

AN EXAMINATION OF THE NATURE AND NECESSITY OF FEMINIST INTERPRETATION OF THE HOLY QURAN

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The Holy *Quran*, as the greatest source of Islam, has always been the origin for multiple interpretive attitudes throughout the history of Islam. The existence of *Mūtashābih* (multivalent or ambiguous) verses in the Holy *Quran* has opened new room for the introduction of various approaches in the interpretation including social approach and Feminist interpretation as one of its examples. After a brief introduction of Islamic feminism, this essay elaborates on the most important principles of feminist interpretation in contrast to traditional or classic ones such as gender equality, equality of rights, avoiding patriarchy, complete freedom of intellect in understanding the *Quran*, the principle of non-contradiction among various sections of the *Quran*, and etc. Finally, the above principles are evaluated and criticized upon different elements including non-patriarchal nature of traditional interpretations, true viewpoints of the *Quran* regarding the equality of rights and gender equality, invalidity of eisegesis or subjective interpretation and matriarchally oriented approaches of feminist thinkers in exegesis of the *Quran*.

Keywords: *Islamic feminism, feminist exegesis of the Quran, social interpretation, interpretative approach, gender equality, equality of rights*

1. Introduction

Shaping various interpretations of the *Quran* has provided rich literature in this field throughout the centuries. Exegesis of the *Quran* comprises various methods and approaches. Various interpretative approaches have been

introduced so far by scholars in the *Quran* sciences e.g. literary, juridical, philosophical, social, moral, historical etc. (Shakir 2004: 49).

Social interpretation can be considered as one of the most important approaches in this recent century. This approach, through expounding the traditions governing the universe and society, claims that the problems of the Islamic society are solvable based on the guidance of the holy *Quran*. Furthermore, it has also rejected any incompatibility between Islam and the modern age so that it claimed that Islam is fully accountable to the needs of the time (Ma'refat 1997: 451–453).

Social interpretation, focusing on the social problems of Islamic societies, are divided into several categories. The feminist interpretation of the *Quran* is one of the types of social approach that has been increasingly discussed over the past few decades in the Muslim world and the West.

The Islamic world has encountered two different feminist currents so far. Women, in the first current, seek to uphold their rights and improve their position in society, while, in the second one, they try to interpret and offer a different contemplation regarding some particular verses of the Holy *Quran* which relate to the feminine. The latter current, claiming an especial interpretative method against the classic one, has expressed its interpretative principles in both affirmative and negative aspects. This feminist current, on the basis of the affirmative aspect, tries to establish its new construction in understanding of the *Quran* while on the basis of the negative aspect, criticizes and questions the classic method in exegesis of the *Quran*.

The initial impacts of this intellectual current can be seen about thirty years ago in the western region of Muslim world, such as Egypt and Algeria. Nowadays, however, it has been spread in all over the Islamic world. It is important to mention that the thinkers' efforts in this field are not limited to provide different interpretations of the *Quran*, but they have always been seeking to develop their understanding so as to be applicable in society. The scope of these practical efforts involves various affairs, from organizing of congregation prayers by a woman as the leader to leading the leadership of a society by women, claimed to be taken from the *Quran*. We strive in this article to introduce and criticize the second current and several of its prominent figures to answer two specific questions:

1. What are the principles of the feminist interpretive approach?
2. What are the critiques of these principles?

However, since the study of both aspects concerning interpretative principles of this school cannot be investigated in this article, it merely examines its negative aspect and lends the positive one to another room.

2. *Feminism and Feminist Interpretation*

Feminism is a concept which analytically consists of two sections:

1. The acknowledgment of gender equality and women's rights.
2. The introduction of plans relating to providing equal rights for both men and women.

It seems necessary to give a brief account of the history of feminism in the Muslim world before going forward and stating the interpretative principles of this intellectual current. The origin of the feminism current, rooted in the events of Western civilization, dates back to the late 18th century. The entrance of both feminism intellectual-practical current and Western culture, through the channel of oppressive and colonial domination, has simultaneously taken place in Islamic countries so that some women's movements occurred as its consequences.

Two waves relating to this thinking have emerged in Islamic countries so far:

1. Feminism with Islam: Since the late 19th century, Muslim women, relying on the concepts of Western feminism and their own understanding from traditional interpretations of the *Quran*, have sought to change their social conditions such as increasing their educational level and connecting more with the community.
2. Islamic feminism: Since the late 20th century, a kind of pattern-shift has happened towards an exclusive feminism which was based on religious discourse (Badran 2002b: 199).

In fact, the difference between these two above mentioned waves is that the first wave, on the basis of traditional self-understanding of the *Quran*, looks for recognition of women's individual and social rights, while the second wave, based on the exegesis of the *Quran*, essentially considers gender equality as a fundamental doctrine of the *Quran*. Furthermore, the feminist thinkers of the first wave have claimed that Islam respected women status and their rights, but not in practice. As a result, they have been objecting to neglecting of women's rights in both social and family aspects. The feminist thinkers of the second wave, on the contrary, do believe in incorrectness of traditional or classic understanding of the *Quran*. As a result, they have been seeking the new interpretation of the *Quran*. The present article looks at the second wave in order to attempt to explain it first and then criticize it.

3. A Brief Introduction of the Prominent Figures

A number of new thinkers and scholars have issued their viewpoints regarding Islamic feminism; however, despite the passing of several decades, they have not yet succeeded in formulating comprehensive and independent interpretations of the holy *Quran*. In other words, the literature formed by these thinkers has never appeared in the form of an interpretation model. Rather, during these years, they have merely published their perceptions about some verses of the *Quran* in their monographs or scattered articles. Therefore, the title “interpretive approach” has been used to refer to this intellectual current in this present article.

3. 1. Amina Wadud Muhsin

The most prominent leading figure in Islamic feminism is an American Muslim philosopher with a progressive focus on *Quran* exegesis. In 1975, Wadud graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a bachelor of science degree. She received her M. A. in Near Eastern Studies and her Ph.D. in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the University of Michigan in 1988. During graduate school, she studied in Egypt, including advanced Arabic at the American University in Cairo, *Quranic* studies and exegesis at Cairo University, and philosophy at Al-Azhar University.

She has delivered several lectures to express her *Quranic* ideas at various scientific and propagative centers. In August 1994, as the most important of her activities, Wadud delivered a Friday *khutbah* (sermon) on “Islam as Engaged Surrender” at the Claremont Main Road Mosque in Cape Town, South Africa. At the time, this was unheard of in the Muslim world. As a result, there were attempts in Virginia by some Muslims to have her dismissed from her position at Virginia Commonwealth University. In 2005, Wadud decided to lead Friday prayers (*salat*) for a congregation in the United States, breaking with Islamic laws, which allow only male imams (prayer leaders) in mixed-gender congregations.

Her specific research field refers to gender and *Quranic* studies. *Quran and Woman Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* as the most important of her books contributes a gender-inclusive reading to one of the most fundamental disciplines in Islamic thought, *Quranic* exegesis. The importance of this Islamic feminist thinker has reached a point where the book *A Jihad for Justice: Honoring the Work and Life of Amina Wadud* has been published in praise of her theoretical and practical efforts. Many thinkers of Islamic feminism have written articles in this book and appreciated the efforts of Amina Wadud.

3. 2. Asma Barlas

Asma Barlas is a Pakistani-American writer and academic. Her specialties include comparative and international politics, Islam and *Quranic* hermeneutics, and women's studies. She joined the Politics department in 1991 and retired in 2020. During this period, she served as the founding director of the Center for the Study of Culture, Race, and Ethnicity for twelve years (1999–2002; 2006–2015), and also held the Spinoza Chair in Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands (2008), for a semester. Her career path, however, dates from 1976 when she was inducted into Pakistan's Foreign Service but from which she was later fired for having criticized General Zia al-Haq, the country's military ruler. She then worked as the assistant editor of the *Muslim*, an opposition newspaper, while also publishing poetry and short stories. In 1983, she felt compelled to leave Pakistan and some years later got political asylum in the U.S.

In general, she is interested in violence, particularly, colonial, sexual, religious and secular. In her earliest work, she traced the genealogy of Pakistan's recurrent military dictatorships (and India's democracy) to the period of British colonialism. After she began teaching about Islam, she became interested in contesting patriarchal interpretations of its scripture and in an alternative, liberatory, hermeneutics of the text (Barlas 2002; Barlas & Reaburn Finn 2019). In the wake of 9/11/2001, she wrote about Western epistemic and secular violence against Muslims. In recent years, she has focused on critiques of the *Quran* by secular/feminists who support its patriarchal readings while also disputing its sacrality. Some of her works on the *Quran* have been translated into other languages (Arabic, Bengali, Indonesian, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, French, and German) and she has been invited to speak about it in a number of countries. She has especially liked doing so in Indonesia, Granada (Spain), Russia, Turkey, and Iceland.

She has a B. A. in English Literature and Philosophy (Kinnaird College) and an M.A. (first position) in Journalism (University of the Punjab), from Pakistan, and an M.A. and Ph.D. (with distinction) in International Studies (Graduate School of International Studies, University of Denver) from the U.S.

3. 3. Azizah Y. al-Hibri

Professor Azizah al-Hibri is a Professor Emerita at the Law School, having served on the faculty from 1992 until her retirement in 2012. Her work has centered on developing an Islamic jurisprudence and body of Islamic law that are gender equitable and promote human rights and democratic

governance. Professor *al-Hibri* has authored numerous book chapters, essays, and law review articles on these subjects, and her work has appeared in the highly respected *Journal of Law and Religion*, *Harvard International Review*, and *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law*, among other venues. In 2011, Professor *al-Hibri* was appointed by President Obama to serve as a commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. She received the Virginia First Freedom Award from the Council for America's First Freedom in 2007, the Dr. Betty Shabazz Recognition Award from Women in Islam in 2006, and the University of Richmond's Distinguished Educator Award in 2004, and was named a Fulbright scholar in 2001. Professor *al-Hibri* is the founding editor of *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, and founder and president of the organization "Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights".

3. 4. Margot Badran

Margot Badran is a historian and a specialist in women's studies who focuses on the Middle East and Islamic world from the late 19th century to the 21st century. Her concerns include feminism, gender, modernity, Islam, trans/nationalism, women's networks, and constructions of the secular and the religious. She has lectured widely in academic and popular forums in the United States, as well as in Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. Her latest books include: *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (2009) and *Feminism beyond East and West: New Gender Talk and Practice in Global Islam* (2006). She also writes on feminism and gender for the *Al Ahrām Weekly* in Cairo.

3. 5. Ruth Roded

Ruth Roded is Senior Lecturer in the History of Islam and the Middle East at the Institute of African and Asian Studies, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She deals in the social and cultural history of the Middle East, and for over two decades has focused on women and gender. She published a study of *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections From Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who* (1994), an introductory reader on *Women in Islam and the Middle East* (1999, 2008), a volume of articles on *Gender in the Twentieth-Century Middle East* (2008), and a special issue of *Hawwa Journal of Women of the Middle East and the Islamic World* (2012) devoted to Gendered Space in Middle Eastern Societies and Culture with Ela Greenberg. In recent years, she has worked on a rather ambitious project on *Twentieth-Century Gendered Perceptions of the Biography of the Prophet Muham-*

mad, some of whose findings have appeared as articles. She is currently focusing on *Islamic and Jewish Religious Feminism: Similarities, Parallels and Interactions* of which two articles have appeared in *Religion Compass, Intertwined Worlds* (2012) and one in *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies and Gender Issues* (2015).

3. 6. *Riffat Hassan*

Riffat Hassan (born in 1943) is a Pakistani-American theologian and a leading Islamic feminist scholar of the *Quran*. Hassan's theology is an example of Progressive Islam. She says the *Quran* is prescribing human rights and equality for all, while the inequality of women in many Muslim societies today is due to cultural effects. Hassan claims the *Quran* upholds rights to life, respect, justice, freedom, knowledge, sustenance, work, and privacy, among others. She supports a non-rigid interpretation of the *Quran*, arguing that while it is the word of God, words can have different meanings, so there are theoretically countless possible meanings of the *Quran*. She believes the meaning of the *Quran* should be determined through hermeneutics – examination of what its words meant at the time it was written. She also speaks of an “ethical criterion” that rejects the use of the *Quran* to perpetrate injustice, because the God of Islam is just.

Hassan supports abortion rights and access to contraceptives for Muslim women, saying that the *Quran* does not directly address contraceptives, but that Islam's religious and ethical framework leads to the conclusion that family planning should be a fundamental right. She says a review of Muslim jurisprudence indicates that abortion has been considered acceptable within the first 120 days of pregnancy, when the fetus has not yet been ensouled.

In February 1999, she founded The International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan, which works against so-called honor killings. She has argued that honor killings are a distortion of Islam, and further, that the whole idea that women are inferior is a result of the mistaken belief among Muslims that Eve was created from Adam's rib, when, in the Islamic creation story, they were created at the same time.

Hassan is not only a scholar; she is also an activist. In her capacity as an activist, Hassan developed and directed “Islamic Life in the U.S.” (2002–2006) and “Religion and Society: A Dialogue” (2006–2009), two peace-building programs which created a standard for interfaith discussion and peace-building, following the 2001 attacks. She also wrote the eleventh chapter of *Transforming the Faiths of our Fathers: Women who Changed American Religion* (2004).

4. Fundamental Principles of the *Quranic* Feminist Approach

4. 1. Gender Equality

Following the women's demands regarding equality among men and women over the past two centuries, the women's movement in the West was formed. Just like in modernism and capitalism, the demands of this movement's supporters entered Muslim countries through developing communication and cultural exchange between Islamic countries and the West.

Muslim Feminist thinkers believe that the Lord is beyond gender, therefore, His instructions and teachings in the *Quran* are beyond gender, too. There are plenty of verses in the holy *Quran* which emphasize the equality of men and women, so the Lord never created women inferior to men (Barlas 2006: 261).

In this regard, Allah says:

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female
and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another.
Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most right-
teous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted”
(The *Quran* 49: 13).

The fundamental principle of monotheism and oneness of God requires all human beings to be created from one soul. In fact, God has never raised the issue of gender (Hassan 1999: 5).

Muslim feminists have also mentioned the creation of Adam and Eve, and criticized the perception of classic interpretations of the *Quran* concerning to creation of Eve from Adam. Through expressing of the verses related to this contest, they believe that Adam and Eve are both created from one soul (Wadud 1999: 18; Hassan 1999: 235).

4. 2. Rejecting Patriarchally Oriented Approaches in Exegesis of the *Quran*

According to this principle, any prejudgment referring to the *Quran* leads to a kind of misunderstanding. Feminist thinkers, on the basis of incorrect and anti-Islamic thought referring to the patriarchal mentality of classic interpretations of the *Quran*, believe that men are superior to women so that they must be under men's control. They claim about the remarkability of this misconception in whole classic interpretations' meth-

ods so that it can easily be recognized that these interpretations have been written by men (see: Badran 2012: 159; Khaki 2012: 168; Taylor 2012: 185; Anwar 2012: 65).

Feminist thinkers offer some examples concerning patriarchally oriented classic interpretations of the *Quran* which, according to their own claims, are accepted by the majority of Muslims. For instance, the term “*Darb*” [beating] in the *Quran* is considered as a sign of violence against women. In contrast, Feminist thinkers have expounded other meanings such as “starting a trip” or “giving an example” so that they have preferred them to the supposed meaning in classic interpretations. Thus, according to their belief, there is no tradition about using of violence by the prophet against His wives and its supporting in family (Yacoob 2012: 160; Anwar 2012: 66).

This principle has also been emphasized by commentators in social interpretative approaches. To have no subjective background and predetermined purposes are conditions for commentators in exegesis of the divine words. Comparing the viewpoints of a particular person or group on the *Quran*, as a source of contemplative distortion, causes a kind of misunderstanding about true meaning of the verses and misleading of true guidance way of the *Quran*. Therefore, it has been claimed that feminist commentators are far from radical biases and deal with the honest and non-orientated approach to the interpretation of the *Quran* (Al-Gilānī 2003: 203).

4. 3. Equality of Rights

Regarding gender equality in the *Quran*, feminist thinkers consider men and women legally equal in all matters while believing that the discrimination against women is a consequence of patriarchally oriented exegesis of the *Quran*.

Most patriarchal approaches, based on three or four words particularly parts of 34th verse of *Surah* “Al-Nisa”, have implemented a kind of female inferiority, male superiority and obedience of women to men whereas the general soul of the *Quran* is on the basis of their equality. For instance, the claim that men are superior over women is taken from the following verse:

“Men are the managers of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others, and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth. Righteous women are obedient and watchful in the absence [of their husbands] in guarding what Allah has enjoined [them] to guard. As for those [wives] whose misconduct you fear, [first] advise them, and [if ineffective] keep away from

them in the bed, and [as the last resort] beat them. Then if they obey you, do not seek any course [of action] against them. Indeed, Allah is all-exalted, all-great". (*Quran* 4: 34)

This approach considers women obedient (*Qanitat*) whereas in case of disobedience calls them recalcitrant (*Nashizah*) and their husbands are rightful to beat them (Barlas 2006 261–264).

It is very difficult to translate the word *Qawwamun* in the above-mentioned verse. No accuracy is taken if we translate that as “protector”, “manager”, “supervisor”, etc. Because it somehow evokes physical and mental weakness of women against men, it is not compatible with other Islamic teachings. The verse, due to the cost that men pay, merely and specifically prefers some men to some women. Thus, the *Quran* does not explicitly treat men as superior over women.

Furthermore, Allah in the *Quran* says:

“The Believers, men and women, are protectors one of another.”
(*Quran* 9: 71)

The concepts of “supporting”, “responsibility”, “guardianship” and “guidance” have been deduced from the above-mentioned verse. Thus, if men are supposed to be superior to women and have absolute authority over their whole life, how can it be imagined that a woman is a guardian or protector over a man (Al-Hibri 1982: 217–218)?

4. 4. A Necessity of Reviewing the Correct Understanding of Quranic Verses

There are multiple issues among the verses of the *Quran*, specially the issue of polygamy and Hijab, which have been interpreted on the basis of patriarchal approaches. Therefore, an absolute change and review are required to be against classic exegesis of the *Quran* in order to correctly understand the exact meaning of the verses.

4. 4. 1. Rejecting Weak and False Traditions

The next critical principle refers to avoiding weak and false traditions that lead the interpretation of the *Quran* toward distortion. According to the feminist thinkers' viewpoints, one of the reasons for using such traditions goes back to tendentious thought of classic commentators themselves. Thus, in interpreting the verses related to women, they use those traditions which

are close to their personal beliefs and provide an interpretation based on their personal attitudes. Feminist thinkers believe that the incorrect use of these traditions in classic exegesis of the *Quran* has caused a negative image in the minds of public Muslim population concerning some of those women whose names are mentioned in the *Quran*. As a result, not only these ones, but also all women are seen as threats toward deviation of Islamic societies (Roded 2006: 530).

Feminist thinkers have mentioned several examples in this regard e.g. it is stated in some of these traditions that Eve was created from Adam's left rib whereas the verses of the *Quran* explicitly state that both men and women were created as a couple from a single soul at one moment (*Quran* 7: 189; 4: 1; 39: 6).

In another example, Eve is blamed due to being responsible for Adam's descending from heaven while the *Quran* explicitly states that Adam and Eve were both tempted, driven, repented and eventually forgiven (*Quran* 7: 23). Therefore, contrary to the classic interpretations, there is no difference between them (Badran 2002a: 203).

Social approach commentators of the *Quran*, avoiding fake and weak traditions, argue that the use of such traditions leads to a kind of misreading and intellectual distortion of the *Quran*. Furthermore, incorrect information that has been transmitted through this channel leads to bringing multiple kinds of superstitions among Muslims. Therefore, to avoid misunderstandings, it is compulsory to be careful about using traditions in the interpretation of the *Quran* (Ayazi 1994: 361; Qutb 1991: IV/2290).

4. 4. 2. Freedom of Intellect in the Understanding of the *Quran*

Freedom of intellect in the understanding of the holy *Quran* is another principle of this interpretive approach. Muslim feminists, who are part of religious reformist movements in the Islamic world, consider intellect as merely reliable source in understanding of the *Quran*. They, on the one hand, charge classic interpretations with imposition of patriarchal belief in the *Quran* and, on the other hand, seek to provide a new comprehension of the *Quran*. Feminist thinkers, relying on their own personal thoughts, consider the *Quran* as the best source to understand Islam.

Consequently, they pay all their attention to the *Quran* without applying other sources. In other words, their interpretative procedure is merely summarized on thinking about the apparent of the *Quran* (Badran 2002a: 201).

For instance, some of these thinkers have rejected the indication of the following verse concerning priority of men over women, whereas, in contrast, they have interpreted it as superiority of women over men (ibid.: 290).

“Men are the managers of women, because of the advantage Allah has granted some of them over others, and by virtue of their spending out of their wealth”. (*Quran* 4: 34)

They argue that the reason is stated in the verse itself, since men work for women and give them financial support, so women are prior over men.

In another example, contrary to the views of classic interpreters, feminist thinkers have stated that the subject of polygamy cannot be ascertained in practice, since the *Quran* has provided a condition¹, in which the same correct behavior has to be applied by man about all his four wives, because, based on natural human emotions, it is impossible for a man to love several women at one level. Some other feminist thinkers, referring to the following verse, believe that Allah (SWT) has accepted polygamy under constraint (Badran 2002a: 290).

“Allah has not put two hearts within any man”. (*Quran* 33: 4)

Another example that has been seen in feminist viewpoints refers to the principle of respect for women. They say there are some women’s names mentioned in the *Quran* in a way that have been added to the names of men such as *Īmra’t F īr’aūn* or *Ūm Mūsā* (*Quran* 28: 7, 9–10). This kind of names denotes the obligation of respecting in addressing women at any time (Wadud 1999: 32–33).

Freedom of intellect in understanding of the *Quran* has also been discussed among social commentators. Classic interpretations, in this field, are criticized and a new interpretive approach is adopted. As a result, the interpreter focuses on personal reasoning in understanding of the *Quran*. Some of these social commentators believe in compulsion upon all Muslims to find out the *Quran*. In this regard, Muslims must not make their understanding limited to classic interpretations (Rashid Rida 1994: I/15; Al-Dhahabi n. d.: II/606).

4. 4. 3. The Principle of Non-Contradiction among Various Sections of the *Quran*

Another principle, in this field, refers back to a kind of coherence among the principles and sections of the *Quran*. Feminist thinkers believe that the

1 “If you fear that you may not deal justly with the orphans, then marry [other] women that you like, two, three, or four. But if you fear that you may not treat them fairly, then [marry only] one, or [marry from among] your slave-women. That makes it likelier that you will not be unfair.” (*Quran* 4: 3)

Holy *Quran*, as a context, has its specific world-outlook so that it includes some fundamental principles. If a commentator takes a particular view about some of the verses that is contradicted with those fundamental principles, it is necessarily void and needs to be corrected.

The principle of gender equality is one of the most important fundamental principle of the *Quran* which is emphasized by this interpretive approach. They believe in incorrectness of any understanding of the *Quran* which contradicts this principle. For example, they refer to the patriarchal understanding of the *Quran* in verse 34 of the above-mentioned *Surah* “Al-Nisa”. Feminist thinkers say that the wrong perception in most of classic interpretations indicates the priority of men over women so that women are dependent on men and deprived of many of their legal rights. This perception is against the fundamental principle of gender equality, the principle which is emphasized by the *Quran* in various verses. Since it is against the fundamental principle of gender equality, feminist thinkers argue that such patriarchal interpretations of some verses have to be rejected (Badran 2002a: 201; Wadud 1999: 3).

5. Critique and Evaluation of Fundamental Principles of the *Quranic* Feminist Approach

In this section, we will try to evaluate and criticize the above-mentioned principles. Although some of the information compiled by feminist thinkers is correct, some critiques have been made on some of the principles. We will mention them briefly as follows.

5. 1. The View of the Quran Regarding Gender Equality

A number of verses in the *Quran* do not denote the difference in gender and creation between man and woman. The following verse is stated as an example:

“Certainly, we created man from an extract of clay”. (*Quran* 23: 12)

What is meant by man in the verse is “humankind”, which, as a result, includes Adam and all his next generations. The mere difference among commentators on the creation of men and women is probably related to the first verse of *Surah* “Al-Nisa”:

“O mankind! Be wary of your Lord who created you from a single soul, and created its mate from it, and from the two of them scattered numerous men and women. Be wary of Allah, in whose Name

you adjure one another and [of severing ties with] blood relations.
Indeed, Allah is watchful over you". (*Quran* 4: 1)

According to most commentators, the meaning of "single soul" here is Adam, and it is narrated in both Shiite and Sunni sources that his mate, Eve, was created from one of Adam's ribs (Tūsī 1998: III/99; Qomi 1998: XI/130; Tabarsi 2003: V/7).

5. 2. Patriarchal Partiality as an Unfair Charge of the Classic Interpretation

Feminist thinkers criticize classic interpretations concerning patriarchal partiality in exegesis of the *Quran*. They believe that the classic commentators have entered patriarchal views and imposed their opinions on the *Quran*, while, through investigating different interpretations, something against this viewpoint can be concluded. Subjects that have been expressed in classic interpretations are typically out of wrong partial and oriented attitudes so that the commentators have tried the best to extract the divine words as they have to be. Basically, most of the teachings of the *Quran* include religious, moral, and practical doctrines that regard human beings themselves and do not have patriarchal or feminine partiality.

What provokes feminists in this regard is a small number of the verses in the *Quran* which directly relate to the issue of women or compare them with men. Even if the patriarchal partiality in some limited verses is correct for the male classic commentators, it cannot be considered as a general patriarchal orientation in the interpretation of the *Quran*, since the "classic interpretation" is much broader than the interpretation of a few verses relating to women.

In criticizing classic or traditional interpretation, feminist thinkers often suffice to express merely the general titles than reject them whereas the correct method of critique requires to mention the exact source, evidence and convincing proof.

Furthermore, female commentators who have interpreted the whole verses of the *Quran* not just the specific verses related to women, also have presented their attitudes as similar as classic interpretative ones. For instance, Lady Amin in the interpretation of the verse 34 of *Surah* "Al-Nisa" mentions that men are often prior over women in management, endurance of hardships and physical power whereas women are somehow emotional in dealing with life issues (Amin 1982: IV/62).

Regarding to the case of polygamy, she also has interpreted the same as the classic interpretations and stipulated, on the basis of explicit utterance of the *Quran*, man's observing justice among his wives (ibid.: 10).

These similar attitudes among women and men interpreters imply a single interpretative method which is an honest attempt to understand the divine word in its correct form.

In fact, classic commentators, just like non-feminist ones, provided an exegesis that they truly understood and never wanted to impose their personal beliefs on the *Quran*. In contrast, a number of feminist opinions are somehow matriarchally orientated. Thus, some of them have concluded the superiority of women over men in understanding the verse 34 of the *Sura* “Al-Nisa”.

5. 3. *The View of the Quran Regarding the Equality of Rights*

Islam is a religion derived from the *Quran* and Tradition (*Sunnah*), not something self-made. In fact, what feminists introduce as the religion of Islam is derived from their own attitudes and eisegesis toward Islam and the *Quran*. The difference between man and woman does not make one superior to the other. This difference in roles is merely for the sake of systematizing the creation and universe. The only criterion for superiority of human beings over each other is piety and spiritual virtue whereas, feminists believe in Islam, which originates from the *Quran* and Tradition, as a kind of limitation. They cite 34th verse of *Surah* “Al-Nisa” to prove that women rights have not been respected in Islam. Furthermore, patriarchally oriented interpretations of the verse violate women rights. Men guardianship and the issue of beating (*Darb*) are two subjects included in the verse. Now, in order to understand the verse more accurately, some opinions presented by Muslim commentators and thinkers come as follows:

- Man and woman are two important elements of the family. Woman plays an important role in child upbringing; that is why she is so important. However, there are some physical and mental differences among these two genders, so that the Holy *Shari'ah* has defined special various rights for each. They have equal rights in some matters such as the right to worship, possess and social independence, while man is rightful in the case of guardianship because he pays the dowry and alimony of the family (Qutb 1991: II/649; Fazl Allah 1998).
- Men have general guardianship over women, it means there is no limitation to a husband toward his wife; rather, it has been legislated based on the nature of men and women. In this regard, men are women's guardians due to their physical and rational strength. Husbands' guardianship does not deprive wives' independence in their own interests, individual and social rights. Rather, wives should

be obedient to their husbands in sexual pleasure because men pay their wives' dowry and alimony of the family (see: Tabatabaee 1996).

- In some cases, beating of wife is legitimate in order to defend the family reputation and safety (see: Rashid Rida 1994).
- Beating should not injure the wife (see: Makarem Shirazi 1995).
- The rule of the verse regarding wife battering has been abrogated (see: Ma'refat 1997).

Thus, based on the above-mentioned attitudes, not only has Islam not disrespected women rights but, according to their own physical and mental potentialities, it has repeatedly emphasized to observe their rights.

5. 4. Performing Incorrect Methods in Understanding the Quranic Verses

Feminist thinkers believe in necessity of change in exegesis of the *Quran* in order to contemplate the exact meaning of the verses in a correct form. According to their viewpoint, majority of the *Quran* verses have been interpreted based on patriarchally orientated approaches so that women rights have been disrespected. Although they have tried to bring a kind of change against the classic exegesis of the *Quran*, no appropriate method has been declared. They have just tried to mention something totally opposed to the classic exegesis of the *Quran* so that it necessitated matriarchally orientated approaches in the interpretation of the *Quran*. These attempts have caused some wrong procedures and consequences. Some of them will be briefly mentioned as follows.

5. 4. 1. Taking Benefit from Fake Traditions and Radical Viewpoints in Feminist Interpretative Approach

Feminist thinkers believe that classic commentators have extremely interpreted in favor of men. However, referring to feminist views, a kind of a matriarchally orientated and extreme approach in favor of women is apparently vivid so that they are in serious conflict with understanding of other commentators, linguists and specialists. For instance, in understanding the verse 34 of the *Sura* "Al-Nisa", some of them have concluded the superiority of women over men while it is against Arabic language grammars. In addition, Hijab is also considered in their opinions as an esoteric matter like chastity; however, it is clearly contrary to the instructions of religion.

In fact, feminists have violated their claims and accomplished what they had forbidden. Therefore, these views are a type of eisegesis and imposition

of specific feminist thoughts on the sacred text of the *Quran*. Consequently, due to their fanaticism and extravagance toward feminism, they have made its principles a foundation in their thinking and interpreted verses of the *Quran* in accordance with them.

Furthermore, Islamic scholars have emphasized the necessity of avoiding the use of incorrect and misleading traditions in the interpretation of the *Quran* (Zarghani 1948: I/491; Ma'refat 1997: II/92; Babae 2007: 314).

Although taking a use of false traditions is incorrect in the exegesis of the *Quran*, we occasionally encounter some of them in classic interpretations. For instance, creation of Eve from Adam's left rib and Eve's responsibility for Adam's descending from heaven are among those incorrect traditions that have been stated in some classic interpretations. However, attention should be paid to the fact that even though some of these false traditions are taken in use in some classic interpretations, in other cases, they have not been deliberately mentioned to distort the verses of the *Quran*. Therefore, concerning taking a use of false traditions, it is not eligible to relate a general charge to classic exegesis. These critiques have been stated by feminist thinkers, while they themselves have clearly driven a benefit from poor and fake traditions in their views in which they have expressed some strange deduction in accordance with them.

One of these fake traditions is stated in relevance to the following verse;

“When you ask [his] womenfolk for something, do so from behind a curtain. That is more chaste for your hearts and theirs. You should not offend the Apostle of Allah, nor may you ever marry his wives after him. Indeed, that would be a grave [sin] with Allah. (*Quran* 33: 53)

According to some fake traditions, the wives of the Prophet Muhammad were subjected to sexual harassment by some guests (Roded 2006: 525).

5. 4. 2. Eisegesis or Subjective Interpretation

Eisegesis is the process of interpreting a text or portion of text in such a way that the process introduces one's own presuppositions, agendas, or biases into and onto the text (Zarkishi 1990: II/335; Al-Dhahabi n.d.: I/ 277).

This wrong approach is referred back either to inaccurate intellectual partiality or rooted in despotism of viewpoint and the lack of taking benefit from correct methods in understanding of the *Quran*. Freedom of wisdom is one of the feminists' leading principles which finally, in practice, leads to eisegesis or subjective interpretation. Thus, they believe that they must pass the limitations of the classic interpretations and gain a new exegesis based

on the wisdom, reasoning faculty and understanding of all human beings. But, by concentrating on their understanding, various assumptions about the status of women appear in their opinions such as sociological, epistemological and legal ones. These assumptions do not have a rational basis, but are based on mental illusions and eisegesis.

In fact, feminists have violated their claims and accomplished what they had forbidden. One of the obvious examples of these false assumptions is the deduction of “the principle of respect” for women, referring to the *Quran*’s addresses to women without mentioning their names. However, they have neglected the possibility of direct stating of men’s names as a sign of their special respect in the *Quran*, while women’s names are rarely mentioned.

6. Conclusion

Feminist interpretive approach as one of the branches of social approach in the exegesis of the *Quran* has attracted much attention in recent decades. Believing in gender equality is the first principle of this interpretive approach. Based on this principle, there is no difference between men and women because the fundamental principle of monotheism and oneness of God requires all human beings to be created from one soul and God has never raised the issue of gender.

Rejecting patriarchally oriented approaches in exegesis of the *Quran* has been stated as the second principle. According to this principle, any interpretation which includes patriarchal partiality has to be rejected. However, profound studying of *Quranic* sources indicates that patriarchal partiality is as an unfair charge to the classic interpretation of the *Quran*.

Equality of rights has been stated as the third principle. Based on this principle, feminist thinkers state that women’s rights have been disrespected in Islam. The only criterion for superiority of human beings over each other is piety and spiritual virtue whereas, feminists believe in Islam, which originates from the *Quran* and Tradition, as a kind of limitation.

In the last principle, feminist thinkers believe in the necessity of reviewing for the correct understanding of *Quranic* verses. They have discussed rejecting weak and false traditions, freedom of intellect in understanding of the *Quran* and the principle of non-contradiction among various sections of the *Quran*.

According to their last principle, they invalidate the use of false and fake traditions in the process of interpretation, but they practically violate it whenever they want to prove their feminist approach. Furthermore, according to freedom of intellect in understanding of the *Quran*, they can

completely abandon the classic exegesis and merely consider their own approaches and thoughts.

However, their attempt to change and review toward new understanding and exegesis of the *Quran* caused their radical interpretative approach to make patriarchal partiality evident in their sources. Taking the benefit of fake traditions, eisegesis and rational distortion of the *Quran* are among other critiques of this interpretive approach which are due to their unsystematic and unrestricted freedom of intellect in understanding of the *Quran*. Consequently, on the basis of those proofs presented by feminists and the critiques stated against them, there is no necessity to enter such an interpretive approach. Moreover, according to other mentioned arguments, feminist interpretive approach is a kind of eisegesis.

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Preispitivanje prirode i neophodnosti feminističkog tumačenja *Kurana*

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Kuran, kao najvažniji izvor islama, uvek je u istoriji ove religije bio merilo ispravnosti različitih pristupa tumačenju svetog teksta. Činjenica da u *Kurana* postoje rečenice s dvosmislenim ili višeslojnim značenjima (arap. *mutašabih*) bila je uzrok da se u islamu ustanove veoma različiti modeli tumačenja, uključujući i socijalne modele od kojih jedan primer jeste feminističko tumačenje. Nakon kratkog upoznavanja s islamskim feminizmom, u ovom radu se preispituju najvažniji principi feminističkog tumačenja, koje je u suprotnosti s modelima tradicionalnog, odnosno klasičnog tumačenja, u pitanjima kao što su rodna ravnopravnost, jednakost prava, ukidanje patrijarhata, potpuna sloboda mišljenja u procesu razumevanja *Kurana*, učenje o tome da različiti delovi *Kurana* nisu međusobno kontradiktorni itd. Dakle, spomenuti principi se vrednuju i kritikuju na osnovu različitih elemenata, kao što je to da usmerenje tradicionalnih tumačenja nije patrijarhalno, da su izvorna učenja *Kurana* usmerena na pitanje jednakosti prava i rodne ravnopravnosti, te da feministički mislioci prilikom tumačenja *Kurana* slede neutemeljene norme subjektivne interpretacije i izražene orijentisanosti na matrijarhat.

Ključne reči: *islamski feminizam, feministička egzegeza Kurana, socijalna interpretacija, interpretativni pristup, rodna ravnopravnost, jednakost prava*