbuh) in Ibn-Hambal - Hadith No 736, 7396 it is mentioned that, “the most perfect of the believers are those that are best in character and behavior, and those that are best to their family and their wives.” Thus, the relationship between husband and wife in Islam is rather a divine mutual contract. In *Surah Baqarah*, Ch.2, Verse No.187, Allah (SWT) says, “Your wives are your garments, and you are their garments”. Garments add to the beauty of a human and also they hide the odds of one’s body. So the inference here is that, husband and wife enhance each other’s beauty and hide the flaws of each other, if any. Islam has protected the dignity of a wife in such a manner that if a man not likes his wife still he has to treat her kindly and with equity as, in *Surah Nisa*, Ch.4, Verse No.19, Allah (SWT) says, “treat your wives on a footing of equity and kindness even if you dislike her for you may be disliking a thing for which Allah has made good for you.” All the above authentic traditions are testimonial to the fact that Islam repudiates all the ill-notions of unequal or unfair treatment towards women.

iii. “Read, thy Lord is most bountiful”: Rights Regarding Education

Islam at the very outset has been propagating to nourish the society through proper education. It is a much spoken fact that the very first verses of the Holy Quran revealed upon The Great Prophet (pbuh) were regarding knowledge as Allah (SWT) says, ‘Read in the name of thy lord, Who has created the human beings from a congealed clot of blood, a leech like substance:

Read, and your Lord is the most gracious,

who imparted knowledge by means of the pen.

He taught man what he did not know. (Shafi and Shamim, *Ma’arif* 830)

This is the ample justification of how much importance is given to acquire knowledge in Islam. More over the era of Prophet (pbuh) is evident itself whereby we can infer that it was because of the atmosphere created by the endeavors of Prophet (pbuh) and his companions that a passion and zeal was imposed in women also to acquire knowledge. It is mentioned in Sahih Bukhari that once women asked Prophet (pbuh), “You are usually surrounded by men why do not you give us one particular day so that we too can ask you questions”. (qtd. in *Women’s Rights in Islam – Modernized or Outdated*, Naik 23) Prophet (pbuh), in turn assigned the duty to some of his companions to educate women. During the enlightening era of Prophet (pbuh) women were allowed to acquaint themselves with knowledge in different spheres even when world was steeped in ignorance. The best example is Hazrat Aisha (r.a.) the wife of Prophet (pbuh) She has 2210 narrations of *ahadith* (Prophet’s sayings) to her credit. Once Prophet (pbuh) said, “Half the knowledge of my revelation should be acquired from all of my companions and the other half from Aisha.” Besides being well versed in scripture, she had profound knowledge of other different areas, as mentioned by Urwah-Ibn-Zubair, “I have not seen a greater scholar than Ayaisha in the field of learning of the Qur’an, in obligatory duties, in lawful and unlawful matters, in literature and poetry, in Arab history”. (qtd. in *Women’s Rights in Islam – Modernized or Outdated*, Naik 23-24) She also knew medicine and mathematics. People used to consult her for the matters of inheritance and its accounts. Moreover her erudition is evident from Abu Moosa, who says, “whenever we lacked knowledge on a matter we used to visit Hazrat Aisha (May Allah be pleased with her) and clarify our concepts.” It is also said that she has taught some eighty eight scholars. (qtd. in *Women’s Rights in Islam – Modernized or Outdated*, Naik 24)

Mary Wollstonecraft in her vindication wishes women to pursue in the same direction. She avers, “Women might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses. And midwifery, decency seems to allot to them...they might, also, study politics...Business of various kinds, they might likewise pursue...” (*A Vindication* 208-209) The rich Islamic tradition during Prophet’s era had taken care of these aspects as well. Besides, Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) there were several other women scholars like Hazrat Umm e Salma (May Allah be pleased with her), the wife of Prophet (pbuh) who according to Ibn Hajar (r.a) has taught 32 scholars. It will be worth noticeable here that there were some women who had expertise in medicine and surgery like *Rafidah Aslamiya*, *Umme Muta*, *Umme Kabsh*. *Rafidah Aslamiya* had a nursing home next to Masjid e Nabvi (SAW). (qtd. in *Women’s Rights in Islam – Modernized or Outdated*, Naik 24-25)

Thus, according to Islam a woman has a special role to play for the upliftment of society and its culture. So, what Wollstonecraft is demanding, Islam has already taken care of that. Comparatively analyzing, it is quite clear that what is being proclaimed in the modern age, Islam with its deep insight, has given to the women an outstanding position in the society without any discrimination.

The only thing which Islam does not favour is co-education. Wollstonecraft emphasizes the aspect that both sexes should be educated together for their overall development:

...to improve both sexes they ought to be educated together, not only in private families but also in public schools...If boys and girls were permitted to pursue the same studies together, they might early learn the graceful decencies that produce modesty...Lessons of politeness and decorum (that rulebook that treads on the heels of falsehood...)” (A *Vindication* 237-238)

Islamic belief contradicts this view instead demands separate institutions for separate sexes to ensure the moral security. Islam in general, “discourages unnecessary intermingling of genders and determines separate spheres of activity for them. (Ahmad, *Religious Obligations* 25) Though there is compulsion for every female to get proper education, hence there may be reservation in terms of ‘unnecessary intermingling’ in the matter of seeking education, but, there is also a provision to establish separate educational institutions to ensure more productive results. According to a survey conducted in England it has been observed that the unisex institutions are showing brighter results, as per academics is concerned as compared to co-educational institutions. In the co-educational setup there is a definite possibility of the students to be inclined to build up evil designs towards each other which in turn can distract them from acquiring good results in academics. Their attention gets deviated as surveyed in America and even in India that students indulge in negative activities rather paying due attention to their studies. (Naik, Wordpress.Com)

iv. Economic Rights...

Economic aspect is also highlighted in the feministic texts whereby the fact is emphasized that women are denied their economic rights and are always dependent on their men to get economic benefits. Ibsen in “A Doll’s House” also exposes this nuisance by projecting Torvald Helmer as an overpowering male dominating his wife in every economic pursuit. He constantly and unnecessarily dictates to her that she must be economic in terms of spending money. He slates his wife by hurling the term ‘spendthrift’ on her thus, clues to the notion of women being recklessly dominated by men and suppressed by their rights. Helmer ridicules his wife as:

Helmer. Can you deny it, Nora dear? {He puts his
arm round her.) It’s a sweet little lark, but it gets
through a lot of money. No one would believe how
much it costs a man to keep such a little bird as you. (Ibsen, *Doll’s House* 10)

Ibsen through his play condemns this ill-formed patriarchal system based on sheer inequality and injustice. He projects the heroine as his mouthpiece to break the

shackles of the patriarchy who at the end leaves his husband and children to live a life devoid of the principle of male domination. When the same economic aspect is comparatively examined within the framework of Islam one can ascertain the fact that Islam does take care of women in terms of economic wellbeing which is a concern with other societies only in the twentieth century, as quotes Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, "...Historically, Islam had been very liberal and progressive in granting property rights to women. It is a fact that there were no property rights given to Hindu women until 1956, when the Hindu Code Bill was passed, whereas Islam had granted these rights to Muslim women over 1400 years ago." (*Women Between* 46) In Islamic constitution, a woman has a definite share in her father's property. Also, in marriage it is obligatory for a husband to give dower called 'Meher' to his wife as, mentioned in *Surah Nisa* in Verse 4, "And give the women their dower in good cheer. Then, if they give up some of it out of their own sweet will, you may have it to your advantage and pleasure." (Shafi and Shamim, Ma'arif 314)

v. Legal Rights...

Another right Islam gives a woman is to retain her maiden name. There is no compulsion for her to add her husband's name to her name. Islam also gives the right to be a witness fourteen centuries ago. In Jewish Rabai, in the 1980's they had a debate over the issue of whether a woman may be given a right to be a witness or not. A woman in an Islamic State could even interfere in the legal matters evident by an incident during Hazrat Umar (r.a.) reign whereby a woman openly challenged Umar (r.a.) when he was discussing with his companions about setting a limit on the 'Meher' convenient to every man, that woman claimed that in *Surah Nisa* Ch.4, Verse No.20 Allah says, "you can even give a heap of treasure, a heap of gold in Meher", when Qur'an puts no limit on 'Meher', who is Umar to put a limit (may Allah be pleased with him). Hazrat Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) he said on this occasion, "Umar is wrong and the lady is right". (qtd. in *Women's Rights in Islam — Modernized or Outdated*, Naik 28) Such are the reservations in Islam.

During Prophet's (pbuh) era, women also took part in battle fields either to serve water and first aid or in the *Battle of Uhud*, a woman named Hazrat Nasiba (r.a.) fought for Prophet (pbuh). But that particular society was the pure from every evil design. Not any kind of misconduct is recorded unlike the Modern society, as at the wake of feminism, women got the right of participation in battles in 1976 and in a single convention in USA, according to a report of the defense department of America released on the 23rd of April, 1993 in a convention eighty three women were sexually assaulted. (Naik, *Women Rights* 29) Thus, women in western societies did obtain Socio-economic and Lego-political rights, through the consistent feministic discourses, but, undoubtedly a woman is robbed of her dignity, family life and even she is still an object of sex though in a modern fashion.

Conclusion

Therefore, in the Islamic Civilization the cause of women is of profound significance. Islam empowers women in every aspect of life. In the history of civilizations the status women enjoy in Islam more or less, remains unparalleled. The prejudice of the west and some weak interpretations do create a wall between Islam and the world in terms of human rights in general and gender issues in particular. It needs a proper insight to evaluate the women question in Islam. The study tried to examine that right from its pristine age i.e. the era of Prophet (pbuh) Islam has been advocating a pure system devoid of any kind of discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, colour etc. Contrary to the western feminism which provides only a material view of the status of a woman devoid of any spirituality and which has rendered a certain position to women whereby all the moral and spiritual degradation is possible, Islam in its essence has given them their natural and due rights.

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