

Islam and Muslim Feminism

[Based in Kuala Lumpur, Zainah Anwar, a leading Malaysian social activist and intellectual, is one of the founding members of 'Sisters in Islam', an activist group struggling for the rights of Muslim women. She is also one of the pioneers of Musawah, a recently launched initiative to build a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. In this interview with Yoginder Sikand, she talks about her vision for an understanding of gender justice in Islam and the place of Islam within a democratic nation-state. Excerpts :]

Q : You may not like being labeled, but how would you describe yourself? As a Muslim feminist? A feminist who is also a Muslim? An Islamic feminist?

A : I am a feminist. That is my foremost identity. But I am also a Muslim, and so I have no problems calling myself a 'Muslim feminist'. I am very proud of my Muslim identity. I don't see any contradiction in being Muslim and feminist at the same time, because I have been brought up with an understanding of Islam that is just and God that is absolutely just, including in matters related to women and gender relations. At the same time, I would hesitate to call myself an 'Islamic feminist'. I find that term 'Islamic' too ideological. I prefer to call myself a 'Muslim feminist', because the term 'Muslim' signifies human agency and how I, as a human being, understand God and religion. Because of political Islam, there is a tendency to believe that anything labeled 'Islamic' is the divine word of God, unmediated by human agency and interpretation, which is not the case. Islam does not speak on its own, without human intervention. So, at *Sisters in Islam*, we are trying to start using the term 'Muslim' more, rather than 'Islamic', to emphasise the human role in defining what is seen as Islam and what is not. For example, we prefer to use the term 'Muslim Family Law', rather than 'Islamic Family Law', to help Muslims better understand that the call for reform is not a call to change God's words, but, rather, to change Muslim understandings of God's message.

Q : Many Muslim feminists seek to articulate a gender-just understanding of Islam based almost wholly on their reading of the *Quran*, without taking recourse to the corpus of Hadith and fiqh, possibly because the latter two sources contain prescriptions and rules that seem to greatly militate against gender justice. How do you relate to these latter two sources of Muslim tradition?

A : For me, as a Muslim, the *Quran* is the ultimate authority. Anything that contradicts it, including in the corpus of Hadith and fiqh, cannot be considered to be Islamic. Furthermore, I also believe that the *Quran*'s open to multiple interpretations, as a result of human agency in seeking to understand the text. There is no final, authoritative human interpretation of the text. Thus, the history of *Quranic* exegesis is a story of a constant, and continuing, endeavour of Muslims seeking to understand the word of God, a wondrous exercise that can result in new meanings and perspectives evolving over time. If you read a particular verse of the *Quran* you might derive a certain meaning today, but, five years later, the same verse might suggest something quite different or deeper. There is nothing as a static, frozen interpretation of the text. Interpretations of the same text can vary due to temporal and spatial differences, differences in the class and educational background or the gender of the reader or the sort of experiences the reader has been through and which informs her when she reads

the *Quran*. Thus, every understanding of the *Quran* by us mortals is really simply an effort to understand it, rather than being the absolute understanding. To claim that a certain understanding of the *Quran*-even if it be that of the most well-known ulema-represents the absolute, final understanding is simply fallacious. It is tantamount to the sin of shirk or associating partners with God, because only God knows absolutely what God intends to say and mean.

In other words, Muslim feminists argue against any monopolistic claims on the part of anyone, including the ulema, of knowing fully the mind of God, as revealed in the *Quran*. Every understanding of the *Quran* is necessarily a partial, limited, and humble one, which cannot be considered to be perfect or free from error. The great ulema of the classical period were always conscious of this. They never said, 'Islam says this or that'. It is 'I' who is saying or interpreting, and 'I' could be wrong or 'I' could be right. Only God knows best, they always ended. But, today, such acknowledgment of the humble, fallible self no longer exists. The ideologues who claim to speak for Islam always claim that 'Islam says this' or 'God says that', and anyone who challenges this is at once accused of being against Islam and God. This is tantamount to claiming to be the embodiment of God, and is, in fact, a form of shirk.

Q : Muslim feminists are routinely accused of seeking to undermine, if not defy, the authority of the ulema as authoritative spokesmen of Islam, and of allegedly serving as fifth-columnists or 'agents' of the West or of what are described as the 'enemies of Islam'. How do you respond to this charge?

A : We are not questioning the authority of the ulema because we want to. What we are saying is that if someone's interpretation of Islam violates the norms of justice, which are so integral to the *Quran*, and if this interpretation is then imposed on us as a source of laws and public policies that are oppressive and discriminatory towards women, then we, as citizens of a democratic country, must speak out against this. If there are ulema who subscribe to a gender-just vision of Islam, there would be no reason for us to disagree with them. We would, in fact, have lent them our whole-hearted support. But, sadly, there are very few such ulema on the scene.

If you want to take Islam into the public sphere, you can only expect people to challenge you if they disagree with your views, especially when your views are made into laws that govern the lives of citizens. You cannot prevent others challenging you by using the argument that only you know what Islam is, and that no one else has the right to speak of, or for, it. This would, in effect, be tantamount to equating your own views with that of God, a grave sin in Islam. Sadly, however, that is precisely the tendency of conservative ulema and Islamist radicals alike.

We are not claiming that ours is the sole, authentic, authoritative interpretation or understanding of the *Quran*, which must replace the interpretation of the conservative ulema or Islamist ideologues. As I mentioned earlier, all interpretations are necessarily limited and partial, at best. But what we are arguing for is the need to respect everyone's right-the Muslim feminists', the ulema's, the Islamists' and everyone else's-to seek to understand and interpret God's word. We are all on a journey of discovery of the intent of God's word, and this journey will never be complete. We are arguing for recognition of this fact.

We are arguing against the authoritarian tendency, sadly so marked among many conservative ulema and Islamist ideologues, to imagine that one's own understanding of God's word is absolute and binding on everyone else and that this must be a source, if not the only source, of law and public policy. In this way, they are, in fact, limiting God to their own limited experience, understanding and intellect.

That said, I do not deny that the ulema and other religious scholars do have their own roles to play. And I do believe that there are principles within the rich heritage of Islamic jurisprudence that render open the possibilities for re-interpretation to bring about justice and equality in the modern world. What I am against are the monopolistic claims and the insistence that law and public policy must be based only on their misogynist and unjust interpretations, and that those who disagree with them are to be labeled as anti-Islam, as against God or as opposed to the shariah. This is what is turning people against the Islamist demand for an 'Islamic state' and Islamic law. It turns their project into a totalitarian scheme where there is no democratic space for anyone else to differ and disagree.

Q : Does this mean that you are opposed to the notion of the 'Islamic state', which is such a central pillar of the agenda of Islamist groups?

A : If Islam is to be a source of law and public policy-making, this has to come about as a result of democratic engagement, and cannot be imposed on the people, as the Islamists demand. The modern nation-state, with all its coercive powers, did not exist at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. For self-styled Islamist groups to seek to use the modern nation-state, with its massive coercive powers, to force people to lead a life that they see as consonant with Islam—that is to say, their own interpretation and understanding of Islam—completely negates the Muslim heritage, which was characterized by a tolerance of diverse schools of jurisprudence and theology that themselves emerged from diverse understandings of Islam.

Another reason for my opposition to the notion of a so-called 'Islamic state' is that this is used by many of its advocates simply as a tool for acquiring political power. It is also a regressive ideology, in the sense that, in the face, first of European colonialism, and, now, continuing Western hegemony, it is a reflection of a hankering for the times when Muslim political power was at its height. It is the yearning of a defeated people, a dream of a people who know, but perhaps refuse to recognise, that they are defeated by others. But going back in time is not really the way to overcome the predicament of loss, failure and defeat. It is not the way to acquire power and ascendancy, because the world has so dramatically changed today. Issues like human rights, justice, democracy, women's rights are the major ethical demands globally today. In the face of all this, the sort of 'Islam' that conservative ulema and Islamists alike want to impose, stridently totalitarian and vehemently against democracy, human rights, minority rights and gender justice, is simply not the answer. It is, obviously, and needless to say, unsustainable. In Malaysia, even within the Islamist party PAS, there is now a debate on which direction it should take—to stay firm on its demand for an 'Islamic state' ruled by the ulema or to democratise and modernise, along the lines of the AKP model in Turkey. Hardliner 'Islamic' rule will in the end

miserably fail in providing the credible alternative to the present global system that its advocates believe they are able to offer.

'Sisters-in-Islam', are dependent on foreign, especially Western, institutional funding. Why is this so? I ask this question particularly since their source of funding opens them to the charge of serving as 'agents' of non-Muslim forces that are portrayed as engaged in a 'conspiracy' to undermine Islam.

A : It is strange that although Islamist groups, too, get funding from overseas, no one levels the same sort of criticism against them. If we Muslim feminist groups are 'tools' of the West, the same could also be said of Muslim governments across the world that are so dependent on Western countries and Western-dominated institutions for aid. If our Muslim critics are so concerned that we should not have to take recourse to Western organisations for funding, why don't rich Muslims, like the Gulf Arabs drowning in petrodollars, ever assist groups like us? We would be happy to accept their aid as long as they do not interfere with our work. But, of course, they will not aid groups like ours. The reason is simple: they do not believe in equality for women.

I would like to make it clear here that our donors do not interfere at all with our functioning. We draw up proposals, set the agenda, and set it before potential funders, who, if they provide us with money, do not at all meddle with the way we go about doing the things we do. We just have to be accountable for the money we spent.

Q : You, along with colleagues from various countries, recently set up a platform, called *Musawah*, to galvanise the struggle for gender justice in Muslim communities world-wide. What sort of work does *Musawah* envisage for itself in the coming years?

A : *Musawah* was launched last February to a roaring welcome from Muslim women activists and scholars from 50 countries. Over the next few years, we are focused on knowledge-building and movement building. We are about to start a research project on the Qur'anic concept of *qawwamah* or men's authority over women, which lies at the core of the unequal construction of gender rights in Islam. It is through this concept of *qawwamah* that women's subjugation is rationalised, sustained and operationalised. The legal rights that emanate from this concept not only put women under male authority, they give men the right to terminate the marriage contract at will, to control their wives' movements, to polygamy, and to other inequalities in the family. Given the changing realities of women's lives today, the fact that women are also providers and protectors of their families, how can we re-understand and re-construct this concept so that equality and justice between genders and in the family are ensured? This is what we want to focus on.

At the international level, we plan to intervene with international organisations with regard to laws in place in many of our countries that restrict or contravene the international treaties that our governments are party to, especially on the issue of women's rights. *Musawah* as a knowledge-building movement will concentrate on developing a body of knowledge on different issues related to Islam, women's rights and human rights, that can help inform activism and legal and social change in Muslim communities worldwide. □□□