

ISLAM AND THE FEMININE – THE POST- COLONIAL RESPONSE

SUVOROVA, Anna
RUSYA/RUSSIA/РОССИЯ

ABSTRACT

1. The paper presents a spectrum of issues linked to women and Islam, particularly, as they appear in Islamicated South Asia. Firstly, it reflects the newly emerging female spirituality in South Asia as it is being shaped by the experiences of women facing a range of political and social injustice. Secondly, it is a particular devotional subculture which, even if it defies Islamic orthodoxy, offers profound religious alternatives to it.

2. In Jungian terms, masculine and feminine are psychological and symbolic concepts in which ‘feminine’ represents a sort of intellectual attitude that is receptive, more inner-oriented rather than external, action-focused view. All religions, including Islam, reflect the ‘mix’ of masculine and feminine. But the monotheistic religions were hypermasculinized after their founders’ death – even though the religious experience in those religions requires a ‘feminine’, receptive consciousness.

3. As H. Corbin pointed out, the ideal of Divine Truth in Muslim Sufism has been frequently depicted in the feminine form by Muslim poets and thinkers such as Rumi and Ibn ‘Arabi. The prominent Sufi mystics have obtained “the highest theophanic vision in contemplating the image of Feminine Being...of the Eternal Womanly as an image of Godhead”.

4. In recent years the issues of violence against women in the name of Islam has gained considerable attention. The spectrum of violence ranges from maltreatment of women by the Taliban and wife beating in Pakistan to denial of divorce and property. None of them are sanctioned by Islam. But they occur in many societies which are overwhelmingly Muslim. At present the feminist protest in these societies is taking shape of devotional mystical movements which are the subject of the paper.

Key Words: Islam, the post-colonial studies, the gender studies

The world religions have been called patriarchal religions. Does it mean that the religion itself was a projection of male concerns and imagery and a legitimization of male desire to subjugate women and have power over them? Some Western scholars note that there was:

“congruence between the gender of a people’s creator god(s), their orientation to the creative forces of nature, and the secular expression of male and female power...Almost always in male-dominated societies, the godhead is defined in exclusively masculine terms.”¹

Judaism, Hinduism, and Confucianism were ethnic religions in their early stage, and they generally acknowledge male dominance outside the home. Christianity, Islam and Buddhism are universal religions; women were very active in the initial phase, but later, after the death of the founder, the tradition reverted to male dominance in the religious life.

In Christianity (both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox) through the ages a lot of independent female mystics and charismatics arose, and their independence was also potentially threatening to male authority. For this reason the Church found ways of institutionalizing such women, either by the founding of new religious orders in which male authority and control could be established, or by official canonization of these women as saints. Nevertheless, the role of the Feminine in Christianity with its veneration and worship of Virgin Mary\ Our Holy Mother has never been disputed.

So often has Islam been portrayed as an exclusively masculine, patriarchal faith that many have never suspected the central importance of the Feminine in Islam. Due to the metaphysical interiority of the Feminine, this aspect of Islam has lived a largely hidden existence – but it is no less vital for that. Moreover, in the sources of Islam and in the Sufi tradition growing from there, we find a distinct, explicit preference for the feminine aspect of God, especially the nature of ultimate Divine Reality as essentially feminine.

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¹Peggy Reeves Sanday. *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality*. London, 1981: 6.

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Dr. Durre Ahmed who was the first to use the sound metaphor of the subject of women and religion as "the last frontier" of post-colonial landscape wrote:

"In sum the notion of the feminine is both an aspect of divinity as well as a psychological experience. All religions, particularly mysticism, incorporate this dimension in which human consciousness must put itself into a receptive state in order to experience the divine. This feminization of the psyche in religion is evident across numerous cultures"²

"Masculine" and "feminine" both have the roots on the level of the Divine Nature. On this highest level God is Absolute and at the same time Infinite. That Allah is Absolute is the principle of masculinity, and that Allah is Infinite relates to the principle of femininity. Allah has revealed Himself in the names of Majesty (*Jalāl*) and Beauty (*Jamāl*) – the former are the prototype of masculinity, while the latter are the prototype of femininity.

Some of the key terms associated with the Divine are of the feminine gender in Arabic. Three of them are essential to understand the feminine dimension in Islam. First is Wisdom (*hikmah*) that can be referred to with feminine pronoun (*hiya*). This may remind us of the Christian tradition where the Divine Wisdom is personified as a woman, Sophia.

The second term is Mercy (*rahmah*) related to the most important name of God – al-*Rahmān*. In its turn the term is related to the word for *rahām* – the womb. Therefore the Divine Mercy is the source of life as the womb and the feminine aspect of it is evident.

The third, and the most remarkable of all, is the term for the Divine Essence itself, *al-Ẓāt*, which is also feminine. The renowned Sufi sheikh Najm al-Din Kubra wrote of *al-Ẓāt* as the "Mother of divine attributes". Ibn al-ʿArabi himself wrote that he sometimes employed the feminine pronoun in addressing God, keeping in view the Divine Essence.

Sufi literature has contributed a lot to the discussion of femininity in Islam. In their poetry and narratives the Sufis have transformed the stories of earthly love (*ʿishq-i majāzī*) into the most sublime meaning of the Divine

² Durre Ahmed. Women, Psychology and Religion. – in Gendering the Spirit. Women, Religion and Post-Colonial Response. London-New York, 2002: 8.

Love (*‘ishq-i haqiqī*). In most poems of Nizami, Amir Khosrow Dihlawi, Jami and other classics the heroine is elevated to symbolize the Divine Reality itself. The hero goes in quest of the Divine which is a masculine act. God as the Beloved in Sufi poetry, *ma‘shūq*, is depicted with female iconography. Sufi literature is replete with the imagery of mystic experience of God as the vision of the Beloved and union with the Beloved.

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The famous couplet about woman from Rumi’s *Masnavi* reads:

Partaw-e haqast ān mashūq nīst

Khaliqast ān gūyia makhlūq nīst

She is radiance of God; she is not your beloved.

She is the Creator – you could say that she is not created.

(Masnavi, 1:2437)

Unlike Christianity, Islam has never depicted God as Father. Such comparison is outside the boundaries of Islamic discourse. However, Muslims have found it natural to speak of the maternal qualities of Allah. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was the first to use the example of mothers to illustrate God’s mercy.

The hadith from al-Bukhari describes how during the Muslim conquest of Mecca a woman was running about in search of her son. Having found him she clutched him to her breast weeping. The Prophet told his companions pointing to her:

“Do you wonder at this woman’s mercy (rahmah) for her child? By Him in Whose hand is my soul, on the Day of Judgment, Allah shall show more rahmah towards His believing servant than this woman has shown to her son”.

The Ka‘bah in Mecca is also associated with feminine imagery. Medieval poets have often compared the holiest shrine of Islam with a desired veiled bride, especially when on the hajj. The Persian poet Khaqani most frequently employed this bridal symbolism in his pilgrim poems.

Surah 109, al-Kawthar, gives a revealing look into the validity of the Feminine. The Prophet's enemies had been taunting him that he had only daughters, while they had been given sons. God revealed the message of consolation to the Prophet:

"We have given thee al-Kawthar....surely one who hates thee will be cut off (from progeny) ".

Al-Kawthar, a sacred pool of life-giving water in Paradise, is a profoundly feminine symbol. It represents a heavenly exaltation of the Feminine over patriarchal society.

Nevertheless through the ages the issue of Islam and the Feminine still remains marginal for intellectual and theological discourse. How to change the old sex role models in patriarchal religions that cling to extreme male dominance is the challenge of the post-colonial present.

As women's movement in the West began to pick up steam in the 20th century, the same thing occurred, although to a lesser extent, in the Muslim world at this time. Feminists in the Muslim world in the 20th century (until the 1980-s) were generally upper class women whose ideas and practice were modeled after feminists of the West. But just as modern socio-political models in the Muslim world of the post-colonial period began to shift from Western models of society to "Islamic" models, feminism in the Muslim world took on Islamic forms rather than aping the Western feminism pattern.

This has been true not merely for Muslim women but for women throughout the entire Third world. Hence, the Third world women realize that while they have many things in common with the struggle of Euro-American feminists, what is the best for the Western women is not necessarily going to be best for them. Consequently, Muslim women have been developing a distinctly "Islamic" form of feminism as a post-colonial response.

One example of the difference between Western feminism and Islamic feminism concerns the issue of 'veiling'. The *hijab* in the form of hair covering has always been seen by the Western feminist as oppressive and as a symbol of a Muslim woman's subservience to men. As a result it often comes as a surprise to Western feminists that the veil is often worn by well-educated and socially-active Muslim women as a symbol of Islamic identity and the post-colonial freedom from the Western cultural domination.

In many cases, Muslim women feel that restrictions placed upon them in the name of Islam are unjust, but they have neither fluency in the Islamic legal discourse nor the religious authority to convincingly argue their objections. When the religious leadership does not include women, their experiences, concerns and priorities will not be well represented. More compellingly, when women are not in leadership positions in their communities, they are cut off from religious education, and they have few means to access the rights they possess in theory.³

At present the feminist protest in Muslim societies is taking shape of devotional mystical movements as well as of the religious leadership within the community. The most ambitious form of such a would-be leadership is the effort of some women who are well-versed in the Qur'an, to act as imams in a congregational prayer.

There is a current controversy among Muslims on the circumstances in which women may act as imams – that is, lead a congregation in prayer. According to all existing traditional schools of Islam, a woman cannot lead a mixed gender congregation in *salat*. Some schools make exception for *Tarāwih* (optional Ramadan prayers) or for a congregation consisting only of close relatives.

With regard to women leading the women-only congregations, however, several hadith report that the Prophet's wife 'A'isha did so and as a result most *mazhabs* support it. Now, fully aware of the importance of 'A'isha as the foremost scholar of her generation, Muslim women are confident that they have a right to study and speak about Qur'an interpretation, the Sunna and Islamic law. Confidence springs from the knowledge that it is not an innovation to have women authoritatively and publicly interpreting and teaching Islamic texts; rather, this is a renewal of the spirit of the early Islamic community.⁴

By the end of the last century the Muslim women's claims for religious leadership had gained a new strength and recognition. In 2000 some Shia religious authorities in Iran declared that they allowed women to lead a woman-only congregation, reversing a previous ban in that country.

An unusual feature of Islam in China is the existence of *nūsī*, mosques solely for women. The imams and all the congregants are women and men

³ Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: from Ibn Sa'd to Who's Who*, Boulder and London: 1994.

⁴ Mohja Kahf, "Braiding the Stories: Women's eloquence in the early Islamic era," in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb, Syracuse, 2000: 147-171.

are not allowed into these mosques. On the other hand, in at least some communities where these mosques operated, women were also not allowed in the men's mosques. A handful of women have been trained as imams in order to serve in these mosques.⁵ In recent years, efforts have been made to establish similar mosques in India and Iran.

In the Western countries women strive for acting as imams in a mixed gender congregation. One of the earliest reported cases of a woman imam in the West occurred in 1995 in Johannesburg, South Africa. For about two years a congregation met every Friday for the Jum'a prayer. The *khutba* was delivered by either a male or female *khatib* and the imams for the prayer also included men and women.

Most of the cases of women leadership in prayers are recorded in Canada and the USA. In 2004 in Toronto Yasmeen Shadeer led the night 'Isha prayer with her congregants including both men and women. This was the first recorded occasion in contemporary times where a woman led a congregation in prayer in a mosque. Some of the women-imams including the American converts into Islam, became so popular that the former Mufti of Marseille, Sohaib bin Sheikh, requested that either Raheel Raza or Pamela Taylor would lead him in prayer during his visit to Canada.

In the USA the most popular woman-imam was Amina Wadud, an Afro-American Muslim, and a professor of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, who in 2005 led a congregation in Friday prayers in New York sponsored by the Progressive Muslim Union.

The Assembly of Muslim Jurists in America responded by issuing a *fatwa* against the event and reiterating the traditional opinion that a woman can neither lead the Friday prayer nor can deliver the sermon. Supporters of the "Wadud prayer" as it had been called by media, insisted that it was a long overdue change.

After the case had gained full national and international attention, Amina Wadud acted as imam for a congregation of about 60 women and 40 men seated together, without the traditional separate male and female sections.⁶

The Wadud prayer was followed by a Woman-led Prayer Initiative which sought to bring together the progressive opinions on the prayer as well as engage more conservative Muslims to bring about a transformation

⁵ Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: a mosque of their own* Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000.

⁶ The Progressive Muslim Union's Woman-led Prayer Initiative. New York, 2005: 23.

of gender privilege in Islam. Nowadays women continue to lead prayers in the US in several communities, as a rule with broad media coverage.

The Wadud prayer had a sound response in Europe, particularly in Spain. Spanish Muslim religious scholars responded to it with supportive legal opinion and later the same year of 2005 Wadud led a mixed gender congregational prayer in Barcelona.

In Muslim countries the occasional attempts of women to act as imams have always been banned. In Bahrain in 2004 the police arrested a 40-years old woman for trying to deliver the *khutba* at one of the biggest mosques of the state. The incident took place on the last Friday of Ramadan. The would-be *khatib* was wearing full male dress with an artificial beard and moustache. The mosque was packed with 7000 congregants. When sat on the *minbar* just before she was to deliver the *khutba*, some people realized that a new imam was a woman in disguise. So the impostor was handed over to the police.

There are, of course, many competent male religious leaders in the Muslim world who are sensitive to women's experiences and listen to their counsel and their concerns. But when few or no women in a community have recognized spiritual authority or positions of leadership, however, there is a good chance that the women of that community will experience religious authority negatively. This is a serious matter, because it defeats the very purpose of religious institutions, whose primary purpose is to bring people closer to God. One should be conscious of the unfortunate reality that religious institutions often develop in ways that lead them to defeat the very purposes they were created to serve.

To sum up I'll come back to the beginning of this paper to note that seen from the exterior, Islam may appear as a masculine-dominated religion. That is because its external aspects, such as shariat, are the manifestation of masculine, *Jalāl* attributes. The hidden side of Islam is connected with the values of interiority, the infinite *Jamāl* aspects of God's Beauty and Mercy. The primacy of the feminine aspects is established in the first *Hadith Qudsi*: "*My mercy prevails over My wrath*".