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Evolution from Feminism to Postfeminism: Islamic Representation of Womanhood

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Abstract

The paper aims at examining the emerging role of postfeminism in the present era and its concordance with the Islamic representation of womanhood. In this regard, the researchers highlight the role and purpose of feminism since its inception, and its various manifestations are also dealt with at length. The philosophy of postfeminism is discussed and the point of interest is its harmonious relationship with Islam and the Islamic concept of womanhood. Thus, this study asserts that there is a gradual transition from the theoretical and philosophical framework of feminism to postfeminism as these frameworks have been used frequently in the field of language and gender research. The contemporary study is embedded in the wider theoretical framework of Islamic Feminism. The researchers found out that there are conflicting ideologies between feminism (and all its offshoots) and Islam but as far as postfeminism is concerned, there is none. Rather, postfeminism propagates and supports the Islamic concept of womanhood in true spirit. It is also worth noting that feminist ideas and ideology have greatly dented the social and political fabric of mankind and human civilization in general. Postfeminism advocates for integrating and maintaining a balanced position for womanhood in life, that is, a balance between social and individual life, a balance between professional and family life. The purpose of this article is to promote a better understanding of the status of women in Islam and its overlapping and common grounds with postfeminism, that is, Almighty Allah has equated female folk at par with their male folk. The research is significant as it challenges the western notion of women in Islam and dispels the erroneous notions of suppression of women in Islam. The prime finding of this research is that like Islam, postfeminism proclaims equal footing for men and women in life, as enshrined in the Holy Quran.

Keywords: Feminism, Postfeminism, Role of Women

Introduction

Women in Antiquity

The status of women in different past civilizations and their respective religions was very humiliating and degrading. In Athens and Greek civilizations, the woman was considered as a man's property, and thereby, she was deprived of the rights of consent and divorce. Women were esteemed as a calamity or peril. She was believed to be the mother of all human ills and thereby, celibacy was promoted as a virtuous and sacred act. In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill (1869) mentions the status of women as a servant of their husbands as she holds a subordinate position. He further elaborates his viewpoint in the words "the wife's position under the common law of England is worse than that of slaves in the laws of many countries" (p. 17).

The vision of an Ideal Society in the Past

The representation of a woman is largely influenced by age and its belief system in all walks of life. The patriarchal societies profoundly restrict women merely to domestic affairs. For instance, the pretext of motherhood is embedded with child nurturing and domesticity. Another socio-cultural constraint for a woman is to shun public and practical aspects of life which are thought to spoil purity and innocence. Hence, the idealized concept of women is to present women as a paragon of virtues and an "Angel in the House" as portrayed by Patmore (1858). Tennyson (1847) also highlighted women as a separate entity from men. He asserts that men are meant for the fieldwork and women are

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meant for housework, men are meant for the sword, and women are meant for the needle. He concludes that "Man to command, and woman to obey".

The patriarchal doctrines in the past lead to no space for equality of sexes and its awareness amongst people. This makes feminism pleading its war against patriarchal norms legitimating gender suppression and confinement of women's private life into domestic affairs. Feminists harbor the yearning for exposure and experience of private and public life to become the captain of their souls.

Patriarchy

It is referred to as a social system to be governed by a male member such as the father or elder brother as a patriarchal figure, but through the lens of feminism, it postulates the supremacy of males over the dormant female folk. Patriarchy means to identify the boundaries of personal capacity, physical dominance, and institutional power of males over females (Coppock et al., 1995, p. 18). Feminists blame patriarchy as the genesis of all societal ills for women. In this regard, Walby (1990) states that gender stereotypes are based upon the inequalities prevailing in the veins of a patriarchal system that empowers the male gender. Gender represents the social construct of the sexes living in the cultural fields (Bertans, 2003) and can be differentiated from sex, which is a biological determinant (Kendall & Tannen, 2003). According to Wodak (1997), gender-specific attributes are construed by the portrayal of peculiarities of women. Loomba (1998) defines stereotyping as an abstraction of ideas and images into a manageable form as it becomes a procedure for processing the information. The supposition which asserts that women are naturally sweet or timid constructs the expected behaviors as socially obligatory roles. These roles determine their social conduct according to the will of the speakers (patriarchal society). In this regard, gender studies are carriers of political motivations and implications. The conservative critics were least disturbed with gender-specific traits and issues and they deliberately ignored any reference of gender-specific discourse. Men and women are supposed to refer to universal human nature that goes beyond the scope of any specific gender, but it highlights the supremacy of masculine nature by focusing on the male-driven interpretation of literature (Cuddon, 1982). Consequently, the need to study gender and feministic tendencies means understanding the underlying power game and draw conclusions for the present times.

Feminism

This study focuses on the theoretical context of feminism, a term that has gained currency in the field of language and gender research. Feminist theory engrosses a woman-centered perspective in a wider, all-encompassing system of ideas about life and experiences. This provides distinctive vantage points to see the world of the women and looking for constructing a better place to live for them. The theory of feminism brings the patterns into the limelight in which the marginalization and suppression of women are expressed (Murray, 1999). Feminists have criticized their male counterparts by stating that the knowledge of the world which we have considered as absolute and universal is knowledge derived from the powerful section of society, men as masters (Tyson, 2006). This apprehension casts a suspicious eye on the prevailing ideologies of life, and this is the quintessence of the feminist school of thought.

The focus of feminism is on gender discrimination and gender oppression or subjugation. This emphasis on gender has brought the concerns of women in limelight (Christie, 2000). The term gender brings social conditionings of being a man or a woman, biologically. Feminist theorists view gender, not as a neutral phenomenon but a socially propagated inequality. Gender inequality pinpoints sidelining of women and relegates their social status to a secondary position. In addition to this, there is a conflict established for assuming power dominance between men and women in terms of gender oppression. Male supremacy and subjugation are the tools to make another group subordinate. Men (patriarchy) exploit and control women's position and status. Hence, Ruthven (1984) claims that women's dominant aspects of their social construct were generated to fulfill the purposes of patriarchy. Gender repression and gender discrimination are by-products of patriarchy. In this way, feminism comprises of cultural and political drive which focuses on instituting equality in nearly all spheres of life including rights for women (Gamble, 2002).

Feminism can be factually bifurcated into three waves, in which each wave deals with various levels of diversified sufferings of women's inequality (Baxter, 2003; Tannen, 1993, etc). The first wave of feminism (the pre-modernist) spreading over two centuries (17th – 19th), is generally referred to as the suffragist movement. The first wave feminists not only raised their voice against the existing rules but also deemed to achieve equality and better participation of females especially in the social

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and political arenas of life. The second wave aimed at the elimination of gender oppression and the promotion of equality of sexes. The third wave of feminism deconstructed the identities of sexes in everyday life. The different shades of feminism fought against the suppression of women and highlighted discrimination among sexes as a grave issue. A brief description of these types of feminism is as follows:

Liberal Feminism

It can be esteemed as the first manifestation of gender inequality on the part of women and is based on the longing of women to attain non-discriminatory access to the available opportunities which are socio-culturally associated with men. It focuses on enhancing the status of women without tarnishing or propagating any significant transformation in the prevailing order of the society. Generally, liberal feminists have immensely emphasized restoring existing systems without challenging their fundamental construction or assumptions that support the system. This view holds that men and women can adopt flexible roles to curtail gender suppression and differences will be minimal or will disappear, and they achieve peace and harmony in their lives.

Marxist Feminism

It highlights the role of capitalism and patriarchy to suppress the fundamental rights of women. The outcome of this ideology challenges the fixed conceptualization of gender by making it a fluid motion. In simple words, Marxist feminists opine that capitalism is mainly responsible for the manipulation and exploitation of women. Moreover, it asserts that woman is regarded as a marginalized creature in family structure, workplace, and public domain. It also deems for bringing the holistic transformation in the socio-economic structure of the society.

Postmodern Feminism

As the name suggests, this strand of feminism is influenced by the works of postmodernist theorists who challenge the predetermined concepts of truth and reality which are acknowledged universally, such as the conviction of the existence of a coherent self that transcends circumstances. Deconstruction is one of the primary tools of postmodern feminism to analyze the text as a fluid construction pregnant with multiple meanings. It considers text as an arbitrary relationship of signs and signifiers as there is no conclusive meaning rather embedding diversity in meanings. Hence, it unfolds the hidden and contradictory nature of meanings. Furthermore, it explores the binary opposition in the construction of meanings by depicting their construal and artificiality which is responsible for defining the power dominance system.

Postfeminism

Since the 1980s, postfeminism has acquired widespread recognition and momentum in the realms of media, academia, and gender debate. There has been a fast transition from feminist to postfeminist tendencies and now it is a widely held belief that people are existing in the post-feminist age. However, postfeminism, like other postmodern trends, is a non-rigid word that evokes diverse notions in different individuals. Brooks (1997) points out that "any movement or philosophy which defines itself as post whatever came before is bound to be reactive" (p. 2). As a result, the word 'post' relates to the concept that feminism has achieved its purpose and has thus become superfluous, done, finished, and no longer necessary, for better or worse. Faludi (1992) claimed that feminism lost its relevance because it is a source of women's misery and despair. According to Brooks (1997), the term 'Postfeminism' can be applied in two different ways. First, the media has ingrained and legitimized the term in the language and gender fields, and second, postfeminism is concerned with feminism's practice of investigating concerns of inequality and difference. Postfeminism has become synonymous with anti-feminist sentiments in the media as women's liberation movements have lost their value. In a similar vein, McRobbie (2009) asserts that the movement is "decisively aged and made to seem redundant" (p. 255) and that it should be abandoned.

Gill (2007) asserts that there are three implications of postfeminism: political, historical, and backlash. In political terms, there is feministic integration of difference as linear postfeminism. Historical feminism is aided by a movement away from 2nd wave feminist conceptualization. The third one is tantamount to reaction to feminism.

Postfeminism is defined by the researchers as not a rebuttal to the feminist movement but an overlapping of different varieties of movements such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism (Brooks, 1997). According to Gamble (2002), it is a mistake to perceive the feminist

movement as a fragment because postfeminism is an expression and representation of the movement's most recent divergence. It does not break away from feminism, but it does interact with it critically.

The main distinction between feminism and postfeminism is that feminism completely rejects domestic tasks and forced housekeeping, whereas postfeminism attempts to reclaim women's roles in the home. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) linked the accusation against domestic affairs with a concentration camp, claiming that the role of a housewife is inherently dangerous as "I am convinced there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous" (p. 253). Feminism's movement has been increasingly ambiguous in its relations with domesticity during the previous few decades. The daughters of Second Wave feminism have profited from their mothers' activity and the lingering conflicts for empowerment between males and females by which today's younger women have been abandoned.

The concept "postfeminism" was coined to describe certain patterns that help people to talk about women's contemporary status and the role that domesticity plays in their lives. Postfeminist domesticity has emerged as a joyful, fantastic, and glamorized kind of domesticity, intending to maintain a standard of domesticity and show off to friends rather than mere labor.

The main postfeminist tendencies as mentioned by Faludi (1992) and Cameron (2005) are expressed below:

1) In postfeminism, there is always a revolt against second-wave feminism as it focuses upon context-specific gender issues rather than more generalized notions. The stress is shifted on the individual level instead of considering the sisterhood or womanhood issues arising on a collective level as the idea of the universality of female nature is dubbed as erroneous. The women's identity is diversified and multiplied.

2) Postfeminists believe in performativity instead of being essentialist in the construction of gender (Butler, 1990). Gender does not have its construction according to people's behavior patterns; rather, it changes as it is formed in a conversational dyad.

3) Domesticity, motherhood, and romance bring forth traditional feminine nature. In this regard, postfeminism essentially influences women to return home. With feminism immensely emphasizing career-oriented lives for women, postfeminist women have resolved the conflicts and frustration by integrating career and domesticity as the essential aspects of their lives.

4) Power is formed as a flow or emerging in a net or web-like way, rather than as a possession, therefore powerlessness cannot be identified as a basic gender construction of all women. Similarly, because identities are formed via social contact, they are subject to change. That is why, rather than essentialism, postfeminism incorporates constructionist theory into its theoretical foundations.

5) There is a purposeful effort to empower women by overcoming fear and demonstrating the capacity to handle pressure and the foresight to make the best decisions to thrive in the future. Women are no longer shown as wretched creations incapable of performing under duress. As a result, while there is no conscious effort to bring the oppression of women to light, there is an endeavor to reinterpret the stereotypical status.

Postfeminist theorists have passionately worked to embed female desire with female empowerment. Consequently, the postfeminist discourse stresses characteristics such as a woman's financial independence, which is encouraged by job advancement. Furthermore, it is linked to feminine romantic impulses, as well as a stable heterosexual relationship and family, which are seen as impediments to female development and freedom in second-wave feminism. Resultantly, reconciliation is considered the most striking feature of postfeminism. There is a strong awareness that women should accept subordination for their welfare. The main distinction between postfeminism and antifeminism critics is that the former think that reconciliation is beneficial, whilst the latter argues that feminism is the source of instability in women's lives, leading to self-imposed seclusion. Postfeminism strongly recommends returning to the traditional gender roles by inducing developments in the relationships.

The postfeminist woman has evolved as attractive as well as aggressive. They do not intend to outcast men, but they challenge the male norms due to the patriarchal system through their interaction with them. The world of women is recreated according to their whims and wishes and challenges the blind imitation of men. This was unprecedented in earlier periods, as the social circumstances did not give exposure to women to feminist paradigms. Hence, women folk challenged the essentialist

conventions offered by biological determinism and religious ideologies which are the reason for enshrined natural female inferiority.

Postfeminist women are no longer going to be passive or restrained. Instead, they are self-sufficient in their ability to perform their part in becoming responsible citizens and contributing to the advancement of society. Traditional women's roles are despised by postfeminist women, who are expected to carry out menial tasks and face boredom. Traditional women had little or no say in how their lives were directed by males, and every aspect of their life was under the authority of men. A postfeminist woman is defined as a woman who is free of male influence and control. Eliza, as portrayed by Bernard Shaw, is an excellent example of a powerful and brave postfeminist woman. The postfeminist woman is no longer considered to be a doormat as Eliza's remarks in Shaw's *Pygmalion* (2005) that she wants congenial gestures from her teacher by stating that she knows that she is a common girl, and he is a learned scholar as she asserts "…. but I'm not dirt under your feet" (p. 102).

There is a remarkable shift in attitude, and postfeminists' trends and tendencies have turned the tide. Females are no longer seen as frivolous or petty, but as valuable members of society. In other words, in academics, the depiction of a woman is transformed from an object to a subject. The woman is described as an active member of society because she is not only managing her life but also guiding the fates of her counterparts.

In comparison to silence and marginalization in the past, contemporary women have visibility and voice. Women are more powerful and autonomous than males, as seen by this difference. Rather than being accountable for a potential solution, the feminist movement bears the responsibility for women's issues, whereas postfeminism arrives in the arena as a potential remedy. Motherhood is celebrated in postfeminism philosophy. As a result, there is an urgent need to support research aimed at bringing to light the notion of women reinforcing family structures and demonstrating that women's appropriate realm is not only domestic but also public.

Men and women complement each other rather than conflict.

The purpose of postfeminist research is political as it commemorates the blend of theory and practice to apprehend the world and to build a world as a peaceful place for women and men to live in. In this regard, it is worthy to highlight that neither political nor confrontational elements are involved in their essential nature. A kind of interdependent relationship is established among men and women and that dependence makes them complementary partners to each other rather than being rivals and this paves the way for a postfeminist solution. A postfeminist woman has the characteristics of being an educated and employed gender who is not burdened or financially reliant on her husband, but who is equally accountable to do her responsibilities passionately and contribute more to the progress of her family and country.

The Islamic concept of womanhood

Islam is the religion of universal values as it provides a complete code of life. The essential aim of Islam is to impart moral and spiritual instructions to human beings. In line with this philosophy, it devises a comprehensive system of rules and injunctions from which the whole human race can take benefit. History is evident of the fact that Islam is the first-ever religion, unlike other religions of the world, which has removed the stigma of impurity attached to a woman and identified the exalted position of women and commemorated her highest dignity and honor, and granted her rights equally by abolishing all discriminations based on sex. The Prophet (SAW) emphasized the importance of treating women well in his renowned discourse at the Farewell Pilgrimage. He said that Almighty Allah has entrusted women in your hands so that, you could treat them with kindness and benevolence as he emphasized, "O my people, you have certain rights over your wives and so have your wives over you" (Ali, 2011).

Islam can therefore be interpreted as a religion that loudly supports feminism, women's rights, and women empowerment. The framework of study that emerges by building the nexus between feministic discourses and the Islamic paradigm is entitled Islamic feminism. Margot Badran (2002) propagated this field of study and stated that Islamic feminism "derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence." This proclaims that Islamic Feminism, unlike the previous forms of feminism, promotes equality among genders and highlights the importance of empowering both genders in all the circles of life to

increase social harmony rather than creating the hegemony of one gender upon the other and giving rise to further conflicts in the society.

No Difference of Nature

The Holy Quran addresses generally by referring to the "mankind" which categorically declares that He has created all mankind upon one nature. In the Holy Quran (chapter 4:1), men and women are given equal status and are, therefore, social mates- they complement each other in faith.

> O Mankind, keep your duty to your Lord who created you from a single soul and it created its mate (of the same kind) and from them, twain has spread a multitude of men and women.

> In the Holy Quran (chapter 3:195), Almighty Allah offers to reward each of them independently according to deeds without discrimination of gender. This indicates that both men and women are equally responsible in Allah's eyes. Thus, any scholar trying to prove that woman is deficient in reason that she is defective in her religion because of her menstrual disabilities and that man has been appointed to rule over her is futile because the nature of man and woman is not discriminated against at all. Undoubtedly, the discrimination between men and women is against the true essence of Islam.

Law of Inheritance

Islam acknowledges a woman's autonomous life and hence accords her a share of the inheritance. The woman was not only denied that share of inheritance during the dark ages but she was also considered a property to be inherited by men. Women are entitled to a specific portion of the deceased kin's property under Islamic law, which is decided by their degree of proximity to the deceased and the number of heirs. Inheritance, on the other hand, requires equality and similarity. In theory, both men and women are entitled to have an equal share of the deceased relatives' property, although the amount they get may differ. The rationale of the difference of property share is that the male heirs have liability to perform their financial responsibilities but there is no such kind of liability for the female heir. If female folk is deprived of inheriting a share completely, it would be undue to her as she is related to the deceased. Similarly, if female folk is granted equal share to that of male folk, it would be an unjust measure in society and to the man folk. Islam maintains a balance by providing a large portion of the inherited property to the man, but at the same time not forgetting the woman. Thus, Islam grants heritage according to the responsibilities and liabilities in the society.

> It is significant to note that wherever there is leverage for men, it is not to grant supremacy of men over women. So, it is Almighty Allah's distribution of abundance by the requirements of nature, created by Almighty Allah and He is all-known of the things which favor woman and the ones which support man.

> The present study points out the fact that instead of articulation of the stated positions and going into isolation like scattered stones, gender compatibility needs to communicate for minimizing turbulence. The goal of the feminist study is not to promote lofty theories that have no bearings on humanistic issues. The aim is to bring about the radicalization of gender constructions in society. Feminists who study gender have the dual viewpoints that their research will enrich knowledge about gender inequality and promote the cause of women's freedom. By raising awareness, updating, and developing policies among women, research can further inspire a fundamental shift in society. Thus, the fact that gender research aims to address communal matters raises the practical and scholarly worth of the field. Consequently, Feminism still shares relevance to the life of modern man as a critical movement. Hence, it cannot be discarded.

> Furthermore, the current research is an attempt to find a cure for all ills of women. It begins by stating that modern woman faces a paradoxical and conflicting position while trying to strike a balance between professional achievement and household joys. They are satisfied with their womanly attitude because they want to show themselves as a paragon of feminine virtues such as kindness, socialization, and caring, but they also want to demonstrate activeness, rationalism, assertiveness, and independence by separating themselves from males (Litosseliti, 2006). The study is a response to the notion that feminism has lost its vitality as it no longer shares its relevance to the present times. Rather, the researchers aver that feminism would continue to be enunciated as a stimulating movement that has the competency of guiding and empowering women. In this regard, Postfeminists argue that men and women have equal chances and that women face minimal prejudice in contemporary times. The ideal postfeminist woman seeks to integrate and reestablish a balance between her work and her desire for a husband/hearth. As a result, postfeminism claims that women's

natural desire is to be spouses and mothers and that feminism denied them this opportunity. In postfeminism, thus, women do not have to wait for men to propose marriage, do not have to earn less than men, do not have to stay at home, and do not have to attribute themselves to men at all. Feminism cannot become outdated if women are present and their relationship with men is studied. Feminism may not exist in a society that reflects a perfect balance among human beings, which is a hard nut to crack.

Like postfeminism, Islam does not suppress womenfolk in any shape or form. Western scholars have misread the status of women in Islam as oppressed because they have little or no true knowledge of Islamic laws and jurisprudence. The researchers believe that women are not permanent adversaries of men. The question of superiority or inferiority of any sex is not raised by Islam at all. Islam considers each sex exceptional in its domain and assigns roles to them accordingly. In Islam men and women are not at daggers drawn, but they are created to complement each other. Personal development, intellectual pursuits, and the acquisition of knowledge are the gist of human rights that should be granted to each sex, without any bias and bigotry.

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