

Women in Feminism and Politics: New Directions towards Islamization

By Zeenath Kausar. *Petaling Jaya: Women Affairs Secretariat [WAFA], IIUM, 1995, 119 pp.*

The debate about Islamization of the human sciences, of physical sciences, of linguistics and aesthetics has become global. If Islamization is vital and a necessity for the rejuvenation of the new Islamic civilization, women and families cannot escape from Islamization. Zeenath Kausar has argued the same in her book. Her arguments for the necessity of Islamization of women's and family's problems are pioneering ideas on the subject.

The book comprises four chapters and each chapter follows the general framework of the methodology of Islamization of Knowledge: presentation of the Western theories followed by their critical analysis and Islamic alternatives. The first chapter titled "Women in Western Political Theory: An Islamic Analysis," surveys Western political thinkers from classical to postmodern (Plato to Foucault), on their views on women. Discussing the arguments of these thinkers, especially from Plato to Hegel on the ineligibility of women for political participation, she contends that Western political thought is essentially misogynistic. Plato argues that women, children, and slaves mainly belong to the appetitive class when compared to the classes of "philosophers" and "soldiers," where men predominate. Aristotle denies women citizenship; he contends that women are not capable of political participation. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, relying on biblical sources dealing with the creation and the

fall of man, also looked at women as inferior physically and spiritually in comparison to man. Social contract theorists—Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau—did not assign any role to women except to give faithful obedience and submission to the male. Rousseau in *Emile* argued for discrimination between women and men even in education. Hegel also confined women to the family and argued that women lack universality and rationality, which are essential qualities for political participation. For Marx and Engels the oppression and subjugation of women are not natural and unchangeable but social and alterable. They argue that sexual division of labor in the family and the capitalist mode of production enslaves women and children. Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish* overlooks the “disciplinary practices which produce the docile bodies of women,” which shows sexism is central throughout Western political thought.

The author, after analyzing the views of Western political thinkers on women, refutes their arguments on the basis of Islamic texts and historical evidences. Women are rational and virtuous and women, like men, are created as Allah's vicegerents. Zeenath finds no substance in the Western approach as to “women's subjection to man.” She argues that there is an interchange of functions and mutuality of rights and obligations toward each other in Islam. She asserts that Islam does not use the family as an excuse for women's oppression, rather encourages the family unit to develop a healthy, just, and fair society.

Although this chapter succinctly presents woman in different political theories and elaborates the Islamic stance on the position of woman in family and society, there is one dimension missing. Indisputably, Islam does not forbid women from contributing positively toward society and state while following Islamic etiquette and norms. However, the predicament of most Muslim societies is different from the theoretical claims of the prominent position, Islam assigns to woman in the family and society. Nevertheless, she is not ignorant of this reality as is obvious from her own observation in the same chapter. She says, “there is a large gap between the Islamic theory of woman and its practice in Muslim societies” (p. 241). But there is a need for the elaboration of this problem, discussing its main causes and suggesting some practical solutions.

The second chapter, “Issues in Feminist Philosophy: Few Islamic Responses,” reveals the author's comprehensive and in-depth study of feminism. She has critically examined all the important schools of feminism—liberal, socialist, Marxist, existentialist, and radical. On the liberation and emancipation of women, the feminist philosophy, as she points out, suggests different programs for women's liberation. However, there is unanimity in identifying issues (for example, equality in education, equality in employment, right of political participation, legal rights of married women to own property, equal matrimonial rights and obligations, role of mother as an obstacle in the way of liberation, problem of double workload, economic dependence, and patriarchy) despite differences of approaches with regard to their solutions. For some liberal feminists, both men and women should be breadwinners as well as caretakers of children and family work at the same time. For some, marriage is unpaid prostitution. Marxist feminists argue that the economic independence of women and the socialization of housework liberates women, whereas for some socialist feminists, professionalization is the only way to achieve women's liberation. For existentialist feminists, reproduction technology helps women to lead an autonomous life, while radical feminists demand biological revolution for the abolition of the biological family and biological reproduction.

The author has responded to these issues on the strength of Islamic texts and historical facts. The philosophy of equality is rooted in the conception of the very creation of man and woman from a single soul (al-Qur'an 4:1). Both man and woman enjoy equal rights to education, as the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said that the pursuit of knowledge is obligatory for both. An impressive account is available dealing with the participation of women in legislative, executive, and judicial activities performed by women during the different phases of Islamic history commencing from the time of the Prophet through the contemporary era. This testifies to the author's erudite scholarship of women's position in the corridors of history in general and Islamic history in particular.

On women's right to employment and the feminist philosophy of economic independence of women, the author convincingly satisfies the logic. She argues that women's economic dependence on men in Islam does not mean women's enslavement or victimization. She observes that "economic dependence on men strengthens the relationship between husband and wife on the basis of their sense of responsibility toward each other, selfless love and intimacy" (p. 59). Nevertheless, she contends that if women are able to contribute to society while doing justice with their primary obligations in the family, Islam does not discourage them.

On the problem of patriarchy, she asserts that Islam is not despotic and tyrannical. According to her, the term *qawwamun* mentioned in the Qur'an (4:34) must not be understood in a despotic sense. The term refers to one who stands up for another in a protective and benevolent manner. It does not mean man's domination over woman but man's responsibility for women and children's security and maintenance.

On equality in political participation, she divides the whole topic into two parts, general participation and leadership of the state. On the general political participation of women, the author provides historical evidence which illustrates that the women of Islam performed legislative, advisory, judicial, and executive functions. On the leadership of the state, she presents the views of Muslim scholars from classical to contemporary times. It is a controversial issue among scholars, most of whom don't recommend that women play a leadership role for various reasons. However, Kausar seems to place the debate in a different perspective. She provides an analogy on the basis of a hadith concerning the leadership of Quraysh. She revisits Muslim scholars on this issue and emphasizes Maududi's interpretation of the hadith. The most competent candidate for the caliphate should be appointed, whether he belonged to the Quraysh or not. However, if there is any candidate who is fully competent for the leadership and also belongs to the Quraysh, then he should be preferred to the equally competent person of a different group. The author argues that the same should be applied on woman's leadership. She writes:

The same criterion can be applied to the problem of women's leadership. If there is no man who possesses all the necessary leadership qualities for the caliphate, a woman possessing these qualities would be more eligible than any man. But, if there is a man who possesses all the necessary qualities for leadership, then he would be preferable to a woman possessing all these qualities. (pp. 57-58)

In other words, the author argues that the qualities of a leader should be counted, not sex. This seems to be a departure from the earlier traditional and moderate trends in Muslim political thought on women's leadership. However, it would have been better had she surveyed a few oft-quoted traditions on the

problem of women's leadership and a controversial debate on the interpretations of these traditions and then provide her own views and interpretations of the traditions.

On the radical feminists' argument of the elimination of the distinctions between male and female, the author asserts that although Islam stands for equality of men and women, it is completely against the elimination of the differences between male and female and protects the identity of women and men. She argues that some feminists unite men's actions and gestures, which is ironically a sign of male chauvinism. She writes:

Observe how feminism, while fighting against male domination has turned into "masculinism" . . . Does not feminism aggravate male chauvinism on one extreme and in some causes lead to its opposite —lesbianism.(p. 65)

There is merit in her thesis in this chapter on feminism.

In the third chapter, "Women, Politics, and National Leadership," an in-depth study of some of the female leaders is made. The chapter is informative as well as inspiring. Toward the end of the chapter, a comparative analysis of women political leaders is presented which reflects different patterns of their leadership roles and different patterns of their family life. Few important conclusions have been made on the basis of the comparative study of the women leaders. She observes that a tug of war between home and political leadership always hangs over the heads of women leaders. They estimate that their roles are doubly or triply heavier than men's role. It is proposed that men should encourage women and help them in different ways to lessen their psychological burden and reduce the chances of separation and divorce. All reflections on women's leadership are noteworthy, but a question remains to be answered. Why weren't Muslim women leaders like Fatimah Jinah, Benazir, Khalida Zia, Laila Khalid, and Tansu Ciller selected for this study? Had the study concentrated on Muslim women leaders, it would have generated more awareness on women's leadership problems from an Islamic perspective.

The last chapter titled "Women and Family Life Between Tradition and Westernization: The Need for Islamization," is the central attraction of the book. Here, the author takes pain in presenting some practical guidelines to the problems of women and addresses her problems with committing herself to the school of Islamization of Knowledge. In line with the enthusiasts of the movement, she points out the necessity of "intellectual orientation" of women as a first step towards women's liberation from misconceptions. She argues that the insignificant position attributed to woman in some Muslim societies is not Islamic but is an innovation of societies themselves. Hence, through proper "intellectual orientation," a sense of confidence can be restored in Muslim women. The author suggests that the first step toward "intellectual orientation" is the supply of adequate education and training to women along with men based on the philosophy of Islamization of Knowledge.

Kausar contends that the contemporary intellectual crisis has serious implications for the problems of women. She argues that the real malaise of the problematique of women is methodological. Because the Western methodology of knowledge emphasizes "reason" and "sense perception" alone and dismisses revelation, life and education are compartmentalized into religious and secular models. Women and their domestic work is trivialized. She points out that there are three reactions against secularization, namely, traditionalization, Westernization, and accidentalization. The first two reactions are common in other writings, but the third trend and the terms "accidentalization" and "acci-

dentalists” are coined by the author to show the need for Islamization. She observes:

Thus Islamization of knowledge is urgently needed to solve the contemporary crises in methodology and women’s issues. The necessity of the paradigm shift from the western weltanschauung to the Islamic weltanschauung should impel women to journey from ignorance to knowledge. (p. 94)

The author also suggests the Islamization of domestic work. She asserts that the trivialization of domestic work is also a methodological problem and a result of secularization. It is the reason that domestic work is categorized as mundane with only ephemeral value and its spiritual purpose is completely overlooked. She considers domestic work as a form of *‘ibadah*. She argues that on one side, the domestic work is devalued and on the other side, the outside work for women is exaggerated at the cost of family and caring for children. Providing instances of how children are complaining against their workaholic mothers, she writes:

If such a state of affairs continues, we are afraid, it may be possible that in the near future the children may launch a movement for the freedom from mother’s or parent’s oppression. Then who will liberate them and how? (p. 106)

The catchy phrase “bed-to-kitchen Islamization” is defined and elaborated by the author. She argues that the example of the Prophet Muhammad as a husband, helping his wives in the housework, should be followed by husbands. On this Kausar cites Betty Friedan, mother of American women’s liberation movement, who in her widely acclaimed book *The Second Stage* suggests the assimilation of women in work outside the house and the counter assimilation of men in work inside the house. However, Kausar’s emphasis on men and women’s work inside and outside the home is based on the Islamic concept of *‘ibadah*. However, this point needs more elaboration; otherwise, it may give a different image to the readers.

There are other interesting phrases such as “heart-to-heart communication,” “round table talk with children,” and “house seminars” which provide practical suggestions on women and family issues based on the Islamization philosophy.

As a whole, the book is an important contribution to the existing literature on women’s issues from the Islamic perspective. Since there is no work on the Islamic analysis of Western political philosophies on women and feminism, the book would benefit from an enlargement and elaboration of all the chapters. However, it impresses upon the reader the author’s deep insight and clear vision of prevailing social realities, political currents, faulty educational systems, the plight of women, and misplaced sympathies for women. She comes out with a pragmatic program that draws its strength from the philosophy of Islamization of Knowledge. The author’s ardent appeal that the Islamization of Knowledge movement should take up the problems of women on a priority basis shares the essence of relevance and merit in the contemporary scenario. Its contents are inevitable to academicians who are involved in women studies, policy makers for the welfare of women, and institutions dealing with the cause of women. Also, it is relevant for researchers in the area of social sciences.

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