

## Are Islamic Thinking and Ecofeminism Possible?

Prof. Nawal Ammar

In her presentation about *Are Islamic Thinking and Ecofeminism Possible*, Prof. Ammar explained that it is not difficult to understand the ecological crisis in its apparent manifestations as polluted air, radiation, contamination of water, and the eradication of entire species of animals and plants.

However, as **Foucault** (1978) argued we do not live in an ecology but we live in a culture that influences ecology. A number of new epistemes have been introduced regarding the relationship between culture and the environment in the past quarter of a century, **Ecofeminism** is one of those epistemes that examines such a relationship.

Eco-feminism is a movement that is still evolving. According to **King** (1988) the French theorist **Francoise d'Eaubonne** coined the term ecofeminism in 1974. Ecofeminism parallels an ecological critique with gender role critique. Ecofeminism is a social and political movement that unites environmentalism and feminism, with some currents linking deep ecology and feminism. Ecofeminists argue that a relationship exists between the oppression of women and the degradation of nature, and explore the intersection between sexism, the domination of nature, racism, speciesism, and other characteristics of social inequality.

□ **Rosemary Radford Reuther** defines ecofeminism as: representing the union of the radical ecological movement, or what has been called 'deep ecology', and feminism. A critique of modern Western science with its dualistic, technological domination, synthesized with gender domination. The ecofeminists view the domination of earth as directly connected to a set of cultural, psychological, and economic factors that create hierarchies, which in turn oppress women, and other vulnerable segments of society. For ecofeminists, the characteristics of masculine-centered ideologies, violence, discrimination, ethnocentric views together with Western technology and science, have contributed greatly to the depletion of the biological environment, and pose a threat to the continuation of life on earth (King 1998:207, 1997; Plumwood 1993). The earth crisis to the ecofeminists is, hence, not a biological problem or a variable connected solely to fertility rates or education. It is a process that needs to be perceived in a holistic manner with a focus on issues of justice, equity, accessibility to resource and recognition of human rights for women and other vulnerable animate and inanimate components of society. Can Islam be compatible with such a theory that looks at feminism, deep ecology, and oppression?

### Islam and Feminism.

Half a billion Muslim women inhabit some 40-45 Muslim-majority countries, and another 30 or more countries have significant Muslim minorities. Monolithic stereotypes of Muslim women have long prevailed in the media, and scholarship (especially in the west). Women in Muslim societies and communities (Both Muslim and non-Muslim women, from Asia to North Africa) face gender-based inequalities associated with the so-called patriarchal gender system.

The system, regardless of religion, features kin-based extended families, male domination, early marriage (and consequent high fertility), restrictive codes of female behavior, the linkage of family honor with female virtue, and occasionally, polygamous family structure.

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Most current scholarship rejects the idea that the Islamic religion is the primary determinant of the status and conditions of Muslim women. Variation in Muslim women's status and conditions, researchers typically explore factors that vary across nations and regions. For example, variations in the economic structures, or variations in the preexisting cultural value patterns of a given nation. The conclusion from textual analysis is generally either that the Qur'an's revelation is inherently ethical and egalitarian in spirit (Ahmed, Badran, Barlas, Keddie, Mernissi, Stowasser, and Wadud).

It is patriarchal readings of the Qur'an and the fiqh (rules of jurisprudence), as well as the structure of religious and sexual power in Muslim societies, rather than Islam, that discriminate against women. While the texts embody egalitarian principles whereby women and men have moral equality Islam's sacred texts are bound up with their time and place. They, therefore,

require ongoing reinterpretation to disentangle outmoded cultural ideas and practices from the authentic Qur'anic norms and message of revelation.

Islam is the only monotheistic religious doctrine to deny the concept of woman as evil seductress, responsible for the original sin and fall of humankind .

Equality between men and women in their creation:

O humankind! Verily We have created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other.... (Qur'an, 49:13; cf. 4:1).

The Creator of heavens and earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves ... (Qur'an 42:11)

And Allah has given you mates of your own nature, and has given you from your mates, children and grandchildren, and has made provision of good things for you. Is it then in vanity that they believe and in the grace of God that they disbelieve?

Qur'an (16:72)

### **Equality in responsibility**

And their Lord has accepted (their prayers) and answered them (saying): 'Never will I cause to be lost the work of any of you, be he male or female; you are members, one of another...â€" (3:195; cf 9:71;33:35-36;66:19-21).

History shows that women in early Islam participated in public life, in debates about the religion, in protecting early Muslims from attacks, in work outside the home and in the transmission of

the religion.

### **Endearing girl-children**

And when the female (infant) buried alive – is questioned, for what crime she was killed.”  
(Qur’an 81:8-9).

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 her on (sufferance) and contempt, or bury her in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on? (Qur’an 16: 58-59).

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Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise. (Ibn Hanbal, No. 1957).

Whosoever supports two daughters till they mature, he and I will come in the day of judgment

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Whosoever has a daughter and he does not bury her alive, does not insult her, and does not favor his son over her, God will enter him into Paradise. (Ibn Hanbal, No. 1957).

Whosoever supports two daughters till they mature, he and I will come in the day of judgment as this (and he pointed with his two fingers held together).

### **Feminism**

Feminism is a collection of social theories and an ideology of liberation and respect of women. Offen (1988) define feminism as a person (male or female) who recognizes the validity of women's own interpretation of their lived experiences and needs. Protests against the institutionalized injustice perpetrated by men as a group against women as a group, and advocates the elimination of that injustice by challenging the various structures of authority or power that legitimate male prerogatives in a given society . Another way of expressing this is that one of the main goals is to correct andocentric bias.

According to American Heritage Dictionary, feminism is belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. The movement organized around this belief.

Several subtypes of feminist ideology have developed over the years. Early feminists and primary feminist movements are often called the first- wave feminists , and feminists after about 1960s the second-wave feminists . More recently, some younger feminists have identified themselves as third-wave feminists while the second-wave feminists are still active.

In Marilyn French's (1985) its effects on the world at large, she defines patriarchy as a system that values power over life, control over pleasure and dominance over happiness. According to French, "it is not enough either to devise a morality that will allow the human race simply to survive. Survival is an evil when it entails existing in a state of wretchedness. Intrinsic to survival and continuation is felicity/pleasure. Pleasure has been much maligned, diminished by philosophers and conquerors as a value for the timid, the small-minded and the self-indulgent.

'Virtue' too often involves the renunciation of pleasure in the name of some higher purpose, a purpose that involves power (for men) or sacrifice (for women). Pleasure is described as shallow and frivolous in a world of high-minded, serious purpose. But pleasure does not exclude serious pursuits or intentions, indeed, it is found in them, and it is the only real reason for staying alive. This philosophy is what Marilyn French offers as a replacement to the current structure where power has the highest value.

### **Status of Women in General**

According to studies cited by the United Nations Human Development Report (2004) on average, women work more than men do, when both paid employment and unpaid household tasks are accounted for. In rural areas of selected developing countries, women performed an average of 20% more work than men, or an additional 102 minutes per day.

In the OECD countries (Organization for Economic and Co-operation Development), a survey showed that on average women performed 5% more work than men, or 20 minutes per day. In fact, UN statistics cited by the May 2001 Pan Pacific Southeast Asia Women's Association 21st International Conference are even more specific, stating that "in the world as a whole, women comprise 51 percent of the population, do 66 percent of the work, receive 10 percent of the income and own less than one percent of the property". On average, women work more than men, when both paid employment and unpaid household tasks are accounted for. In rural areas of selected developing countries, women performed an average of 20% more work than men, or an additional 102 minutes per day. In the OECD countries surveyed, on average women performed 5% more work than men, or 20 minutes per day.

Overall women wage earners in developed countries receive an average of 77 cents on the dollar, in developing countries 73 cents. — World Bank, Gender and Equality, April 4, 2003.

According to the World Bank, 60% of the 110 million primary-school-age children in developing countries not attending school are girls. In Senegal, only 15% of all girls go on to secondary education. In Turkey, only 48%. In Thailand, 80%.

Source: Women in National Parliament (UNESCO, 2006). Total MPs 43'755 Gender breakdown known for 42'734 Men 35'480 Women 7'254 Percentage of women 17.0% Source: Population

Resource Center, 2001 (Tabel)

Source: RPB, 1997 World Population Data Sheet

### **Islam and Deep Ecology**

In Islam the connection and Linkage between nature and other Creations of God lies at the center of the theology and social existence.

#### Deep Ecology

The Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess coined the phrase deep ecology in 1972. According to Devall & Sessions, (1985) and Naess deep ecology is based on eight ethical principles.

The well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth; intrinsic value; inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes.

Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are values in themselves. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease. Policies must therefore be changed. The changes in policies affect basic economic, technological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent worth) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes. Islamic ideas are in many ways appropriate with the general ideas of Deep Ecology. They differ mainly on two ideas (principally different). That is Tawhid (relationship between creator and created) and the issue of interdependence.

Respect of earth/ecology/nature is not due to its inherent value or respect of quality of life is not due to its inherent value. The sacred nature of earth that renders its value and the quality of life on it of value.

In addition, Prof. Ammar said that the source of the sacredness of earth is not an inherent one, but rather an associated one. Nature itself is not sacred. It is sacred in as far as it is a reflection of the will of God.

### **A creation**

As a creation of God, it stands in the same class as humans. The Prophet concerning God's creation said, All creatures are God's dependents and the most beloved to God among them is the one that does good to God's dependents.

### **Characteristics of the class of created:**

All creation is a reflection of God's sacredness, glory and power. God's creation is orderly, has purpose and with function. The created category is all actualized to worship and obey God. Created have all been created from the same element, water. The unity of God's creation as a category is also exemplified in Islam in terms of the social structure. Otherwise, Islam has many commonalities with deep ecology, but a different approach:

The whole universe is one single system created and united by Allah. Humans were given the responsibility for managing the earth because they possess special qualities, and not because they have better qualities. For some reasons the universe is given to humans as a "trust", amanah that they accepted when they bore witness to God in their covenant of Tawhid, there is not God but Allah . In her presentation, Prof. Ammar pointed out that:

People should to improve the earth, to enjoy and use the bounties of the earth and to maintain the balance between the two. Population pressure (and regulation) is another disagreement



with the principles of deep ecology. Population regulation as a permanent measure is not accepted in Islam, however one looks at it. From the explanation, we can see that Islam is compatible with **Deep Ecology** and compatible with feminist ideas.

One of the Prophet's Sayings clearly underscores this:

“Verily, this world is sweet and appealing, and Allah placed you as vice regents therein; He will see what you will do. So, be careful of [what you do in] this world and [what you do to/with] women, for the first test of the children of Israel was in women!” [Sahih Bukhari].

Before closing her presentation, Prof Ammar argued how to do ecofeminism.

Equity of access among creatures (including different gender). Improving conditions (of life and use) for all creatures (including different gender). Protecting the rights of all creatures (including different gender). Maintain harmony in all communities (including human communities). Reduce (or eliminate) treating any creature violently (including women). Respect the diversity and contributions of all creatures (including women).

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