Research Paper

The Construction of Islamic Feminism in Iran: A Critical Discourse Analysis on Zanan and Zanan-e-Emruz Magazines

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Abstract

Islamic feminism is one of the movements that developed in reaction to the revival of political Islam in post-Islamic Revolution Iran (1979). The present study attempts to seize the major nodal points around which this discourse has been formed. Using Margot Badran's theory of the convergence of secular and Islamic feminisms, this study also explains the tenets of Islamic feminism in a country where filling the gap between the secular and the Islamic is rejected. It focuses on the analytical articles published by *Zanan* and *Zanan-e-Emruz* magazines as two prominent platforms for Islamic feminists to highlight their answers to the modern concerns of Iranian women. The results indicate that the major discursive nodes include: a) women's Ijtihad and the re-interpretation of the holy texts with a women-friendly outlook, b) human equality exempt from sexuality, c) demands for a conventional notion of justice, and d) recognition of women's socio-political capacities vis-à-vis their family identities.

Keywords: Iran, Islamic Feminism, Religious Intellectualism, Zanan-e-Emruz Magazine, Zanan Magazine

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1. Introduction

The victory of Iran's Islamic Republic in 1979 and the establishment of a government based on the political doctrines of Islam invited commentators to debate and theorize the contingency and the extent of women's rights under Islamic rule (Ahmed, 1992, 2014; Mernissi, 1994, 2004, 2014; Yegenoglu, 1998; Arat, 1998; Cooke, 2007; Kassam, Kirk-Duggan, & Ashc, 2010; Badran, 1996, 2013). This "new Islamic political paradigm", as Afsaneh Najmabadi calls it, has brought to the forefront the empowerment of Iranian women and their socio-political identification over the last four decades. Unlike its nationalist and socialist precedents, the Islamic Republic highlighted "the centrality of gender" in the construction of an anti-imperialist political discourse that would resist the cultural dominance of the West. It, thus, changed women's position from a "marginal, secondary, postponed, illegitimate, and discredited into that which [is] central, primary, immediate, and authentic" (Najmabadi in Haddad & Esposito, 1998, p. 60) to symbols and agents of resistance.

According to revolutionary women, "agency" was achieved through the correction of the predominant materialistic outlook and the commodification of women's sex and beauty during the Pahlavi Era. Instead, attention had to be paid to the centrality of women's intellectual power and social participation. Unlike their secular counterparts, early Islamic feminists were to use this emerging freedom and voice for the elevation of women's status and the revision of discriminatory laws and cultural norms (Tohidi, 1996, p. 3). The Islamic Republic demonstrated great determination to recognize women's rights to improve their social status along with women's active participation: Female students' education at primary levels stood at 57.8% only three years before the Revolution and reached 96.9% in 2016. Significant improvements

were also made in women's health and hygiene; for example, women's life expectancy rose from 56.2 years in 1976 to 75.5 years in 2016. Though still lagging behind in the employment rate and political decision-making posts comparing other sections, Iranian women now enjoy a degree of mobility in economic and political positions as the number of employed women in various sectors with academic degrees has increased from 5.2% in 1976 to 46.9% in 2016. Moreover, their involvement in village and city councils has tripled from 1998 (1375 seats) to 2017 (4029 seats). These are only a few instances pointing to a larger picture, though nobody can deny the existing gap to be filled *(A Summary of the Developments of Iranian Women …,* 2018).

The fact that women are now provided with a degree of agency does not mean that their position remains unchallenged under the Islamic Republic. It is not difficult to presume that part of such criticism has roots in the liberal modern ideal addressing gender equality; the possibility of coexistence between democracy and the establishment of a civil society with the prefix of "Islamic" is rejected in the modern world. Therefore, many critics believe that for the sake of eliminating restrictions on women's family and social rights, "the separation of religion and state is inevitable" (Shahidian, 2002, p. 182).

Still, we shall not turn a blind eye to the different voices of Iranian women as half of the Islamic Republic's citizens. Among these women are Islamic feminists who, as Margot Badran illustrates, Started nurturing and developing in Iran in reaction to the political Islam of the early 1980s. This group's attempt to re-contextualize the Islamic teachings into modern ones is still determining, compared to similar efforts in other countries such as Egypt, where the idea of political Islam was born (Badran, 2013, p. 304).

The present study is an attempt to critically portray the discursive construction of non-discrimination, gender equality, and women's socio-political empowerment by Islamic feminists in Iran. It addresses around which nodal points Iranian Islamic feminism has taken shape. This study provides a critical overview on Islamic feminism's meaning-making complexities as their paradoxical approaches is being questioned.

1. 1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The present paper re-considers Islamic feminism in Iran through the theoretical prism Margot Badran has built up in her pivotal works *Feminists, Islam, and Nation* (1995) and *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (2009/2013). The purpose is to illustrate how Islamic feminism has confronted a pragmatic dilemma in defining its nature, role, and function as the intermediary between secular feminism and Islam under the only government based on political Islam, that is, the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Theoretically, Badran substantiates Islamic feminism as an "exclusively Islamic paradigm" (2000) that seeks to achieve "a gender-egalitarian, socially-just Islam" (Badran, 2013, p. 323). For her, Islamic feminists are also encouraging Muslim women to "dismantle" the entirety of the patriarchal laws and practices to "lay the groundwork for the articulation of gender equality and equal treatment" (Badran, 1995, p. 66). Islamic feminism, thus, becomes a benchmark to reveal the power of the re-interpretation of the Quran and Prophet's Sunnah by women as legitimate agents of negotiation or through a woman-friendly perspective (Badran, 1995).

Islamic feminism, then, is commended by Badran as a "global

phenomenon" that connects "global Islam" with "global feminism" by deconstructing the "polarities" between the "religious" and the "secular", and between "East" and "West" (Badran, 2002, p. 4). Badran affirms that for resistance against the supremacy of political Islam, Islamic feminism has served as a "new edge" in continuation with secular feminism rather than engineering a rupture or contradiction with it (Badran, 2013, pp. 304-308). This enforces the assumption that no real binary opposition exists as secular and Islamic feminisms are only two "named" phenomena (Badran, 2000).

The present study proposes that the lack of frontiers between "Islamic" and "secular" ways of thinking is paradoxically the same feature that has made the practice of Islamic feminism substantially inappropriate in the Islamic Republic where the incorrigible gap between the two is the *de facto* convention. The early theorization of Islamic feminism in Iran encountered the same insufficient capacity to bridge the gap between an Islamic-oriented state and feminism. Islamic feminists' exaggerated strategic reliance on relativism (Alavitabar, 1381 [2002 A.D.]) to reconcile the binaries, then, has worked as a double-edged sword in Iran in the sense that today we confront two Islamic feminisms: one favoring the Islamic government in Iran and the other advocating a secular "regime change". The latter presents the normalcy of white feminist standards of women's empowerment through silencing the heterogeneity that has the potential to distinguish Iranian Shiite gender politics from the secular, liberal feminist discourse.

At odds with Badran's definition of Islamic feminism as a reconciliatory force, the particular experience of Iran indicates that a proportion of the first generation of Islamic feminists, who came from an idealistic revolutionary background, aspired to improve

women's lives as citizens of an Islamic Republic with no aims for secular change in the late 1980s and 1990s. Farideh Mashini, Masoume Ebtekar[1], Monireh Gorji, Faezeh Hashemi[2], Azam Taleghani[3], and others were among these Islamic feminist thinkers. The 1980s witnessed the rise of a new secular consciousness among the Islamic feminists who had by then put their problems in a transnational framework to find out how they still lagged behind their western counterparts. As a result, new forms of challenges surfaced that questioned the whole notion of the prevalence of Islam as an overwhelming political power. As such, secularization was a turning point for Islamic feminism developing in Iran. Hasan Y. Eshkevari and his colleagues maintain that Islamic feminism proliferated in this period when such women came to the awareness that "they will not be perfect citizens unless they offer an entirely modern and democratic reading of Sharia" (Mir-Hosseini, 1385 [2006a A.D.], p. 25).

Of the specific characteristics of Iranian Islamic feminism is the promotion of women's press in comparison with other countries where feminism has been merely theorized in academic platforms such as conferences, books, and papers. Women's unprecedented influence in newspapers and magazines in the mid-1980s and 1990s has embodied the spirit of religious intellectualism addressing women's contemporary needs and wishes. Women's press, then, is still regarded as equivalent to the well-known politically reformist tribunes such as Kiyan magazine, Salam, and Bahar newspapers (Ahmadi Khorasani, 1391 [2012 A.D.], p. 322).

1. Vice President of Women and Family Affairs and then one of the participants in the "hostage crisis" of 1979-1981
2. The daughter of the former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani
3. The daughter of Aytollah Mahmoud Taleghani, a founding father of the Islamic Republic

The intellectual movement known as "religious intellectualism[1] or "dynamic jurisprudence[2]" that became prevalent during the 1990s has focused on updating religion, highlighting the superiority of modern Reason as the ultimate meta-narrative that would rule out the private and social spheres. Islamic feminism in Iran, thus, can be taken into consideration as the feminine aspect of this larger context of the modernization of Islam (Alavitabar, 1379 [2000 A.D.], p. 45).

The development of Iranian Islamic feminism has been characterized by the dominance of a journalistic aura (Afshar, 1996; Abu Lughod, 1998; Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010), the role of which in bringing women to the "center of nation-building project" is lauded by Minoo Mo'allem (2005). *Zanan*[3] and *Zanan-e-Emruz*[4] inspired the most enduring, firmest, and most central ideals and ideas among the Islamic feminists during the post-Revolution years. Therefore, to acknowledge their points of concentration is of high significance.

Methodologically, selecting a sample was a challenge for the present researchers as *Zanan* and *Zanan-e-Emruz* magazines have

1. The "religious intellectualism" or "dynamic Jurisprudence" are acknowledged as the popular thesis during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, who asserted that Islamic teachings are "a collection of prepared prescriptions and action plans" that shall "take on new forms based on [conditions of] time and place in order to preserve their dynamism and durability" (cited in Alsultan & Saied, 2017, p. 105). This is a conventional belief in Shiite Islam that Khatami and his supporting intellectuals applied to modern cultural reforms.
2. The present study uses the terms jurisprudence and fiqh interchangeably, meaning the process of exploration and analysis of the Islamic sources to find practical and worldly instructions for a redemptive life to get the final salvation.
3. Women
4. Women of Today

been published as a continuum in 186 issues over 24 years. It is almost impossible to cover all these issues in one article. Those issues that do not include analytical articles, then, were excluded in the first stage. The sampled analytical articles are considered the fundamental venues for theorizing Iranian Islamic feminism in comparison with other materials such as translated articles or commentaries. From the remaining literature, 15 issues of *Zanan* and 4 issues of *Zanan-e-Emruz* were randomly selected. They represent almost 10 percent of the whole number of published issues. The selected issues ultimately consist of 1, 2, 3, 5, 14, 32, 58, 65, 88, 92, 96, 116, 122, 136, 150 from *Zanan* and 9 , 10, 17 and 18 from *Zanan-e-Emruz*.

The sample was analyzed employing critical discourse analysis. A complementary glance at Laclau and Mouffe's notion of "nodal points" (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 112) has allowed for the systematic classification of ideals, strategies, and practices therewith. The nodal points are similar to "a knot of definite meanings" (Laclau, 1990) or the "privileged signifiers" of the text (Nitoiu & Tomic, 2015, p. 24), whose specific configuration justifies the arguments, legitimizes the claims, and represents the worldview of Islamic feminists in this article. The researchers were deeply engaged in reading the sample for the sake of familiarization. It was followed by extracting the concepts and ideas which bear high emphasis and circulation throughout the text. Afterwards, the most relevant or complementary issues were bunched under the umbrella of common themes as presented here. As Laclau and Mouffe acknowledge, identities are never complete, and every formation would remain vulnerable to destabilization as "the moment of final articulation is never obtained" (Cited by Smith, 2003, p. 99. To grasp the existing order, however, capturing these points is of significance and value.

2. Islamic Feminism in Iran: A Contextual Analysis

The manifestation of women's social responsibility and their aspiration for independence has a long history in Iran. Its modern instances, though, date back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It usually consisted of negative resistance movements against the imperial exploitation of Iranian national resources, such as women's boycott against the tobacco monopoly awarded to the British Entrepreneur G. F. Talbot in 1892. The Constitutional Revolution (*Mashrouteh*) (1905-1911)[1] was undoubtedly a decisive moment in the lives of Iranian women. According to William Morgan Shuster in *The Strangling of Persia* (1912), the veiled women of Iran, with little prior experience, instantly turned into teachers, journalists, founders of women's clubs, and spokespeople for political affairs. Their activities account for the same social status for which the women's movement in the West had spent tens or perhaps hundreds of years to achieve (Shuster, 1912, p. 192). Many religious women covered in hijab actively participated in revolutionary riots, demanding democracy and end of dictatorship, demolishing the foreign imperial agents such as the Russian banks, and boycotting the imports that consolidated the ruling power structure of the time (Mir-Hosseini, 2002, p. 77).

None of the mentioned episodes of women's movements in Iran can be taken into consideration as qualified and efficient as their full engagement in the Islamic Revolution. Although women had been actively involved in the procedural development of the Islamic Republic, the fostering of feminism as a full-fledged movement was postponed due to the changing political order and

1. The Constitutional Revolution took place in Iran with the key role of the clergies and in a close cooperation with modern intellectuals to establish the Parliament and restrict the King's power during the Qajar Era.

the imposed war by Iraq. Feminists, then, began holding their private circles during the 1980s and were mindful of expressing their identity.

The late 1980s were also a turning point for Islamic feminism to develop in Iran. According to Mahmood Monshipouri in *Muslims in the Global Politics* (Monshipouri, 2011, p. 176), the women's movement was initiated in Iran by the "revolutionary women" who attempted to develop a sense of identity by asking a simple but fundamental question: "Who am I?". In the late 1980s, a generation of Islamic feminists emerged who, besides devotion to the collective interests, was pragmatic enough to appear in the guise of "religious reformists". The identity question of this group was "What is my duty?" (Monshipouri, 2011, p. 176). In the 1990s, the evolution of this generation culminated in a generation of women who supplemented pragmatism with a learned perception of the international milieu and the concept of global citizenship. As Monshipour describes, this third fraction could be indeed named "Islamic feminists" in the proper sense of the word. They asked, "what are my rights?" and constituted the group who emphasized the re-interpretation of the holy texts and introduced the idea of "dynamic jurisprudence" to Islamic feminism (Monshipouri, 2011, p. 176).

Islamic feminists benefit from the jurisprudential means that certify the temporality and, therefore, the mutability of Sharia. Following the pace of religious intellectualism in Iran, Mir-Hosseini designated the Shiite Fiqh as implying a form of plurality and constructivism that gives it the power to change and evolve to respond to women's demands for freedom and equality (Mir-Hosseini, 2003, p. 24).

Mir-Hosseini confirms the same idea in *Religious Modernists and the Problem of Women* (2002), suggesting that religious intellectuals in Iran have not directly addressed women's issues; however, the women-friendly ideas are easily construed from their doctrines. Zahra Shojaei, head of the Center for Women's Participation of the reformation government[1], delineates her approach to Islamic feminism:

> In my opinion, one of the most progressive legal systems that meets women's rights is the Islamic law. Meanwhile, factors like time and geography must be observed in defining laws. Not only is there no religious obstacle to women's participation in society, but also religion is itself a force for realizing women's various rights and compromising them with family relationships. …We see one of the pioneering ideas about observing women's family rights in Quran. … Sharia is not an obstacle, but the guarantee and compliment to individual, either men or women, and family rights (Shojaei, 2014).

The present study is derived from a pioneering book project that indicates the concept of identity for Islamic feminists in Iran has not been a static construction. Its internal complications and changing patterns can be briefly discussed as follows: In the first years of its publications in 1992, *Zanan* magazine focused on confirming the equality of men and women in their human status. It put emphasis on the socially constructed maternal roles and the predominant stereotypes about women. The magazine also addressed issues such as reconsideration of gender equality, in particular within the family institution. Moreover, it asked for change in providing care to family members and other traditional burdens on women through giving new interpretations on the Islamic sources of morality that were more compatible with the

1. As President Khatami's is well known for.

socio-economic improvements in women's education, health care, and employment in post-Revolution Iran (Sherkat, 1370 [1991 A.D.], p. 70; Kadivar, 1381 [2002 A.D.], p. 81; Pourzand, (1373 [1995 A.D.], p. 73; Kar, 1374 [1995 A.D.], p. 74; Mahmoodian, 1381 [2002 A.D.]), p. 81; Karami, 1381 [2002 A.D.], p. 81; Mir-Hosseini, 1385 [2006b A.D.], p. 85; Ali Akbari, 1393 [2015 A.D.])., p. 93).

Established in 2014, *Zanan* and *Zanan-e-Emruz* gradually began to frame gender relations from a new angle after a decade of activities. This time the knowledge production was conducted as if it was taken for granted that men and women are equals in terms of human honor and dignity. Thus, their rights, labors, and commitments had to be re-formulated to keep them in line with this new perspective. Throughout this phase of the magazines, the everyday life gained more significance. For example, the fathers' role at home and in rearing children in a cooperative manner was highlighted. Moreover, women's serious engagement in social spheres, the business sector, economic production, their civil and political participation as conventional voters and as potential candidates for the parliament and presidency, were added to the agenda.

The ultimate step for *Zanan-e-Emruz* was taken through articles which took an offensive rather than a defensive or apologetic tone. These pieces were formulated to enable women to break the barriers and make a practical difference through maneuvering on possible forms of resistance such as introducing new stipulations in marriage contracts that provided women with creative advantages in terms of family conditions. The modern lifestyle based on diverse individual choices, doing sports, establishing women NGOs, holding concerts for women, etc., became prevalent in *Zanan-e-Emruz* (Ghaffari, & Azizi, 1394 [2015 A.D.], p. 94; Bayat,

1394 [2015 A.D.], p. 94; Baghi & Shari'ati, 1395 [2016 A.D.], p. 95; Hoodfar, 1394 [2015 A.D.], p. 94; Ameri, 1393 [2014], p. 93; Malekian, 1394 [2016 A.D.], p. 94; Dabagh, 1393 [2015 A.D.], p. 93; Minoui, 1393 [2015 A. D.], p. 93; Minoui, 1394 [2015 A.D.], p.94).

The next section examines the analytical articles published in *Zanan* and *Zanan-e-Emruz* to discover the discursive nodal points which prevail to construct the mentioned modern re-interpretation of Islamic teachings regarding gender equality and women's rights and empowerment.

3. The Islamic Feminism in Iran: Discursive Foundations

To re-contextualize the Islamic teachings within the modern concept of gender equality and women's rights is the main characteristic by which Islamic feminism is globally recognized. Islamic feminists put emphasis on the "changing" and "interpretable" nature of Islamic sources such as the Quran and the Hadith in an attempt to denounce masculine knowledge as the universal and absolute. Iranian Islamic feminists are not exceptional among their international fellow feminists in their belief in the constructive nature of gender discrimination, attributing it to social structures rather than biology.

This section covers up 15 sampled issues of *Zanan* and 4 of *Zanan-e-Emruz* magazines. The discussion is an attempt to provide a discursive portrayal of Islamic feminism around five nodal points as follows:

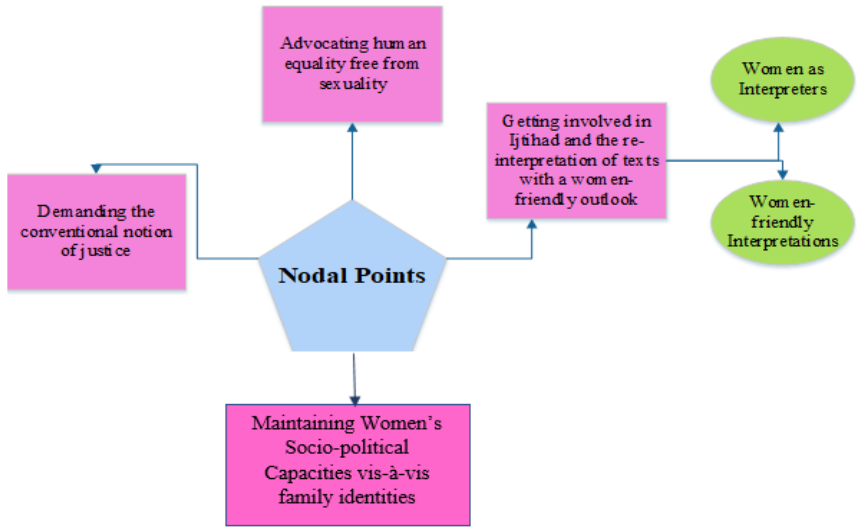

Figure 1: Discursive Construction of Islamic Feminism in Iran

A. Getting Involved in Ijtihad and the Re-interpretation of Texts with a Women-friendly Outlook

The "feminization" of or women's arrival into the process of interpreting Islamic texts seems to be an essential component of Iranian Islamic feminism which embodies a) women's interpretation of the texts, and b) addressing the womanly aspects of texts from critical stances that are more women-friendly (by interpreters of either sex).

a) Women as Interpreters

Islamic feminists underscore the re-reading and re-interpreting of the holy texts as the threshold of epistemological pluralism and discursive equality. Ali Reza Alavitabar, a prominent advocate of dynamic jurisprudence, indicates in *Traditional Family, Improbable Alternatives* (2007) that current affairs should be articulated in the Quran and Hadith,

> The holy books and religious texts have given the eternal message of God in the form of the human culture [at the time of revelation] and religious studies at different times mean to separate that eternal message from the culture imposed on it. This requires grave contemplation. What we know as women's fiqh, … is rather a reflection of a [specific] time than the eternal message of God (p. 50).

Mohsen Saeidzadeh, who was mainly outspoken in *Zanan*, believed that there is no intrinsic or even contractual preference for men over women in Islam and the two are eligible for jurisprudence and judgment (Yadegar Azadi, 1371 [1992 A.D.], p. 24). In *Women's Ijtihad and Jurisprudence*, Saeidzadeh says:

> In major Islamic texts such as the Quran and Hadith, there is no document clearly stating that Islam prevents women from issuing fatwa and holding the position of spiritual leadership; in second hand sources, however, like the principles of fiqh, and theoretical, ethical, and exegesis hadiths, you might find material around the mentioned debate (in Yadegar Azadi, 1371 [1992 A.D.], p. 24).

On women's partaking in exegesis, Saeidzadeh (1372 [1993 A.D.], p. 51) believes that no Islamic major and subsidiary ruling is purely imitative and ritualistic. Islam basically demands the believers to research and learn about jurisprudential interpretations and this is the *de jure* principle as the believer, regardless of any dividing lines such as sex, race, or ethnicity, is expected to put his/her efforts in order to deduce in order to get jurisprudential maturity.

Critics with supporting arguments such as Mahdi Mehrizi believe that when we notice a woman's interpretation is different from that of men, this might be a sign that men and women shall collaborate and strive to find the truth. Both should be provided

with equal chances of learning and presenting their understandings of the holy texts. For him, then, the omission of one sex from the process can lead to defective understanding or, in some cases, to erroneous outcomes (Mehrizi, 1385 [2006 A.D.], p. 55).

Iranian Islamic feminists, confirming that the legal system in Iran is based on Sharia and Sharia is itself founded on the holy Quran and hadiths, assume interpretation as a task that has been traditionally carried out by men. These feminists recount this as the reason behind the historical paternalism in Iran. Re-interpreting and re-reading the Quran and hadiths continue in other Islamic feminists' contributions to journalism. Among these feminist are Shahla Sherkat[1], editor of *Zanan* and *Zanan-e-Emruz*, and Faezeh Hashemi, editor-in-chief of Zan[2] newspaper.

b) Women-friendly Interpretations

By initiating the discussion on the possibility of re-reading the holy texts, Islamic feminists emphasize the need for new and more women-friendly interpretations of them and thereby add to the force of hermeneutic approaches by highlighting the essential situationality of Shiite jurisprudence (Haghighi, 2005, p. 53). For Mir-Hosseini, the important epistemological outcome of such a practice is to emancipate sexuality and women's status from the domain of fiqh, so that certain laws which were implemented in the

1. Shahla Sherkat is a pioneer feminist activist in Iran who founded and has served as the editor of *Zanan* and *Zanan-e-Emruz*. Her magazines have been suspended or banned in various occasions for promoting liberal versions of feminism. She is considered by her critics as a member of the opposition against the Islamic Republic, particularly after her participation in the Berlin Conference (2000). Her international reputation is constructed with international awards such as Louis Lyons Award (2005) and The Courage in Journalism Award (2005).
2. Woman

name of Sharia could no longer be sanctified as divine and immutable. Instead, such laws should be deemed as humanistic and mutable (Mir-Hosseini, 2003, p. 20). That is the reason why a significant part of Islamic feminism in Iran is devoted to the interpretation of the Quran and the rulings of Shiite scholars over women's issues (Moghadam, 1993, p. 178; Mahdi, 2004, p. 440).

In an article titled *Man, Head or Share-holder*, published in *Zanan*, the writers criticize the pyramid relation of man and woman in spousal relationships and bring pieces of evidence from Sadr-ul Motealehin, Tabarsi, Abul-Fath Razi, Morteza Motahari, Mousavi Bojnordi, Sanei, and other Shiite grand scholars on the interpretation of Al Nissa, verse 34[1] to conclude:

> The recent transformations in women's social status, their conceived presence in the workplace, education, politics, economy, and even at war, and the growing rate of their expertise in various fields, all necessitate the clarification of women's rights and status in the Islamic society and the need for novel interpretations of texts … [This] interrupts the power pyramid. Here, the purpose is to bring back balance and equilibrium to family rights and relationships (Shokri & Labriz, 1989, p. 27).

Farideh Mashini refers to the verses one to three of Mujadilah Chapter which retells the story of a woman who went to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to complain about her husband. She concludes that "not only does this woman have rights, but also she has to fight for this right of her, even if she is to discuss her problem with the Prophet, because [in discussing this issue with him] it is God who listens to her" (cited in Baghi, 1391 [2012 A.D., May]).

1. "Men are the protectors and maintainers [guardian] of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other."

In this regard, Saeidzadeh also revises conventional interpretations of Quran verses such as Al Nissa, verse 34[1], Al Baqarah, verse 228[2], and Al Ahzab, verse 33[3] as verses highly referenced by the opponents of women in judicial positions. He re-interprets these verses to reject the conceptual understanding of men's essential supremacy over women, hence the rejection of men's authority over women as the pretext for the issuance of ruling and judgment to men only (Yadegar Azadi, 1371 [1992 A.D.], p. 24).

The probability of re-reading the texts and using the potentials of jurisprudence in women's rights and problems is concurrent with the emergence and popularity of social sciences in which particular issues should be addressed based on their historical context. Religious and legal dominance, especially in modern times, are no exception to this rule (Nikpei, 1390 [2011 A.D.]). This is a point of departure for Islamic feminism epistemology that prompts women to "[believe] their own knowledge" (Shahi, 1385 [2005 A.D.], p. 58).

B. Advocating Human Equality Exempt from Sexuality

Islamic feminists relied on verses such as "indeed the most respectful of you before God is your most pious"[4] and criticizing interpretations of verses such as Al Baqarah, verse 228. In interpreting similar verses, they replace the concept of men's "superiority" with "humanity" and announce the latter to be prior to gender and sexuality (Baghi & Shari'ati, 1395 [2016 A.D.], p. 108).

1. "Men are the protectors and maintainers [guardian] of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other".
2. "And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them".
3. "And stay quietly in your houses, and make not a dazzling display, like that of the former Times of Ignorance".
4. Al Hujurat, Verse 13th

Islamic feminists begin from the story of creation, and, relying on transparent Quranic verses, assume both sexes of the same spirit both of whom misled by Satan –against the narrative that says it was Eve that was misled and who then misled Adam. From the same perspective, they emphasize that Quran supersedes, by using the double tense for the verbs used in the story of creation (in Arabic), as against the negative Greco-Roman and Testament-Judaic readings that entail the feminine curse of creation (Ali Akbari, 1393 [2015 A.D.]).

Islamic feminists claim that resulting from the mentioned essential equality in creation, women and men are also equal in social rights and the discrimination women suffer is due to the misunderstanding of Islam and certain parts of social traditions and culture. In *Human Rights and Gender in Quran*, Farideh Mashini delineates her interpretation of gender equality based on the Quran. She believes that Al Isra, verse 70[1], implies that God has created the human kind in a way that regardless of their colour, race, gender, and any biological attributes, they all deserve respect. This natural human value entitles individuals to undeniable rights. In her view, Quran has indicated that women and men are created by the same essence and their equality in deserving respect entails their equality in rights. Also, based on Al Hujurat, verse 13[2], the variety in colours and races is merely an expression of the plurality

1. "We have honoured the sons [sons and daughters] of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favours, above a great part of our creation".
2. “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things)”.

of humankind for the purpose of survival. Mashini goes on to defend the idea of equality in major human rights, including the right to life, the right to education, working and economic independence, safety and social life, political participation, access to power structures, and the right to spiritual life. She justifies these rights based on Quranic reasoning (Mashini, 1386 [2007 A.D.], p. 162).

According to what is reviewed in this section, it appears that recognizing women's individual agency and taking into account their feelings and preferences as equal humans are among the main concerns of Islamic feminists. This is specifically evident in their reviews on family laws in Iran. Among the works that best exemplify this concern in the 1990s are the literature that appeared in *Zanan* on docility and similar discussions. The articles written by Shokoufeh Shokri and Sahereh Labriz are among such literature (Shokri & Labriz, 1991a; Shokri & Labriz, 1991b). In *Obedience*, they point to the 1105 article of Iran's Civil Law that they claim has announced man as the guardian of the family, and take it as the basis for interpreting the 1103 article concerning couples' "amicability" and 1104 article on couples' duties concerning "strengthening family foundations" and "cooperation" in rearing children. Back to almost three decades ago when this article was published, the Islamic feminists did not reject the religious and natural necessity of obedience as a major family principle; however, they undermined the "special obedience[1]", that is, women's sexual docility to their husbands. They refer to "the son of Ayatollah Haeri[2]" and other lawyers and jurisprudents such Seyed Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad, Seyed Mohammad Mousavi

1. Tamkin Khas
2. Ayatollah Abdolkarim Haeri was one of the most distinguished Shiite jurisprudents who founded the seminary schools at Qom in 1922.

Bojnordi, and Naser Katouzian to infer that in new religious discourses, such an unconditional obedience to the husband without taking into account the personality of the woman and the social norms of the day is a matter of debate:

> In a human relationship where the personal temper of each party affects the course of things, women could not be considered handy instruments under total control. How brutal it is to demand a woman, who carries socio-economic burdens in the family and is spiritually and physically sensitive, to be sexually available without the least emotional and psychological consideration as enforced by the alimony system (Shokri & Labriz, 1991b, p. 59).

Islamic feminists believe that the traditional religion-based laws do not take "women's emotions" into consideration. They hold that reducing matrimony to a legal contract has become so conventional that women's satisfaction of their husbands' sexual needs has become the essential part of marriage. Such obedience on the part of women is in exchange for the life expenses and other duties that men need to take care of (Shokri & Labriz, 1991b, p. 53). On the other hand, Islamic feminists remark that the health of a relationship, which is not unilateral, is the primary factor that maintains internal happiness and builds mutual trust between couples. In agreement with psychologists, Islamic feminists believe that both men and women have to go through mental and physical preparation before the initiation of intercourse (Shokri & Labriz, 1991b, p. 54).

Appropriately, they seek to change the views on women's status as humans and seek an Islamic answer to the urgent need for social transformation (Sanei, 1381 [2002 A.D.]). In Iran, many fields on which Islamic feminists have focused their efforts are directly related to their emphasis on the changing views toward women's

human status. These fields include age of consent for marriage, polygamy, adjusting divorce rules to women's independence in modern times, women's freedom of choice, their economic safety (Milad, 1383 [2005 A.D.], p. 53), their right to custody, housework as paid work, contraception (Sanei, 1381 [2002 A.D.]), vand promoting women's socio-political participation.

C. Demanding the Conventional Notion of Justice

Justice for Islamic feminists is a concept that the scholarly body of each era corroborates (Tohidi, 2017, p. 23). Such an understanding designates to justice a relational meaning that is bound to change in every period, making the instances of justice different from one social and historical setting to another. The realization of women's lost rights and the elimination of inequalities is the ultimate purpose of justice for Islamic feminists. They have focused their efforts on replacing the "rights-based" constitutions for the traditional "duty-bound" legal frameworks (Dabagh, 1393 [2015 A.D.], p. 86). For them, this change is dependent on an epistemic change: The jurisprudence/fiqh has lost its normal superior position to define legislature prospects. In modern times, fiqh has become a branch of knowledge that can be learnt and used by everyone even if the individual does not posses the ideal level of pious virtues (Alavitabar, 1386 [2007 A.D.]), p. 51; Ameli Mousavi, 1989, p. 43). Moreover, law is reduced to a form of structured morality with binding effects, rather than jurisprudential inferences, that is bound to change based on contemporary social norms and cultural settings (Ebrahimi, 1381 [2002 A.D.], p. 19).

Defining Islamic rulings according to the definition of justice in every historical setting is supported by these scholars in order for ending any discriminatory rules over women in the contemporary times. In *Women, the Book and Tradition* and in *Hermeneutics, the*

Book and Tradition, Mojtahed Shabestari gives his idea on secular justice:

> The Prophet (PBUH) changed a set of unjust rulings on women in that era. … He recognized women's property rights, restricted polygamy [to four wives], balanced inheritance rights, …. He changed the uncontrolled gender inequalities of his time as much as his contemporary understanding of justice allowed and took steps toward justice. … The message of these changes is is that other inequalities that have historically been imposed on women must be in the same way fought against. This is the general message of the Prophet's movement (Mojtahed Shabestari, 2000, p. 509).

As the Prophet (PBUH) has fought the discriminatory rulings of his time for the sake of justice, today we are obliged to carry the true message of the Prophet's reforms and focus on gender equality at a time of rapid socio-cultural progress. For this purpose, we are but to give new interpretations of the holy texts and adjust Islamic rules to the appropriate notion of justice that fits our times. However, the demand for conventional justice has raised serious criticisms for its vagueness and relativism: who the authenticated reference is to define the contemporary needs and judicial requirements, based on what sort of logic or way of life justice is highlighted, and through whose prism the justice and its practical instances would be communicated remain controversial topics to this day (Alasvand, 1395 [2017 A.D.]); Aghajani, 1388 [2010 A.D.]).

D. Maintaining Women's Socio-political Capacities vis-à-vis their Family Identities

The cause advocated by all feminist schools around the world is women's social, political, and leadership participation. This is true about those Iranian Islamic feminists who attempt to draw on

religious texts in order to legitimize and promote women's social and political participation.

Proving women's individual "agency" alongside their social and family rights constitutes Islamic feminists' major concern. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic regards family as a main factor in forming national identity. According to the Constitution, all rulings must maintain the stability of the family as an institution (Alizadeh, 2000, p. 279). Paidar opposes this principle, arguing that such a doctrine reduces the identity of female citizens with political rights to their maternal roles. In her view, in post-Revolution Iran, women's role accounts for a state of motherhood that cannot be compared to any other family or social roles. Motherhood, ultimately, becomes the foundation of womanhood on which the entire concept of femininity is dependent (Paidar, 1995, p. 261).

Iranian Islamic feminists focus on the worldly character of women. They claim that although the principles of the Islamic theology validate women's divine-human status, the social status of women is continually challenged in the sphere of societal affairs: The divinity of women's motherhood and rearing roles are frequently prioritized and their social participation is made peripheral to such roles. Borrowing from the discourse theory, Islamic feminists argue that the classical Islamic ideas take women's "rearing" roles as the central sign that naturally confines women to their homes. They place the central sign around women's socio-political leadership without denying the former's significance (Women from Another Perspective, 1991, p. 39; Baghi & Shari'ati, 1395 [2016 A.D.]; Mohajer & Khoramshahi, 1385 [2016 A.D.]).

Iranian Islamic feminists share much affinity with international feminist thinkers. They frequently refer to scholars such as Amina Wadud as she points out how the Quran cherishes Bilqis, the Queen

of Sheba, as a political leader and elaborates on the Quranic appreciation of female socio-political role-taking. She assumes this admiration to be due to Sheba's spirituality and wisdom (Ali Akbari, 1393 [2015 A.D.]). As part of the re-interpretation of gender roles in the Quran, Monireh Gorji also mentions the Queen of Sheba and her just and rational reign, objecting to the traditional prohibition of supervising roles for women under the excuse of their physical weakness. She theorizes that such considerations in modern times are due to the change in supervisory roles that have shifted from performing physical tasks to exercising power through technologies and sciences (Gorji & Ommi, 1372/1373 [1992/1993 A.D.], p. 28).

4. Iranian Islamic Feminism: A Critical Outlook

Islamic feminism in Iran can be taken into consideration from a critical perspective as it suffers from the following epistemological shortcomings and methodological subjectivity:

A. Fabrication of Binaries in Benefit of Relativism

The very criticism of Iranian Islamic feminism, as a product of discursive haphazardness and epistemological complicatedness, lies in its ambiguity in dealing with conceptual binaries. One significant instance is the fabrication of dualities between Shariah vs. fiqh to highlight the difference between Islam's immutable principles and the paternal readings vs. the mutable and dynamic readings of fiqh. However, for Islamic feminists, fiqh is assumed to be a socio-cultural construct. According to them, the feminist epistemology can, as a rival construct for the current masculine one, take part in the interpretation of the holy texts and inference of the Islamic laws (Alcoff & Potter, 1993).

Women-centered jurisprudence, that is, the inclusion of female jurists in courts, and addressing women's issues and demands, constitute Islamic feminists' main demands. That said, Islamic feminists have never defined the perimeters of women's jurisprudence, seemingly having reduced jurisprudence to the elaboration of women's personal or partisan preferences. Here, they demonstrate their preference for modern lifestyles, so, they contend that Islamic jurisprudence should be permanently revised based on the variables of time and place to adopt the "changing interpretations in line with modern demands" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 88).

B. Conceptual Binaries Mixed

Among the major conceptual binaries, mostly developed in an implicit and indirect tone by Islamic feminists, is religiosity/religion-centeredness, which is itself inclusive of lesser binaries of private/public, personal/political, and Shariah/statute law. Islamic feminism suggests that it is Shariah, as the masculine epistemological construct of Islam, that brings women and their issues to the political sphere through acts such as gender segregation and discriminatory laws, intensifying conflicts over women's rights and the emergence of feminist inclinations.

Islamic feminists, thus, follow liberals in arguing that social issues such as hijab are personal and matters of religiosity. They indicate that societies can remain religion-centered, relegating personal religiosity to the private sphere of people's lives. Azam Torab indicates that the concept of "intention", or Niÿat in Arabic, in religious teachings gives the follower a level of interpretative power that is as decisive in inter-personal as in God-subject relations (Torab, 2007, p. 37). Alavitabar also sees the separation of Shariah rules from the statute law as the prerequisite of democracy:

"The two differ based on their legal sanctions. The statute law is sanctioned by the government force while Shariah rules are sanctioned by personal conscience rooted in religious belief" (Alavitabar, 1379 [2000 A.D.], p. 53).

Secular vs. Islamic, with the precedence and supremacy of the former, is the subsequent binary to understand Islamic feminism in Iran. It apparently adopts differentialism, that is, respecting men and women's biological differences in order to conserve the deterrence of inequality in topics such as atonement, retribution, inheritance, custody, etc. (Najmabadi A. , 1990, p. 20) The belief in historical, cultural, and social constructivism of femininity and masculinity allows Islamic feminists to, in line with the essence/appearance binary, suggest the eradication of different social roles and rights of men and women. They consider a large part of differences as socio-cultural constructs created as a consequence of men and women's socialization and acculturation patterns in Islamic societies. Islamic feminists hold that these patterns are in need of reconstruction (Paidar, 1995, p. 11).

The pluralist view to Shariah and jurisprudence in Shiite Islam, thus, is well articulated in Islamic feminist literature as denouncing a divinity-driven legislative status and the ascendency of customary justice as its byproducts. The two entail the applicability of rules to contemporary issues based on the global gender norms and standard as against the so-called "strictness" of traditional jurisprudence. However, Shiite jurisprudence already takes the emerging issues of the day and the universal problems as sources of change and dynamism of jurisprudence. The remaining question is what the ultimate limit of the changes to the de-essentialized Shariah would be according to the Islamic feminist ideology.

C. Methodological Considerations

Islamic feminism in Iran can be ultimately subject to methodological criticism. The amalgamation of modern sociological, hermeneutic (interpretation-narrative), and jurisprudential-legal methods has created an eclectic method that hardly justifies the egalitarian religious outcomes elaborated on by the researchers.

The methodological problem remains unresolved even about the literature produced by those with seminary background, given that a sociologist, anthropologist, or researcher of political science has referred to a few examples in the actual world of religion to develop a modern or even post-modern set of ideas. This has caused the literature of the field to be more of a reproduction of the secular Sunni Islamic feminists, as its global model implies, rather than the development of a local Shiite school of thought.

5. Conclusion

The establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran as an unprecedented form of religious democracy has been approached by numerous advocates of women's rights within the country and around the world. Islamic feminists have been the most prominent of these groups for their intellectual reaction against the revival of political Islam that still holds power in Iran –as against other Muslim countries such as Egypt where similar inclinations have almost entirely failed.

Islamic feminism in Iran started to develop in the 1980s and reached its pinnacle during Mohammad Khatami's reformation government (1997-2005). This movement was contemporaneous with the flourishing discourse of "dynamic jurisprudence" or

"religious intellectualism" and the prevalence of liberal secular journalism. The present study concentrated on 15 sampled issues of *Zanan* as well as 4 issues of *Zanan-e-Emruz* monthlies as two ground-breaking magazines published by Islamic feminists.

As Margot Badran theorizes, Islamic feminism serves as a continuity of, rather than a rupture from, secular feminism. *Zanan* and *Zanan-e-Emruz* as the manifestations of the Islamic feminist ideas and ideals are, thus, appropriately situated in an innate conflict with the Islamic Republic where the irreconcilable gap between the Islamic and the secular is predominant.

As the present research demonstrated, the alternative discourse that the Iranian Islamic feminists suggest is constructed around five nodal points, including a) getting involved in Ijtihad and the re-interpretation of texts with a women-friendly outlook, b) advocating human equality exempt from sexuality, c) demanding the conventional notion of justice, and d) maintaining women's socio-political capacities vis-à-vis their family identities.

Islamic feminists in Iran, compared to their international counterparts, call for the re-contextualization of Islamic sources such as the Quran and Sunnah based on women's outlooks and women-friendly interpretations. They attempt to fuse Islamic teachings with the modern norms of gender equality as they strive to dismantle the repressive patriarchal understandings of Sharia in family relations, such as issues concerning divorce, child custody, and socio-political participation.

Iranian Islamic feminists set out to utilize the unique capacity of Shiite mutable jurisprudence to handle the emerging practical needs and existential concerns in modern times and circumstances. They prioritize women's human dignity to justify their equality with men

in terms of identical levels of power within family as well as in society and politics. For Iranian Islamic feminists, not only morals, but also justice is relational: Traditional "religious" customs and conducts such as polygamy, thus, would be prohibited today to adjust such rules to modern women's preferences. They criticize the reductionism in cultural and legal areas, arguing against reducing womanhood to motherhood and rearing roles as they believe prioritizing such roles pushes women's social participation to the periphery.

To critique Islamic feminism and its modern voice, the present study also adopts a critical approach to it from three different perspectives: a) its epistemologically relativist viewpoint, b) the fabrication of binaries to undermine Shariat and conventional jurisprudence against customary justice, and c) the lack of methodological objectivity.

Islamic feminism, as Margot Badran indicates, is secular in vision and Islamic in appearance, literature, and evidence. As the present study demonstrated, the same holds true about its Iranian model. Islamic feminists draw on Shiite Fiqh as an instrument to recalibrate modern gender norms and values which are regarded as mere socio-cultural constructs. Religiosity for them is limited to the private sphere and being a devoted Muslim depends on personal intentions and conducts rather than systematic jurisprudential instructions. The ideological underpinning of Iranian Islamic feminism, similar to its Sunni Arab counterparts, lies in religious intellectualism. Religious intellectualism has been nourished by clergies and academicians who use Islamic terminology in post-structuralist interpretations of the holy texts and Quranic exegesis. As the present study suggested, Islamic feminists' theories about women and family issues have mostly sufficed to provide general conclusions and generalizations in condemning "classic

jurisprudence" and the Seminary without observing the minimum standards of scientific research and materialization of their claims.

The present study portrayed an overview of the discursive map that Islamic feminists have worked on for four decades in Iran. What remains unanswered is the complicated political gives and takes between a fraction of Islamic feminists who have joined the political opposition against the Islamic Republic by promoting the de-Islamization of law and contributing to the "regime change" agenda in favour of a secular government. Thus, giving a contrapuntal reading of Islamic feminism and their critics to reach a holistic picture would be beneficial in prospective research projects.

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