

## REVISITING POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM AND THEOLOGY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

*The postcolonial ethos, especially in terms of its association with feminism, calls for an increased focus on the role religion essentially plays in shaping up the lives and situations of women. The author, in this paper, tends to cover the diverse yet unified strands which characterize the feminist postcolonial theology as a new but so far overlooked paradigm. The paper is a review of the most prominent scholarship which is mainly produced by theorists belonging to regions that have survived colonialism. Beginning from the subaltern disposition and passing through the ideal of 'difference' as upheld by Indian postcolonial feminists, the journey will finally culminate in theology, as a means of either emancipation or suppression for the living experiences of the women from postcolonial and Middle Eastern societies.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, religion, technology, postcolonial

### INTRODUCTION

The academic study of religion which evolved in the mid-nineteenth century in the European universities was deeply embedded in the prevalent colonial and political ethos. There had been a conspicuous dependence of this study on the colonial powers for its sustenance and support that served the sacred mission of 'civilizing' the colonized. Similarly, the genesis of the ideology behind colonization and imperialism owes a lot to the Western religious heritage especially Christianity. In the contemporary milieu, where colonialism finds an archly critical reception, many critics like Hillary M. Carey, John P. Burriss and David Chidester have examined the multifarious relation that exists between religion and colonization. These critical responses, although influential in themselves, however falter in missing out the role that gender has to play in this realm. Gender operates as a catalyst in not only establishing the colonial identities but also nurtures the stratum of domination and submission.

However, the present-day situation is different altogether. We now have colonial and postcolonial feminists on move who are very much there to highlight the androcentricity that reinforces the gender-based differences among the human race. It appears that both gender and sexism have become the predominant concerns breathing in the colonial and postcolonial camp of study today. Yet, there is a wide-spread consciousness on the part of the contemporary criticism that we have the *Post Colonial Bible* on one hand and *Race, Gender and Sexuality* on the other with no one seriously inclined to address 'all' the constituents of the critical trilogy of Colonialism, Gender and Religion together. Many Euro-American female authors with Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether at the top have tended to study religion with the lens of feminism. Yet, they have only succeeded in giving out works preoccupied with the relationships existing between cultural-religious traditions and the gender system. There has been a lot of work done on sexuality, race and gender in the context

of colonialism and post colonialism, but there is not too much effort that virtually addresses the role religion has to play in the scenario.

The subjectivity and disenfranchisement of women, especially when done in the name of religion, is the point of focus for this paper. The author tends to undertake the journey beginning from Asian theorists in the last few decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century which later on got popular as postcolonial feminism or third world feminism. Interpolating this certain and newly born brand of feminism with the feminist theology of American and Asian feminists, the journey finally ends up in the strife that emerged from the Middle East in 1990s and was subsequently termed Islamic feminism. The paper is a survey of the eminent literature produced from these divergent quarters but all together shaping up the theoretical episteme of feminist postcolonial theology.

### **Women of the Third World: Postcolonial Feminism**

Giyatri Spivak's contribution is indeed of considerable worth in this connection since the concept of subaltern (and in this case female subaltern) provides a sustaining backdrop for theorizing the subordination of women. Besides taking sub alternate as an intricate postulate of the contemporary postcolonial paradigm, it also stands as an umbrella concept exposing certain marginalized subject positions breathing in any specific social or cultural context. A historical tracing of the concept of Subaltern tells that it was Antonio Gramsci who, in his *Prison Notebooks*, took up the word while referring fundamentally to any individual or group of individuals who are considered 'low rank' in a 'particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation' (Louai, 2012). It was however Giyatri Spivak in 1985 who revived the debate on subaltern expanding its theoretical underpinnings to the historical developments of politics of capitalism and the way labor is divided in a globalized world order. (Louai, 2012) With her famous interrogation on the mutability of the sub alternate, Giyatri Spivak imparts another extension to the status of the suppressed or marginalized. Feminism has been an idea not new or radical, but postcolonial feminism is indeed something relatively new. The dual colonization women are subject to during and even after colonization have been addressed by Spivak remarkably. Her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* acts as an onslaught on the most agreed-over meaning of the term 'Subaltern'. She has rather extended the scope of sub-alternate to all those (with a suggested caution) who are out of the ruling hegemony of imperialism. However, at the end, she specifically alludes to the female subaltern, who is actually faced with double colonization. Postcolonial or Third World feminism stands apart from the White feminism of the West while denouncing it in the favor of non-White or non-Western woman. The hegemonic 'Western' feminism can thus also be taken to task in this connection.

Spivak's popular rearticulation of the histories of subaltern women has brought about a change which is radical as far as the terms and focus of western feminist episteme is concerned. (Morton, 2003) Spivak insists that feminism, with due gravity, must look at the actual lives, experiences and material histories of the 'Third World' women as far as their struggles and situation against oppression are concerned. The way cross-cultural and cross-gender differences have been over simplified by Western feminists needs to be addressed. This partially explains why one needs to sit and decipher the oppression experienced by a Third World woman and that sustained by a woman belonging to the First World. Chandra Talpade Mohanti talks over the matter with these convictions while also questioning the universality of oppression executed by man over the woman. Her essay, *Under Western Eyes* (1984) appears to be a developing move against discursive colonization. Her methodological stance operates in favor of decolonizing the feminist methodology where she views the

efforts of First World women (subjects) tending to speak for (or perhaps in place of) Third World women, a dynamics involved in establishing power hierarchies and cultural dominations. To Mohanty, the construction of the Third world woman, in the annals of history of white feminist discourse, has always been monolithic establishing the former as a mere 'victim'. Mohanty places the issue of identity formation of the woman of color in diverse historical and cultural contexts. This makes her out rightly assault the white feminists' stand point who believe the Third World women as 'already constructed, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial locations, or contradictions'. This, in a certain way, paralyses the outflow of the complexities and intricacies that characterize the lives and situations of Third World women thus labeling the Third World as debased, under developed and backward.

### **Feminist Postcolonial Theology**

The employment of feminist theology at this point owes to the fact that it is surely religion (besides a few other factors) which stands fundamental in shaping up the lives and experiences of women who are the inhabitants of postcolonial societies. Keeping in view the neo-colonial grappling, as this sieges the global and especially the post-colonial world order, while imprisoning it into a complex web of war and capitalism, the idea of difference (which is laudably celebrated by postcolonial feminists) should be looked at with a critical eye. Difference, besides being a manifestation of the variety characterizing God's creations, also accounts for relationships between people and nations marked with stigmatization and exclusion. The interest of the postcolonial critique in the investigation of power relations brings it close to theology. This initiates a certain stream in the paradigm of postcolonial feminism popularly known as feminist postcolonial theology. *Post colonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse* (2002) by Laura E. Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan is a prominent work on the subject that argues that gender, religion and colonial triumph are indispensable to each other. However, the relationship among the three factors is quite tangled and needs a serious effort for unpacking. The editors have successfully demonstrated a consciousness of the minor role played by gender in the postcolonial work on religious and Biblical studies. The book comprises articles by individual critics who examine the theology of the white feminists in terms of their misappropriation of the religious and social beliefs of the women of color and those belonging to the Third World. Women, in the context of colonialism, experience liberation and empowerment when it comes to their dismissal of the Western legacies against their indigenous cultural and traditional structures. Similarly, Kwok in her work *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (2005) emphasizes the need to decolonize both the religion (Christianity) and its observer since it is generally believed that theology actually flourished in dominant and imperialist cultures. With a remarkable inspiration from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, she goes back to Christian theologians who, being the founders of the 'Christian West', are responsible for a negative and mystified representation of the 'Orient' sustaining and breathing under the schemata of colonial politics. The Western Christian model is both self-serving and burgeoning in its subalternist treatment to the Buddhist, Hindus and Islamic traditions that mutually characterize the Orient.

Similarly, we have *Postcolonial Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* (2009) by Purushottama Bilimoria and Andrew B. Irvine as another anthology of essays that addresses the problematic issues of sex, gender, class and race pertaining to the philosophy of religion especially the one breathing in the contemporary world of growing consciousness. These essays impart varying treatments to the subject while adopting psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, postmetaphysical and epistemological frameworks. In terms of subaltern/postcolonial ethos, Bilimoria offers an insight on the philosophy of religion under

the microscope of the historical estrangement between faith and reason. Keeping the cases of India and North America in view, it is difficult to compare religions since religions function as organic wholes which cannot be dissected for making comparisons. The volume nevertheless poses a number of questions especially on the ambiguity of philosophy of religion and the role post colonialism has and should perform. Should the indigenous or subaltern voices contribute in furthering the scope and immensity of postcolonial philosophy of religion? Is it that the most sophisticated voices in postcolonial study have contributed to further colonization of the heritage and legacy in an age of modernity and modern sensibility of religion? What is however important is one's positioning of oneself as philosophizing with the other or for the other.

### **Ours and Theirs: Orientalism and the Question of Woman in Islam**

Singh (2004) establishes that these were middle east specialists, Arabists and those studying East Asia and the Indian subcontinent who used the term 'Orient' for the first time. The researcher believes that any study conducted in the context of these parts of the world (or the East) calls for support from Orientalism. This is for such a study can never be self-containing. In a most globalized order of the world today, it is hard for the academia to study a subject in isolation from others. East is not only what it is but also what others believe it to be. And when it comes to Orient, how can one forget to talk about the founding father of the study on Orient. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2001) is indeed the foundational work that addresses the long-standing and established tradition of contriving false images of Asia and Middle East as a justification of setting up American and European colonial regimes in these lands.

Said draws inspiration from Michel Foucault's idea that knowledge has been at the mercy of power. So whatever shape knowledge assumes, that is bestowed upon it by the hegemony it is part of. This accounts for why Orient has been established as mythical, magical, exotic and sensual while Occident is all what Orient is not. To Said, actually it is the binary opposition between Orient and the West that defines and justifies the later. Nevertheless, the former needs an appropriate representation since it is considered to be dumb and disable. West has always been targeting the Orient on behalf of its so-called inclination for autocracy and despotism, sensuality, mythical horror and a backward mentality. It is thus representation, as said by Said that has turned into misrepresentation.

Owing to the beliefs upheld by feminists like Leila Ahmed, the author is of the view that Islam, both in itself and especially in terms of its treatment towards women, has always been received by the West in a most biased and parochial manner. To the West, Islam is all unchanging and monolithic opening up ways for the slavery and subordination of women. Such ideas actually belong to the camp of Orientalist thoughts upheld by the West where, as Said documents, there has been a growing fascination with *harem* and veil which mutually signify women's oppression and eroticism together. With special reference to Islam, we have Muslim feminist writers who, through their theory, have been striving to resolve the intricacies involved in the issue. Leila Ahmed is one of these who are intensely conscious of the egalitarian spirit of Islam. Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) dilates upon her quest of the historical roots of a debate which is contemporary. She sits upon studying Islam's position in terms of its being inherently or uniquely sexist. Ahmed, in her endeavors, provides a meta-analysis of the tilt of the Western intelligentsia to consider Muslim women as some historical specimens destined to gender-based prejudices. Ahmed critically lays bare the relation that exists between a colonial mind set concealing cultural imperialism with sympathy for the Muslim women against the way they are subjugated and the present-day discourse on gender and sex as they exist in the Muslim world. While studying the historic development of misogynist and patriarchal tendencies in the cultural, societal and legal

structures in Sunni Islam, Ahmed believes that as Islam spread through ages and various geographically distinct regions, it came to lose its egalitarian origins which were either deliberately ignored or forgotten by the patriarchal structures institutionalizing and establishing Islam. Leila Ahmed has forthrightly explained the traces left by such forces on the present-day understanding of gender and women's place in Islam. There is thus a two-fold task of redefining their role and identity in postcolonial and patriarchal social structure.

Upholding feminism as an epistemology rather than a mere ideology, Miriam Cooke in *Women Claim Islam* (2001) evaluates the effect it casts on the lives of Arab women when especially reflected through the literature they produce. Arab women, today, are striving to be heard and seen primarily on account of the Islamic discourse which is widespread and gives unprecedented importance to women. The discourse entails the revolution in information technology as a result of which there is a strong sense of networking and linkage among women and at all national, transnational and international levels. They are today questioning the male hegemony in terms of production and establishment of official Islamic knowledge. Muslim feminists, either secular or Islamist, are directing their energy in interrogating how contemporary advancements in technology besides the renewed meta-cultural consciousness of 'Islamic' can go parallel when it comes to the issue of survival in a world which is rapidly transforming. Cooke casts a glance at the narratives of the Arab women who crave to be heard with a more pronounced and redefined identity in a manner which is increasingly political. This gives birth to an Islamic feminism which is sort of burgeoning. Islamic feminism, with Cooke, is no less than a paradigm proper since she provides historical, theological and political foundations for its establishment. Cooke's argument is based on the trajectory of political and historical developments in the Arab world. With this, she looks into Arab women's resistance to the androcentricity operative in the emergence of 'official Islamic knowledge' Muslim voices like those of Huda Sharawi and Nazira Zayn-al-Din openly questioned the male authorities that have been dictating the historical, political and theological discourses about Muslim women. Cooke draws examples from contemporary Arab world where Muslim women are active in the public and private spheres of life thus paving way for the dissemination and understanding of Islamic knowledge from a gendered standpoint.

The marginalization of Muslim women and the control of their movements are the key concerns of the hermeneutical presuppositions of Fatima Mernissi. Her worries owe mainly to Western feminism and contemporary Islamic thought. Nevertheless, she never accepts Western feminism *in toto* while her works demonstrate indebtedness to the works of Western feminists in the footnotes only. To her, the Western traditional patriarchy looks at women as passive and inferior while in Islam, female sexuality is considered active and dangerous. For Muslim women, the ultimate end is not equality with men but an overall dismissal of the sexual patterns attached with female. The solution lies in the relationship of Muslim with their past. The Arab Muslim past is read selectively while taking egalitarianism as an import from the West. With Mernissi, there comes the term 'Nisaism' in contrast to 'feminism' of the West. This is actually a term that defines the ideological and theoretical stance of the women existing in the contemporary Islamic world. Mernissi's agenda of 'Nisait' differs from Western feminism on the grounds that it does not take men to task as is traditionally done by feminists. Secondly, it poses an opposition to the oppression executed in the name of (traditional and misinterpreted) Islam. To her, the major justification behind white feminist's anti-male stance is the physical threat that they expect from them. But Muslim women should not show such type of an anti-male position since unlike their white fellow creatures; they do not harbor any such fears from the opposite sex. Mernissi's Nisaism believes in co-opting

men in the struggle for equality of rights and benefits for all the masses in the Muslim society. It somehow discourages the demonizing of men since Nisaism does not borrow everything from Western feminism nor does it look up to it for its strength and support.

### **Gender Equality Bracketed Out: Islamic Feminism Criticized**

Any compatibility between Islam and feminism is however oxymoronic for many. Such voices can be recently heard mainly from Iranian leftists who are gravely at odds with the establishment of Islam in Iran as a legal and political system than being a matter of one's personal or spiritual choice. To illustrate, Haideh Moghissi is one of these. Moghissi, in the course of her argument in *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism* looks at Islam as 'a religion which is based on gender hierarchy [and] the struggle for gender democracy and women's equality with men' (Moghissi, 1999:126). Both Quran and Shariah do not support the equality of the two genders. Moghissi observes that the women who have been advocating the cause of Islamic feminism are not a part of the Muslim societies but diasporic academicians and researchers living their lives in the West. Being a leftist, Moghissi out rightly establishes that the divine law has always demonstrated hostility towards the notion of feminism and those seeing a ray of hope while struggling within the framework of Islam are extremely forgiving and these are postmodern relativist feminists living in the West. Celebrating Islamic feminism alludes 'to highlight only one of the many forms of identity available to Middle Eastern women, obscuring ways that identity is asserted or reclaimed, overshadowing forms of struggle outside religious practices and silencing the secular voices which are still raised against the region's stifling Islamification policies (Moghissi, 1999: 137-38).

Hammed Shahidian, in a number of his articles, presents many another such cases according to which the hermeneutics of Islamic feminism are problematical whether in Iran or elsewhere. Shahidian further asserts that the role performed by Islamic feminists has been over shadowing the efforts of the secularists and leftists who have been persistent in facing the wrath of Islamic political repression in Iran. Shahidian dismisses the contribution of women like Fatima Mernissi and Asma Barlas who managed to devise a feminist theology by reinterpreting the Quranic text. Such efforts, to him, are all futile, conservative and orthodox based on inspiration from stifling trends and institutions breathing in the Islamic fundamentalist camps. This makes Shaidian share Moghissi's views regarding feminism in collision with Islam and their oxymoronic relation. He is also critical of the Islamic feminists in Iran who, to him, have been following the Western feminist models. He discredits their efforts on account of their negligence of the key issues like sexuality, veiling and Shariah.

### **CONCLUSION**

The cross-cultural and multi-ethnic feminist currents among the post-colonial societies have recently developed feminist postcolonial theology as a subject of both academic and sociological scrutiny. This reveals that women are no longer the silent followers and observers of religion but are now in a position to code and even re-code it in their favor. The post 9/11 situation has changed the global order into something most heterogeneous and disparate where things seem to be in strict compartmentalization labeled as 'ours' or 'theirs'. This calls for an increased consciousness on the part of feminists belonging to third world and post-colonial backgrounds, especially when there is either an existence or anticipation of the neo-colonial order they are likely to be a part of. Any polemics involving religion as a shield against such backdrops should be fully exploited (especially by Muslim and Islamic feminists) who are on a move to seek all the legitimate possibilities of emancipation and balance.

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