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Muslim Women Perspectives: *A Liberation and Restoration Process*

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Abstract:

Life and future of Muslim women are hot debates gripping the world media. The opponents are usually the traditional feminists who question the rights and power of Muslim women and the other party being passionate defenders of Islam who often violate those very rights to keep feminist influence at bay, lest their women would be corrupted. The feminists question the rights of Muslim women but end up trivializing the matter by focussing on her ensemble whereas the biased clerics impose cultural and tribal edicts to reinforce their male-chauvinism. A true Muslim woman belongs to none of the above-stated categories. The present article discusses few eminent Muslim women from history like Nur Jahan to contemporary Malala Yousafzai in the light of Islamic feminism, who lived or are living their lives at full throttle with the very rights given to them by their faith without violating any, thus setting up role-models for future generations.

Keywords: Muslim women rights, Islamic feminism, Nusaybah, Nur Jahan, Malala Yousafzai, Illyasah Shahbaz, Asra Nomani.

“The extremists are afraid of books and pens, the power of education frightens them. They are afraid of women.” - Malala Yousafzai¹

Everyone else in the world seems to know what is best for Muslim women. Concurrent questions such as: who they are, what they can or cannot do, what they must endure or modify or even inculcate in their general comportment- presumptuously accredit them with an identity. Over the past few decades, this trend has surged, and debates about Muslim woman - her appearance, voting rights, marriage, divorce, etc. has gripped the world, especially the western media, much to the discomfort of the biased clerics; thus, both the extremities patronizing her. However, an educated Muslim woman (deliberately skipping the term "modern") will not be content with the lopsided verdict thrust on her by people who actually do not know who she is. She has emboldened herself, voicing her opinions through different channels of communication. She refuses to play the part of the inanimate rope in the age-old tug-of-war between vaunting custodians of society and religion seeking to gratify their political agendas; she is proclaiming her opinion and reclaiming her entity, and practicing her right given to her none other than her own faith. Attempts are being made by these women to spread awareness, as can be seen in an exhaustive report on Muslim marriage and divorce in Britain published in January 2016 by Muslim Women's Network, UK. It "is

aimed at Muslim women in Britain so they are better informed about their rights and practices relating to marriage and divorce."² Reflection of life that Literature is, self-proclamations by Muslim women accrue, propelling the age-old literary trend of feminism into a new direction - towards Islamic-feminism, which in turn reflects in different genres of English literature. Islamic feminism is neither the classical feminism nor a protest against the Muslim paradigm. It is one that revives Islamic texts/teachings or values based on the Islamic theology through canonical texts restoring the rights of women as they stand against the oppressing prejudice arising from varied and often false interpretations of Quran backing male sovereignty, saturating it further by transfusing cultural/tribal practices homogeneously. Branching out from this basic description, we encounter a plethora of different interpretations, movements, projects, and personalities creating feminisms that have divergent facets. This paper attempts to engage those texts that deal with the thought of Islamic feminism explicitly or implicitly, thereby voicing women perspectives. In a purely literary pursuit, it aims to study a few eminent Muslim women ranging from the annals of history like the Mughal Empress Nur Jahan to recent times like the youngest-ever Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai. These women are seen becoming an agent of change through their egalitarian ideals or discourse setting an example for future generations.

Exploring the model women's moral agency and its effect in their everyday life, these Muslim women have powerfully positioned themselves in their respective fields, asserting their influence on wider social institutions and this forms the crux of this study. The information dealt here is entrenched in the facts provided by well-established historians and researchers in case they aren't alive and interviews, blogs and social media in case they are. In each case, they are seen as challenging the dichotomist, singular, political or theoretical, whether liberal or not liberal. That is an important aspect of Islamic feminism. But first, let's have a closer look at what Islamic feminism is.

A feminist evokes an image of rebelliously independent and angry women refusing to be limited by any boundaries or tags imposed on her, whereas, the image of a Muslim woman completely revokes it. In the second case, we imagine a woman oppressed, bound by the shackles of socio-religious dogmas, uneducated, subjugated and deprived of any rights. These are two rather extreme opinions of an average non-westerner in the case of the former and average westerner in the latter. Quite naturally, Islamic feminism may be another example of "The most heterogeneous ideas ... yoked by violence together"³ as the first impression. However, both the images as mentioned earlier are misinformed and misconstrued.

Feminists of all shades, as the literati would agree, aspire for one common goal. All of them perceive patriarchy as unjust and indefensible and therefore are committed to disintegrating it to create gender just society and give equal opportunities especially to women. Simultaneously, Islam favours equality in all facets of life, for example, equality in religious obligations, basic humanity (both are susceptible to good and evil), rewards and punishments, financial dealings and property ownership, preservation of honour and nobility, education and cultivation, and a fair share in inheritance. Islamic feminism draws on this Quranic concept of equality of all human beings and insists on the application of the theology to everyday life

repudiating any bias or prejudice. Chairperson of UK's largest Muslim women's group, Shaista Gohir (in Frances Perraudin, 2016) says:

“Islam is neither rigid nor limited to narrow and conservative interpretations. Muslims who view Islam in that manner do not represent Islam in its entirety. Likewise, those secularists who view Islam in a reductionist manner will campaign to limit religion to the private domain and want it eliminated from all public discourse. However, our faith is not like a garment that can be cast aside as soon as we leave our home.”⁴

This spiritual equality forms the crux of Islamic feminism which is best described by Dr. Margot Badran, a graduate of Al- Azhar University, Cairo and Oxford University, London who (in Rachele Fawcett, 2013) says:

“...a concise definition of Islamic feminism gleaned from the writings and work of Muslim protagonists as a feminist discourse and practice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeking rights and justice within the framework of gender equality for women and men in the totality of their existence. Islamic feminism explicates the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all *insan* (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life. It rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*) conceptualising a holistic *umma* (generation) in which Quranic ideals are operative in all space.”⁵

The first woman who is recognized as a champion of Muslim woman's rights is Nusayba bin Ka'b Al-Ansariyah (Arabia, unknown-634 C.E.). Women in Islam have equal spiritual value was proved by this daunting lady (soldier) who accompanied Prophet Mohammed in battles. In Medina, she was one of the earliest converts to Islam and a member of the Banū Najjār tribe. Many virtues were attributed to her as a companion of the Prophet Muhammad. She is popular, however, for taking part in the Battle of Uhud (625), in which she carried sword and shield and fought against the Meccans. Nusayba was one of the first advocates for the rights of Muslim women. Notably, she questioned the Prophet Muhammad that why did God only address men (in the Quran).⁶ Soon after this dialogue between them, a verse was revealed to the Prophet in Chapter 33, Verse 35. It mentions that a woman can attain every right to which men have access. The verse also concluded that women stand on the same spiritual level as men. She was viewed as an acknowledged visionary who transcended her own generation.

After Nusaybah, Empress Nur Jahan deserves to be celebrated as a great Muslim woman whose involvement in government and society distinguished her and her (husband's) reign. India's most legendary and controversial Empress— she was a woman whose brilliance and determination outmanoeuvred every obstacle that stood between her and her dreams and whose love and devotion for her husband shaped the course of the Mughal dynasty. She was the twentieth wife of the Mughal emperor Jahangir, but it is very scarce that the Emperor's

name is mentioned without even a fleeting reference to her. She was a woman of great substance that left a great legacy to the future Muslim women.

Soon after his marriage to her, the Emperor gave her the title of Nur Jahan meaning the light of the world. In the words of Ellison Banks Findly:

“...the new title betokened what in fact Mehrunnisa was almost from the beginning, the legal and emotional wellspring from which the strength of this generation of rule was to emanate.”⁷

Her character inspired Indu Sundaresan, a historical fiction author, to write two fantastic novels, ‘*The Twentieth Wife*’ and ‘*The Feast of Roses*’ dedicated to life and times of Nur Jahan. Indu Sundaresan has brilliantly and accurately portrayed her protagonist by keeping her as close to the historical facts as possible and brought her to life by her vivid imagination. In these tales of historical romance and fiction, her woman protagonist exercises power in the only way available to a woman in seventeenth century India, that is from behind the veil and surpasses every other woman in the King’s *zenana* in beauty and brilliance. At the age of 8, Mehrunnisa (the name means "Sun of Women", Nur Jahan’s maiden name) has already settled on her life’s goal. After just one glance at his face, she resolves to marry the Crown Prince Salim. And she does marry him, albeit some 26 years later, after overcoming the hurdles of her family, an ill-fated early marriage, several miscarriages, and the jealous scheming of his other wives. There are several passages in the novels that highlight Nur Jahan’s intelligence and creativity that equipped her well in her ambitions. One of many examples of this can be observed in the second novel, *The Feast of Roses*. In this novel, Nur Jahan outwits a bold and aggressive courtier, Mahabat Khan, at a game of chess. He was also the Emperor’s childhood friend, but being a male-chauvinist, he had developed a strong dislike for her. A mere woman’s excessive interference in public affairs and Jahangir’s decisions irked him. Mahabat is very cleverly sent away to Kabul by Nur Jahan, lest his influence on Jahangir would pose a threat. Kabul would be a safe distance - too far from the court yet close enough to keep her vigil, thus relegating him to his rightful place:

“She had outmanoeuvred him, not just in Shatranj but also at court. Mahabat’s head bowed in a brief, grudging admiration. Sharif had been right all along when he had warned him of Jahangir’s affection for this woman.”⁸

There are several mentions in the novels about Nur Jahan’s creativity, and we believe that they are not imaginary because they are confirmed by the great historian Abraham Eraly in his book, *Emperors of the Peacock Throne*. The most notable being this:

“She was as talented as she was beautiful. A gifted artist, she designed new patterns of carpets, brocade and lace, and dressed in simple elegance, usually in white or soft colours, the dresses and jewellery she designed remained in high fashion for well over a century...In architecture, she broke new ground with the exquisite white marble mausoleum that she built for her father, a jewel of a building and a precursor of the Taj Mahal.”⁹

As Sundaresan writes in her afterword, Mehrunissa exercised far more power than was usually allotted to an empress.¹⁰ Nur Jahan was a very shrewd and capable ruler that knew how to support and promote the right people. She was a great politician too and was also acknowledged by the emperor for her many accomplishments. She even had Mughal coin struck in her name which was quite an achievement at a time when most women's lives were subjected to strict *purdah* system and zenana (harem) as it is called in India. He gave her the charge of the royal seal so that no royal decision, be it the royal zenana or a political matter, would be complete without her awareness and approval. Many interesting parts of the novel reflect her public dealings, her patronage of the arts, her influence in architecture, and the construction of splendid gardens. Indu writes in the afterword to *The Twentieth Wife*:

“My interest was piqued. Who was this woman hidden behind the veil, around whom legend swirled wraithlike?...In an age when women were said to have been rarely seen and heard, Mehrunissa minted coins in her name, issued royal order (farmans), traded with foreign countries, owned ships that piled the Arabian Sea routes, patronized arts and authorized the building of many imperial gardens and tombs that still exist today. In other words, she stepped beyond the bounds of convention.”¹¹

These incidents are confirmed in Ellison Banks Findly's book *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India*, where he quotes from *Ikbal-nama-i-Jahangri* (written by Jahangir, translated and edited by H. M. Eliot and Johnson Dowson):

“Day by day her influence and dignity increased...no grant of lands conferred upon any woman except under her seal....sometimes she would sit in the balcony of her palace, while the nobles would present themselves, and listen to her dictates. Coin was struck in her name...(and) on all farmans also receiving the Imperial signature, the name of “Nur Jahan, the Queen Begum,” was jointly attached. (Until at last her authority reached such a pass that the king was such only in name.”¹²

In a very interesting chapter ‘Arts and Architecture of Nur Jahan’ from the book *Nur Jahan* by Findly, her literary merits as a poetess are discussed and quoted. The reader is able to read her compositions and thus her literary side unravels. This chapter is the most revealing and helpful in construing the actual lady behind the royal veil of majesty and cultural traditions. She made innovations in textiles and dressing styles, patronized paintings and had influenced architecture too. It is a most interesting and important account of a fascinating character in the history of India that combined in one person the will power and intellect of Elizabeth I of England and the charm, elegance and seductiveness of Empress Josephine. Indu Sundaresan herself begins *The Feast of Roses* by a quote from *History of Jahangir* by Beni Prasad thus fixing Nur Jahan's character in our minds firmly:

“Nature had endowed her with a quick understanding, a piercing intellect, a versatile temper, sound common sense. Education had developed the gifts of nature in no common degree. She was versed in Persian literature and composed

verses, limpid and flowing, which assisted her in capturing the heart of her husband.”¹³

Apart from this, she was commercially active. Her officers were stationed at various places to collect duties on the imported goods in her *jagirs* (estates - which were many). She owned ships and traded immensely, and is said to have amassed wealth greater than that of Jahangir (in Findly, 1993)¹⁴ She dealt with English and Portuguese very judiciously and played them against one another. In the novel, Nur Jahan says:

“If the English are really that adept in the seas, if their navy is really that powerful, we can use them. They could protect our ships instead of the Portuguese, or rather, we can give both the *firangis* a chance for it-and profit from it. As long as Portuguese are unchallenged, they grow arrogant.”¹⁵

At the same time, she believed in charity and worked laboriously to benefit friendless and orphan women. She was famous for her generosity which is depicted in the novels where we see her in *The Twentieth Wife* aiding a slave girl giving birth to her own husband’s illegitimate child in a hen’s coop when the servants chose not to. Later, when she became the empress, Eraly tells us: “Often she interceded to moderate the harshness of Mughal justice.”¹⁶ Even during her exile in Lahore, where she lived a life of obscurity and neglect, it is speculated that she engaged in social activities aiding orphans.

Nur Jahan deserves more attention from biographers, and her life would be excellent material for an exciting film. Here we have a great example of an impressive and authoritative Muslim woman character- the woman who shaped her thoughts with education, enriched it with experience combined with rare intelligence and created a niche for herself in history within the edicts of her faith. She is a great example for an Islamic feminist because, despite taking liberties with their faith, Mughal emperors kept a strict vigil on their women and they were not allowed to break the rules of modesty set by the society.

The third great personality that deserves mention here is Ilyasah Shabazz (born July 22, 1962). She is the third daughter of Betty Shabazz and Malcolm X. She is an author and most famous for her memoir, *Growing Up X*. She is a motivational speaker and a social activist too. A faithful Muslim, she made her pilgrimage to Mecca, the hajj, in 2006 as her father had in 1964 and her mother in 1965. Her father, Malcolm X, was an African-American Muslim leader and human rights activist. To his admirers, he was a zealous advocate for the civil rights of blacks, and later in life, he aimed to unify different races and religions by means of humanity. He has been called one of the greatest and most influential African Americans in history. William Jackson says that Malcolm X’s words were fuel for the engines of freedom and independence that were also used by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Asa Phillip Randolph, and even Nelson Mandela.¹⁷ Following his footsteps, Ilyasah travels around the world and visits Islamic schools giving lectures to young people about empowerment and motivating them to be a part of the global community. Addressing the parents about the threats of radicalisation, she said in a lecture in Australia:

"If we don't take full responsibility for our children's development, we leave them open to prey — for other people to prey on them... "I want them to understand their power, the power to be their best selves," she said. "It was basically the same information that was given to me by mother, by my parents to understand my power, to understand my role in society, my role as a woman, my role as a person of the African diaspora, my role as a Muslim - there's something I have to give back to society."¹⁸

She is inspired by her father's vision of peace, fraternity, and freedom for all. He endorsed social justice and tried to put an end to the unjustifiable destruction of human as well as economic resources. Her mission is to empower young people through educational programming to achieve their fullest potential, and to accept their personal responsibility for progress of the human family. Ilyasah Shabazz Enterprises (ISE) initiatives celebrate the oneness of humanity; denounce war and injustice; and seize opportunities to promote justice, egalitarianism, and peace.

Thus, we have another example of a well-informed and powerful Muslim woman who knows the difference between true knowledge and bigotry. Her education taught her to respect her beliefs and to defend it against the sinister forces of the society be it Muslim themselves. She stresses the importance of parents' role in educating their children in right manner so that they become well rounded and well-balanced individuals and contribute to a healthy society. In her memoir, she celebrates her mother's insight and strength in struggling hard to bring her daughters up and whatever she is today, it is because of her mother's determination.

Another great person, without whom this essay would be incomplete, is Malala Yousafzai. Malala was born in Mingora on July 12, 1997. It is the largest city in the Swat Valley, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province of Pakistan. Her parents Ziauddin and Tor Pekai Yousafzai have two sons younger than her. From a very tender age, Malala developed a yearning for knowledge. Her father, himself a passionate education advocate, ran an educational institution in the city, a big part of which is Malala's family. She later wrote that her father recounted tales about how she pretended to be a teacher toddling into classes as a child. Determined to study and go to school despite any hurdles cast on her way, and with a firm belief that it is her right to do so, Malala stood up against the unjust dictatorship of Taliban. Supporting her father, Malala was quick to criticize the menace of Taliban. "How dare the Taliban take away my basic right to education?"¹⁹ She once said on Pakistani TV.

Her voice grew stronger and louder, and over the period of the next three years, she and her father became staunch supporters of girls' right to education and were acknowledged, throughout Pakistan, as determined to provide Pakistani girls opportunity to a free and good quality education. She says:

"The extremists are afraid of books and pens; the power of education frightens them. they are afraid of women." ("Malala Yousafzai Quotes (Author of I Am Malala).")

For her activities and courage, she was nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize (2011). She also received Pakistan's National Youth Peace Prize the same year.

Malala Fund is an organization today that empowers girls to confidently accomplish their goals through education. Funding education projects in six different countries and working closely with international leaders, the Malala Fund joins with local partners and advocates free and quality secondary education for all girls internationally.

Residing in Birmingham currently, Malala actively endorses education as a fundamental religious, economic and social right. Through the Malala Fund and with her opinions, Malala Yousafzai surged as a staunch advocate for the power of education and a living example for girls to become agents of change in their communities.

Another great Muslim novelist, Asra Quratulain Nomani, is an India-born American activist and a writer who taught journalism at Georgetown University. Her current project deals with the infamous murder of Daniel Pearl -the Wall Street Journal who was kidnapped by Taliban. Pearl was an old colleague of Asra Nomani.

Nomani has authored two novels: *Standing Alone in Mecca: An American Woman's Struggle for the Soul of Islam* and *Tanrika: Traveling the Road of Divine Love*. Her articles include: "*Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Bedroom*", the "*Islamic Bill of Rights for Women in the Mosque*", and "*99 Precepts for Opening Hearts, Minds and Doors in the Muslim World*". As the titles of her works suggest, challenging male patriarchy in the society by questioning their supremacy when Islam gives equal rights to women, is her prerogative. She said:

“We are standing up for our rights as women in Islam. We will no longer accept the back door or the shadows, at the end of the day, we'll be leaders in the Muslim world. We are ushering Islam into the 21st century, reclaiming the voice that the Prophet gave us 1400 years ago.”²⁰

The restoration of the Islam that has been checked by a discomposed patriarchy will most likely come from Muslim women such as Nomani. Throughout her book *Alone in Mecca*, she stresses that the early Muslims and their Prophet did not treat women as citizens of second-class. Women also preached in mosques. They were valued, not feared or demonized.

Ms. Nomani visits Mecca to offer her pilgrimage -*Hajj* where every Muslim should go only if they are financially and physically capable. Ironically, during the Hajj in Mecca, men and women mixed freely and harmlessly, unsegregated. Impelled by this discovery, which traces back to the original Islam, she hopes to reform the local mosque where she grew up and still lives (in West Virginia). That local mosque has separate entrances for males and females, and the women have to sit in a grimy squalid area behind a screen once they are inside; the reason being that a Muslim male should not see a female, or he will be distracted and tempted by her! Nomani feels that men have dehumanized women

over the years and insisted on the partition to keep them at bay while they themselves stay in power.

Asra Nomani agitates that there should be one door to enter into the mosque for both women and men, and they should pray in the same room, albeit, as a token of modesty, women a little behind men. *Alone in Mecca* contains a comprehensive description of the pilgrims and lots of anecdotal stories of modern day Muslim life in America. The author has a clear way of explaining much of what is the superficial news broadcasts seen in the west and what is deliberately concealed of the Muslim faith by the fanatics. The book is well-written, informative, and should be read by everyone who has been led astray by enemies of Islam to fear and distrust it. Islam does not need a reform. It needs restoration. Asra Nomani shows the way.

Islamic feminism has its detractors within Islam. Several apologetic tendencies of the Islamic traditionalists rely on selective and opportunist attitude towards Islamic tradition which is doubled by a vehement denunciation of the Islamic feminist endeavours. They discredit Islamic-feminism as a cultural attack and a corrupting influence. They view feminism, be it Islamic, as a manifestation of imperialism meant to destabilize local societies and destroy the culture. A similar view is shared by non-Muslim preconception about Islam that believes Islam doesn't provide equal status to women and an Islamic feminist is the one who liberates her by undermining the religious basis of life. However Islamic-feminism is not merely a feminism born from Muslim cultures, but the one that engages Islamic theology through Quran and the period of Prophet Muhammad. Often women's issues in general discourse are either trivialized by cliché questions about wearing a veil or not or highlighted by the domestic violence. But the central issue of equality is largely ignored. This is where the gap exists.

Thus, each of these five illustrious Muslim women, namely Nusaybah, Nur Jahan, Malala, Illyasah, and Asra, has struggled to reclaim her identity as a woman and to empower it. They were successful in outmanoeuvring the hurdles imposed by the patriarchal society and did not allow their gender to become a handicap in achieving their goals. In the case of Nusaybah, she could make God listen and reciprocate to her questions, whereas Nur Jahan slowly but steadily established her control and ruled the empire under a Muslim dynasty from behind the veil. Contemporaneously, Malala, a mere teenager, raised her voice against the unjust and fierce Taliban. Illyasah and Asra too are actively spreading awareness through their lectures and literary works to legitimize the power of Muslim women. They aim to educate the society about their rights that were given to them by their very own God and were practiced by Muslims in the times of Prophet Muhammad. Every Muslim woman who disregards herself, or finds herself weak and mentally or spiritually inferior to men, must ponder over these (and many more) distinguished women from the past and present who refused to be suppressed by the society and pursued their dreams without forgetting their religion.

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