

## Islamic Feminism and Trans-National Women Subjectivities in Middle East Fictions

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### Abstract

Islamic feminism has been widely discussed around the world especially in the academic discourse of feminism in Europe and America. However the position of women in Muslim Majority population countries still considered as depressed and introvert. Islamic feminism awakens many writers and philosophers in the Middle East, especially women writers who have been exposed to lame light from the rigid walls of patriarchal patterns following in the literary world. Palestinian writer Susan Abulhawa and Saudi Arabian writer Rejaa Alsanea are the two novelists selected here for the study. Their important works *Mornings in Jenin* and *Girls of Riyadh* are taken to look at the women subjectivities and their transition. They unveiled women subjectivities from Palestinian and Saudi Arabian context respectively. They show the stages of transition of women from their oppressed tradition.

**Key Words:** Islamic Feminism, Arab Women, Identity, Transition

Since the inception of Islamic feminism in 1990, it has been widely discussed phenomenon around the world especially in the academic discourse of feminism in Europe and America. Discourse on women's right in Islam has been already debated by orientalist by the beginning of nineteenth century. However the position of women in Muslim Majority population constitutes or considered as minority. There are many reasons behind it. Generally, religion is arguably considered as an influencing force to deprecate women. On contrary, traditional customs and norms label women positionalities under patriarchal control.

A central tenant of Islamic feminism is that Muslim women should not have to choose between their faith and their rights. There are ample rights for women within Islam, if only the patriarchal; practices and interpretations can be stripped away from Muhammed's revolutionary message of equality (Coleman 47)

The concept of Islamic feminism starts with the separation of faith and rights. One is privileged to everyone irrespective of any parameters. At the same time, later one is associated with the choice. It does not have any sort of compulsion to be involved in a religion. In the eyes of Islam, it never promotes single religious enforcement over people. Faith should be the basis on individual choice. However, the fundamentalist denies that choice of freedom for women.

Islamic feminism never degrades Islam or Islamic principles. Islam considers men and women are equal. It addresses the entire humanity. Unfortunately, male domination exists in society influenced by religion and takes the supreme authoritative power to control the entire religious principles for the sake of maintaining their authority as well as to instruct women. Perhaps, this phenomenon may cause misunderstanding the Islam about its male chauvinistic stereotype.

In fact, Islamic feminism awakens many writers and philosophers in the Middle East, especially women writers who have been exposed to lame light from the rigid walls of patriarchal patterns following in the literary world. In addition, the majority of women writers have dismantled male constructed stereotypes and conventions. They have opened a new space

and established their identity through their writing. Dominated literary genres in this area are memoirs and autobiographical novels. It was mainly because; each one has their own story to disclose at first. It creates and establishes a number of social problems which women encountered. However, all these problems arose from the basic root called patriarchy. It may be in the form of religion, conventions, stereotypes, politics and identity.

In order to find a solution to this problem, women participation has increased in all fields. Women started to become masters in developing different skills. They assert to represent politics and high profile professions. Women involved in religious activities. They seriously practice religious principles by maintaining their individual freedom. In literature, also they started to produce their own literature in which a significant amount of bestsellers were produced. Indeed that shows the acceptability of the public. It also indicates the emergence of female consumers for female creativity. Religion was mainly male-headed in all Middle East societies. By studying and involving research in theology, women become mastery over religion. They came to understand and reveal the real intention of religion and the purpose of religion not from a gender perspective but from the humanitarian perspective. Gilligan collectively says of different studies and approaches on gender:

The repeated finding of these studies is that the qualities deemed necessary for adulthood- the capacity for autonomous thinking, clear decision-making and the responsible action- are those associated with masculinity and considered undesirable as attributes of the feminine self. (Gilligan 17)

Women participation in public platform increased day by day. They have acquired a feeling of belongingness and sense of unity among themselves. Their deep knowledge in religion and service in other public and private sector made their presence more valuable and unavoidable. While accepting the conception of justice, they simultaneously link politics along with theology. It's complicated nature becomes more transparent. Islamic feminism emerges out in this way. Its prime focus was not to deconstruct the existing ideology or degrading men status in society. At the same time, it ensures equality and equal opportunity to men and women. It also ensures the emancipation of Muslim women from their wretched way of life. Its intention is

to spread women education widely than before. In addition, it focused on women participation in all fields. As Ziba Mir Hosseini explained it as “A movement to sever patriarchy from Islamic ideals and sacred texts and to give voice to an ethical and egalitarian vision of Islam can and does empower Muslim women from all walks of life to make dignified choices. This, in the end, is what Islamic feminism is about” (Hosseini 629- 645)

In its basic principles of Islamic feminism, women have to be emancipated from the different walks of society. Their ideas and talents are to be treated with more priority and preferences. While receiving an education, they should be claimed education and different high profile jobs. It helps women to get more opportunity for participation. However, the prime intention of the present thesis is not to explain Muslim women emancipation and enhancement. Instead, it stresses this area mainly to understand Arab women emancipation in all over the Middle East. It includes Muslims, Jews and Christians as well. Islamic feminism was one of the major reformative movements that emerged and activated in Middle Eastern countries. It helps to emancipate the entire Arab women.

Susan Abulhawa, a Palestinian American writer and human right activist who actively engaged in the medical field. She wrote medical brochures and articles related to modern medicine in different journals. Apart from all these, her reflected participation and representation in Palestine Israel issues are exceptionally noticed, in which she highlights children issues as foremost affecting problems in both countries. *Mornings in Jenin* is her debut novel published in 2010. She was highly confident talking about the story of a young girl Amal and her suffering in different aspects. The setting of the novel is in Palestine and America.

In this novel, Abulhawa portrays the life of a young girl, Amal. She was brought up in the midst of patriarchal suppression. Palestine and Israel war in its background of the story, which completely annihilates native inhabitants from their homeland. The fear and anxiety of these native folks especially women folks clearly depicts through the perspective of a young girl, Amal. It also inhibits the inability of this young girl to resist gender discrimination and traditional stereotypes, which patriarchal society used to impose over the younger generation. Patrilineal hegemony of culture, family and religion plays a crucial role in the development of

Amal. Soon Amal realized that the current situation in their homeland is not convenient for girls both internally and externally. Especially a girl like Amal has lots of limitations since she lost her parents. She was under the control of her uncle and auntie. Indeed, she was taken care of very well by her uncle and Auntie. However, the entire family system was against all kinds of rights and privileges of a girl's wish.

In *Mornings in Jenin*, Amal's journey begins with her orphan-hood. Immediately after the demise of her father, Amal decides to move away to get an education. There were serious discussions taken place regarding the marriage of Amal in her uncle's house. Being an orphan girl, she will have no powerful voice rather than simply obey the order. She soon realizes that living in conflicted dystopian Palestine is not a hectic task for women while comparing to the encounter of traditional stereotypes and patrilineal hegemony that she faces, because a Palestinian woman is comparatively distressed over the traditional flow of the society. In fact, Amal's decision was to run far away and tried hard to get a scholarship to continue her study in the US.

Abulhawa clearly shows the journey of a girl from dystopian Palestinian background to cosmopolitan American platform. The story of Amal continues in the second half not in Palestine, but in America. Abulhawa clearly depicts the initial stage of assimilation and adaptation to the host land. Cultural assimilation was a difficult task for Amal at the initial stage. Later she easily amalgamates with the colourfulness of host land. The dry unsophisticated phase in her Palestinian time disappeared while living in America. Her dressing style changed. That change was from the traditional Arab garments to modern bikinis. She experiences all luxuries in cosmopolitan life. Despite having all these luxuries and comfort, she became self-sufficient. The transition in her approach and attitude from traditional to modern was transparent.

Susan Abulhawa clearly portrays the picturesque sequence of amalgamation and assimilation, where women folks in Middle East arguably enforce to endanger their identity from traditional norms to cosmopolitan identity. It also encapsulates further references for enduring the life and other matters. Despite of being isolated, the idea of rehabilitation was extremely painful and distressed. It eventually looks up things more complicated in the lives Arab women.

There is a certain point where women translocate with new cultural settings. Their instant response against the question of identity regenerates their self to more independent way.

As far as the Middle Eastern writing is concerned, the literary contribution of Saudi Arabia is unavoidable. Rejaa Alsanea, one of the most prominent writers in Saudi Arabia was born in Kuwait to Saudi parents. Her father was an editor and journalist for the information ministry in Kuwait. Alsanea enjoyed liberal way of life since her parents were liberal and treated men and women equally in terms of using their rights and duties. Alsanea received her bachelor's degree in Dentistry from King Saud University in 2005. At the age of eight, her family moved back to Saudi Arabia and became entangled with the ultra-conservative social system. Intending to build up a medical career, Alsanea started writing *Girls of Riyadh* during her medical college education. She got immense help and support from her family especially from her sister Rasha. It took six years to complete the novel and finally, Alsanea published *Girls of Riyadh* in 2005. A number of copies of the book were sold through the black market due to the ban of the novel in Saudi Arabia. The book immediately reached its bestseller status after the removal of the ban from Saudi government.

Alsanea portrays primarily four characters in *Girls of Riyadh*; Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle and Lamis. All four characters are from Riyadh. They study at the University of Riyadh. They have similar upbringing and social circumstances around them. The first half of the novel explains the sequence of struggle under the patriarchal hegemony. In which post-marital complications are a recurrent theme in the novel. In fact, by accepting the patriarchal social structure, Saudi women are skilled not to talk against their society or community. They are subjected to be calm while admitting the problems of society, and probably by this reason, they become passive and inert. It appears that passivity is instilled in the mind of Arab women at an early age.

In fact, four girls portrayed in *Girls of Riyadh* by Alsanea are merely an objective representation of the Arab community. They neither represent Arab womanhood nor reject their representation of Arab womanhood. However, their Arab identity formation was visible until they redefined into the cosmopolitan social structure. Their resistance against patrilineal

hegemony in socio-political and cultural institutions was a sheer challenge in Saudi Arabia. Alsanea condemns the fact that her characters belong to the elite family and always revolve within the city of Riyadh. At the same time, the position of women in other parts of the country, especially interior localities, is still unexplored and will be arguably contaminated by the rigid patrilineal system.

In *Girls of Riyadh*, women adapt the newfangled lifestyle. They have been introduced into the world of technology and more acquainted with modern gadgets. By the influence of the internet, they found new people and community and connect with them. It was mainly to avoid stress and depression of domestic life. They alleviate their stress by bonding with new friends in which the majority were boys, which is forbidden in Saudi Arabian public domain. Alsanea signifies globalization and its effect on Arab native folks especially women. Mostly, she focused the transition of Arab women from traditional social structure to a cosmopolitan social platform. Western values, globalization, industrialization, and advanced technological innovation are the innermost reasons for the cosmopolitan transition. Their relationship turns from real to virtual world, in which no restrictions will bring a barrier. One of the highlighting findings of this novel is written in epistolary form. Alsanea used technological advantage while using literary forms. Here letters are written and sent through email. This novel is autobiographical in its way of presentation. Alsanea's characters face challenges for education and career as many other girls face in Saudi Arabia.

Arab women encountered both physical and mental issues both at home and away. Both selected novels of this article depict women as the victim of tradition and conventions. Women have conversely betokened new dimensions of life to find their space and liberation. By their consistent efforts, struggles and resistance, Arab women finally found their ultimate freedom in the cosmopolitan identity. Theoretical framework of Islamic feminism influenced to the lives of Arab women to some extent.

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