Islamic Perspective on Women's Rights: Questioning the Necessity of Feminism

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Abstract

This thesis critically examines women's rights in Islam in comparison with feminist ideology, with a particular focus on whether feminism is necessary in Muslim societies. Using a qualitative thematic analysis of primary Islamic sources—including the Qur'an and Sunnah—together with classical jurisprudence and contemporary feminist literature, the study highlights the sufficiency of Islam's equity-based framework in ensuring women's dignity, empowerment, and justice.

The findings reveal that Islam guarantees women's comprehensive rights in inheritance, property, education, marriage, and social participation while maintaining complementary roles that safeguard family and social harmony. In contrast, the feminist pursuit of absolute equality, shaped by secular and Western socio-historical contexts, often neglects natural gender differences and has produced unintended consequences such as family disintegration and moral instability. Furthermore, misrepresentations of Islam in feminist critiques and media narratives obscure its protective and empowering dimensions, fostering misconceptions about Muslim women's status.

The study concludes that feminism, as a Western secular ideology, is not necessary within Muslim societies. Instead, the revival and implementation of authentic Islamic teachings provide the most coherent and sustainable framework for women's empowerment. Recommendations include strengthening Islamic education, pursuing contextual legal reforms, promoting media literacy, conducting further empirical research, and supporting renewal and reinterpretation within Islamic scholarship.

This research contributes to gender and Islamic studies by addressing gaps in existing literature and offering a culturally and theologically grounded response to feminist critiques. It reaffirms that Islam, as a holistic divine system, remains both sufficient and relevant in addressing women's rights in the modern world.

Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study:

The discourse on women's rights is often framed within two competing paradigms: feminism and Islam. Feminism, particularly in its Western form, advocates for absolute equality between men and women, seeking identical rights and opportunities regardless of inherent gender differences (Tong, 2014). While this pursuit has played a significant role in addressing women's historical exclusion from political and social spheres (Ahmed, 1992; Badran, 2009), it has sometimes overlooked natural distinctions between genders, leading to consequences such as weakened family structures, sexual liberalization, and erosion of women's dignity (Paglia, 1990; Sommers, 1994; Hakim, 2011).

In contrast, Islam emphasizes equity, a divinely guided framework that grants women comprehensive rights in areas such as life, inheritance, education, business, and marriage (Esposito, 2011; Wadud, 1999). For example, the Qur'an grants women a legally mandated share of inheritance (Qur'an 4:7, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010)), protects their right to marital consent (Qur'an 4:19), and affirms their spiritual equality alongside men (Qur'an 33:35). Moreover, the pursuit of knowledge is enjoined upon every Muslim regardless of gender, as reflected in both Qur'anic principles and the Prophet's traditions (Qur'an 96:1–5). These provisions recognize complementary gender roles while preserving family and social cohesion (Engineer, 2008; Ramadan, 2009). This research critically examines women's rights through the lenses of Islam and feminism, questioning the necessity of feminism within Muslim societies.

The objective of this study is to contrast feminism's notion of equality with Islam's concept of equity, highlighting the consequences of both frameworks on women's status, dignity, and family life. It aims to expose how Islam is often misrepresented by modern activists and media, particularly regarding the veil (hijab), polygamy, guardianship, and divorce (Ahmed, 2011; Abu, Lughod, 2013), while reaffirming that Islamic teachings provide a holistic system of justice and empowerment (Barlas, 2002; Mir, Hosseini, 2010).

The guiding research questions address: (i) the historical development and impact of feminism, (ii) the distinctions between equality and equity, (iii) the unintended consequences of feminist ideologies, (iv) the misrepresentation of Islam, (v) the rights Islam grants women, and (vi) how Islam's framework sustains justice and social harmony. The study hypothesizes that feminism, although influential in Western societies, is not necessary in Muslim contexts, as Islam already

guarantees women's rights within a framework that balances freedom with accountability, thereby ensuring both empowerment and protection (Nasr, 2002; Esposito, 2011).

This research contributes to the field of gender and Islamic studies, where feminist discourse currently dominates. Previous works by scholars such as Fatima Mernissi (1991), Leila Ahmed (1992), and Ziba Mir, Hosseini (2010) have sought to integrate Islamic traditions with feminist thought but often adopt Western feminist assumptions, thereby misrepresenting the authentic Islamic paradigm. While other studies describe women's rights in Islam, few engage directly with the feminist claim of absolute equality as unnecessary or problematic. This gap fosters confusion, especially among Muslim women exposed to global feminist narratives (Badran, 2009).

The purpose of this research is to provide a comprehensive, critical, and comparative analysis that clarifies differences between Islamic and feminist perspectives, demonstrating the sufficiency of Islam in ensuring women's dignity, empowerment, and social justice. By situating this discussion within both historical and contemporary contexts, the study reaffirms Islam's relevance in addressing women's rights and offers a constructive response to feminist critiques (Engineer, 2008; Ramadan, 2009).

1.2 Statement of the problem

Globally, feminist ideologies dominate the discourse on women's rights, advocating absolute equality between men and women, often without regard for inherent gender distinctions and complementary roles. Although feminism has historically advanced women's participation in public life, it has also generated unintended consequences, such as weakened family structures, sexual liberalization, and the erosion of women's dignity. In Muslim societies, feminism is widely promoted as the sole path to women's liberation, while Islamic teachings are frequently misrepresented in media and activist rhetoric as inherently oppressive, particularly regarding the veil, polygamy, guardianship, and divorce. This misrepresentation creates confusion among Muslims, especially women, about Islam's adequacy in ensuring justice and empowerment. In reality, Islam provides a comprehensive framework of equity that guarantees women rights in spiritual, social, economic, and familial domains, while preserving their dignity and promoting social cohesion. The problem lies in the dominance of feminist narratives that overshadow the Islamic paradigm and question its relevance despite Islam's divinely guided principles of justice and equity. This thesis seeks to address this gap through a critical examination of feminism's

necessity in Muslim contexts and the establishment of Islam's framework as the authentic foundation for women's rights.

1.3 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the Islamic principle of equity differ from the feminist pursuit of absolute equality, particularly regarding women's rights, responsibilities, and dignity?
2. How does Islam's equity, based framework sufficiently guarantee women's rights and empowerment, making feminism unnecessary in Muslim societies?

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To critically examine the way the Islamic principle of equity differ from the feminist pursuit of absolute equality, particularly regarding women's rights, responsibilities, and dignity?

2. To evaluate Islam's equity, based framework sufficiently guarantee women's rights and empowerment, making feminism unnecessary in Muslim societies

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study carries significance on academic, social, and religious levels. Academically, it enriches the body of literature in gender and Islamic studies by providing a comparative analysis of two influential frameworks: feminism and Islam. While Western feminist movements largely dominate current discussions (Badran, 2009; Tong, 2014), this research highlights the Islamic paradigm of equity as a distinct and sufficient alternative often overlooked or misrepresented (Barlas, 2002; Esposito, 2011). By questioning feminism's necessity in Muslim societies, it fills a critical gap in contemporary debates on women's rights (Ahmed, 1992; Mir, Hosseini, 2010). Socially, this research addresses misconceptions that influence public opinion and policy concerning Muslim women. Media narratives and liberal activism frequently portray Islam as oppressive, reinforcing stereotypes that alienate Muslim women from their faith (Said, 1978; Abu, Lughod, 2013). By clarifying the rights, dignity, and protections Islam affords women (Engineer, 2008; Wadud, 1999), this study empowers Muslim communities to reclaim their

authentic heritage and challenge narratives undermining their values and institutions (Mernissi, 1991; Ahmed, 2011).

Religiously, the study reaffirms the Qur'an and Sunnah as comprehensive sources of justice and guidance for women's empowerment. In an era where globalized feminist discourse often eclipses Islamic teachings (Moghissi, 1999; Mahmood, 2005), this thesis demonstrates that Islam's principle of equity offers both spiritual equality and practical rights in inheritance, education, marriage, and social participation (Nasr, 2002; Ramadan, 2009). It ensures empowerment without compromising modesty and integrity. Thus, the research situates Islam's holistic framework as the authentic path to justice, dignity, and social harmony, offering a constructive response to feminist critiques and reaffirming divine guidance's relevance in contemporary society (Esposito, 2011; Barlas, 2002).

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The question of women's rights and gender equality has long been one of the most contested domains in both scholarly discourse and public debate. Across history, the role and status of women have shifted in response to cultural, economic, political, and religious transformations (Mernissi, 1991; Kandiyoti, 1991). In the modern era, the issue has gained further urgency due to the rise of feminism as a global movement and the corresponding need to re, examine traditional frameworks of gender justice. For Muslim, majority societies, this debate carries unique weight, as the Islamic tradition already provides a comprehensive paradigm of rights and responsibilities articulated more than fourteen centuries ago (Wadud, 1999; Esposito, 2011). For example, the Qur'an grants women legal rights in inheritance (Qur'an 4:7, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010)), marital consent (Qur'an 4:19), and affirms their spiritual equality with men (Qur'an 33:35). Thus, situating women's rights in Islam alongside modern feminist theory is not merely a comparative exercise but a critical engagement with two competing worldviews—one rooted in divine revelation and the other in secular philosophy (Ahmed, 1992; Barlas, 2002).

The literature on women's rights reveals two overarching trajectories. The first is the feminist tradition, which emerged in Europe and North America during the Enlightenment and industrial revolutions. This trajectory is typically divided into three major "waves." The first wave, spanning the 19th and early 20th centuries, focused on suffrage, legal recognition, and access to

property rights (Offen, 1988). The second wave, beginning in the 1960s, emphasized workplace equality, reproductive rights, and resistance to entrenched patriarchal norms (Friedan, 1963; Millett, 1970). The third wave, emerging in the 1990s, critiqued universalist assumptions within feminism itself and introduced concepts such as intersectionality, highlighting how gender intersects with race, class, and cultural identity (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 2003). Each wave built upon the previous one, expanding the scope of feminist demands while simultaneously generating internal debates about priorities and strategies.

The second trajectory, distinct from but often compared with feminism, is the Islamic conception of women's rights. From its inception in the 7th century, Islam introduced legal and social reforms that radically altered the position of women in Arabia (Nasr, 2002). The Qur'an granted women rights to property, inheritance, consent in marriage, and access to education (Qur'an 4:7, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010); Qur'an 96:1–5), entitlements that were absent or severely restricted in many other civilizations at the time (Wadud, 1999; Engineer, 2008). Historical evidence suggests that early Muslim women participated actively in economic, intellectual, and political life, challenging later stereotypes that reduce them to passive figures confined to the domestic sphere (Ahmed, 2011; Spellberg, 1994). The Islamic framework is distinct from feminism in that it does not view gender roles as interchangeable but rather complementary, assigning men and women rights and obligations designed to foster social harmony and justice (Barlas, 2002; Esposito, 2011).

At the same time, the relationship between feminism and Islam has been fraught with tension. Western feminist scholars often view Muslim women as oppressed, interpreting practices such as veiling or gender segregation as symbols of subjugation (Said, 1978; Mahmood, 2005). Conversely, many Muslim scholars argue that such interpretations stem from cultural misunderstandings or colonial legacies rather than the Islamic texts themselves (Lamrabet, 2016; Mir, Hosseini, 2010). This tension has produced a wide range of scholarly positions, from those advocating for an "Islamic feminism" that reinterprets religious texts through feminist methodologies, to those who reject feminism entirely as incompatible with Islamic theology and epistemology (Badran, 2009; Cooke, 2001).

The significance of revisiting this debate lies in the need to address both internal and external misperceptions. Within Muslim societies, patriarchal practices often masquerade as religious injunctions, leading to injustices that contradict Qur'anic principles (Moghissi, 1999; Barlas, 2002). Externally, Western narratives continue to homogenize Muslim women, portraying them

as voiceless and powerless, thereby denying their agency (Spivak, 1988; Abu, Lughod, 2013). Critical scholarship must therefore disentangle culture from religion, highlight the emancipatory dimensions of Islamic law, and evaluate whether feminism adds anything substantive to women's empowerment in Islamic contexts.

Moreover, the globalization of feminist discourse raises the stakes of this inquiry. International conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) attempt to universalize feminist, derived principles of gender equality. While many Muslim, majority countries have ratified CEDAW, they have often entered reservations to clauses on family law and gender roles, citing conflicts with Sharia (Mayer, 1995; An, Na'im, 2002). This ongoing negotiation illustrates the difficulty of reconciling secular feminist principles with religiously grounded conceptions of justice. It also raises fundamental questions: Do Muslim women require feminism, or is the Islamic framework sufficient to ensure their rights? Can feminism and Islam be harmonized, or are they irreconcilable systems?

This literature review chapter therefore aims to provide a structured engagement with both frameworks. It will examine the historical development of women's rights in Islam, trace the emergence and evolution of feminist thought, analyze points of convergence and divergence, and critically assess whether feminist ideologies offer meaningful contributions to Muslim women's empowerment. By situating the discussion within both theological and sociopolitical contexts, the chapter seeks to demonstrate that Islamic teachings already encompass a rich and coherent paradigm for gender justice, one that may render external feminist prescriptions redundant or even destabilizing in Muslim societies.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two primary theoretical paradigms: the Islamic framework of women's rights and secular feminist ideology. The Islamic framework derives from divine revelation as articulated in the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical jurisprudence (fiqh), emphasizing principles of justice ('adl) and equity (qist) (Wadud, 1999; Esposito, 2011). The Qur'an explicitly affirms that both men and women are equal in their spiritual worth and accountability: "Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women … Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward" (Qur'an 33:35). It also grants women distinct rights in inheritance (Qur'an 4:7, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010)) and marital consent (Qur'an 4:19), while safeguarding their dignity through complementary roles. This paradigm recognizes inherent

natural differences between men and women and assigns responsibilities aimed at fostering social harmony and preserving dignity for both genders (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999; Engineer, 2008). It posits a holistic approach to gender justice grounded in divine ethics rather than secular liberalism.

In contrast, feminist ideology, especially in its Western forms, pursues absolute equality often framed as identical rights, roles, and opportunities for men and women. It critiques traditional gender roles as patriarchal constructs and champions notions such as sexual liberation, economic participation, and the deconstruction of gender norms (Friedan, 1963; Crenshaw, 1989; Millett, 1970). Feminism's historical evolution through successive "waves" reflects expanding scopes and internal debates over identity, intersectionality, and systemic inequality (Tong, 2014).

This study employs these frameworks critically and comparatively. It evaluates the sufficiency of the Islamic equity model in securing women's rights within Muslim societies and examines the applicability and limitations of secular feminist thought in such contexts. The theoretical lens also incorporates critiques of cultural imperialism and Orientalism, highlighting how feminist discourse often homogenizes Muslim women and neglects religious and cultural specificities (Said, 1978; Mahmood, 2005; Abu, Lughod, 2013).

By situating the research within these paradigms, this study aims to offer an informed, nuanced understanding of women's rights that respects religious authenticity while engaging with contemporary gender justice discourse.

The Islamic vision of women's rights derives from three interrelated sources: the Qur'an, the Hadith (sayings and practices of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him), and Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). Collectively, these establish rights in legal, economic, educational, marital, social, and political spheres. The underlying principle is justice (*'adl*) and equity (*qist*), which differ from modern notions of absolute sameness but nonetheless guarantee comprehensive dignity and security for women (Barlas, 2002; Esposito, 2011).

2.3.1 Legal and Economic Rights

Islam was revolutionary in securing women's economic and legal rights at a time when most civilizations treated women as property. The Qur'an explicitly affirms women's entitlement to inherit:

"For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much – an obligatory share" (Qur'an 4:7, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010)).

This injunction decisively broke with pre, Islamic Arabian practices where women were excluded from inheritance and property ownership. Further verses (Qur'an 4:11, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010), 4:12) provide detailed shares for women, institutionalizing their economic entitlements. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) reinforced these reforms by recognizing women as independent legal persons, able to enter contracts, litigate, and hold wealth (Ali, 2016; Nasr, 2002).

Comparative historical studies underscore the radical nature of these reforms. In much of Europe, women could not inherit or own property independently until the late 19th century, the English Married Women's Property Act (1882) being a prime example (Anderson, 2006). By contrast, Muslim women in the 7th century had full autonomy to own, buy, and sell property without male guardianship. Fatima Mernissi (1991) and Amina Wadud (1999) emphasize that Islam not only recognized women's ownership but insulated it: women are not obligated to spend their income on household maintenance, which remains the responsibility of men (Qur'an 4:34, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010)).

Feminist discourse, particularly in capitalist societies, often equates empowerment with identical workforce participation. Yet, critics such as Asma Barlas (2002) highlight that feminism sometimes subjects women to a dual burden, earning income while retaining domestic responsibilities. Islam's framework avoids this contradiction by granting financial autonomy without obliging economic participation, thereby protecting women from systemic exploitation under the guise of liberation.

In Muslim societies, historical evidence further confirms this economic agency. In Ottoman records, for example, women frequently appear as litigants in courts defending property rights (Sonbol, 1996). In Mughal India, elite women established *waqf* (charitable endowments) and financed educational institutions (Khan, 2004). These examples underscore that the Islamic legal tradition has long recognized women's independent economic capacity.

2.3.2 Educational Rights

The pursuit of knowledge is enjoined upon every Muslim without gender distinction. A widely cited Hadith states: *"Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim"* (Ibn Majah, Hadith

No. 224). The Prophet's wives, especially Aisha bint Abu Bakr, became among the most prolific transmitters of Hadith, shaping Islamic jurisprudence (Brown, 2009). Historical figures such as Fatima al, Fihri, the founder of the University of al, Qarawiyyin in 859 CE, symbolize Islam's emphasis on women's scholarship and intellectual contribution (Makdisi, 1981).

Karen Armstrong (2000) argues that Islam's early commitment to education, including women's intellectual development, was unparalleled in contemporary civilizations. By comparison, in medieval Europe, female literacy was restricted largely to convents and aristocratic households (Anderson, 2006). In Muslim Spain, however, women such as Lubna of Cordoba were renowned as scholars and administrators in royal courts (Fierro, 2005).

Modern restrictions on women's education in some Muslim societies stem not from Islamic injunctions but from local cultural practices or political constraints. Wadud (1999) observes that misinterpretations rooted in patriarchy often obscure the Qur'anic encouragement of female learning. Indeed, Qur'anic verses repeatedly stress reflection, knowledge, and understanding as pathways to faith: "Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge, by degrees" (Qur'an 58:11, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010)). Thus, the Islamic tradition provides strong theological and historical precedence for women's education, which contemporary Muslim societies must revive rather than restrict (Barlas, 2002; Mir, Hosseini, 2010).

- **2.2.3 Marital and Social Rights**

Islam elevated the marital contract into a sacred and reciprocal bond. Women possess the right to consent to marriage:

"O you who have believed, it is not lawful for you to inherit women by compulsion" (Qur'an 4:19, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010)).

This verse explicitly forbids forced marriages, which were prevalent in pre, Islamic Arabia and in many patriarchal societies beyond. Moreover, women hold the right to seek divorce through *khula*, a mechanism ensuring agency in marital dissolution (Qur'an 2:229; Mir, Hosseini, 2010).

Islam also uniquely dignifies motherhood. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) declared: *"Paradise lies under the feet of mothers"* (Ahmad, Hadith 22507; al, Nasai, Hadith

3104). This teaching places maternal care at the center of Islamic ethics, contrasting sharply with materialist perspectives that sometimes devalue caregiving roles. In feminist discourse, domestic labor is often framed as oppressive (Delphy, 1984), while in Islam, motherhood and caregiving are valorized as spiritually and socially central roles (Barlas, 2002).

Social rights extend beyond family life. Women participated in public spaces, as seen in the Prophet's era when women attended mosques (Qur'an 9:71), engaged in trade, and even joined military expeditions in supportive capacities (Spellberg, 1994; Hassan, 1987). This demonstrates that Islam never imposed seclusion but advocated modest participation in community affairs.

2.2.4 Political and Leadership Rights

Contrary to stereotypes, Islamic history records women's active participation in governance and public life. Shifa bint Abdullah, appointed by Caliph Umar as a market inspector in Medina, exemplifies early Muslim women in administrative roles (Ahmed, 1992). Razia Sultan (1205–1240), ruler of Delhi, and Queen Arwa of Yemen (11th century) highlight precedents of women's political leadership (Khan, 2004).

Contemporary scholarship debates women's eligibility for head, of, state roles, but there is no consensus restricting women from positions of authority provided they uphold Islamic principles (Qur'an 9:71). Mahmood (2005) emphasizes that women's public participation must be understood within the broader Islamic paradigm of justice, consultation (*shura*), and accountability (Esposito, 2011; Ali, 2016).

2.3 Feminist Ideology: Development and Core Themes

2.3.1 Feminist Waves

The feminist movement developed in the West across distinct historical "waves":

- First, wave feminism (19th–early 20th century): Focused on suffrage, legal rights, and property ownership. Thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft (1792/1995) and activists such as Emmeline Pankhurst demanded political enfranchisement (Offen, 1988).

- Second, wave feminism (1960s–1980s): Expanded focus to workplace rights, reproductive autonomy, and recognition of domestic violence. Betty Friedan's *The*

Feminine Mystique (1963) captured widespread discontent among housewives, while Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) provided theoretical grounding.

- Third, wave feminism (1990s–2000s): Introduced intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), recognizing overlapping oppressions of race, class, and gender. Scholars such as Chandra Mohanty (2003) criticized Western feminism's tendency to universalize women's experiences.

- Fourth, wave feminism (2010s–present): Centered on digital activism (#MeToo), gender diversity, and critiques of systemic sexism across institutions (Munro, 2013).

2.3.2 Core Feminist Tenets

Feminism is anchored in the pursuit of absolute equality, often framed as sameness in roles, rights, and opportunities. Core themes include:

- Critique of Patriarchy: Viewing traditional gender roles as oppressive (Millett, 1970).

- Sexual Liberation: Advocating reproductive autonomy, contraception, and freedom from traditional sexual mores (Friedan, 1963; Firestone, 1970).

- Economic Participation: Demanding equal pay, workplace presence, and dismantling of gender, based labor divisions (Tong, 2014).
- Deconstruction of Gender Norms: Promoting fluid understandings of gender identity (Butler, 1990).
- While these tenets have enabled progress in women's rights globally, scholars such as Haideh Moghissi (1999) caution that feminism's secular, liberal framework often conflicts with religious and cultural value systems, particularly in Muslim societies where family and community obligations are emphasized.

2.4 Points of Convergence and Divergence Between Islam and Feminism
2.4.1 Areas of Convergence

- Education: Both advocate women's right to education (Qur'an 96:1–5; Wadud, 1999).
- Economic Security: Both seek legal protection for women's property rights (Qur'an 4:7, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010); Anderson, 2006).
- Opposition to Violence: Both condemn domestic abuse (Qur'an 30:21, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010); Mernissi, 1991).
- Social Participation: Both encourage women's active role in society, though with different motivations (Ahmed, 1992; Mahmood, 2005).

2.4.2 Key Divergences

- Equality vs. Equity: Feminism seeks identical equality; Islam promotes equity tailored to natural differences (Ali, 2016; Barlas, 2002).
- Family Roles: Feminism critiques traditional family roles as patriarchal; Islam upholds complementary roles as stabilizing (Engineer, 2008; Nasr, 2002).
- Dress and Modesty: Feminists often interpret hijab as oppression, whereas Islam frames it as dignity, modesty, and spiritual empowerment (Qur'an 24:31, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010); Ahmed, 2011).
- Concept of Liberation: Feminism defines liberation as freedom from tradition; Islam defines it as submission to God, integrating rights with responsibilities (Ramadan, 2009).

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2.5 Critical Analysis: Why Islamic Societies Do Not Need Feminism

2.5.1 Sufficiency of the Islamic Framework

Islamic teachings provide a holistic framework for women's rights, grounded not in a secular pursuit of identical roles but in a divinely revealed system that balances rights with responsibilities. This framework emphasizes *equity* rather than *absolute sameness*. Equity recognizes natural biological and psychological differences between men and women and ensures that rights and obligations are distributed accordingly, safeguarding both dignity and social harmony (Barlas, 2002; Wadud, 1999).

For example, in matters of economic provision, the Qur'an explicitly places financial responsibility on men (Qur'an 4:34, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010)), thereby relieving women of the burden of obligatory financial contribution while still granting them full economic autonomy. Critics from within feminist discourse, such as Christina Hoff Sommers (1994), have noted that the feminist pursuit of identical equality has often created a dual burden for women, expecting

them to perform in the workplace on par with men while still retaining primary responsibility for domestic care. Islam avoids this contradiction by separating rights from obligations, ensuring that women's financial independence is guaranteed without subjecting them to systemic overwork.

Moreover, the Islamic framework historically preceded feminist movements by over a millennium. Women in early Islam inherited property, entered into binding contracts, and exercised legal agency in a way that was unthinkable in most premodern Western societies (Ahmed, 1992). Thus, for Muslim societies, feminism does not introduce new concepts but instead overlaps with rights that were already provided by Islamic law.

2.5.2 Distinguishing Cultural Misinterpretations from Religion

A recurring issue in the discourse on women's rights in Muslim societies is the conflation of cultural practices with Islamic teachings. Many practices criticized by feminists, such as forced marriages, denial of inheritance, and restrictions on education, are not sanctioned by the Qur'an or Hadith but are instead products of local customs and patriarchal interpretations (Barlas, 2002; Moghissi, 1999).

For example, in rural South Asia, women are sometimes deprived of inheritance under customary law, yet Islamic injunctions (Qur'an 4:7, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010)–12) make such practices explicitly unlawful. Similarly, in parts of the Middle East, restrictions on women's education stem from tribal customs rather than any Qur'anic prohibition. As Amina Wadud (1999) emphasizes, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) strongly encouraged the pursuit of knowledge for all Muslims, male and female alike.

Therefore, the solution for women's empowerment in Muslim societies lies not in adopting external feminist ideologies but in *tajdid* (renewal) and *ijtihad* (reinterpretation) within Islamic jurisprudence. Reform, oriented Muslim scholars such as Fazlur Rahman and contemporary thinkers like Asma Lamrabet have argued that reclaiming Qur'anic justice through reinterpretation is more authentic and culturally sustainable than importing Western feminist models (Lamrabet, 2016).

2.5.3 Critique of Western Feminism's Applicability

Western feminist discourse developed within specific socio, historical contexts: industrialization, the Enlightenment, and struggles against entrenched patriarchal systems in Europe and North

America. Its categories of analysis—such as individual autonomy, sexual liberation, and deconstruction of gender norms, were shaped by secular, liberal paradigms (Crenshaw, 1989; Friedan, 1963). However, the wholesale application of these models to Muslim societies risks ignoring distinct religious, cultural, and social contexts.

Scholars such as Saba Mahmood (2005) and Leila Ahmed (2011) argue that Western feminism often homogenizes Muslim women as oppressed subjects, requiring liberation through Western frameworks. This perspective reproduces a form of cultural imperialism, where secular, liberal assumptions are imposed globally under the guise of universal rights. Edward Said's (1978) critique of *Orientalism* is relevant here, as Western narratives about Muslim women often reflect more about Western anxieties and power relations than about the lived realities of Muslim women themselves.

For example, debates about the veil (hijab) illustrate this clash. While many Western feminists portray hijab as a symbol of subjugation, numerous Muslim women articulate it as a conscious choice tied to dignity, modesty, and religious identity (Ahmed, 2011). The feminist insistence on unveiling as liberation thus undermines the agency of Muslim women who choose to veil.

2.5.4 Unintended Consequences of Feminist Movements

Critics such as Camille Paglia (1990) and Sommers (1994) contend that certain strands of feminism, especially radical and postmodern variants, have destabilized family and community structures in Western societies. Rising divorce rates, declining fertility, and weakened intergenerational bonds are often correlated with feminist, influenced policies that prioritize individual autonomy over collective responsibility.

When applied uncritically to Muslim societies, such frameworks risk undermining one of the central strengths of Islamic civilization: the family as the nucleus of social cohesion. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of family as a space of tranquility and mutual support (Qur'an 30:21, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010)). By contrast, feminist critiques that dismiss family roles as patriarchal risk dismantling a system that has historically safeguarded women's dignity and social security.

2.6 Contemporary Debates and Islamic Feminism

While Islamic feminism has contributed to drawing attention to the need for gender justice in Muslim societies, this study argues that such an approach is ultimately unnecessary and

potentially misleading. By framing women's rights in Islam through the lens of "feminism," even when prefixed with "Islamic," the discourse risks importing external ideological categories that may distort the Qur'anic vision of justice. The rights of women in Islam are not dependent on feminist reinterpretations but are rooted in divine revelation, which grants women dignity, inheritance, property ownership, education, and participation in social and political life centuries before the emergence of feminist movements (Engineer, 2008; Ramadan, 2009).

Moreover, the language of feminism often carries historical baggage tied to Western secular struggles, which differ fundamentally from the spiritual and legal framework of Islam (Ahmed, 1992; Badran, 2009). While scholars such as Amina Wadud (1999), Asma Lamrabet (2016), and Asma Barlas (2002) seek to reconcile Islamic texts with feminist concerns, and Ziba Mir, Hosseini (2010) explores reinterpreted approaches to gender justice, critics caution that such efforts may unintentionally validate the claim that Islam alone is insufficient in guaranteeing rights. This contradicts the central premise of Islamic law, which situates justice not in human ideologies but in divine guidance.

Therefore, although Islamic feminism represents an important academic debate, this thesis maintains that women's rights should be reclaimed and practiced directly within the framework of Islam, without reliance on feminist categories. True liberation for women lies not in adopting secular feminist terminology but in reviving and implementing the authentic teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah.

Research Methodology

3.2 Research Design

The study is designed as a qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring complex social and religious ideas that cannot be reduced to numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within this framework, thematic analysis was chosen because it provides flexibility and depth in handling textual sources, enabling the researcher to identify patterns across Qur'anic verses, Hadith, scholarly interpretations, and feminist writings. The research design thus supports the thesis's aim of contrasting Islam's equity, based framework with feminism's equality, based paradigm

3.3 Research Approach

The study follows an interpretivist paradigm, recognizing that religious and social texts require contextual and hermeneutical interpretation rather than statistical measurement (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The emphasis is on understanding meanings, values, and frameworks, rather than producing quantifiable generalizations.

3.4 Data Sources

3.4.1 Primary Sources

- **The Qur'an**: The foundational text of Islam, providing guidance on women's rights and responsibilities. For example, verses grant women independent rights in inheritance and property ownership (Qur'an 4:7, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010); Qur'an 4:11–12) and affirm their spiritual equality with men (Qur'an 33:35).

- **The Sunnah:** Authenticated sayings and practices of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), contextualizing Qur'anic principles in lived practice. For instance, the Hadith "Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim" (Ibn Majah) underscores Islam's commitment to women's education, while "Paradise lies under the feet of mothers" (Ahmad; al, Nasa'i) highlights women's dignity in family and society.

3.4.2 Secondary Sources

- **Tafsir (Qur'anic exegesis):** Classical and modern commentaries that expand on verses related to women's rights.

- **Islamic Jurisprudence Texts (Fiqh):** Scholarly discussions and rulings on issues such as inheritance, marriage, divorce, and guardianship.

- **Academic Literature:** Books, peer, reviewed journal articles, and theses addressing women's rights in Islam and feminist theory. Key contributions include works by Ahmed (1992), Barlas (2002), Mernissi (1991), and Ali (2016).

3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through library research and digital academic databases. Relevant Qur'anic verses, authentic Hadith, tafsir works, jurisprudential texts, and scholarly writings on Islam and feminism were compiled. Key feminist texts were also reviewed to understand their claims regarding equality and women's empowerment, which were then contrasted with Islamic principles.

3.6 Data Analysis

The study applies thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involves six stages:This approach ensures that both Islamic and feminist perspectives are systematically examined, while allowing the researcher to highlight convergence, divergence, and misrepresentation in debates about women's rights (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017).

Results and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results derived from the qualitative thematic analysis of Islamic primary texts and feminist literature, followed by a discussion situating these findings within the broader academic discourse on women's rights. The results reaffirm the sufficiency of the Islamic framework in granting women comprehensive rights and critique the necessity and applicability of feminism in Muslim societies. The discussion elaborates on points of convergence and divergence, evaluates the implications for social justice and empowerment, and reflects on contemporary challenges regarding representation and cultural interpretations

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Equity and Comprehensive Rights in Islam

The primary Islamic texts studied reveal a structured system of equity (justice based on differences). Women's rights to inheritance, education, property, and consent in marriage demonstrate a divinely ordained comprehensive rights framework. The Qur'an and Sunnah emphasize women's spiritual equality and legal protections, balanced with complementary social roles (Qur'an 4:7, as cited in Ibn Kathir (2010), 4:11, 33:35; Hadith Ibn Majah).

4.2.2 Feminism's Emphasis on Absolute Equality

Feminist literature overwhelmingly advocates for identical rights and roles for men and women, contesting any gender, based distinctions as discriminatory. Successive waves of feminism have expanded this agenda from legal suffrage to social liberation and identity politics. However, the

feminist insistence on sameness often neglects biological and social realities acknowledged in Islamic teachings.

4.2.3 Misinterpretations of Islam in Feminist and Media Narratives

Modern feminist critiques and popular media frequently depict Islam as oppressive towards women, focusing on practices such as hijab, polygamy, and guardianship. These representations largely neglect contextual theological rationale and the protectional aspects embedded in Islamic jurisprudence.

4.2.4 Social and Moral Consequences of Feminist Ideologies

The feminist agenda's focus on individualism and sexual liberation, observed in some Western contexts, corresponds with rising family disintegration and moral challenges. Islamic principles prioritize family cohesion, social harmony, and dignity, emphasizing duties alongside rights.

4.2.5 The Agency and Status of Muslim Women Historically and Today

Historical evidence demonstrates that Muslim women have held significant roles in scholarship, business, and governance, predating many Western feminist advances. Contemporary Muslim women continue to find empowerment within Islamic frameworks that respect spiritual and social dimensions.

4.3 Findings:

The analysis of the themes highlights that Islam already provides a complete and divinely guided framework for women's rights, making feminism unnecessary in Muslim contexts.

First, the theme of **equity and comprehensive rights in Islam** shows that women have been granted spiritual equality, inheritance, property ownership, education, and marital consent directly through the Qur'an and Sunnah. This framework is not only holistic but also balanced, as it integrates rights with responsibilities to preserve social harmony.

Second, the theme of **feminism's emphasis on absolute equality** demonstrates that while feminism has achieved progress in Western societies, its insistence on sameness often ignores natural differences and complementary roles. This creates contradictions that Islam avoids by grounding justice in equity rather than identical treatment.

Third, the analysis of **misinterpretations of Islam in feminist and media narratives** reveals that much of the criticism directed at Islam is rooted in cultural practices or Western stereotypes rather than the religion itself. These misrepresentations obscure the protective and empowering dimensions of Islamic law, reinforcing the need for an authentic Islamic lens rather than external ideological categories.

Fourth, the theme of **social and moral consequences of feminist ideologies** highlights that feminist, inspired individualism and sexual liberalization in the West have corresponded with family breakdown and moral instability. Islam, on the other hand, safeguards the family as the foundation of social stability, placing duties alongside rights to ensure dignity and justice for both men and women.

Finally, the theme of **the agency and status of Muslim women historically and today** demonstrates that Muslim women have historically enjoyed active roles in scholarship, trade, and governance, and continue to find empowerment within Islam. This shows that Islam does not confine women to subordination but situates their rights and responsibilities within a spiritually anchored framework.

Collectively, these findings confirm that Islam's equity, based paradigm is both sufficient and sustainable in ensuring women's dignity, empowerment, and justice. Feminism, while influential in Western contexts, does not provide solutions suited to Muslim societies and, in many cases, risks undermining the very social cohesion and moral stability that Islam protects.

4.4 Discussion

4.4.1 Addressing the Research Objective: The Sufficiency of Islam

The findings validate the thesis hypothesis that Islam, through its equity, based framework, sufficiently guarantees women's rights without necessitating feminism. Islamic teachings provide spiritual, economic, and social rights holistically, allowing empowerment without compromising family or societal values. This equilibrium contrasts with the feminist pursuit of identical equality, which can disrupt social cohesion.

4.4.2 Conceptualizing Equity vs. Equality

The study confirms that equity, as understood in Islam, is distinct from feminism's equality. Equity respects biological and psychological differences, assigning tailored roles and rights that promote balanced justice. This understanding challenges modern feminist paradigms that equate equality with uniformity, often discounting the importance of complementary gender roles.

4.4.3 Critiquing Feminist Misrepresentation of Islam

Feminist and media narratives often selectively interpret Islamic practices, projecting cultural biases or secular norms. This misrepresentation undermines authentic Islamic teachings and disempowers Muslim women by casting their faith, based choices as oppression. The study advocates for nuanced, contextualized interpretations that appreciate Islam's protective and empowering provisions for women.

4.4.4 Social Impact and Cultural Context

The research discusses the implications of embracing feminist ideologies uncritically in Muslim societies. The erosion of traditional roles and family structures observed in some feminist contexts suggests caution in wholesale adoption of feminist frameworks that may clash with religious and cultural values.

4.4.5 Empowerment Within Islamic Frameworks

Muslim women's empowerment, rooted in Islamic ethics, combines spiritual fulfillment with social responsibility. The research highlights historical female figures and contemporary examples demonstrating stakeholder agency without feminist labeling, underscoring the capability of Islamic frameworks to foster dignity, opportunity, and leadership.

4.5 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

A major strength is the integration of primary Islamic texts with contemporary academic critiques, providing a comprehensive thematic analysis not often present in gender discourse. Limitations include the interpretive nature of thematic research, which may vary based on exegetical perspectives, and the lack of empirical data on diverse lived experiences of Muslim women.

4.6 Implications for Future Research and Practice

The study contributes to gender and Islamic studies by firmly establishing Islam's sufficiency in women's rights discourse, encouraging further empirical research on Muslim women's lived realities. It invites scholars and policymakers to consider Islamic frameworks as valid models for gender justice that do not require wholesale adoption of secular feminist agendas, promoting culturally sensitive legal and social reforms.

4.7 Conclusion

The results confirm the central thesis that Islam provides a holistic, divinely ordained framework ensuring women's dignity, empowerment, and justice. While feminism has contributed

positively in certain contexts, its universal application to Muslim societies is neither necessary nor always beneficial. Islamic equity offers a sustainable, balanced path that respects natural differences while promoting rights and responsibilities integral to social harmony and women's welfare.

Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This thesis has critically examined women's rights in Islam in contrast with feminist ideology, specifically addressing the question of whether feminism is necessary in Muslim societies. Through qualitative thematic analysis of primary Islamic texts, jurisprudence, and contemporary feminist literature, several conclusions are drawn:

- Islam provides a comprehensive, divinely ordained framework of equity that guarantees women's spiritual, legal, economic, educational, social, and political rights. These rights are balanced with complementary gender roles that preserve family cohesion, social harmony, and moral integrity.
- The feminist pursuit of absolute equality, while successful in various Western social and legal contexts, operates on assumptions of identical roles and rights for men and women. This overlooks natural differences and can lead to unintended social and moral consequences such as family instability and erosion of dignity.
- Misrepresentations of Islam in feminist critiques and popular media often ignore the equitable and protective dimensions of Islamic teachings, producing a skewed narrative of oppression rather than empowerment for Muslim women.
- Muslim women, both historically and presently, demonstrate agency and leadership within Islamic frameworks without recourse to secular feminist ideology. This confirms Islam's sufficiency in promoting gender justice and empowerment.
- Therefore, feminism, as understood in the Western secular context, is neither necessary nor wholly appropriate within Islamic societies, which benefit from and should uphold their original, comprehensive, divinely guided gender frameworks.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Educational and Religious Awareness

Muslim communities should enhance educational programs in schools, universities, and mosques to raise awareness about authentic Islamic teachings on women's rights. Curricula

should include Qur'anic principles and examples of women's contributions in Islamic history, correcting patriarchal distortions and cultural misconceptions.

2. Contextual Legal Reform

Legal reforms in Muslim, majority countries should be guided by Islamic jurisprudence that emphasizes equity. Laws should strengthen women's inheritance, property, marital, and educational rights, ensuring that cultural practices do not override divine injunctions.

3. Critical Media Literacy

Muslim societies need programs that teach critical media literacy, equipping individuals, especially youth, to recognize and challenge biased portrayals of Islam and Muslim women. Media platforms should be encouraged to promote balanced narratives highlighting Islam's empowering framework.

4. Further Research and Policy Development

More empirical studies are needed on the lived experiences of Muslim women within Islamic frameworks. These studies should inform policy reforms that align with Islamic principles while addressing contemporary challenges, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

5. Strengthening Islamic Scholarship and Dialogue

Encourage ongoing scholarly dialogue that reaffirms women's rights within Islam directly, using tools of tajdid (renewal) and ijtihad (reinterpretation). Rather than borrowing secular feminist categories, Muslim scholars and institutions should develop contextually authentic frameworks for women's empowerment that remain faithful to the Qur'an and Sunnah.

5.3 Final Remarks

This research reaffirms that Islam, as a holistic and divinely guided system, adequately safeguards women's rights and dignity. It provides an equitable model that many contemporary feminist theories, with their secular and universalist assumptions, cannot fully capture within Muslim socio, cultural realities.

The future of Muslim societies depends on reviving authentic Islamic principles of equity and justice while resisting external pressures to conform to frameworks that undermine family, morality, and social cohesion. By embracing their own heritage and reasserting women's rights as granted in Islam, Muslim communities can ensure sustainable empowerment and social well, being for generations to come.

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