FEMINISM, ISLAM AND MODERNITY

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Abstrak: Tulisan ini membahas tiga tema utama: feminisme, Islam dan modernitas. Islam telah lebih dahulu mengakui keberadaan hak-hak wanita. Al-Qur'an itu sendiri bersifat egaliter. Hanya bangsa Barat-lah yang sering salah menginterpretasikan dan merepresentasikan Islam karena kurangnya pengetahuan mereka tentang Islam, kebodohan, dan kebingugan mereka antara Islam aktual dengan kebudayaan Arab. Dengan melihat argumen-argumen tentang modernitas, feminisme, dan Islam dari sejumlah suara: filosof, pemuka kritik sosial, dan kaum feminis baik dari poros Islam maupun dari pandangan Barat, tulisan ini mengambil kesimpulan bahwa feminisme, Islam dan modernitas dapat berjalan seirama asal ketiga aspek ini dilakukan menurut etika positip, saling memahami dan adanya praktek kebesasan yang seimbang.

Kata Kunci: Feminisme, Islam, Modernitas

Islam as it is often condemned for oppression of women has become one of the central themes in the Western academia and even in the media. Dozens of books and hundreds of journal articles dealing with the issue have been written by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Many Muslim writers, particularly the Islamic feminists have put forwards a lot of arguments that the treatment of women in Islam have to be revisited, reinterpreted because the Qur'an itself as the original source of knowledge and moral codes for Muslims is inherently egalitarian. Some feminist thinkers argue that in classical Islam there was freedom of practices such as Sufism, which had played a major role in shaping the behavior of each gender without being dominated. Others argue that Muslims should not look at the classical history of Islam in relation to the gender system for modern life because it no longer fixes the order of current social, political and economic situations.

Today there are Muslim women who have good education and have proven that they can do what men can.

There are also both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars who argue that the treatment of women in Islam should be solved according to the concept of modern, secular liberation of women as it has been cultivated in the West, in which the power relations are negotiated though reason. They suggest that the moral system should consist of moral codes and ethos, although not all scholars have the same opinion about the demarcation between the divine law and ethics. While some scholars place more space on the moral code, others tend to argue that ethics should be taken into account as a better choice of guide in modern life.

In this paper I will try to revisit the concept of feminism and modernity, principally in the context of Islam as it has been debated on by some philosophers, politicians and feminist thinkers. I divide the paper into five sections. In the first section, I will provide the target of the philosopher Seyla Benhabib's critique of strong multiculturalism and her proposal of deliberative democracy in relation to the concept of cross-cultural dialogue and ethical universalism. In the second section, I will deal with the critique of Candra Talpade Mohanty and Saba Mahmood on Western feminism and try to relate it to Benhabib's framework of deliberative democracy. This section will also discuss Mahmood's use of the concepts of the later Foucault in her study of the Egyptian women's mosque movement. Then in the third section, I will explain the way the later Foucault's concept as it is interpreted by Karen Vintges in relation to the issue of multiculturalism and feminism. Also, in this section I will refer to the documentary *Divorce Iranian Style* to discuss the usefulness of the later Foucault's concepts. In the fourth section, I will discuss Nilüfer Göle's approaches to the issues of veiling and modernity. In the fifth and final sections, I will deal with Leila Ahmed's approach to the issue of feminism and Islam and compare it with Amina Wadud's proposal of reinterpretation of the Qur'an in relation to the issue. Finally, I will put forward some arguments about the possibility of an Islamic feminism by providing several cases from classical Islam and Mariam Cooke's examples of modern Islamic feminists.

Section 1

In this first section I will deal with Benhabib's critique of multiculturalism and her proposal of the interface between multiculturalism and ethical universalism with the expected outcome called deliberative democracy.

Seyla Benhabib in *The Claims of Culture* (2002) criticizes the theory of multiculturalism such as of Will Kimlicka. She argues that strong multiculturalism is impossible because cultures should not be reified but negotiated through cross-cultural dialogue, mutual learning and deliberative democracy. Cultures and societies are not holistic but polyvocal, multilayered and decentered. At the same time she also challenges the concept of linguistic relativism such as of Jean-Francois Lyotard. Benhabib's argument is based the principle that although human beings are all the same everywhere (they need clothes to wear, food to eat and shelter to live in), there are certain principles that we cannot make judgments. Strong multiculturalism is, thus, at stake. For example, the right of women, children and minorities within minorities are disobeyed. This is because people's lives are embedded in their cultures, which cannot clearly be defined as holistic, as many cultural theorists have assumed. Much debate about multiculturalism, in which cultures are conceived as different phenomena, Benhabib argues, is false. The view that strong multiculturalism is possible does not allow us to take into account "the complexity of global civilization dialogues and encounters, which are increasingly our lot, and it has encouraged the binaries of "we" and "the other(s)" (Benhabib, 2002: 25). According to Benhabib, universalism is a form of ethnocentrism, namely, "They" have to follow "Us." But many rationalists do not take into account that agreement on truth, values and norms is not always universal. Thus universalism should not only cover the relative cognitive inquiry, but it also must have moral meaning. Searching for a new paradigm, Benhabib presents an alternative approach, developing an understanding of cultures as continually creating, recreating and negotiating the undesired boundaries between "Us" and "Them." She points out "all human beings, regardless of race, gender, sexual preference, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious background, are to be considered *moral equals* and are therefore to be created as equally entitled to *moral respect*" (Benhabib, 2002: 27, my italic).

Benhabib opposes universalism and linguistic relativism, because universalism benefits a majority group, but hurts others such as the minorities, women and children. She also criticizes the relative philosophical thought of being limited and embedded in language. She instead proposes the integration between multiculturalism and ethical universalism, which can have philosophical and social dimensions.

Using the contemporary cultural politics from Western Europe and the United States as an example, Benhabib puts forward a model of deliberative democracy[1], a discussion based democracy, which is not based on representative of multiple voices, but which allows the cultural contestation within the public sphere and through social movements and the institutions of civil society. This model of democracy is nearly in line with Habermas' concept of rationality, namely, when there is a multicultural conflict, it is reason that decides- a procedural ethics. She concludes that institutional power sharing, legal pluralism and flexible citizenship are quite compatible with deliberative democracy. For instance, immigrants do not need to change their names when they arrive in a new country. To live together in deliberative democracy, there are normative principles that need to be obeyed: egalitarian reciprocity, voluntary self-ascription and freedom of exit and association (Benhabib, 2002: 148-149). Cross-cultural dialogue, intercultural political association and regional assemblies need to be included in policy making of the nation state. Through the standpoint of deliberative democracy, institutions through which the diverse communities negotiate can be created. The right of self-determination as the principle meanings of private sphere has to be interpreted as the right to

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[1]Benhabib's double-track model of deliberative democracy seems to be too optimistic, rather armed-chair theory of cultural diversity, unlikely feasible in the current modern society. Rationality is conceived a procedure, not based on rational subjects in general. Thus, the model she proposes does not seem to be cross-cultural enough. Consider, for example, the War on Terror in Iraq, does reason decide? There is no rationality, situated-self, or cross-cultural dialogue. No one has seen the dossier. Many museums and cultural heritage have been bombarded. Even though Saddam Husein has been hanged, no a single piece of weapons of mass destruction has been found. David Kelly eventually committed suicide because he felt losing face. It is only madness that is finally decisive.

participate in the larger community. Thus, mutual learning and tolerance should be the techniques of living in the modern world.

Section 2

In the first section I provided the synopsis of Benhabib's *The Claims of Culture*. In this section, I have several objectives. First, I will discuss the critique of Mohanty and Mahmood on western feminism. Second, I will relate the critique of these two scholars to Benhabib's framework. Finally, I will explain Mahmood's use of later Foucault's concepts in her study of women's mosque movement.

According to Mohanty (1991), Western feminist discourse has generalized the sexual difference in the West and places it similar to the women in the less developed world. As a result, the Western feminists strongly accuse male dominance of being oppressed to women in the third world such as the right to veil and reproduction. In addition, Mohanty also criticizes the Western feminists for their judgment of women as a coherent group across contexts, namely women in the third world are seen as powerless and dependent without looking at the history and the geography. Therefore, everything is judged according to the Western standard; women should be liberated, secular and having control over their own lives except the injustice of economy such as redistribution.[2] The Western feminists represent the third world women as dependent, uneducated and oppressed. Briefly, it is through this Western humanist discourse that they misrepresent the third world women, yielding significant results, while having a political and colonial axe to grind and through which the Western power over the less developed world is exercised.

Mohanty (1991)) also argues that the Western feminism has uncritically constituted the women of the less industrialized world as the monolithic subjects without taking into consideration the context in which these women are living. Writing from the classical Western

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[2]Many Western feminists have never fought for the rights of the social economy, education of the Third World women as they do for those of the West. What they usually do is attacking the attitude of Islam toward women such as polygamy, female circumcision and forced marriage. See e.g. Vintges (2004).

postmodernism, Mohanty argues that the historical specific approach is better than the Western model of feminism, which takes ahistorical study. Western liberation produces a homogenous model of feminism and it cannot totally be applied to Islam without bearing in mind the constitution of strategic coalitions across races, classes and national boundaries. The majority of Western writings on third world women, according to Mohanty, belong to parts of global colonial discourse, because they have moved beyond the goal of *apolitical* feminism, which can be applied to women in the whole world, not just in the West.

In comparison with Mohanty's critique of Western feminism for victimizing the third world women, Mahmood (2001, 2005) argument departs slightly different from Mohanty's in that Mahmood's standpoint is that a free Western liberalism is a Western product. She suggests that being autonomous should not be limited to the Western humanist political judgment, instead it should be placed in the analytical framework in which agency is *not* linked to Western liberation, but in the context of positive freedom emerging from "the capacity for self-mastery and self-government" (Mahmood, 2005:11).[3] That is, in order for a woman to be a free individual, she has to determine her own behaviors, which "*must* be the consequence of her "own will" rather than of custom, tradition, or social coercion" (Mahmood, 2005: 11: italic in original). It seems to me that Mahmood does not totally avoid the concept of Western humanism; instead she proposes a new way of approaching the similar problem, that is, there should be a practice of willingness to evaluate one's views in the light of others through a mutual learning.

Both Mahanty and Mahmood's concepts of unraveling the cultural injustice in some Muslim countries such as Egypt are in line with Benhabib's proposal of cultural dialogue and deliberative democracy, in which everything including culture and even feeling is not reified but negotiated. This is due to the fact that culture is not fixed but intermingled. Thus the philosophical thought of dealing with equality and

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[3]There has been considerable debate about the notions positive and negative freedoms. For the liberal theory, see, for example, Simhony, Avital .1993. Beyond Negative and Positive Freedom: T.H. Green's View of Freedom. *Political Theory*, 2 (1): 28-54. Positive freedom in relation to Islamic Feminism, see Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *The Politics of Piety*, pp. 118-152.

diversity in this modern era should be derived from mutual learning and cultural dialogue, not from a mere consensus of Western universalism, but from the point of departure of *pluralistic* enlightened ethical universalism, which places the cross-cultural dialogues as a crucial means of managing peaceful life in the modern world.

In her study of the Egyptian women's mosque movement, Mahmood (2001, 2005) refers to Foucault's theory of ethics. According Foucault's analytical framework, there are four components of ethics, which can be applied for conceptualizing agency beyond the confines of the binary of enacting and subverting norms: substance of ethics, mode of subjectivation, techniques of the self and telos. In analyzing the ethics of women's mosque movement, Mahmood implemented the second and third aspects of Foucault's ethics, which recognize the moral obligations through divine law such as the existence of divine arrangements for human life represented in the Qur'an and which deal with the operations one performs on oneself in order to produce an ethical subjects, which is philosophically often called "techniques of the self." Figurer 1 schematically represents Foucault's concept of moral codes and ethics.

Moral system

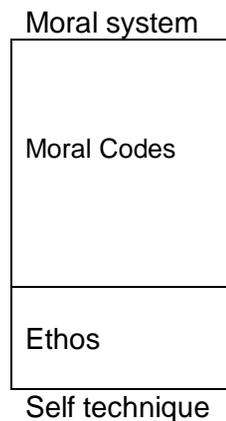| |
|---|
| Moral Codes |
| Ethos |

Self technique

Figure 1: Foucault's concept of moral codes and ethics

Women's mosques movement is a nonliberal movement in which self-realization is aimed at "honing one's rational and emotional capacities so as to approximate the exemplary model of the pious self"

(Mahmood, 2005: 31). To manifest this technique of self-realization, the participants were ordered to perform their obligations through studying the divine text, interpreting the moral codes according to the traditional guideline and emphasizing the roles of religiosity-ritual practices including the way of dressing and speaking. Through practicing the ascetic practice, the mosque participants learn how to analyze the movements of the body and soul, which can balance the coordination between inner states and outer conducts.

Section 3

In this section I will explain the later Foucault's philosophy in relation to the issue of multiculturalism and feminism as interpreted by Vintgest (2004). In addition, I will put forward my point of view on the effectiveness of the later Foucault's concept on the issue, particularly in relation to the system of leadership and marriage in Islamic context.

Vintgest (2004) criticizes some Western thinkers such as Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida of their postmodernist theories of the treatment of women, the abnormal, the senseless and the "strangers" as discredit subjects instead of their common identity as human beings. She argues that the later Foucault's concept of human subjects is more capacious and inclusive, treating the subject without binary boundaries. Her interpretation of the later Foucault's concept of ethics in dealing with multiculturalism and feminism is built upon the concept of practices of freedom as means of establishing "the care of the self" through self-managing without conceiving the "original subject" or "deep self" as being autonomous according to the Western standard of rationality.

Taking freedom of practices as a situated entity and freedom of practices for all, Vintges (2004) refers to Islamic Sufism as example of how practices of freedom via "technology of the self" can be manifested in human life without separating the system of gender; each has the freedom of conscience. She cites one case in Islamic Sufism of the 8th century female mystic Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah, who lived a free life under no one's authority except submission to God alone. Vintges also refers to Foucault's concept practices of freedom in non-Western context as performed in other beliefs such as Zen Buddhism and Christian mysticism, which all provide us with insights that a new universal normative perspective across national, gender, and belief system is

possible as long as endorsing the practices of freedom is taken into consideration. Vintges interprets Foucault's ethics as a new way of living because "it is focused on the ethical-spiritual way of life, which is relatively autonomous in relation to moral codes and metaphysics; and it is new since it is democratic, contrary to the elitism of Greek ethics" (Vintges, 2004: 293). She adapts the Foucault's concept of ethics but revisits the demarcation between moral code and ethos.
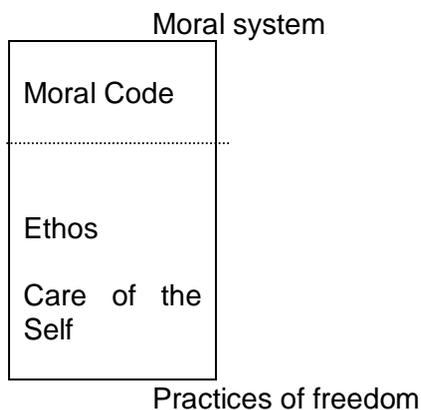
Moral system

Moral Code
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Ethos
Care of the Self

Practices of freedom

Figure 2: Vintges' proposal of ethics built upon Foucauldian concept

According to Vintges (2004), the ethos should have more space and the limit of moral code can be crossed, taking into consideration ethics as the art of living. Figurer 2 schematically represents Vintges' reinterpretation of Foucault's concept of ethics as art of living.[4]

    Through manifestation of practices of freedom for women in all cultures, including the Western one, Vintges argues that a cross-cultural feminism can be cultivated through a shared ethos or commitment without Truth. This is due to the new ethical concept of life as aiming at "the shaping of one's whole life" (Vintges, 2004: 293), in which the political, economic and social dominations are forced to stay in their lowest limits. Vintges concludes that a new cross-cultural feminism does not impose the standards of Western secular liberalism, but seeks

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[4]See Foucault's concept of moral code and ethics on the previous page for comparison

a truly universal norm through orienting itself to practices of freedom for all.There are certain situations where I myself find Foucault's analysis of ethics is helpful for understanding key aspects of life in Muslim society, for example, the concept of leadership and the system of marriage in which both women and men have the same rights. In Islam the role of human beings is the same for both sexes: *Kullukum raa'in wa kullukum arraa'iyatin* (Each of you is a leader and I will ask for your responsibility of your leadership). This statement indicates to us that in Islam there is the concept of "the care of the self" and the concept of "the care of the others" as long as the "the care of self" is not intended to bring about the domination, which can lead to an egoistical behavior when implemented in the society. It should be born in mind that in Islam "the care of the self" is for every one- both women and men- and "the care of the others" is also for all, meaning that it is not only "care of the self" that is prioritized but also "the care of the others." This concept good of behavior is in line with the concept of ethics proposed by Foucault, when he responses to the questions in the interview "The care of the self is ethical in itself; but it implies complex relationships with others insofar as this *ēthos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others" (Foucault, 1997a: 287, italic in original). This suggests that one can occupy the position that she/he deserves in the community: a state leader, an army general, a university professor or what have you, at the same time she/he is an individual.

Another situation where the Foucault's concept of the care of the self and the practice of freedom can be implemented in the Muslim Society is in the system of marriage, which has actually been in practice since the birth of Islam in 7th century. This concept of practice of freedom has been illustrated by the Iranian anthropologist Ziba Mir-Hosseini in her documentary *Divorce Iranian Style*. The film shows us how Iranian wives can plead for a divorce in an Islamic court, informing the Western audience the real agency of Muslim wives who can make an appeal for a separation of an unhappy marriage, which in Islamic law is called *fasah* (divorce made by an appeal of the wife), not *talaq* (divorce made by an appeal of the husband). This example, as one of thousands of divorce cases in Muslim community around the world, demonstrates how the actually practice of freedom is implemented in Islam. The actual practices of freedom in Islamic society are totally different from those propagandized by the Christian missionaries and by

their half-baked experts in some Western media, such as in Islam a husband can divorce his wife by saying "I divorce you three times." The practice of freedom had been implemented *much* earlier in Islam than in the West. I will return to this standpoint of my argument in the concluding section of the paper when I deal with the possibility of Islamic feminism.

Section 4

The "Turban movement" of Turkish politics in 1980s marked the debate between the practice of veiling and the concept of modernity. This section, which is mainly based on Nilüfer Göle's (1996) *The Forbidden Modern*, discusses whether the two issues can be reconciled.

Göle' approach to issues of veiling and modernity is theoretical, originating from the question of meaning rather than from a relationship of causality, derived from the hermeneutic tradition in social sciences. According to Göle, the Islamic veiling movement can embrace two distinct modes of action; one associates with political Islam and the other with cultural Islam. The political Islam aims at defending Islamic identity and independence against Western imperialism. It is a top-to-bottom system. On the other hand, the cultural Islam aims to protect Islam from the loss of its sacredness. In this case it is the individuals, community, not the state, who play a major role. It does not seize the political power. The Turkish veiling movement belongs to the cultural movement, because it is nonpolitical in the broader sense.

In her study of the female university students' attitude toward veiling in 1987, Göle (1996) shows that veiling is not a reactionary phenomenon against the modernity as long as the notion modernity is not defined as the attitude to secularization, locating human body under the aesthetic and command of human willpower, which impoverishes sexuality by way of increasing submission of the human body to the spheres of science and secularization. For modern Turkish women, veiling in nontraditional styles is phenomenon of metropolitan cities. They choose to cover themselves by their own wills, not by enforcements by male family members, the impact of rural traditionalism or effects of religious education. In this case they have distanced themselves from their parents and traditional Muslims in many respects.

They commit themselves by returning to the source, but they consider themselves enlightened and intellectual.

The differences among the various styles of veiling represent the distinction between traditional people and modern Islamic young women. These young women are active, self-asserting and modernist. Therefore, it is less compatible with the social practice of these women to say that "Although women assume that they are not objects thanks to their veils, in fact the very act of veiling per se expresses the visual privilege of men" (Göle, 1996: 136), presupposing that veiling shapes the intersection of political ideology and the power relations between the sexes. She thus approaches the concept of veiling and modernity through macro and micro levels, namely, the conceptual level in which there is a combination between Islam and modernity and the concept of individualism, which emerges from personality of women's own choice. Consequently, the two issues to some extent can be reconciled as she writes "when the system of meaning embedded within the Islamic movements is taken as the main theme of inquiry, it becomes possible to move from a macro-level analysis of historical modernism to a micro-level explication of the everyday experiences of individuals" (Göle, 1996: 131).

Veiling is a modernity phenomenon, not a fundamentalist movement. It contributes to positioning women in the modern world and at the same time serves them with the right identity. It is a type of practices of freedom. The (colorful) veil protects them against Western abstract hegemony. The veil is for sacredness not for aesthetic or rights. This is due to the fact that although the veil conceals the departure of the Muslim women to the outside world, they can be outside by reminding themselves that they belong to Muslim sphere. This approach to modernity is different from the Western modernity:

> "which was bred according to the premises of the Enlightenment and industrial civilization, transformed communitarian relations which have been molded by the religious and traditional beliefs and, eventually produced a heterogeneous, differentiated, and pluralistic social structure that contributed to the formation of rational and positivist values, *in which the roles of women either can be neglected or are at stake*. The Turkish modernity, on the other hand, refused to recognize autonomous spheres in the market and

civil society and was based on the state authoritarianism" (Göle, 1996: 132, italic mine).

The Turkish modernity is not built upon the innovative forces of civil society, but it is a project of civilization by which the local patterns and *traditional* values are rejected in order to seek new code of behavior. For example, within the radical movement, a new, urban, educated Muslim has emerged. The Muslim social actors enter through the Islamist gate, resulting in an interaction between veiling and modernity, which legitimizes Muslim identity and empowers Muslims as political agents of historical and cultural change. The veiled body of Muslim women attempts to resist against Westernization. But this does not imply that Islam stands against modernity; instead, "it acts as a compass of life and as a means of management with modern society" (Göle, 1996: 138).

Section 5

The aim of this section is to discuss the issue of feminism and Islam, particularly in relation to the works of Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) and Amina Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman* (1999). Ahmed's approach to feminism is based on the concept of mutual learning in which there are aspects of Islamic culture, particularly the traditional Arab culture that needs to be adjusted to modernity like other cultures in most parts of the world. One example of the cultural injustices that still have embodied the Arab traditional culture is the treatment of women in terms of marriage, share of household responsibilities, and education.

Ahmed (1992) argues that Islam needs a redefinition and reform in treating women in accordance with the development and civilization, because some practices of the traditional Islam are no longer relevant to the social contexts of the present. We need a reinterpretation of the Qur'an, because it is flexible, and contextual; this is due to the fact that the Qur'an itself "consists mainly of broad, general propositions chiefly of an ethical nature, rather than specific legalistic formulations" (Ahmed, 1992: 88). An example of this new interpretation is the reference made to the polygamy, which in the past was practiced by Muhammad, who "was the judge for his community and the interpreter of divine revelation" (Ahmed, 1992: 88) at the time in the context of war, namely,

the battle of Uhud (625), which made many Muslim women become widows. Some Muslim men have misused this history for the present context. In fact, the basic principle of marriage in Islam is monogamy, as it is explicitly stated in the Qur'an:

> Marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four, but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), the only one, or (a captive) that your right hands posses. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice (Q 4:3).

The other social practices should also be approached from a modern perspective, not a historically based paradigm. For example, women also have equality in terms education, which now have made them able to enter "all the professions, from teaching and nursing to medicine, law and engineering" (Ahmed, 1992: 241). In fact, Ahmed also argues that the fact that there is self-determination among the Muslim society has been practiced by the 8th century Sufi saint Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah. Although Ahmed does not expect feminism as defined by the Western liberalism, she proposes that there has to be practices of freedom by Muslim women as it has been practiced and embedded in cultures and religions, since self is formulated according to these two domains. This is compatible with the Islamic concept of life, because the Qur'an itself is egalitarian.

Closely in line with Ahmed's approach to issue of feminism is Wadud's exploration of the egalitarian nature of the Qur'an. Using hermeneutic and holistic approaches, Wadud (1999) proposes a reinterpretation of the Qur'an, making it more transparent and relevant to the new contexts. She does not oppose the contents of the Qur'an but *reinterprets* it and at the same time keeps its *spirit*, which can be applied to the collective level. Through the hermeneutic technique, Wadud attempts to identify the universals and the particulars in the Qur'an. Wadud argues that despite the fact that there are Qur'anic verses, which speak using the female referents, they do not necessarily mean that men are excluded and vice versa, since the Qur'an itself is for both sexes- it is gendered-bias free.

Wadud's approach to feminism, although she does not like the label, focuses on the practices of freedom, working on the limits of the traditions and using all kinds of possible techniques including writing as she has proven it herself. She challenges the misinterpretations and

misreading of the Qur'an, some of which have led to the oppression of women. Instead she prefers an updated interpretation of the Qur'an that leads to social justice in which "women would have full access to economic, intellectual, and political participation, and men would value and therefore participate fully in home and child care for a more balanced and fair society" (Wadud, 1999: 103).[5] As a result, feminism and Islam *can* go together. I will elaborate this statement in the final section below.

Conclusion

The aim of this section is to argue by answering the question whether there is or not the possibility of Islamic feminism. My argument is derived from the standpoint that Islam does not regard women as second-class human beings. In Qur'an no mention about misogyny is made. There might have been some inequalities due to cultures in which Islam has been embedded in them so that it is not always easy to differentiate between the True Islam and the aspects of social life produced by culture, such as Saudi Arabia, where women are asked to wear abbayyas (floor length veils). Such excessive forms of these kinds of dress are not mentioned in Islam. Islam requires women to wear a veil, not abbayyas, for their own safety, but if a woman chooses not to wear it, it is her choice and it is between her and God. What misunderstood is the practice of abbayyas; it is usually interpreted negatively by some halve-baked experts in the Western academia and the media because of their hatred and confusion between Islam and the Arab culture. One cannot equate Islam with the Arabs, who make up only about 20 percents of more or less 1.5 billion world's Muslim population. Some Western media and academics often say that Islam discriminates against women, and that women have no power or authority. The media and these "experts" do not acknowledge that the Prophet Mohammad himself was one of the greatest reformers for

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[5]This proposal of balancing the social justice between men and women is in fact not new at all; in some Muslim countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia it has been practiced for decades. For the study of women in some countries in Southeast Asia, see Gonsoulin, Margaret. 2005. '*The Islamic Frontier: Islam and Gender Equity in Southeast Asia*.' *Hawwa*, 3 (1): 9-39.

women.[6] In fact, Islam is probably the only religion that formally teaches women's rights and finds ways to protect them. Islam allows women to have the right to be educated and the right to participate in political, economical, and social activities in their community. This attitude of Islam toward women has been reflected by some modern Islamic feminists (see e.g. Wadud, 1999).

Islam acknowledges gender equality. For example, Muslim women were given the right to vote much earlier than those of the West such as the U.S., which did not allow women to vote until 1919, but the Western media and academics often fail to inform their people about this fact. While they are so concerned about negative and discriminatory images about Islamic women, they fail to remind themselves that there are several Islamic countries (Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Turkey) that have had female heads of states. In contrast, most Western nations such as the United States, which condemns Islamic countries for their oppression of women, have yet to see a non-white, male president, let alone a female president. In Indonesia[7] we always have women ministers in the cabinet; on the other hand, in the West including the Netherlands even the women professors are as rare as Sumatran tigers[8]. But the western academics keep campaigning that Islam is oppressed to women. They can see a very small "fly" far away, but they cannot see a very big "elephant" in front of their eyes. No Western academics including the feminists have written a single article in protest against the exploitation of women at the "red light districts".

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[6]In my search for the literature on Western women liberation at the libraries of the University of Amsterdam, I found that most books about women liberation in the West had been published since 1980s, despite the fact that the university was founded in 1632. In Islam liberation of women has been practiced since 6th century. It is just the West, who has not managed to understand it.

[7]For the women's movements in Indonesia, see Anwar, Etin. 2003.' "Directed" Women's Movements in Indonesia: Social and Political Agency from Within.' *Hawwa*, 2 (1): 89-112.

[8]At present the number of Sumatran tigers around the world including in captives is only a few hundreds. Because it is totally irrelevant, I never intend to compare women to tigers.

Islam totally eradicates any perspective that distinguishes men and women, particularly in relation to humankind as the Qur'an itself revealed to oppose the practice of *jahiliah*:[9]

> When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he has had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the ground? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on (Q 16:58-59).[10]

In the Qur'an and prophet traditions there are verses that both women and men are obligatory to study, to go school for their education, for example, in the first verse: Read in the name of thy Lord and cherisher Who created (Q 96: 1). In Islam both women and men are encouraged to search for knowledge as far as and as much as they want to have it. The tradition points out "search for knowledge even to China." God rewards all intellectuals, not only men but also women, who remember Him and think of how He creates the earth and the sky, leading them to unravel the secrets of the universe:

> Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female, ye are members, one of another (Q 3:195).

This verse presupposes that women can also learn whatever interests them and apply their knowledge for the benefit of humankind. There have been several ideal examples of women who have become the references for men, such as the prophet wife, Aisyah, who was well

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[9]Jahiliah is the attitude that hates women; in the past it even had led to the killings of female babies- infanticide, as soon as they were born, by burying them alive. According to Ahmed (1992: 42) Islamists' argument about condemning this attitude seems simplistic and inaccurate. Her arguments which are full of very low modality- seem, appear, maybe, probably, perhaps, suggest- are accurate? The Qur'an condemns even "modern jahiliah", such as the exploitation of women in the Netherlands and Thailand.

[10]As a believer, in defending my argument that there is a possibility of Islamic feminism, since Islam is egalitarian, I cannot avoid making some references to some verses of the Qur'an or prophet traditions. In this paper I have quoted the Qur'anic verses mainly from 'Abdullah Yusul 'Ali (1946) *The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary*. Cambridge, USA: The Murray Printing Company.

known as a great critic, and the prophet himself acknowledged her competence as confirmed by some *ulamas* (Muslim clerics) that the Prophet once said:

Take a half of your religious knowledge from al-Humaira (Aisyah).[11]

From social practice perspectives, there are a lot of examples that show us that Islamic feminism has always been possible. Even in the classical Islam period feminism existed. For example, Sayyidah Sakinah, the daughter of Al-Husain bin Ali bin Abi Thalib, and Al-Syaikhah Syuhrah, who have been called *Fakhr Al-Nisa* (the pride of women) represented early Islamic feminists. Al-Syaikhah Syuhrah was one of the teachers of Imam Syafi'i, the greatest scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, today practiced by the majority of Muslims around the world. In addition, Imam Abu Hayyan noted three women who were the teachers of that school[12], namely, Mu'nisat Al-Ayyubiyah, Syamiyat Al-Taimiyah, and Zainab. In Islamic history, there were many other women who were recognized as great scholars such as Al-Khansa' and Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah; the latter has been referred to by several modern feminists (see e.g. Vintges, 2003; 2004 and Ahmed, 1992).

In her approach to feminism as a multiple belonging, Cooke (2001) listed several names of modern Islamic feminists such as Assia Djebar and Fatimah Mernissi, who take advantage of how to build up multiple self-positioning identities made available for them by Islam. Although their positions as Islamic feminists are debatable, I would argue that they belong to the feminist group, because they all fight for equality and freedom, which have been neglected in some Muslim societies. Their positions as Islamic feminists cannot be categorized the same as those of the Egyptian women's mosques movement participants, because these women are not scientifically involved in fighting for equality. I do not think many of them produce scientific works in which their voices are understood and used by others; they are

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[11]The Prophet Mahammad used to address his wife, Aisyah, with the label Al-Humaira, meaning "the pink cheek". This was due the fact that Aisyah's cheeks were always beautifully pink.

[12]The notion *school* used when talking about Islamic jurisprudence refers to the method Muslims practice Islam in their daily life, such as Hambaliyah and Syafi'iyah called *madhabs*.

frequently involved in limited settings, such as mosques. If we do not accept Fatimah Mernissi, Zaynab al-Ghazali and other Muslim women scholars, technically fighting for equalities such as writing, as belonging to the feminist group, then feminism does not exist in a universal context. Or perhaps, feminism needs to revisit its epistemology.

There are, of course, many other examples that I cite to support the possibility of Islamic feminism, but since the space is very limited we have to conclude that women, to quote what the prophet says, are *Syaqa'iq Al-Rijal* (women are the siblings of men); therefore, their positions in the community are equal. If there some particulars that result in a distinction between the two sexes, it is merely the function of their main tasks (such as women must not pray or fast during their menstruation) which are obliged by God to each of the gender and which need to be admitted, but it does not necessarily mean that men have more freedoms than women. God rewards some people more than others and that *is* God's right, not to be debated.

In short, the answer to the question whether there is or is not the possibility of Islamic feminism depends on how the West treats and judges it. If Islamic feminism is steered according to the Western liberation, such as exploiting women by calling them "social workers" as it has long been legalized by the Dutch government, my answer is *not* possible. Islam will never accept such an incorrect practice of freedom. But if feminism is manifested in accordance with positive ethics, norms, morals, and fair practices of freedom the answer is *absolutely* affirmative. There is always a possibility of Islamic feminism.

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