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The Other Feminine: Status of Women in Islam in a Globalized World

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Abstract:

This write-up attempts to address the issues relating to the status of women in the society, their subjugation, and unfortunate commodification in a market oriented globalized world. The increasing number of crime and violence against women in today's fashion and media crazy world is a matter of great concern. Effort has also been made to highlight the status and dignity of women as prescribed in Islam and how one can search for a proper solution to the ever-growing violence against women in this age.

Keywords: women, globalized, Islam, status, dignity, violence, subjugation, rights, property, education, hijab, feminist, the Prophet, the Holy Qura'n, Jannah (paradise).

Introduction:

In today's globalized world, women's studies is emerging as a fast growing discipline which is not restricted any more to the academia but is significantly capturing the attention of the civil society. The way civil society responded to "Nirbhaya" gang-rape case of December, 2012 in Delhi; the way people came on the streets in protest against this horrific and barbarous crime committed against a 23 year old woman; this people's movement has undoubtedly engineered the emergence of a new consciousness among us about the need for a realization of women's honour and dignity in the society. There have been serious debates on the issue of whether more stringent laws (in the line of *Shari'a* law) be implemented in our Indian society so that such heinous crimes against women can be prevented. However, the aforesaid incident is only one among many hundred other such crimes happening everyday in almost every corner of the globe. Many such incidents of crime are either suppressed or do not come to limelight. The following analysis is a humble attempt to deal with the status of women (especially in Islam) in a globalized world.

The discourse on the status of women and their struggle for liberation in the society and in literature, however, is not new. Women's liberation movement, popularly known as 'feminist' movement, started with an aim of establishing and defending equal rights and opportunities for women. Until late eighteenth century, women, whether of Europe or non-Europe, did not raise any voice to claim their rights in the society. With the publication of the British feminist writer and advocate of women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft's revolutionary work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), there emerged a women's movement which not only articulated the causes of women's subjugation and deprivation in a 'patriarchal' society, but also demanded equal status, rights and opportunities for women. This has subsequently resulted into the birth of several feminist theories and movements. Again, there are different factions among the feminists themselves: some are liberal feminists, while some others are radicals. This study, however, does not attempt deal with the theoretical aspects of feminism which includes notable feminist critic and theorist Elaine Showalter's idea of evolution of a *female* through the stages of *feminine* and

feminist. Toril Moi makes an interesting distinction between these terms saying that *feminism* is a political position, while *femaleness* is a matter of biology, and *femininity* is a set of culturally defined characteristics (qtd. in Hawthorn, 115). The present study, therefore, deals with the cultural aspect of the *feminine*.

This paper attempts to address the issues related to the position of women in the society, their subjugation, and their unfortunate commodification in a techno-trade and market oriented globalized world. Effort has also been made to highlight the status and dignity of women as prescribed in Islam and how one can search for a proper solution to the ever-growing violence against women in this age. Attempt has also been made to negotiate the issue of the status of women in Islam with reference to authentic Islamic texts such as *The Holy Qura'n* (the revelations of Allah for mankind) and *Hadith* (the teachings of the Prophet of Islam).

It is to be noted here that Muslims comprise of nearly one fifth of the world population. There may be little differences in terms of day to day practices among different Islamic societies since most of the converted peoples are significantly influenced by their local pre-Islamic customs and practices. Therefore, the practices of a particular Islamic society or a particular group cannot testify to be the authentic practices of Islam. It is all about proper interpretation of Islamic texts as mentioned before. For example, Islam never says that women should not receive formal education, should not be allowed to go out or should not go to job or business, or seek any other dignified and lawful profession. Unfortunately, what is happening in some Muslim countries in the name of Islam and *Shari'a*, (Talibanized Afghanistan is one such example) where women are said to be subjugated, maltreated and are not allowed to receive education, is indeed a matter of concern for those who want a harmonious and healthy society prescribed in Islam. It is, therefore, necessary to highlight how Islam gives women a status of dignity and equality in religious, social, educational, political, legal and economic terms. However, before going to this discussion in detail, let us try to understand the term 'globalization' and how it has drastically affected the nature of women's position, their lifestyles and their overall status in our society today.

The Deadly Cocktail:

The noted French philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) terms globalization as the 'greatest form of violence in our times' (cited in K. Satchidanandan's essay "Towards a Critique of Globalization and Culture Industry" in *Together We Survive*, FOSWAL, 2010). Globalization has indeed remained in the centre-stage of many debates in the contemporary era and is seen from different angles. Some scholars see it as a new strategy of the West, particularly the US to dominate the non-West through cultural propaganda. This cultural propaganda can be seen as an attempt of cultural colonization by the West. However, by globalization one can also understand that it tries to make the world a consumer chain, a market oriented consumerist venture which blindly thinks for the export of the culture of Mc Donald or Coca Cola and such other Western oriented life-style. Such Western oriented fashion-featured life-style has drastically affected our society and culture as a whole. In order to locate the status of women in a globalized world, it is therefore, necessary to understand how globalization is responsible for a paradigm shift in almost all the areas of our day to day affairs including life-style and ways of thinking.

Western societies, with their colonial expansion, drained the wealth and resources of non-Western societies and with that money they not only developed their economy and infrastructure but also set up various means of entertainment such as: casinos and bars, fashion parlours, movie

theatres, night clubs etc. Now, *this* Western culture is imported by many non-Western societies (including India) as a mark of their modernity! Moreover, the West and its media too are meticulously working for upholding and universalizing their culture and civilization and pass it on to other non-Western societies. They are intentionally doing it not only for popularizing their culture and life-styles but also to create huge consumer markets throughout the globe for the consumption of their fashion products and other related consumer goods. There is a continuous and ever-growing effort on their part to encourage these societies for adopting their culture and life-styles. However, the sad reality is that, such a Western oriented culture is in sharp contrast to our culture which stands upon modesty, simplicity, traditionality (in the sense of belief in customs and traditions) and above all, a sense of morality. The adoption of the so-called free culture of the West has led to our moral, social and cultural degeneration.

By the grace of globalization and technological advancement, we are flooded with ideas, fashion styles and various other products, which, in the true sense, do not fit us. The culture of miniskirts, bikinis, cabaret and night clubs, DJs etc., stand out as a sharp contrast to our culture and civilization. The Western cultural propaganda, therefore, through various and overwhelmingly strong media resources (the US is a major player) has not only punctured our culture, life-styles, ways of thinking etc., it has also given birth to a class of our own people who take pride in looking and behaving Western. In fact, an Indian woman in *saree* or *salwar kameez* looks far more beautiful and dignified than a woman clad in mini clothes. Likewise, the grandeur and simplicity of our sisters of north-east tribes — Khasi, Mizo, Naga, Manipuri, Bodo, Dev Barman etc. in their own traditional costumes, is a classic example of how one's own culture and tradition, if thoroughly preserved, can testify one's cultural identity and dignity. Western costumes and life-styles are not only unsuitable for our socio-cultural circumstances, but also they are proven to have fatal consequences on our society as a whole. There are numerous instances of crime and violence (rapes in particular) against women where their aggressive mini dresses and Westernized life-styles are said to be responsible for attracting such crimes. However, it will be unfair and injustice to put the blame completely on women; men folk with diseased minds are more responsible for such heinous crimes. It cannot be denied that, when, in a society, there is a lack of mutual respect between men and women, and sense of morality, there emerge numerous crimes particularly against women. Therefore, we must understand that, through mutual respect and by ensuring women's dignity we can build a harmonious and healthy society in this globalized world.

Women and Islam:

Gender inequality and subjugation of women is a common accusation directed against Islam and Islamic societies in today's globalized world. Let us see how far such accusation is true and how Islam and its holy books *The Qura'n*, and the *Hadith* (teachings and practices of the Prophet) deal with the rights and status of women. In Islam, women are supposed to enjoy a high and dignified status harmoniously balanced with men. Men and women are, in fact, complementary to each other. For instance, in the *Holy Qura'n* the Merciful Allah says about man and woman, particularly husband and wife: “. . . *Hunna libasul-lakum wa'antum libasul-lahunna . . .*” i.e. they (women) are apparel for you and you are apparel for them (Surat Baqarah, Part 2:187). This particular verse makes us aware of the relationship between men and women, in other words, the kind of relationship between a husband and a wife should be. It undoubtedly indicates towards a very close, equal, respectable, balanced and harmonious relationship. However, one cannot ignore physical and biological differences that exist between the two sexes.

Unfortunately, due to misinterpretation of the *Holy Qura'n* and lack of adequate knowledge, there are misconceptions among the people about the role and status of women in Islam. Women, therefore, have a dignified status and role to play in Islam. In ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, women were considered inferior, subhuman, evil and an object of lust. In the pre-Islamic Arabia women were looked down upon and hence they had no respectable status at all, they were treated like slaves. When a girl child was born she was buried alive because people thought it was disgraceful to have a girl. Even in twenty first century we are aware of the reports of abortion of female foetus and abandonment of newborn girl children. Islam has uplifted the status and dignity of women and has given them their due rights.

Islam gave women their due rights and status even in the early 7th century more than a thousand years before the women's movement started in Europe for their rights. As mothers, as wives, as sisters and as daughters Islam gave women a place of honour and dignity. The scholars on *Hadith* say that the Prophet said that 'your Jannah (Paradise) is under the feet of your mother.' It gives us a lesson that one has to be dutiful to his/her parents, especially mother and this is the key to success. As wives too, women have dignified status in Islam. The Prophet said, "*Khairukum khairukum li ahli wa'anaa khairukun li ahli*," (Tirmidhi). It means 'the best amongst you are those who are best to their family (i.e. wife) and I am the best towards my family.' In the *Holy Qura'n* Allah orders men to be kind to their wives: "and treat them [wives] kindly; then if you hate them, it may be that you dislike a thing in which Allah has placed abundant good in it," (Surat Nisaa, Part 4: 19). The Prophet of Islam had deep respect for his wives and set example to us to be kind and respectful to our womenfolk. As sisters and daughters too women have a status of dignity and honour in Islam. As discussed before, since time immemorial, in many societies including the pre-Islamic Arabia, women were considered worthless, burdensome and evil. People even used to bury their girl children alive in the sands. The *Holy Qura'n* forbids men for such injustices done to girl children and women in general. It says that a girl child or a sister if treated properly with kindness will be a man's key to Jannah (paradise).

In fact, the evil and injustice existing in our global society especially against women have multiple causes which should be addressed sincerely in a secular perspective and not certainly through blaming Islam which is happening today. Islam mandates for justice, equality, love and forgiveness and warns against injustice, inequality, hatred, evil and transgression. Therefore, it becomes clear that Islam gives women a position of honour and dignity and they too have a respectable role to play in building up of a good and harmonious family life and a healthy society as a whole.

Let us try to discuss the crucial issues the feminists raise about Islam and Muslim societies with reference to the *Holy Qura'n*:

- **Men and Women are same:** Men and women are of same kind and there is no question of one to be superior and the other inferior. The *Holy Qura'n* says, "O mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord who has created you from a single soul and from it created its mate (of the same kind) . . ." (Surat Nisaa, Part 4: 1). From the above verse we can understand that Islam tries to establish the fact that men and women are not only of the same kind but also complementary to each other.
- **Marriage:** Before Islam there was no limit of marriage. One could marry whomever he liked and as many times he wished as women were treated as an object of lust only. Very often men owned women like cattle or sheep and there were no laws to protect them or their rights. Islam puts a restriction on polygamy to a limit and allows having more than one wife on

special circumstances only. There is a misconception among the people (and feminists take advantage of it) that Islam allows men to have four wives. Let us see what the *Qura'n* says: “And if you fear that you will not deal fairly towards the orphans, marry of the women who seem good to you, two or three or four; and if you fear that you cannot do justice (to so many) then marry only one . . .” (Surat Nisaa, Part 4: 3). So, the *Qura'n* restricts the number of marriage to maximum of four. Then, most importantly it says that it is not possible do justice to more than one, therefore, marry only one. Thus, it becomes evident from the above verse that Islam advocates for monogamy and not polygamy.

- **Right to inheritance and owning of Property:** Islam gives women their due rights more than fourteen hundred years ago. It gives women inheritance rights for which others fought for these rights for women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The *Holy Qura'n* declares the rights of women first and then men. It says: “*Yusii kumullahu fii awlaadikum: lizzakari mis`lu h`azz`il uns`ayaiin . . .*” (Allah enjoins you concerning [the provisions for] your children: to the male the equivalent of the portion of two females . . .” (Surat Nisaa, Part 4: 11). It is evident from this verse that, in Islam, women have the right to property and most significantly through the revelation of the *Holy Qura'n*, they were entitled to it in the early 7th century over a thousand years before the feminists fought for it. Besides this, in Islam, women are free from any economic or financial responsibility. A woman has no economic burden for running the family or even herself. Men are solely responsible for meeting the financial requirements of the family. To be frank, this does not however, mean that women are economically dependent on men. In fact, in Islam, women enjoy economic freedom without any responsibility.
- **Education:** The first verse of the revelation of the *Holy Qur'an* to the Prophet is ‘*iqra*’ (read): “Read in the name of your Lord Who created (everything). He created man from a hanging mass (clinging) like a leech (to the mother’s womb). Read, and your Lord is Most Generous, Who taught man (reading and writing) by the pen, Who (besides that) taught man (all that) which he did not know” (Surat A`laq, Part 96: 1-5). It is to be understood that reading is a part of the process of acquiring knowledge. Therefore, everyone both men and women must read i.e. seek knowledge which his/her Creator has ordained. Hazrat Anas, a companion of Prophet Muhammad) describes that the Prophet of Islam said: “seeking knowledge is mandatory for every Muslim” (Mishqat: 207, p.135). Here, by every Muslim one can understand that it certainly includes the women. Therefore, it becomes clear that the Prophet of Islam granted the right to education for women a thousand years before the European women fight for it.
- **Purdah or Hijab:** Purdah or hijab is perhaps one of the most misunderstood subjects relating Islam and Muslims. It is taken to be a cause of women’s subjugation in Islam. Hijab or purdah, in Islam, is a symbol of modesty. It includes not only the veiling or covering of one’s body as a protection; it also means the protection and guarding of one’s eyes, thoughts, intention and moral conduct. Hijab, therefore, doesn’t simply mean wearing a veil or a burqa etc. it has a deeper meaning and hence applicable to both men and women. We find that the *Holy Qura'n* first addresses men about such hijab: “Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them: and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do” (Surat Noor, Part 24: 30). So, the verse is indicating that a man when comes across a woman should lower his gaze and guard his modesty. In the next verse, the *Qura'n* mentions about the hijab for women: “And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should

not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty . . .” (Surat Noor, Part 24: 31). From the two verses quoted above, one can understand that besides modest and unaggressive clothing for both men and women, they must also guard their gaze, their mind and their intention in order to preserve their modesty and mutual self-respect.

Conclusion:

The foregoing analysis has shown the face of the true *feminine* quite unlike the one found in the feminist discourse. One crucial point one can underline here from the above discussion is that, Islam not only advocates for gender-just harmonious society, it also dictates its followers to abolish gender inequality and injustice to women by giving them due rights, status and dignity in the society. It may not be wrong to believe that if the *Qura'nic* teachings and injunctions about rights, manners, duties and responsibilities for both men and women are properly followed, there will be no crime in the society, particularly against women and in this way, we can offer a harmonious healthy society to our globalized world.

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