Unequal Faith: Analyzing the Discordance of Secular and Islamic Feminism

Taking a fundamental text rooted in equality for all and alienating it for the hierarchical benefit of a single gender creates grave ramifications for the marginalized population that is deemed inferior to their counterparts. This is the inherent struggle of Islamic women who are attempting to form their feminist identity in the eyes of their Koran that has been subject to heavy patriarchal interpretation. Some argue that the unique convergence of Islam and feminism creates a need for a new sector of egalitarian pursuit that differs from the conventional Western definition of equality and holds Islamic faith at a higher regard (Mir-Hosseini 70). The rise of the term "Islamic feminism" has sparked disagreement in both the Islamic and feminist branches, as there is a common belief that the empowerment of women does not work naturally within the framework of Muslim policy. Above the heavily disputed meanings that have arisen from Islamic feminist thought, there is a crucial concern as to whether Islamic Republics around the world have the flexibility to improve the status of women in the first place (Moghadam 1142). The niche that Islamic feminism occupies has not been able to reach the same widespread audience as secular feminism due to its specificity and thus has not been able to garner the same amount of support since its conception. In order for the Islamic feminist movement to progress successfully, it is vital for a shift to occur that looks to value the integrity of Islamic faith without renouncing the successes of secular feminism as inapplicable to their cause.

By classifying secular feminism as a counter-force to the Islamic feminist cause, instead of acknowledging it as a possible asset, Islamic feminists have created a hyperbolized enemy and relied on outdated stereotypes of the Western colonial agenda. Clouded with past discordances with Western powers, many Islamic feminists see the adoption of a secular approach to feminism

as falling victim to the colonial tendencies of the West (Badran 15, Mir-Hosseini 69). Instead of focusing primarily on the means by which secular feminism has gained respect in the field of human rights, they have cast many ideologies that lie at the core of Western feminism aside in an attempt to protect the integrity of their specific branch of social justice. Though these women are justified in their hesitancy to follow a Western model due to turbulent relations in the past, there is an ingrained Islamic feminist belief that secular feminism and those that support it have "the express wish that Muslim society may someday hopefully emerge into a secular and equality-focused future" (Seedat 40). Since Islamic feminism is defined as unique by virtue of its adherence to Muslim beliefs that promote equality at their foundation, this mentality presents an obvious threat to the essential values of a movement that is attempting to find both religious and political justice instead of regarding secularization as the overarching goal. Undermined by the trepidation of losing the qualities that make their crusade distinctive, Islamic feminists have encountered obstacles in finding a platform to get their cause heard.

Regrettably, from the Western perspective, secular feminists are not actively trying to remedy this rift and amplify the voices of Islamic feminists due to their own preconceived notions about the incompatibility of the Islamic religion with the pursuit of gender-equality initiatives. In fact, one of the central tenets of secular feminism is the idea that "feminism can only emerge and flourish when religion is relegated to the private space" (Mir-Hosseini 67). Hence, secular feminism has not enthusiastically voice its support for the Islamic feminist movement that has proven to be an exception to this requirement. With an inability to see the Muslim religion as validating gender equality, Western feminists have attempted to use their own dominating discourse to include the struggles of all women instead of recognizing Islamic

feminism as having its own mission (Seedat 28). In the case of the U.S. in particular, following the attacks of 9/11, the illegal invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were justified in part as an attempt to stimulate democracy and women's rights (Mir-Hosseini 71). By using blanket statements that pledged to provide gender-equality using Western methodology, the U.S. disvalued the work of Islamic feminists and furthered the West's identity as a colonial imposition. To this day, instead of seeing male-centric interpretations of the Koran as areas for improvement, many Western feminists see them as insurmountable obstacles.

Through the acceptance of Islamic feminism and secular feminism as linked entities, the search for justice in the context of the Muslim faith will earn the backing of a reputable movement and, consequently gain prestige as a valid pursuit. Despite the fact that the term "Islamic feminism" was coined fairly recently in the 1990s in order to establish the set of philosophies a formal movement, the notion of a feminist consciousness as a quest for equality in the eyes of Islam has existed for quite a while (Mojab 125). In fact, as the movement was first spreading during its preliminary stages, it heavily utilized the roots of secular feminism as a common and preexisting language for Muslim women to work from and use as a framework (Seedat 32). By having a certain familiarity with the pillars of Western feminism, Islamic women were able to identify a particular sector that had not been addressed by the movement and create a subsection of feminism that was more applicable to their lives. Muslim women were able to use feminist methods to read Islamic sources like the Koran for equitable language and thus further their cause without becoming clones of their Western feminist counterparts (Seedat 27). Islamic feminists were thereby able to occupy a particular sphere of gender inequality that had not yet been properly addressed.

In order to combat the patriarchy that lies at the root of modern Koranic interpretation, measures must be taken by Islamic feminists to empower themselves with human rights activism that casts notions of their gender's subservience aside. The true injustice of gender inequality in Islam is grounded in the fact that the Koran itself does not explicitly favor one gender over another. Instead, it is patriarchal interpretations of the text that have forced Muslim women to create an outlet to recognize the oppressive nature of their faith, begin to build their feminist identities and formulate a movement as a means of resisting the patriarchy (Seedat 43). In addition to combatting their second-class status, Islamic feminists are confined to their role as the markers of boundaries within the Muslim community and thus it is much more difficult for them to make meaningful change since they serve as models of the Islamic identity (Mojab 137). When the guidelines for what is just in a community are based off the actions of a single population, raising another population to an untouchable status, the presence of a human rights violation is undeniable and must be addressed as such. Though the patriarchy of Muslim Law has become a means of exercising of male power and should not be underestimated due to the support it has garnered from the state, religion, law, culture, and media, the only power that makes it potent is the social and political forces that give it authenticity (Mir-Hosseini 75, Mojab 131). Women should not feel as if they are betraying their morality by pursuing a strain of feminism that inhibits the hierarchical understanding of a community based at its core on principles of egalitarianism.

By employing secular feminism's ability to critically evaluate the injustices of a gender-biased legal system, Islamic feminists will be able to hold Muslim Law accountable instead of simply relying upon the promised justice of religious principle. Although the Koran is

fundamentally a religious document, in the case of gender relations, it serves as the Constitution of the Islamic Republic and it must be interpreted as a legal document (Badran 9). In fact, it is necessary for the Islamic feminist movement to encompass more than religious establishment in its communities and attempt to question the secular forces of the state (Mojab 128). Inevitably, Islamic feminists must utilize secular discourse to make changes to the foundations of Muslim Law and uphold these revisions in the long-term. The transition into an emphasis on more secular rhetoric must begin in an adjustment to the means by which Muslim women are portrayed as legal entities. For the most part, these women are portrayed as the foundational units of the Islamic family instead of as legal citizens who have the ability to exercise rights of their own (Mojab 140). While many Western feminist initiatives have had the central purpose of attempting to rectify unequal gender rights in the political arena, Islamic feminists have focused on the long-term objective of changing the mentality of women who consider themselves helpless subjects of the patriarchy. Though this course of action is highly effective in empowering women and assembling support for the Islamic feminist cause, these techniques do not provide the same quantifiable progress as initiatives like The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which gave gender equality a clear international legal mandate and helped overall in secularizing the legal rhetoric of Iran (Mir-Hosseini 69). To combat the conservative readings of the Koran, Islamic women are in need of the progressive voice and tactics of secular feminism to fortify their cause and reinvigorate their need for meaningful and legally binding change.

The task of valuing one's personal sense of morality and faith while being subject to the pressures of an organized religion that no longer values the pillars of justices from which it was

founded upon is complex and multifaceted. This formidable endeavor requires a brand of sophisticated discourse, especially in regards to the Islamic feminist movement as it attempts to change the conversation about the subjugated gender. Feminist scholarship, whether in the secular or Islamic context, has much to offer in the comprehensive understanding of religion and the consequential pursuit of justice, and thus it should be seen as a means of uniting these two factions that have the same fundamental beliefs at their core (Mir-Hosseini 72). The combination of secular and Islamic feminism would have the potential to endorse the equality of women and men both socially and politically while remaining grounded in new equitable readings of the Koran. Furthermore, it is vital to address the fact that comprehensive understanding of inequity, as it exists in the case of Islamic feminism, is not sufficient to pursue justice and there must be a catalyzing force behind this understanding to prompt tangible righteous action.

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