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God and Gender in Islam

İslam'da Tanrı ve Cinsiyet

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Abstract: The feminist theology depends on the thesis that the theology based on male-dominant culture. According to this thesis, it is believed that the present theology must be revised from women's point of view. It has been said that this theology is a relative theology on the assumption that the present theology is largely a masculine paradigm, which is a result of man's historical experience. When the concepts of Islam and feminism are thought together, the status of women in Islamic societies is generally discussed. However, instead of this, it should be investigated whether present situation has a theological foundation in Islam or not. It should be discussed whether God' attributes and names have sexual or masculine content. Biologically, it is widely believed that God has no sexual character. But metaphorically, whether God has female or masculine attributes, and women's socially backwardness results from Muslim's imagination of God is an important issue to research. In this paper, it will be discussed whether some Qur'anic verses commented against women are masculine commentaries or Quranic data.

Keywords: Feminism, God, feminist theology, Islam, Christianity, gender, masculine dominant culture.

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Feminism can generally be described as the struggle to resolve issues stemming from men's sovereignty over women. From this point of view, it might seem, if the description above is true, that history and civilization have been thought up by men, not by women, so that history and civilization are not colored by the feminine, and all of human legacy is impregnated by the masculine. Indeed, the same claims are made about religion, its foundations and its interpretation. 'Feminist theology' in this context, then means the reconstruction of religious beliefs allegedly kneaded by men in an attempt to frame them in the context of women's understanding, "bringing [new] insights [resulting] from the women's experience and wisdom" (Parsons, 2002: xiii). Thus, the main problem for feminist theology is to prove the dominance of masculine and the passive position assigned to the feminine in the development of the theological discourse so as to change the situation in woman's favor.

Accepting as true that theology or theologies were developed under the dominance of the masculine brings to mind automatically a question: Does this dominance come from the original sacred texts or from the historical interpretations of believers? It is very important to address this question, for another point has to be taken into account and kept in mind: most religions claim that their sacred text are not product of humans, that they are divine messages that came from God to humans by means of revelation. Then feminist theology can be divided into two different categories, secular feminist theology on one hand, and religious feminist theology on the other hand. By "secular" we meant all codification, all comprehension, whether stemming from mental or physically realms, all existence within a sphere or a reality independent from any religion (Casanova, 2009: 1049).

Thus, the first one, namely secular feminist theology holds that all religions are exclusively historical constructs, and in no way of divine source. It constitutes then an atheistic attitude towards religions in general. The second, namely religious feminist theology argues, at least, that *the religion* perceived by the masculine focusing and interpreted in frame of misogyny. So they argue that the whole images of masculinity about God are only the deviation of the *religion.* Secular feminist theology rejects the whole concept of religion and claims that all religions reflect a

masculine focus and that, furthermore, they do not emanate from any divine sources. Religious feminist theology does not refuse the whole of religion; they refuse only the masculine understanding and interpretations of the sacred texts as well as God. In any event, if the whole concept of religion is rejected, it becomes then irrational to address the issue of religious interpretation, since it is hardly the concern of atheists. So the *feminist theology,* not *feminism,* should not be a philosophical problem for atheists. It would be a problem rather for believers in any religion to discuss their religious interpretation. Otherwise, it would be like a sophist discussing rationalists' claims concerning knowledge after having rejected knowledge. It is not up to the sophist to assess which claim might be more rational, since he rejects the very basis of all of their claims. Conversely, it would seem most irrational for atheists to argue whether any of God's verses are masculine in nature or not.

In the Western world, there are many discussions about women's rights in religion, referred to as feminist theology. For example Kathryn Tanner, in her 'Theories of Culture: a New Agenda for Theology' proposes a cultural theory of modernization of mainstream Christian understanding. She calls her theory feminist theology whereas it is only a 'social construct' (Tanner, 1997: 128, 140), as is the case today in the West for most feminist theological understanding. However, we hold that these are not theological discussions: if 'feminist theology' adds the word 'theology' to the concept of feminism, it should at least include some thinking about God and his attributes, for the rights of women in any given civilization are about law more so than about theology. We therefore shall not refer to women's rights as 'feminist theology' in this paper, and propose that religious feminist theology is the only kind of feminist theology worth discussing to the exclusion of secular feminist theology. If we can say without hesitation that men have historically exercised a dominant influence in all areas of religion, it is not clear whether man uses a masculine methodology in pondering religious epistemology. Such a claim ought to first be supported with proof so as to avoid the hasty conclusion that theology is masculine-based simply because it has been established by men. Moreover, we would have to put forth that women generally speak in a different manner, and that they do so in particular in discuss-

ing theology. Otherwise, it would only be an opportunistic hypothesis to push the feminist cause: all symbols and images of theology would get transferred to the feminist realm and therefore to a feminine mode of expression as stated by Rebecca S. Chopp (1997: 230). So that in short, denouncing men dominance would automatically constitute a feminist theological discourse. But it has nothing to do with theology, with the existence and nature of God. It relates exclusively to social, cultural and political interpretations of religion. Conversely, it would not be appropriate for discussions about theology to be anchored on the examination of male dominance in the realm of religious sciences, as feminist theology attempts to do. This phenomenon takes place in Muslim societies as well, although it is endemic of the Western Christian world, whereby thinking and writings addressing women's rights are referred to as feminist theology (Mogissi, 2005: 323; Bardan, 2010; Arimbi, 2009: 53) and whereas it is certainly pertinent to call it feminist, if speaking about feminist theology, the focus ought to be placed on what is believed or expounded about God in the context of male-dominated thinking. Otherwise, it would only be women's rights from perspective of *feminist anthropology* or just *feminism*.

Let us now examine whether or not Islam's views of God are the result of androcentric influence. As commonly known, the pronoun 'He' (*Huve*/*Hu* in Arabic), and not 'She' (*Hiye*/*Ha*), is used in referring to Allah. We can say many verses in the Qur'an saying 'He' or 'Him' for Allah instead of 'She' or 'Her'. But is it enough to judge that God is therefore of the masculine gender? Or why does God always have masculine pronoun in the Qur'an? It is clearly known that in Arabic language it is necessary to use one of the sexual pronouns. For that reason, all this kind of using is only grammatical classification, not an ontological classification. There is, therefore, no truth in the claim that God would possess any sexual ontological identity based on using masculine pronouns. For instance, the Sun is a feminine word in Arabic language, but no one talks about the sexual identity of the Sun. Because the femininity can only being applicable for plants, animals and humans grammatically, not biologically or sexually. So, this kind of femininity should not be considered in the context of God's nature. An interesting question in the context of the use of the masculine pronoun is however, why is the 'He' (*Huve*) always used in the

Qur'an when referring to Allah? We believe it to be only a grammatical choice. If the pronoun 'She' were used instead, we would have the same question. No more than that need be read into that choice, and it can be unequivocally stated that such a choice does not contain any deep philosophical message to be explored by feminist theology as to Islamic perspective. What might need to be particularly examined by feminist theology however is how our own imagination fathoms God's existence and nature. Namely, we ought to explore whether or not how we imagine God is derived from masculine perception. In that context, feminist theology would focus on our beliefs about God and how they might reflect a gender-based thinking since as above-stated. Because the femininity only be considered for plants and animals in this context.

Even insofar as our imagination about God containing gender elements is concerned, two different points have to be considered: *first* that these gender-based elements might be due to the way Allah describes himself in the Qur'an; *secondly*, that is not at all due to any description Allah might have given of himself in the Qur'an, but to our own masculine bias in reading the Qur'anic texts. What would cause such self-description of Allah to imply gender-based qualities is the unavoidable result from having to translate such description in human terms which inexorably imply gendered elements. But I believe this to be a mistaken supposition. If the way in which we imagine God is imbued of gender considerations, then we have not succeeded in thinking in the abstract which is fundamentally required in order to think about God, for in a certain manner, to understand or interpret God's attributes from gender-based perspectives engenders a kind of *religious pluralism.* As John Hicks states, all of our intentions and of our experiences in understanding God are not only the result of cognitive ability, unavoidably, involuntary contributions are made as well by our state of mind, and the images suscitated by our attempts at understanding God's messages to us. Hick speaks in terms of Kant's *numen* to explain this inevitable interference. He says: "Divine reality is necessarily known to us in the forms made possible by our own conceptual resources and spirituals practices." (Hick & Nasr, 1997: 175-188). If theological interpretations contain some kind of masculine-based understanding, Hick is right in his claim in theology and con-

ceptual resources relation. This means that the human mind does not easily avoid the gender trap as it attempts to fathom and imagine God's attributes. But let us not forget that Muslim do not believe that the Qur'an is the 'answer to understanding Allah', as Hick may say (Hick & Nasr, 1997: 175-188.). On the contrary, the whole of Muslim understanding of what is stated in the Qur'an is Allah's message to humans.

After this determination what we can say in examining feminist theology from the perspective of Islam is that the main issue is whether there are any gender considerations influencing our understanding or not in Islamic theology. If there are any gender contents in Muslim faith about Allah's attribute and his existence we should clean them by *feminist theology* method to reach the real theology without shadow of gender. In this context the main problem for Islamic feminist theology is: (1) eliminate from our imagination all masculine elements concerning the abstraction of God, so as to sanitize Muslim theology, and (2) to do the same with any feminine elements so as to achieve the reality required by Muslim theology in perceiving God's image.

On the other hand if there is any other element perceived as implying that women are ontologically different, then that has to be discussed as well by Islamic feminist theology. For example as Riffat Hassan establishes three prejudices relative to women's ontological status. She says "(1) that God's primary creation is man, not woman, since woman is believed to have been created from man's rib, hence, women are ontologically derivative and secondary; (2) that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is generally referred to as "Man's Fall" or man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, hence, "all daughters of Eve" are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion, and contempt; and (3) that woman was created not only from man but also for man, which makes her existence merely instrumental and not fundamental" (Hassan, 2001). If this understanding is God's message to human about women then it will be possible to argue that there is a feminist theology in Islam.

We must then *first* ask: is there in the Qur'an any substance to see women ontologically of lower status than that of men? For example did Allah say in the Qur'an that he created women from the rib of men? We know that there is not any such thing in the Qur'an. This is only a reper-

cution of Torah tradition upon Islamic culture. They called this unilateral impact as Israiliyyah in Islamic literature. In this subject we can see that the Qur'an states: "Allah created you from one soul (nafs)." (Qur'an, al-An'am: 98) In another verse Allah says: "Allah created you from one soul and created from her mate that he might dwell in security with her" (Qur'an, al-A'raf: 189). In addition we can see in Qur'an that the *Adam* word is mostly used for human in general, not for the male gender in particular.

The *second* statement implying that women were the cause of humans being thrown out from paradise, is not also indicated anywhere in the Qur'an. In the section (*surah*) where the creation of humans is described Allah says: "We said: O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden; and eat of the bountiful things therein as (where and when) ye will; but approach not this tree, or ye run into harm and transgression. Then did Satan make them slip from the (garden), and get them out of the state (of felicity) in which they had been. We said: Get ye down, all (ye people), with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your dwelling-place and your means of livelihood - for a time." (Qur'an, al-Baqarah: 35-36) We can see the same event in another where in the Qur'an: "O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden, and enjoy (its good things) as ye wish: but approach not this tree, or ye run into harm and transgression. Then Satan began to whisper suggestions to them, bringing openly before their minds all their shame that was hidden from them (before): he said: "Your Lord only forbade you this tree, lest ye should become angels or such beings as live forever. And he swore to them both, that he was their sincere adviser. So by deceit he brought about their fall: when they tasted of the tree, their shame became manifest to them, and they began to sew together the leaves of the garden over their bodies. And their Lord called unto them: Did I not forbid you that tree, and tell you that Satan was an avowed enemy unto you? They said: "Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls: If thou forgive us not and bestow not upon us Thy Mercy, we shall certainly be lost. (Allah) said: Get ye down. With enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your dwelling-place and your means of livelihood,- for a time. He said: Therein shall ye live, and therein shall ye die; but from it shall ye be taken out (at last). O ye Children of

Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. But the raiment of righteousness,- that is the best. Such are among the Signs of Allah, that they may receive admonition! O ye Children of Adam! Let not Satan seduce you, in the same manner as He got your parents out of the Garden, stripping them of their raiment, to expose their shame: for he and his tribe watch you from a position where ye cannot see them: We made the evil ones friends (only) to those without faith" (Qur'an, al-A'raf: 19-27).We can see clearly that women are not described as cause of expulsion from paradise in Qur'an. In the Qur'an both man and woman are responsible. No justification is required to vindicate ontologically claims of feminist theology in Islam.

There is not any proof in the Qur'an to justify that woman is created only to help man. So, no need to dwell upon the above-stated third claim.

So we have to ask the question: Is there any masculine-based theological imagination in Muslim culture even if there is not any masculine-based theological understanding in the Qur'an? Is there any cultural element in Islamic culture which Carol P. Christ denounces in Western culture in saying: "feminist criticism of religion began with a protest against this familiar image of God as an Old White Man found in traditional piety? This God is known through the image of Lord, King, and Father" (Christ, 2003: 24). Can anyone say the same thing for Islamic Culture? It is not easy to claim that there is any masculine-based imagination of Allah in Islamic culture. Establishing that way of referring to God with masculine pronouns in the Qur'an, in the Bible or in the Torah, is devoid of meaning more than grammatical. Were there any masculine images for God in these holy texts, it would justify the rightfulness of the feminist theological claims towards religion. Here are some verses from Holy Book: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. In he was life; and the life was the light of men... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth... No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (Holy Book, St. John: 1:1-2; 1:14, 18). Another verse from John: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how say is

thou then, how us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me?" (St. John, 14:9-10).

Let's see what Qur'an says in the same subject: "The Jews say: Uzair (Ezra) is the son of Allah, and the Christian say: Messiah is the son of Allah. That is saying from their mouths. They imitate the saying of the disbelievers of old. Allah's Curse is on them, how they are deluded away from the Truth!" (Qur'an, al-Tawba: 30.). Another verse of Qur'an says: "It befits not Allah that He should beget o son"(Qur'an, Maryam: 35).

Of course there is not only masculine sovereignty in theology in expressing God with the names reminiscent of man. Sometimes understandings which refer to man can also imply the existence of the masculine-based theology. For some feminist authors it can be easily mistaken as the thought of men. In this frame, man is paralleled to rationality and woman to irrationality (Anderson, 1998: 32). For example Anderson says: "in symbols and myths, the female other configures the material content of affections, desires, biological needs, of life from fatality to mortality; this material is precisely what the rational subject lacks but needs. In the end it is to the subject's detriment that, while belief has been tested rationally and justified rigorously according to formal principles of logic, the material content of life has been symbolically and literally excluded from and devalued in the construction of religious belief. For instance, the formal side of belief construction might include the a priori and empirical principles of coherence, of credulity, and of simplicity while the material side of belief, including the believer's own bodily life, would be excluded and then devalued as female, defiled, or abject" (Anderson, 1998: 32). Anderson says that man assigns to himself the "rational creator" role in many, and gives two examples to justify her claim. One of the example is John Locke's "God is the creator of the rational creatures" and other is Alvin Plantinga's "warrant to Christian realist forms of theism." For Anderson, to see religion and rationality paralleled by Descartes is only relevant to a masculine religious imagination. He says that Descartes produces a "rational God" in the image of man (Anderson, 1998: 36).

We should question whether Islamic theological understanding is rational or irrational. As in many religious traditions we can see many different theological understandings of Islam, too. One can see both ration-

al and irrational theological understandings in Islamic theological theories. For example we can say that theologies of *mutakallimun* (Islamic theologians) and of *falasifah* (Islamic philosophers during Medieval) are mostly rationalistic whereas theology of *mutasawwifah* is irrational. And we cannot underestimate the Sufi understanding in the whole of the history of Islamic culture. We can see clearly that Allah's attributes of love, forgiveness, mercy, grace and beauty belong to woman, -if they are-, are dealt with more extensively than other attributes. So maybe we can say that the rationality is not an attribute of the nature of man's mind as Sue Anderson says. We should remember that many understandings about love, desire and passion which are mostly feminine, if they are, are developed also by men as much as did by woman. We can say the same thing for *tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticisms), too. So it will not be right to say that rationality belongs to man and irrationality to woman, neither for Islam nor in general. Indeed it is not rational to say that men are more rational from woman. At least it contains a humiliation towards woman to say that women's mind is not rational as man's mind is. This understanding also implies that woman and man belong to different species. However there is possible both for woman and man to be rational or irrational. This may be rather about individual qualities more than about gender.

As a conclusion it can be said that the status of women in Islamic societies can be discuss in frame of feminism not of feminist theology. Because it may be called as feminism but it is far from being feminist theology. That is the first point of this paper to be established. Because we cannot describe as theology any discussion unless it is not about God's nature and his existence or about his messages directly. To describe any theology as *feminist theology*, God's imagination or his messages must contain a masculine-based influence or an ontological discrimination between man and woman's nature. In this context it is not possible to say that there is any feminist theology in Islamic culture, because there is no masculine attributes for Allah or any masculine God images in Islamic culture. The using of masculine pronouns, like 'He' (Huve/Hu), is not an ontological gender classification, only a grammatical and literal necessity for Arabic language.

Another point, as some feminists say, if women are irrational and

men are rational, we can see many attributes both rational and irrational which used for Allah in Qur'an. So one can say both masculine and feminine attributes used in Qur'an in same time. We did not discuss the claim that man is superior or not comparing to women in the fields of legacy, divorce, witnessing. Because, as we said before, these kinds of claims are the problems of feminism more than of "feminist theology".

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Özet: Feminist teoloji, büyük oranda teolojinin erkek egemen kültür üzerine kurulduğu tezine dayanır. Bu iddiaya göre mevcut teolojiler kadın bakış açısından yeniden gözden geçirilmeli ve revize edilmelidir. Çünkü mevcut teoloji göreli bir teoloji olup erkeğin tarihteki deneyimine dayalı olarak gelişmiş bir erkekçi paradigma ile geliştirilmiştir. İslam ve feminizm kelimeleri birlikte düşünüldüğü zaman teolojik bağlamdan çok kadının İslam'daki hukuksal yerinin tartışıldığını görüyoruz. Bununla birlikte kadının İslam'daki hukuksal durumunun teolojik bir temeli olup olmadığı tartışılmalıdır. Allah'ın isimlerinin veya sıfatlarının bir cinsiyet veya erkekçi içeriği olup olmadığı gözden geçirilmesi gerekir. İslam dininde Allah'ın biyolojik olarak cinsiyet özelliği olan bir varlık olduğuna inanılmaz. Fakat metafor olarak Kur'an'da geçen kimi ifadelerin cinsiyet anlamı içerip içermediği araştırılması ve üzerinde düşünülmesi gereken bir konudur. Bu yazıda kadınların aleyhine yorumlanan bazı ayetlerin kendi gerçek anlamı mı yoksa bir tür yoksa erkek yorumu mu olduğu tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminizm, Tanrı, feminist teoloji, İslam, Hıristiyanlık, cinsiyet, erkek egemen kültür.