

# Exploring Feminism: A case study of Egypt

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**Abstract:** Women's movement in Egypt can be seen as a result of the awakening process and modernization of the society. The early reformers were mainly male members of the society who felt the nation can't be developed unless the women are educated enough. So, the main stress was on the education. As the time passed, women themselves took the command of the movement in their hand and the call for overall personality development, political rights, social empowerments and changes in the personal laws became their main demand. The feminists involved themselves in the process of their struggle into the philanthropic works as well. They raised the issue of women's health and hygiene. Many waves of feminism can be noticed in Egypt, as in the first wave education of women is stressed upon and then removing of veil, then political rights and then reform in the personal laws. The feminist movement in Egypt was not of single classification but broadly there were three main classifications. Here in this paper I have tried to explain how the Islamic feministic phenomenon is gaining ground especially in the post 2011 scenario. My paper tries to resolve whether this new phenomenon augments well for the society or whether the fear among the secular feminist that the rise of this brand of feminism will negate what has been achieved so far.

**Key Words:** Modernization, Feminism, Islamism, Patriarchy, Neo-Patriarchy, Emancipation, Sexism,

## Feminism Defined.

According to the Cambridge dictionary the feminism is defined as the belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way or the set of activities intended to achieve this state.

Merriam Webster defines feminism as

- 1: the theory of political, economic and social equality of the sexes
- 2 : Organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests

Dictionary.com defines

Advocating social, political and economic rights for women equal to those of men

The advocacy of women's right on the ground of equality of sexes is called feminism. On this basis the movement for emancipation of women or women's liberation movement or feminist movement started to liberate the women from the shackle of patriarchy (male dominated society) or neo-patriarchy (A concept where the society is getting modernized but the age old culture and tradition of male domination with subjugation of women is not changed and the authority of male is unchallenged. (Sharabi, Hisham)

## Historical Facts.

The awakening process in the Arab world has started from Egypt (Daif, shauqi). The invasion of Napoleon of Egypt in 1798 is thought to be cornerstone. Though the French invader was forced to leave but the foot print remained very deep on the soil of Egypt. Mohammad Ali replaced him after a long struggle from 1801 and finally succeeded in consolidating his power in 1805 has not reversed but carried forward the process of

modernization through his policy of contact with the European world. In 1832, he established a school at which girls (mainly slaves and orphans) were taught to be nurses and midwives.(Jayawardhana,Kumari ,p-46)Egyptian student's were sent to the European countries for studies on state scholarship. In the years 1813-49, 311 students were sent to France, England, Italy and Austria (Hitti, 1961:433).Another ruler Khedive Ismail (1863-82) continued the policies of his predecessors. In 1873 his third wife Jashen Afet Hanem started Sufiyya Girls School which soon had 400 pupils.(Jayawardhana,Kumari,p-46)It provided instruction in mathematics, geography, history and religion. In 1875 the government opened another school, giving girls a western style education. The purpose of the school was restricted to prepare women to be efficient mother and good wives, however it was mainly the girls of the urban upper class who benefitted out of it.(Abdul Kader 1973:118-19)

The history of women's liberation clearly illustrates that it was male reformist who first advocated the cause of women as they felt the goal of modernization and development can't be achieved without the improvement of life of the women. The Islamic scholar, well known poet and author Mohammad Abdahu (1849-1905) said "To leave our girls a prey to ignorance and taken up with stupid pursuits is indeed a great crime"(El-Saadawi 1980:171).The very first name was of Ahmad Fares Al- Shidyak, who in 1855 had published "one Leg Crossed Over Other, one of the first book to support the cause of women's emancipation. Other early reformer was Rifa'a al- Tahtawi, who was the leader of the 1<sup>st</sup> student group visited to France. On returning home he published a treatise ,his third book Al Murshid Al-Amin fi- Tarbiyat al-Banat wa Al-Banin (A faithful Guide in Bringing up Girls and Boys).It was for the first time in modern Egypt , a voice was raised for educating the female. In order to have healthy and progressive generation, he explained the Egyptian society should have equal educational opportunity for both the sexes. To improve the community the country needed educated women who could raise their children properly. When a mother is ignorant, how can she introduce her child to the value of educated society? He recommended the reform in the educational system because he considered the existing system is too archaic to satisfy the needs of the nation (Rifa'a,Al-Mushid al- Amin,P-16).

Another eminent reformer was Abdahu an eminent poet who not only advocated the cause of girls education but was against the commonly prevalent system of polygamy and thought it was against the true spirit of Islam to have more than one wife.

Abdahu was outspoken on woman's status, denouncing polygamy against Islam and condemning the prevalent practices of concubinage and women's slavery. Citing the Quran in favour of women's education, he claimed that the backwardness of Arab women was detrimental to the future of the Arab peoples (Philip 1978:278).

Abdahu pioneered a flexible interpretation of the Quran in the light of modern thought. Rather finding fault in the religion or cursing on the norms of the society, he engaged himself in extracting solution by re-orientation of the religious text. In Egypt, he was bitterly opposed by the religious leaders and the conservatives but he didn't hesitate to propagate his ideas. He maintained that the most important sources of weakness and passivity which has assailed the Arab people was backwardness of women (El –Saadawi 1980:171).

One of most famous early male reformer, a disciple of Mohammad Abdahu was Qa'asim Amin (1865-1908), educated in France and by profession a judge. He was a very vocal advocate of women's liberation from chain of tradition and the so-called name of religion or culture. In 1899, he wrote a valuable book Tahrir Al- Mar'a (Emancipation of women). In this book he showed his uncompromising attitude for the present status of women. The remedy was suggested as follows

- 1-: The compulsory Education of women is a must
- 2-: Removing of Veil from the Face of society.
- 3-: Banning of polygamy as it is unlawful in the light of religious text.
- 4-: Need to amend divorce Law (Though he agreed that the divorce law is very much compatible with the need of the time but it is more often misused.)

In 1801 he wrote another book Al-Mar'a Al- Jadida (The New Woman). This was the book written in response to the criticism of his early book. Though the content remained the same, his tone was more aggressive in this book and tried to give more secular look than earlier (Ahmad Khaki. Qasim Amin P-65).

Religion is an important factor in a country like Egypt which is a very downtrodden, politically subjugated under the colonial imperialistic nation. The majority of its population is Muslim (Almost 99 percent). So, any kind of reform or idea against the prevalent socio-cultural hegemony is to face backlash from the patriarchs of such established customs and the guardians of the religion. Hence, the reformer of the early period had been cautious. They not only tried to convince the masses in general but the clergy as well against established set of evil (as the religious heads were convinced that they are actual master of the religion). The reformers took great pain in popularizing the emancipation of women and giving few rights to them is not against the tenets of Islam. They argued that the incorrect interpretation of the Holy Quran and Sunna (Hadith of Prophet) is the real source of problem.

With the emergence of Qasim Amin and later Lutfi Ahmad Al-Sayed, the discussion on the women's issue took a new turn. The marginalization of women and their rescue which was earlier thought as a result of corruption, interpolation and mis-interpretation of traditional texts had been altogether stopped. Qasim Amin in his second book Al Mar'a Al-Jadida (The New Woman) stressed upon the natural justice and genuine rights of women, as the basic principle of social justice. Thus they sew the seed of secular Feminism.

### **Nationalism and Feminism**

In the early twentieth century, mass agitation against the Britishers started which resulted in the election for legislative assembly in which Saad Zaghlul led wafad party won the majority but leaders of the wafad party were arrested and then exiled to Malta. This led to a violent protest throughout the Egypt and women from all section of the society were in the fore-front protecting their male counterpart (Jayawardhana p-51). The British refused to negotiate with the protesters on the exile issue led to violent protest, boycott of British goods, mass petition, demonstration, strike and even assassination (Jayawardhana P-51). In 1922 British finally recognized Egypt's independence but kept defense and imperial communication with her.

The nationalist movement gave birth to few prominent women's emancipators. In the fore front was Malak Hefni Nassif (1886-1891), who wrote extensively on the issue of women's education, increase in age of marriage for the boys and girls, modernization of divorce law, abolition of polygamy and positioning herself against the veil. The other famous feminist and nationalist were Huda Shaarawi (1882-1947) founder of Egyptian Feminist union in 1923, May Zaida (A poet and a reformer), Nabawiya Musa (a writer), Hadiya Afifi (mostly engaged herself with Philanthropic work and wife of the wafad leader Saad Zaghlul) Nabawiya Musa (a writer), Ceza Nebarawi (writer and a close associate of Huda Shaarawi), Zaynab Al Gazali, founder of Muslim women's society in 1936 and Doriya Shafique the founder of Bint Al- Nil (Daughter of the Nile) in 1948.



The demands of these feminist leaders were concerned only with the improvement of women's personal life. These women were the representative of upper class and had hardly in relation with the cause of lower classes, the labourer of the town or the peasant from the rural areas. The other aspect of the movement is that the demands made by were against the established norms of the society or were against traditional customs of the society but they very clearly stated that it is not against the religion. Thus the reformers and the feminist leaders both the group tried to convince the people that in the past the religious text has been mis-interpreted or many foreign elements has been incorporated in the passage of time due to cultural influence of others. The example which was brought forward here was the example of the veil and polygamy. It is stated that nowhere in the Holy Quran Veiling and seclusion of women has been mentioned but it was later on incorporated in the Islamic way of life as it is the real narration of religion. In case of polygamy, the reformers and group of feminist, both were of the opinion that the Quranic verse (4:3) which permits the men to have four wives is not fully implemented as the second part of it clearly says "if you can do justice between one and other". This means to be just between all the four wives is a precondition for more than one wife. The reformers advocated that no human being can do justice between all the wives because it is in the human nature to love and be intimate with one person than the other.

The basis of the early advocates of women's right and the well wishers who wanted to improve the condition of them at home and in the society as well. As, they well understood the secular argument will not augment well for their cause as the society will reject any such reform which will go against the religion and a large section of religious scholar will stand in way of their cause. This was what happened when Qasim Amin wrote "The Emancipation of Women" and "The New Women". At least thirty books and so many articles had been written in response to his first book only (Al-Jins al-Jammeel, Jammayat al -Istiqama, Fasal al-Kitab and al-Daf al-Mateen are few examples). The same thing happened when Huda Sharawi while returning from a women's conference at Rome had thrown her veil into the sea. Here one important aspect is to keep in mind that challenging the established system and custom only antagonized the opponents, (here the religious scholars and so-called upper classes are meant) and the fact remains that the peasants of the villages and the lower classes of town dwellers have nothing to do with the custom of veil and many such other things.

### **Feminism after 1922.**

Although in the year 1924, a new constitution was promulgated but the nationalist didn't support the cause of women's struggle. The personal law remained intact except the changes were made in by increasing the marriage age i.e. sixteen for the girls and eighteen for the boys. The other issues such as question of women's political rights were ignored as was the right to divorce and abolition of polygamy. In 1935 Huda Sharawi lectured at the American university of Cairo on the status of women and called for abolition of Polygamy which met with the protest from two Sheikh of Al-Azhar university (jayawardhana). Meanwhile, there was a group which was always critical to women's liberation. Talat Harab, a prominent nationalist of his time, in "Tarbiyat al-Mar'a wa- al-Hijab, 1905 argued that the emancipation of women was just a plot to weaken the Egyptian nation and disseminate immorality and decadence in its society. He criticized those who desire to ape the west and claimed that there was a imperialistic design to project a negative image of the position of Muslim women. Another nationalist had more or less the similar kind of views regarding the improvement in the status of women. This is resulted in discontentment and growth of socialist communism. After the world war II, Egypt faced economic hardship and this resulted in radicalization of Egyptian polity as well as radicalization of women's movement. (Wikipedia-Feminism in Egypt). The two ladies Ceza Nabarawi and Inji Aflatun founded Lajnat Al- Shaabat to revive the fading Egyptian Feminist union and they in the 1940s became pro-communist who were prevented by the government to form their own organization. In 1942 Egyptian Feminist Party was formed by Fatema Neamat Rasheed, the party called for complete equality

between women and men in education, employment, political representation and rights. It also called for the right to paid leave for the working women. In 1948 Doria Shafique has formed Bint Al- Nil whose primary purpose was to claim full political rights for women. It also engaged itself in the literary programme and other philanthropic activities such as health awareness, the issue of hygiene, social services among the poor and enhances mother and childcare. In 1951, a year before the revolution Doria Shafique gathered 1500 women and stormed into Parliament demanding full political rights, amendment in Personal Status Law and equal pay for equal work.

### **Nasser and State Feminism**

The years 1940s saw the active militant and pro-communist type of feminist activities. Then these movements temporarily became dormant. The Egyptian feminist movement under Jamal Abdul Nasser (1952-1970) Started to recede as the authoritarian ruler didn't allow any kind of autonomous organization. He strictly monitored the political activism. The state became the sole guardian of every citizen's right through its welfare policies and a ministry of Social Affairs came into existence. Nonetheless under the Nasser the Women's status saw a sea change due to his broadmindedness as Nasser was committed to egalitarianism which provided women more rights and freedom within the limits of government (Hatem 231).

The lack of women's activities was compensated by the governmental activism. This governmental activism is known as state feminism. The 1956 constitution gave women the right to vote and run for the offices. It declared that all the Egyptians are equal before the law regardless of their gender. The labour laws were changed to guarantee state sector jobs for all holders of high school diplomas and college degree irrespective of gender (Hatem 232). The educational system was reformed and the elementary education was made compulsory for all (Ahmad 210). The very advanced measure taken by Nasser was approval of birth control (Keddie 123).

Nasser's measure regarding the improvements in the life women is not considered complete as his policies were thought merely an appeasement to the feminist group. The matter of personal law remained untouched. The feminists highly expecting improvement in the law of divorce. The abolishment of polygamy was in their mind but it remained as it was before. The new Constitution of 1956 was a setback to the Islamist as well. As it was perceived that the government is forcing women to come out of the traditional role assigned to them by the religion (Keddie 123).

### **Feminism in 70s,80s and up to Arab spring**

With the death of Nasser, aggressive or militant feminism started in the Egypt. This period is marked by the entry of feminist like Nawal Al-Saadawi and her genre were very aggressive. They opened the Pandora of demands for the upliftment of women's life in the society. The main demands were actually more attitudinal and practical one. They believe that women have always been treated as a commodity rather than as person of flesh and blood. This led to the degeneration of her status and corruption in the society. Nawal al saadawi raised many issues such as the circumcision of part of female genital, issue of honor and the honor killing, mis-representation of women in administrative and other high profile job and reservation of the number of seats in legislative assembly. Most importantly she was against the patriarchal structure of the society which is ever forcing and always ready to curb the right of women. So, she was always of the view that structural change is more needed than anything else.

Saadat's era was of privatization and opening up of economy. It created more problem in the arena of women and all the good work done by Nasser is either sidelined or pushed back the only important step during this

period was improvement in the family law and more famously known as Jehan law. This law guaranteed women legal rights in marriage, in the matter of divorce and polygamy and child custody. However during Saadat's period women like under Nasser lacked independent representative organization of their own and were dependent on the regime's particular needs. However, with the personal status law of 1979, the state seemed to be lacking the overall programme to ensure women's right and the curb on the independent women's organization did no good to the cause of women's emancipation. During this period the women's associations became associated with the authoritarian state structure and authoritarianism led to dormancy of these associations and their activities.

During Mubarak time a large number of women's organization started to emerge. As Mubarak's focus was on the economic growth, women's empowerment and their economic rights were on the top of the agenda. So these organization and government were closely linked to each other. Few steps were taken towards what Abu-Lughod has termed as the "governmentalization of women's right" with the establishment of National Council for Women in year 2000, for which the first lady Suzanne Mubarak was chosen as its president. The establishment of NCW is perceived a welcome step towards the achievement of reform in the Personal Law. In the same year legislation was passed accepting the demands of women rights group which notoriously became famous as Suzanne Law. The aspects of Law as follow (weekly.ahram.org.eg 5-11 May 2011)

1-: Mothers have custody of children from nine (earlier) to 15 years.

2- : Women's alimony rights have been assured.

3-: Khul Law was enforced (A woman's right to divorce)

4- A law for divorced parents enabling them to visit their children.

With these powerful laws as generally conceived that the position of women has improved but the deep state, s main characteristics is suppression with power and oppression with brutality. The existence of law did not help to change the situation as the patriarchal mindset of the ruling elite and its follower did not allowed the women to benefit of these existing provisions. In 2005 Kifaya (enough) movement took off which seen the women protesting on the streets for their economic rights and similarly many labourer or workers strikes has been noticed. The common aspect of these agitations was the brutality of state armed forces and sexual harassment of the forces of these protesting women. The women demonstrators were target of sexual violence by plain clothes men as the police stood by (Rana Magdy). The situation of these types is an indication of a shift in a feminist discourse in Egypt where classic authoritarianism and patriarchy is challenged. As a result prior to 2011 women organization started to fight the sexual Harassments with the beginning of the Harassmap which in the aftermath of Arab spring culminated into protection shield where women protestors were provided a cover from sexual harassment and gender based violence ,intervention team started to emerge in 2012 such as Tahrir Bodyguards(Rana Magdy). A recent report by United Nation Entity for Gender Equality And the Empowerment of women published that 99.3% of Egyptian women have experienced some form of sexual harassment, whether physical or verbal and 91.5% have experienced some form of physical contact. Furthermore the study reveals that approximately 62% of the male accepted to perpetrating harassment.(Hope,Grigsby 3).

Feminism Classified



In Egypt, there are many more types and categories of feminism could be noticed as per the activities and belief involved. But broadly three main categories may be identified. The most familiar to a general audience is secular feminism which is a stereo-type. It has nothing to with the local culture, tradition and religion. The main source of ideological support for this group is western feministic philosophy and in maximum cases they blindly follow their philosophy. The group believes in all sorts of equality in the society as it is given to the men. It attempt to separate itself from association of religion expressing women's right as a human rights rather than anything else as prescribed by the society , social norms and religion. In fact this group firmly believes that the real cause of women's backwardness is religion and social system. Then there is another type of feminism, the Muslim feminism. It is a moderate group of feminists who believes in the religion and don't think religion as factor in the backwardness of women in Egypt. They most of the time support secular feminism but often differ with their philosophy. This group attempts to achieve greater rights and autonomy but within the Islamic framework. It continues to encourage women to work outside the home, to focus on their career and to choose their own husband. It tries to move beyond the traditional Islam and reform from within is their philosophy. The re-interpretation of the religious texts such as Quran and Sunna (prophet's saying) is essential to them. Lastly there is Islamic feminism. The fact remains that the two terms Islamic and feminism seems to be impossible to reconcile with each other. The very foundation of Islamism is to return back to the traditional and fundamental Islamic society where women plays important role in the private sphere as wife and mother. Most Islamist abhor the term feminism as the western idea that breaks and destroys the traditional value and social system(Karam 21-24) .In the view of the Islamist, the feminism is synonyms with colonialism and imperialism. It encourages immorality and is solely responsible for the destruction of social system and family. Islamic society provides respect and a very high status to the women. The main element is compatibility not competition (Karam 21).

The most celebrated Islamic feminists are Zainab Al- Gazali, founder of the Jam'at al- Sayyidat al- Muslimat (Muslim Women Association), Safinaz Qasim, Zainab Radwan and Heba Rauf Ezzat. The new generation of the Islamists is outspoken and confrontational about the way they view women's role in Islamic state. They stress Islam's compatibility with the UN-Stipulated standards of women's right (Ahmad 1992). Zainab Radwan stresses that women's general reform only advocates women's right to education, freeing of veil and etc. but failed to address women's right and position in the family. Heba Rauf Ezzat, one of the youngest and most prominent Islamist women's activists is certainly the most outspoken in the call for launching of Islamic women's movement. She clearly expresses her objective to re interpretation of the sources of religion and traditional values and examination of Islamic history are methods to women's liberation (A, ALI 17).

The Islamist movement (mainly Muslim Brotherhood and its associates) has sprung in Egypt and for that matter in the whole region of Middle East for the variety of reasons. The growth of materialism, consumerism, the impact of westernizations, lost of values, all these negativity culminated into the growth of Islamism in Egypt and these aspects has given birth to Islamic Feminism. One more factor is which is the cause of Arab spring as well is the general unemployment and with this the female unemployment has risen many bounds which forced women to take up the traditional role of wives and mothers rather than focusing on their careers (Keddie 125).

The general conception about the Islamist feminism among the secular feminist is that they are the forces of darkness and will negate all what has already been achieved (karam 18). But the fate of women within such a pious culture is not quite as dire as some would have us believe (Kristina Nordwall 8).The secular feminists within the Egypt and the Feminist groups outside are of the view that Islamic feminism has no future but the fact remains the popularity of this brand of feminism has increased much in the post Arab Spring scenario of Egypt. More and more women are preferring Hijabs and the traditional role of wives and mothers and

simultaneously having a strong hold on the family matters and decision making. So it may be assumed that this rejection of materialism and western influence may lead to find a solution which can better suit to their culture and environment.

## **Conclusion**

The reformist movement which started in Egypt in the mid of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the male reformist has gone through various phases the change. The women feminist started to contribute in it in the very early stage. As the movement progressed many aspect of freedom like right to get modern education, participation in the work force, demand for political rights, reformation in the personal laws were started to be part and parcel of the these demands. It is also noticed that many time very aggressive or militant mode of feminism has dominated. The suppression of feminist association was also noticed which was replaced by the State backed feminism during the Nasser era where state legitimized the cause of feminism and suppressed all other players. During Saadat and Hosni Mubarak's time state backed few organization and neglected many more, rest of the organization either eclipsed or became philanthropic organizations. It is very clearly noticed that these feminist movements were divided ideologically in three broader groups and with the Arab spring of 2011 Islamic feminist has started to dominate whose roots are very much there in tradition and culture of the region. The debates regarding the loss of achieved ground in the past has also started and time will better decide that the ongoing struggle for improvement in the life of women will go which side. But it remains a fact that in Egypt Islam and Islamic feminism is a tool for the protagonist of women's cause to get in touch and to be closer to the rural women folk and with the lower class urban women where the entry of socialist hardcore feminists is most difficult, so using the Islamic framework and then talking about the women's right becomes easy. Experience has shown that it is an easy way to get women accepts what you say.

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