

The Critical Study of Islamic Feminism in Benazir Bhutto's Daughter of the East: An Autobiography

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Abstract

The paper seeks to contextualize Islamic feminism in Benazir Bhutto's Daughter of the East: An Autobiography. The theoretical position has been propounded by Fatima Seedat for the equality work by female Muslim researchers (Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, and Fatima Mernissi). Islamic feminism employs western feminist methods to construe the Muslim women's equality struggle and subsumes their religious, cultural and social heterogeneities. It emerges from the convergence of Islam and feminism, yet it does not seem to adequately address the issue of sex equality in Islam. Bhutto draws the Muslim model of female struggle in the early history of Islam and espouses Hazrat Khadija (R.A), Hazrat Umm-e-Umara (R.A), Hazrat Ayesha (R.A), and Hazrat Zainab (R.A) as the archetypes of female struggle in Islam. Nevertheless, Bhutto denigrates the Sharia limitations of political participation, purdah (veiling), co-gatherings, dress code, and seclusion of Muslim women as patriarchal and anti-women. Her demand for the reinterpretation of the Holy Quran aligns her thoughts with liberal feminism. The narrative of the (mis)convergence of Islam and feminism reveals the repulsive alterity between the two intellectual paradigms. Thus, the paper questions Bhutto's discursive shift on Muslim women's rights from the propagation of the Muslim mode of female struggle to western feminism.

Index Terms

Islamic feminism, convergence, western feminism, reinterpretation, alterity

I. INTRODUCTION

The former Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto discourses the Islamic mode of female struggle against social injustice, patriarchy, gender discrimination, and male-dominated politics in Daughter of the East: An Autobiography. After her father's execution during the Zia regime, she entered the political world to seek justice for her deceased father and to restore democracy to her country. Bhutto claims to have the perseverance of Hazrat Khadija (R.A.), Hazrat Muhammad's (PBUH) first wife, the determination of Hazrat Imam Hussein's sister Hazrat Zainab (R.A.) (276), and Hazrat Ayesha's (R.A.) wisdom, and many other

Muslim women who served Islam (282). She develops a Muslim model of female struggle to counter the Islamization project of the Zia regime. Seedat posits, "The broad narrative of Islamic feminism is of newly educated Muslim women who offer innovative challenges to Islam" (42). It seems an effort to produce a convergence of Islam and feminism.

The article neither tends to invent an alternative theoretical paradigm to counter Islamic feminism or western feminism nor does it aim to demean the viability of feminism for women empowerment and equality work in Muslim and non-Muslim societies. It seems that Muslim female scholars have produced a significant oeuvre close to the theoretical borders of feminism raising questions on the possibilities of the convergence of Islam and feminism. Moghissi theorizes that Islamic feminism reveals a difficult and dual commitment to Islam and feminism related to the public and private lives of Muslim women (78). Seedat advocates Moghissi's position on Islamic feminism, "Instead, the questions I raise here are prompted by the apparent need to find equivalence between Muslim women's equality work and feminism and by the seemingly difficult task of resisting the hegemony of the European intellectual heritage" (26). It infers that the theoretical project named "Islamic feminism", indicating the fusion of Islam and feminism, attempts to create a collaborative link between these two paradigms instead of allowing intellectual differences and diverse cultural contexts.

Islamic feminism critically concerns the role of Muslim women in Islam. It aims to ensure equality for all Muslims irrespective of gender both in public and private life. Islamic feminism calls for social justice, women's rights, and gender equality grounded on the reinterpretation of the Holy Quran and the Hadith. Regardless of the Holy Quran and the Hadith being the primary sources of Islamic law, the Muslim modern scholars (Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud etc.) employ the discourses of western, secular and non-Muslim feminist modes and serve feminism as an inclusive global feminist movement (Badran 38). They locate the commandments of gender equality in the Holy Quran and require the reinterpretation of religious discourse. The theorists of Islamic feminism are Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, Riffat Hassan, Asma Lamrabet, and Asma Barlas. These activists censure the restrictions placed on Muslim

women concerning Purdah (veiling), co-gatherings, dress code, seclusion, education and polygamy (Badran 40).

Seedat theorizes the Islamic mode of female struggle known as Islamic feminism in her essay "Islam, Feminism, and Islamic Feminism: Between Inadequacy and Inevitability". She elaborates on the critical space between two intellectual paradigms (Islam and feminism) that covers Muslim women's anti-colonial struggle in this neo-colonial present. There are two approaches to Muslim women's struggle for equality and justice in Muslim societies. First is the fundamentalist one that precludes the possibility and necessity of convergence of Islam and feminism. The second one the Muslim feminist approach neither supports nor opposes the convergence and "takes Islam for granted" employing feminist methods suited to various reform aspirations in Muslim societies. The intellectuals of the second approach (Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud) assume their theoretical position as reparation for the historical absence of gender equality in Islam (25). It seems that Islamic feminism is an inevitable outcome of the convergence of feminism and Islam, yet it is inadequate to address the problems of women in Muslim societies. Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud resist the naming of this new analytic construct as Islamic feminism (Seedat 27), however; Islamic feminism perpetuates new comprehensions of sex differences emerging in non-western and anti-colonial paradigms.

It seems that Bhutto penetrates the thoughts of western feminism into the theoretical space of Islamic feminism to reconcile Islam with the west. Muslim model of female struggle includes equal rights and opportunities within the Islamic social system, however; Bhutto analyzes this sensitivity and adapts the Islamic commandments on a system of government, economy, dress code, veiling, education and social gatherings to the ideology of feminism. Similarly, Asma Barlas rejects the way Badran, the critic of Islamic feminism, characterizes her gender equality work in Islam as Islamic feminism. Asma Barlas uses feminist methods for the analysis of Muslim women's struggle against social injustice and patriarchy (Seedat 26). Badran argues that Muslim female modernists have particular mindsets, demands and thoughts similar to the western feminist theorists, therefore, they are labelled as Islamic feminists not because of the proper adjective "Islamic" which indicates the identity of the Muslim scholars as 'Other' of western feminism. Badran declines any probability of the intellectual role of Islam in the formation of Islamic feminism and considers Islam as a patriarchal and anti-feminist religion. However, Barlas counters this anti-Islam construct with the argument that Islam is anti-patriarchal and seeks to undo all the patriarchal structures (Seedat 38).

The advent of feminism in Pakistan originated as a result of the political upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s. After the coup of 1977, General Zia launched his disputed project of Islamization of Pakistani society in response to the former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's political thought of revolutionary Islamic socialism which aimed at reforming the social and political landscape of the country (Bhutto 185). Bhutto continues, "Under Zia, all this [the plan of revolution through Islamic socialism] was reversed" (199). Islamization manoeuvred mullah (clergy), money and the military and pursued the implementation of Sharia in an egalitarian manner

to ensure the reformation of the Muslim society where ninety-eight per cent of the population already practices Islam (261). She writes, "The [Zia] regime had tried to impose their bigoted minority views on the rest of the country" (261). Islamization was disseminated as a rejection of Islamic socialism, the fusion of Islamic teachings and socialist thought, as a rejection of western thought and civilization. However, Bhutto modelled her struggle against the military regime as an Islamic mode of female struggle by alluding to the female figures in the early history of Islam.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The Muslim female political leaders theorize feminism in Islamic discourse as an anti-colonial struggle in the neo-colonial present (Seedat 25). In her article "The Fight for the Liberation of Women: Excerpts, Remarks, 4 September 1995", Bhutto argues they (Pakistani women) must differentiate between the teachings of Islam and social taboos that deny justice and freedom to women. Islamic teachings discourage gender, colour and race as the merits of distinction among fellow Muslims. Nevertheless, Islamic law approves piety as the only criterion for the evaluation of human beings. According to these teaching, a woman reserves the right to inherit, divorce, and get alimony and child custody. Since the emergence of Islam, Muslim women became soldiers, jurists, intellectuals and poets. The Holy Quran describes the rule of a woman, the Queen of Sabah, her wisdom and her country being the land of abundance. Hazrat Muhammad (PBUH) himself put an end to female infanticide, the practice of Pre-Islamic Arabia (91-93). This is a scholarly trend of the Muslim modernist that uses feminist methods suited to various reform aspirations in the Muslim communities.

Modern western feminists impose their thought and ideology on Muslim women and highlight them as effective ways of empowerment in the Muslim post-colonial states. "At issue here is feminism's claims to know other women's ways of being self-sufficient well to propose solutions to their problems, in much the same way that other women might have suggested solutions to their problems" (Seedat 41). In her article "Benazir Bhutto: A Willful Muslim Woman", Jangbar construes that western media biasedly portrays Muslim women as submissive, ignorant and subjugated, however; many Muslim women reject this conjecture about themselves (79). Having analyzed more than two hundred news articles, Gill resolves that British media "perpetuates stereotypes of Muslim women as wives and mothers, as passive and submissive, and as victims and sex slaves" (qtd. in Jangbar 79). The news articles and stories often emphasize Muslim women's struggle against Hijab (veiling) instead of employment and education. Terman concludes that correspondents report on Muslim women when they suffer human rights violations whereas non-Muslim women are immensely depicted in news sections when they are honoured, appreciated and celebrated (qtd. in Jangbar 79).

Jangbar constructs counter documentation of a willful and progressive Muslim woman by exploring the achievements of Pakistan's former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. "Islamic feminism constructed as a necessary outcome of Muslim women's feminist aspirations is a claim to render gender struggles in Islam

equivalent to gender struggles represented by historical feminism” (Seedat 42). Bhutto’s willfulness developed a substance for collective action that ousted a despotic regime and extended the boundaries of possibilities of higher achievements for Muslim women. By employing Sara Ahmed’s theoretical framework of willfulness, she develops three themes: how Benazir converted herself into a distinguished woman, how she spread willfulness across the country, and how her willfulness enabled female leadership in the Muslim world. Even though the Muslim population around the globe belongs to diverse nationalities, cultures, ethnicity, education and family systems, western media platforms deny this heterogeneity that Muslims are religiously monolithic and that Muslim women have homogenous practices in their societies (Jangbar 83). The indiscriminate classification of submissive Muslim women is challenging because it thwarts gratitude to Muslim women who struggle against patriarchy and achieve rights in their communities.

In her article “Bhutto’s Pakistan/ Pakistan’s Bhutto: Daughter of the East”, Ray Claims that Benazir Bhutto’s autobiography *Daughter of the East: An Autobiography* records the tragedy of a woman. The military regime of General Zia executed her father, extra-judicially killed her two brothers (Shahnawaz and Murtaza) and unlawfully persecuted the Bhutto women (Benazir and her mother) on the allegations of a false murder case. These incidents are so pathetically interpreted that the tragedy of the Bhutto family seems to be the tragedy of the Pakistani nation (410). “Many in Pakistan have come to believe that the victimization of the Bhutto family and our supporters was the Karbala of our generation” (Bhutto 251). She situates her story in the martyr cult of Shiite Imam (the Karbala tragedy) to glorify her life history. Ray’s article traces how Bhutto builds the narrative of convergence of nationalist historiography, political legacy and self-validation which causes a tension between personal political interests and their legitimization, and challenges boundaries of national and personal space (411).

Seedat postulates that the Western feminists correlate Western feminist discourse with the problems of all the women in the world: “Though intended as a corrective to the homogenizing effects of the second wave, third-wave feminism frequently returns instead to posit white liberal ways of being woman as universal ways of being woman” (28). Bhutto elaborates on the idea of oppression against women in a male-dominated society. Women are physically, politically, socially and culturally undermined because of their biosphere, social and cultural reasons. The regime sensed that Bhutto was expecting a child. It used this ploy to impede her participation in the elections and recommended the election date clash with her pregnancy period. However, Bhutto remained indomitable, managed to supervise the election campaign, lead her party to historical victory, and proved her political adversaries wrong in their anticipations (320).

Zia argues that a significant turnaround has occurred in the political and feminist discourses in Pakistan. Feminism embedded in Islamic discourse seems non-confrontational, privatized and individualized whose ultimate objective is to empower women within Islam. However, in the post-9/11 world, the proponents of feminism in Islam seem to incline toward the progressive women’s movement in the Muslim world (29). “Political

modernity traces its roots back to pervasive categories and concepts whose genealogies are embedded in the intellectual and theological traditions of Europe” (Chakarbarti xxi). The secular feminist movements of 1980s have triggered this possible epistemological shift in the discourse on feminism in Islam and paved the way for the marginalization of the concept of women empowerment in Islam by legitimizing such voices. Hence, both brands of western feminism and feminism in Islam have been diluted in their effectiveness and strength because of discriminatory religious laws, and diverse political systems on account of their divided goals. Concisely, it may be considered as the theoretical inconsistency of the political strategies, feminist discourse and the Muslim identities of the secular feminists that instigate the Islamic feminists to redefine the feminist agenda in Pakistan.

The significant and contentious slogan in the political resistance raised by Pakistani feminists is “men, money, mullahs and the military”. This approach of the feminists reveals their structural moorings and clarity in confrontation against the state, military, and capitalist development. The liberal activists of feminism in their debates are confronted by their own religious identity which produces theoretical ambivalence and marks the movement which may cause serious implications for the future of the women’s rights movement in Pakistan. Bhutto’s pro-women program encouraged the feminist movement to engage her government in a meaningful manner. Benazir Bhutto categorically reinforced the suspension of Islamic laws such as the Hudood Ordinances, although she never succeeded to do so (261). Likewise, modern Muslim feminists seek to reinterpret religious texts in both modern and indigenous contexts rather than in a classical interpretation or western feminist discourse, a new brand of feminism which is in-between western feminism and Islamic feminism.

III. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Benazir Bhutto’s Concept of Islamic Feminism

Islamic feminism traces its roots in western feminism on the grounds of gender equality and women empowerment. Bhutto interprets her political struggle against the Islamization project of Gen. Zia’s regime by developing the conceptual framework of Islamic feminism, an Islamic mode of female struggle. She tries to find the justification, foundation, and legitimization of her equality work and the model of feminist struggle in the early history of Islam. She premises her argument that Hazrat Khadija (R.A) successfully established her own business, employed and married the Holy Prophet (PBUH), and Hazrat Umm-e-Umara participated in the battles against infidels (30). Hazrat Ayesha (R.A) remained an authority on the knowledge of the Holy Quran and Hadith, and Hazrat Zainab (R.A.) overtly condemned the persecution of her family (the Karbala tragedy) by Yazid I in his court (276). Perhaps, it is a hybrid theoretical construct which attempts to homogenize the Muslim model of female struggle and feminism on women’s rights. Bhutto’s intellectual construct addresses women’s issues regarding domestic violence, demand for democracy, Purdah (veiling), and customs of social gatherings for the feminist-reform

ambitions in the Muslim society in conflation with western feminism, homogenization of Islam and feminism.

Bhutto challenges the conventional and patriarchal notion of Muslim society about Muslim women and counters it through the grand narrative of a religious discourse that aligns her concept of Islamic feminism with the western model of feminism, the intersection of Islam and feminism. Seedat argues, "In the 1990s, scholars such as Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas instigated new trajectory of [Islamic] thought that implicated early Muslim societies and contemporary Muslim practice in the decline of Muslim women's status" (26). While locating Islamic feminism in the Islamic context, it is important to consider if there is an epistemological connection between Islam and feminism. It seems that the Muslim female authors' work on gender equality moves along the theoretical lines of feminism. This discursive intellectual shift and the successive work affect the Islamic thought on women's rights and supposedly confine it to Islamic feminism. The question arises whether this supposedly theoretical intersection of feminism and Islam maintains itself and erases differences between these two intellectual paradigms or not.

It seems that the intersection of Islam and feminism is a far-fetched theoretical pursuit of Muslim female researchers because both stand in opposition to each other on the ground of the role and responsibilities of Muslim women. The emergence of Islamic feminism is inevitable as it is the legacy of the western culture of enlightenment in the distant eastern countries, yet it is inadequate to inclusively address the concerns of both western and non-western women. Bhutto progressively propagates liberal feminism; however, she conforms to the Islamic mode of female struggle while theorizing her concept of feminism. This dichotomy between the theoretical western and non-western positions on the demands, place, roles, rights and equality of Muslim women demarcates Islam and feminism. Mohanty exposes the hegemony of western feminism. It discursively colonizes "the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third-world countries" (62). Through the invention of the "third-world difference" construct, western feminism constitutes religious and social complexities in the lives of Muslim women from anti-colonial countries. Bhutto resists gender segregation at official and social gatherings. She narrates that the women had no access to media coverage; the journalists were not allowed to enter the fundamentalist Muslim colonies (294) and the Islamization agenda was "women are not safe with men". Bhutto's criticism of Islamic social customs indicates the hegemony of western liberal feminism that attempts to integrate the differences in religions, cultures and societies into modern western ways of living.

Chakrabarty challenges the hegemony of western feminist discourse which proliferates the inclusive nature of feminism for all women across the world, the legacy of European enlightenment in distant countries (xxi). "Some boundaries are being breached among women while other boundaries are being erected" (Badran 39). The feminist discourse colonizes the material and historical heterogeneities of the women from third-world countries and tries to (appropriate their lives under the western model of gender equality. Hence, it may cause new

complexities in the lives of these women when they try to achieve homogeneity with the west in non-western countries. "Tensions are surfacing in some quarters between secular and Islamic feminist positions, although more broadly secular and Islamic feminist are working in tandem" (Badran 39). Seedat continues to highlight the third-world difference that third-wave feminism is grounded on new sensitivities to the practicality of the role of sex and gender and the differences among women from different religiopolitical backgrounds (28).

The (Mis)Convergence of Islam and Feminism

Bhutto evolves her concepts of the Muslim mode of female struggle into the western mode of women struggle in the context of her struggle against the Zia regime to bring democracy to Pakistan. "Now is the time for serious political work. In this social movement stage what is needed is not more theology but more politics" (Badran). "The press saw it more as a dramatic and poignant confrontation between a young woman and a military dictator, a modern and feminist version of David and Goliath" (Bhutto 267). Ahmed-Gosh says, "Western feminism is viewed as an imposition of Western cultural values in contradiction to Islamic cultural values" (4). The biblical interpretation of Bhutto's struggle against the Zia regime seems to mark the hybrid composition of her narrative of Islamic feminism. The westernization of Islam in the framework of feminism is a stereotype of feminism which tends to find its inclusiveness in Islamic countries.

Islamic feminism epistemologically borrows from western feminism in its equality work and feminist methods of analysis of the problems of women. Bhutto seems to (mis)appropriate her liberal feminist construct to Islam: "We learned at an early age that it was men's interpretation of our religion that restricted women's opportunities, not our religion itself. Islam had been quite progressive towards women from its inception..." (28). A group of feminists espouse Islamic feminism as a tool with an emphasis to reinterpret the Holy Quran and question the Hadith and Sharia in Islamic countries (Tohidi 4). Wadud claims that the Holy Quran guarantees equal rights to women and demands the 'proper' interpretation of the Holy Quran (38). In the guise of demand for the reinterpretation of the Holy Quran and Hadith, Bhutto seems to express the need and utility of Islamic feminism in the Muslim society to serve her purpose of developing an anti-Islamization project corresponding to her political feminism. Seedat writes, "The difference between need and utility is fine but significant in the convergence of Islam and feminism" (33).

Bhutto's demand for the reinterpretation of the Holy Quran is a call for the feminist tafsir of the Holy text. It shows that the classical tafsirs of the Holy Quran do not seem to provide social justice and gender equality to Muslim women in Muslim societies. Wadud claims to mention the difference between the classical interpretation of the Holy Quran and modern concepts of social justice: "Muslim women create their voice as they experience the text (the Holy Quran) (41). Sheikh construes the feminist tafsir as the "the tafsir of praxis" (73). This discursive approach to the reinterpretation of the holy Quran seems beyond

understanding that how the scriptures can be reinterpreted in the light of social experience instead of the divine commandments. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet argue that the result of the discursive approach to the classical tafsir of the Holy Quran and gender difference, for Muslim women's equality work, is the continuous meaning-making of the holy text (17).

Bhutto accuses the Zia regime of being repressive and divisive toward women. The women were socially, politically and economically subdued (263). These uncanny conditions created unusual questions (294). She writes that Jamat-e-Islami's student wing, with support from Gen. Zia, insisted on imposing the fundamental law that women are not supposed to be safe with men (262). However, she proudly mentions that Bhutto women still live in purdah, are rarely allowed to leave the four walls of their compounds and are completely covered in black burqas (veils) (28). To confront the religious fundamentalism of the Zia regime, she propagates the western mode of feminism, which is contradictory to her aforementioned Islamic leanings. Paradoxically, she resists all the Islamic and cultural norms of veil and purdah in which she previously took pride. The prevalence of the narrative of feminism fosters the possibility that it is inevitable to consider women's struggle for justice and equality in both western and non-western countries as the feminist one.

The (mis)convergence of Islam and feminism attempts to correlate the problems and challenges of Muslim women with that of western women. Bhutto argues in "The Fight for the Liberation of Women" that a Muslim woman silently bears domestic violence and persecution for the sake of her children and does not walk out, for she has no other shelter or refuge beside her husband's house. This is how domestic violence becomes a tradition and women are destined to it after signing the marital bond (Nikah) (93). "This is only a slight departure from the historical western narrative that explicitly associates Islam with the oppression of women" (42). Bhutto argues in "The Fight for the Liberation of Women" that we initiated an awareness campaign against domestic violence through media platforms in Pakistan to intimate our men and women that domestic violence is a punishable crime. It can also be pursued by the in-laws of a woman. Sometimes a wife is killed by her husband or in-laws to get more dowries since the dowry system is a social evil. Women are the victims of cultural exclusion and patriarchy (male dominance) in Pakistan (95). The attempts of amalgamation neither inflate nor conflate the space between Islam and feminism. However, instead of suggesting solutions to the problems of Muslim women, Islamic feminists try to interpret these problems in the western feminist discourse.

The third-wave feminism has incorporated new ideological sensitivities and differences into the convergence of feminism and Islam concerning religious faith and civilizational heritage. Seedat claims, "Post-colonial feminism, however, has challenged the way [through which] difference has been incorporated into feminism" (28). Bhutto builds a narrative of Islamic feminism but she has some contradictions and inconsistencies within her discourse on Islamic feminism and the (mis)convergence of Islam and feminism. On women's rights, she theoretically benefits herself from both Islamic and western feminist discourses; this disparity damages her stance on the Islamic mode of female struggle. Suvorova reveals how the third-world difference results. Bhutto's

eastern image as a Muslim female political leader, a desi (local) image, is for domestic purposes to lure a domestic audience and the western image, a secular and progressive image, is to class her among the western political scientists (99). Bhutto's concept of the Islamic mode of female struggle (Islamic feminism) is contradictory in content and thought to the theory itself. She and her political identity remain disputed in the theoretical trope of the Islamic mode of female struggle and the western norms of sex equality.

IV. CONCLUSION

Bhutto's concept of feminism based on the convergence of Islam and feminism questions her stance on female struggle and equality work in Islam. She portrays the problems of Muslim women in Muslim societies in conflict with Islamic teachings and culture. She challenges the classical interpretation of Hadith and the rules of Sharia and demands the reinterpretation of the Holy Quran. The Pakistani Muslim women are depicted as submissive, illiterate and the victims of domestic violence corresponding to the historical narrative of associating Islam and Islamic culture with the subjugation and oppression of women. "Feminism can also be inadequate to articulate these conversations (discussions on Muslim women's rights)" (Seedat 44). The shrewdly theorized concept of Islamic feminism in *Daughter of the East: An Autobiography* reveals the critical space between Islam and feminism on the grounds of diverse problems of Muslim and western women owing to their religious, cultural and social heterogeneities. It is not the differences that divide the people but "our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences (Lorde 11).

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