

Understanding the Feminism in Islamic and African Literature

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Abstract – Women everywhere across the world crave for equal treatment and equal rights as that of their male counterparts. Misogyny is prevalent among human beings from centuries and hence, feminism as a discourse seeking a conscious individual identity for women, has flourished to give voice to the unheard, unnoticed, and exploited part of the human race - women. As a movement, feminism has served incalculable women in the history of humankind in numerous ways. Women through different expressions explain the complex scenario of suppression by patriarchal authorization. Women are imprisoned in their sex which itself does impose on her certain limitations. Male patriarchy is a socio-cultural phenomenon; from the very birth of a kid, irrespective of sex, the socio-cultural hammering begins and deforms the psyche of an individual forever. Women were viewed as objects in the 14th century with the increasing popularity of “nude” paintings. The thesis on Women’s Poetic Responses to the Male Gaze: Cutting Them Down by Nadine Yonka justifies that those paintings “in 14th century” were usually painted by men with their objects being beautiful, “naked, passively positioned women”. In Ways of Seeing, Berger says that “men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at”, and describes male painters’ psychology while painting a woman, the “person who is the object of their [male painters’] activities – woman – is treated as a thing or an abstraction”. And more than this, “the ‘ideal’ spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him” In this Article, we tried to understand The Feminism in Islamic and African Literature.

Keywords: Women, Feminism, Feminists, Islamic, African Literature etc.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The word ‘feminism’ cannot be explained by a single phrase or definition. It has very subjective interpretations according to its appropriateness and relevance. It’s been said that today there are as many definitions of feminism as there are feminists. Each definition of feminism is governed by many factors including one’s own beliefs, history and culture. Significantly, Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan in “Feminist Paradigms” write and justify the nature of today’s approach towards ‘feminism’ as a discourse [1].

It is crucial to mention that many female activists avoid tagging themselves as feminists while taking for granted all the political and cultural achievements of the movements initiated by feminism. Culler questions “is this the death of feminism or the triumph of feminism, when principles it fought for go without saying?” Most certainly, this should be seen as a triumph of this theoretical discourse. The pains and troubles and accusations and controversies have been resulted into a little liberated world for women to live in.

In the literary and theoretical world, the contribution of women was neglected and discouraged while men’s

experiences were considered as universal truth. The different feminisms and their emergence can be seen as the necessity of the time and place they belong to. The female writing existed but it was not appraised or critiqued with zestful interest. In Feminist Writings from Ancient Times to the Modern World: A Global Sourcebook and History, Wayne surprisingly, with the evidences of historical records, literary documents and archeological disks, says that “Enheduanna”, “estimated 2350 BCE”, is the first identifiable female poet in history. She was not only a poet but also a priest in the temples of Ur and Uruk, two Mesopotamian cities located near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what is known today as Iraq. The poem Inanna 2000 years before the Bible represents the fate of a goddess who questions sexual discourse. These evidences are secured in the University of Pennsylvania Museum which says the first ever written script in Summerian language was done by a woman, Enheduanna. This indicates that female writing existed but critical analysis of such literature or at least recognition of the same became inappropriate. Such investigations done by feminist critics justify their pain, suffering and anxiety through their words.

II. RELIGIONS AS ANTI-FEMINIST PROPAGATION

Among all the influences, here, religious influence as a major subjugation on women is focused upon. Besides other factors, it is affirmed that religion plays a significant role in formation of a 'woman' as strong determinant of gender [2]. Every religion is basically and/or over the time has become patriarchal in nature. The mere fragility of physique which is naturally in such a form to promote, protect and preserve the progeny or regeneration became the tool to dominate and oppress women and make them the 'second sex'. While meditating on the Golden Age of Women as the Myth, De Beauvoir makes up a point that pre-religion eras were having women's status superior to men, they were able to rule and govern their clans as being more close to mother earth and/or being mystic physically – generating lives.

III. ISLAMIC LITERATURE

Pluralism, syncretism and ethnic diversity compose and represent India as a unique land on the world map. India "has no established religion and this is the first sign of its commitment to treat all communities as equal" (*Mahajan*). Indian civilization has welcomed various cultures with their ethnographical, linguistic, social, and ritualistic influences. The country is for a multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious population with colonial influences [3].

"The pan-Indian, civilizational dimension of cultural pluralism and syncretism encompasses ethnic diversity and admixture, linguistic heterogeneity as well as fusion...The sharing of space, regional ethos and cultural traits cut across religious and sectarian differences and bind the local people together" (*Das*) [4].

Asghar Ali Engineer (2004) argues that "Islam entered into India almost in the lifetime of Muhammad the Prophet of Islam...through the Arab traders in a peaceful manner" (71) in Kerala and not during 7th century A.D. by an invasion through Muhammad bin Qasim. Islam as a belief system was warmly welcomed and followed by many local people. Marriages between the Arab traders and Kerala women played a significant role in spreading the religion. Hence, Muslims are an integrated part of India from the beginning of Islam. Different Muslim rulers, British rulers and Indian political leaders – all together in a complex way, have influenced lives of Muslim women in a distinct way [5].

Shahida Lateef (2010) in her essay "Muslim Women in India: A Minority Within a Minority" in the book *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity* states that "The status and role of Muslim women in India is inextricably linked to the political, economic, and social survival of the Muslim community in India; to developments in Indian society; and to the position of all Indian women". Their triply marginalized selves

are 'linked' and dependent on various factors which overshadow their 'beings' as individuals equal to men around them. Their religion and then their gender endorse and tag them as 'a minority within a minority' [6].

3.1 Feminism in Islamic Literature

The Quranic Verses have been interpreted by various Islamic feminists and theorists to suit their purpose unleash the age-old authoritarian patriarchal viewpoints. The manipulations done to the sacred words are examined by these scholars in depth. Many male feminists too have contributed to analysis in an unbiased way. The Muslim world is divided into two major parts: Sunnis (orthodox) and the Shi'ites (literally, schismatic) Furthermore, the Sunnis are divided into four schools (madhabib)

1. The Malikis – following Malik Ibn Anas,
2. The Hanafis – following the school of Abu Hanifa,
3. The Shafi'is – following al-Shafi'i and
4. The Hanbalis – who follow Ibn Hanbal.

They all have differences among them on the details of juridical procedures. Each group has a specific texts of fiqh (religious knowledge) based on the sources of Shari'ah and Hadith (documentations of legislations and laws based on Prophet's words during his life span).

Over the years, the drastic changes in perceptions and understanding of the sacred words have been the issue of conflicts. It is ironic to see the various differences among the different sects of a single religion, their different interpretations and ideological differences in laws and legislations. Everything which is documented systematically and formally after the death of the Prophet has had various power politics inculcated into it. Al-Jabiri with various and extensive references and cross check, calls the era of putting the religious texts into writing ('asr al-tadwin') as the "beginning of an institutionalization of censorship".

3.2 Islam and Hijab

The burqa clad woman has become a symbol of Islam which is seen as a patriarchal, misogynist and anti-feminist religion. The very image of woman in 'purdah' or 'burqa' creates a gory impression of conventional, orthodox, suppressed and confined Islamic ideology. The time a man gazes a woman in a 'burqa', automatically or say conditionally, the perspective changes. A man gazes at a female, in most of the cases as an object of pleasure. But here in this case, the lady in 'veil' as indicating being 'Muslim' becomes somewhat lesser than the image of an 'object'. The ultimate function of a veil,

according to so-called leaders of Islam, is to protect a lady from ill-intentional male gaze but contrarily it serves the opposite purpose wherein the 'veil' symbolizes her doubly muted objectification. The compulsion of 'purdah' hides these women's real beings, crushes their individuality and freedom, and makes them real slaves to misogynist system.

IV. AFRICAN LITERATURE

The African novel presents different images of women in the contemporary patriarchal society. The famous African writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ulasi, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri use African imagery in portraying and dramatizing the characters and situation, for effect and authenticity.

Nwapa speaks of the divine machinery at work in the lives of Ugwuta community. Uhamiri, the goddess of the lake is the most revered in her village whereas in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* Chielo, the Priestess of Agbala is not regarded always in her village. Ani is worshipped only during the period of New Yam Festival. The people are afraid of Chielo's curse that befalls on the entire community if they go wrong, while Uhamiri is worshipped also for motherhood. Uhamiri is believed to make barren women conceive with her blessings [7].

African literature is replete with write-ups that project male dominance and inadequately pleads the case of the African woman. It becomes imperative to trace the genesis of gender inequality in African literature. As **Kolawole (2010)** notes, by omission or commission, most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged the marginalisation of women. In this context, female characters are made marginal to the plot of the fiction, while only a few emerge as powerful and credible protagonists [8].

Chukukere (2015) affirms that the ideal female character created by male writers often acts within the framework of her traditional roles as wife and mother. So strong are social values that the respect and love which a woman earns is relative to the degree of her adaptations to these roles. For instance, while Chinua Achebe's *Okonkwo* in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) slaughters a goat for one of his wives who has had three sons in a row, Elechi Amadi's *Madume* in *The Concubine* (1966) is demoralized by his wife's inability to produce a male heir [9].

The omission of female authors from the collection of works that are definitive of literary excellence is a matter of great concern and this lack of acclaim can be partly attributed to the lack of criticism these authors' works receive (**Kumah 2010**). Increasing attention is being accorded to the mediation of gender relations in contemporary African literature [10].

4.1 Feminism in African Literature

The representation of African women in male-authored works reveals the ideological standpoint of the writers that quite explicitly identifies women with tradition and self-denied role of mother. It reveals women and predators who take to the flesh trade for high life and quick money. African women writers of first generation like Grace Ogot, Flora Nwapa have focused on the marginalized position of women and need to revolt against-exploitation and oppression of women in African society. African woman writing as a 'multi-voiced discourse' has challenged a number of orthodoxies: 'the voicelessness of the black woman', 'the derogatory portrayals of their gender' and 'their economic marginalization'. West African women writers are concerned with the protest against sex discrimination and woman oppression in patriarchal society. Their writings by presenting the realistic picture of suffering of women appear to have sympathized with the plight of women and denounced their meek submission in male dominated society.

This, research being a comparative study, between the Women African and Muslim authors, both different from each other in views, perspectives, countries, races etc, there can only be a considerable measure of factors that may modeled their encounters and works. On the off chance that the writers from the same writings and cultural contexts are analyzed, the appraisal of the themes, methods and the degree of their (feminist) political responsibility might be more precise. On the off chance that they are from totally different societies, an analysis of all aspects of the separate societies will make the investigation excessively clumsy. This investigation breaks down the cultural contexts with the attention just on the components of sex and gender. This examination considers the sex of the novelists as the overwhelming variable for tracing the sex particular introductions in their books. The examination perceives the way that similar writings might be analyzed from feminist point of view, with center around various themes and methods. The expression "a feminist viewpoint" in the title proposes the majority of "feminist points of view" and the "a" signifies the person and in addition the constrained idea of the present examination. Another main limitation of the study is that since it is research on previously done works of the novelists in context to feminism we will not be able to do any new research on the topic; we can only be able to refigure and reanalyze the works done by the writers of both the community on feminism.

V. CONCLUSION

In comparison, relationship and parallel examination are given significance, as the point of the exploration is to discover both the shared characteristics and contrasts in the structures and themes in the writings of African and Islamic

Literature towards feminism. As it is a near report, extensive investigations of neither of these writers are conceivable. Indeed, even as a similar report it concentrates just on the feminist themes and strategies in the writings. The investigation incorporates every one of the books composed by the African women and Muslim women's on the topics related to feminism. The essential sources incorporate all the full-length books including all the novels which depict feminism as a discourse. The nonfiction compositions are not regarded as essential sources. Auxiliary sources from life stories to feminist and non-feminist critical works have been utilized to feature directs related toward the compositions. The proposed study discover certain new facts as well as re-approach the already known facts, thus it will certainly put a new milestone in the arena of English writings on feminism. The study provide the finest example of the blend of different feministic aspects of the characters. It constitute a considerable contribution to the understanding of African and Muslim women writers' thematic approach to fiction as well as non-fiction and their contribution to English Literature and feminism. It can be asserted that the application of Islamic and African feminism as a discourse in social sciences and literature provide readers a better understanding of the religious vision of Muslim and African women's rights which would help to create better and balanced societies for women in future.

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