



Gender conflicts in Muslim societies: A feminist analysis of sherine hafez's *women of the midan*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the various forms of gendered conflicts experienced by Muslim women in predominantly Islamic societies, as depicted in Sherine Hafez's biographical memoir, *Women of the Midan* (2018). Adopting a qualitative approach and descriptive design methodology, the study employs the theoretical lens of Islamic Feminism to critically analyse how patriarchal structures, societal norms, and institutional frameworks perpetuate gender inequality, leading to gendered conflicts encompassing sexual violence, restricted political agency, economic disparities, and legal barriers. Through a detailed textual analysis of Hafez's (2018) memoir, the paper identifies and analyses specific instances of gendered oppression and resistance, highlighting the resilience and struggles of Muslim women. Islamic Feminism provides a crucial framework for re-interpreting Islamic texts and traditions to advocate for women's rights and gender justice, demonstrating how many forms of gendered conflict are rooted in cultural misinterpretations rather than core religious principles. The findings reveal that Muslim women, despite their active roles, faced systemic discrimination and violence, underscoring the urgent need for a transformative approach to gender relations in Islamic societies. The article concludes with recommendations for fostering greater gender equality rooted in the principles of justice and equity inherent in Islam.

Keywords: Gendered Conflicts, Islamic Feminism, Patriarchal Structures, Sherine Hafez, *Women of the Midan*.

I. INTRODUCTION

Muslim women in predominantly Islamic societies often face various forms of gendered conflicts due to patriarchal structures, power dynamics, and the patriarchal interpretation of religious texts. Hafez's (2018) biographical memoir, *Women of the Midan*, vividly depicts these conflicts and the struggles of Muslim women to overcome them. This article aims to explore the gendered conflicts experienced by Muslim women in such societies and analyze how these conflicts are perpetuated by patriarchal structures, societal norms, and institutional frameworks. By employing the theoretical lens of Islamic feminism, this study critically examines the ways in which these factors contribute to gender inequality and how they manifest in different forms of gendered conflict, including sexual violence, restricted political agency, economic disparities, and legal barriers.

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1.1 Research Objective

The objective of this study is to examine the nature and manifestations of gendered conflicts experienced by Muslim women in predominantly Islamic societies and to analyze how patriarchal structures, societal norms, and



institutional frameworks—interpreted through the lens of Islamic feminism—contribute to and sustain gender inequality.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have explored the gendered conflicts faced by Muslim women in predominantly Islamic societies. For instance, Badran (2009) argues that patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts have led to the marginalization and oppression of women in these societies. Similarly, Mernissi (1991) highlights the historical roots of gender inequality in Islamic societies and emphasizes the need for a reinterpretation of Islamic texts to promote gender justice. In her work, Abu-Lughod (2013) discusses the role of cultural norms and practices in perpetuating gender-based violence and inequality in Muslim communities. These perspectives provide a critical backdrop for examining how Muslim women navigate systems of power and resistance in contemporary contexts. By situating this study within such debates, it extends the conversation to consider how women's voices are represented, contested, and reimagined in digital and textual spaces. Collectively, the works of Badran (2009) underscore that gender inequality in Muslim societies is not inherent to Islam itself but rather emerges from patriarchal readings, historical power imbalances, and entrenched social traditions. Building on these insights, this study explores how contemporary Muslim women reinterpret their faith and identity to challenge such structures and assert agency within their sociocultural and religious contexts.

This argument further suggests that the struggle for gender equality within Islamic societies is not merely a battle against religious doctrine but against the socio-political forces that have historically shaped its interpretation. As Badran (2009) and Mernissi (1991) imply, reclaiming interpretive authority allows women to redefine their place within both faith and society. Abu-Lughod's (2013) insights reinforce this by showing that everyday practices and discourses often sustain patriarchal power, making women's resistance both a personal and collective act of reinterpretation. In this light, examining how Muslim women articulate these struggles through narrative and performance provides a deeper understanding of how feminist consciousness emerges within Islamic frameworks.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach and descriptive design methodology to analyze the gendered conflicts depicted in Hafez's (2018) *Women of the Midan*. The research is based on a detailed textual analysis of the memoir, which provides firsthand accounts of the experiences of Muslim women in a predominantly Islamic society. The theoretical framework of Islamic Feminism is employed to critically examine the ways in which patriarchal structures, societal norms, and institutional frameworks perpetuate gender inequality and contribute to gendered conflicts.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Response Rate

Through a detailed textual analysis of *Women of the Midan*, the study identifies and analyses specific instances of gendered oppression and resistance experienced by Muslim women in a predominantly Islamic society, quickly morphed into a renewed struggle against deeply ingrained gendered conflicts. Interpreted through an Islamic feminist lens, these narratives expose the pervasive nature of patriarchy and the ways in which women, often devout Muslims, navigate, resist, and sometimes succumb to these challenges. The findings are categorized into the specific forms of gendered conflicts identified through the analysis.

4.1.1 Sexual Violence

Sexual violence, particularly in the form of mob sexual harassment and assault in public spaces, emerged as a terrifying reality for women who participated in the Tahrir Square protests. While the revolution promised liberation, the public space often became a site of extreme vulnerability for women. These acts were not random; they were often systematic, aimed at deterring women from political participation and reasserting patriarchal control over public spaces. Scholars like Tadros (2016) have documented how such violence became a tool of political repression, used to delegitimize women's presence in the public sphere during and after the revolution. The memoir highlights the psychological trauma and fear that resulted, acting as a powerful deterrent.

One woman recounted the terrifying experience of being targeted in the square:

"The square became a place of fear for us. We went there to fight for freedom, but we found ourselves fighting for our bodies. We were told, 'Go home! This is not your place!'" (P.321)

This quote encapsulates the immediate reassertion of patriarchal claims over public space and women's bodies even within the revolutionary crucible. From an Islamic feminist perspective, such violence directly contradicts the Quranic emphasis on respectful social interaction, modesty for all, and the sanctity of individual dignity (e.g., Quran



24:30-31, 33:59). The perpetration of sexual violence against women, often under the guise of religious or moral guardianship, is a profound misinterpretation of Islamic principles which actively condemn aggression and uphold the protection of vulnerable individuals. The systematic nature of the attacks also points to a deliberate strategy to silence women, undermining their voices and participation a direct challenge to the Islamic feminist vision of women as active and respected members of the community (Wadud, 1999).

4.1.2 Restricted Political Representation and Participation

Despite their pivotal role in igniting and sustaining the revolution, women were largely sidelined in the formal political processes that followed. Post-Mubarak transitional governments and subsequent elections saw a significant decrease in female political representation. This marginalization was not merely an oversight; it was a deliberate exclusion, often justified by arguments rooted in conservative interpretations of gender roles. Women were lauded for their revolutionary spirit but expected to retreat to the private sphere once political order was ostensibly restored. Research by Charrad & Stephan (2020) points to how state-level patriarchal structures in the Middle East often co-opt women's movements, only to marginalize them once their utility is perceived to diminish.

One woman expressed, Amina, her profound disappointment:

"We were integral to the revolution, but when it came to writing the constitution, to forming the new government, we were nowhere to be found. They praised our courage, then told us to go back to our kitchens. It was as if our voices were only needed when men were afraid" (P.46)

This statement poignantly captures the betrayal felt by many. Islamic feminism posits that true Islamic governance emphasizes justice, consultation, and the well-being of the community, principles that necessitate the inclusion of all capable individuals, regardless of gender. The exclusion of women from decision-making bodies after they had proven their leadership and intellectual capabilities in the streets directly violates these principles, revealing a preference for patriarchal power structures over authentic Islamic governance (Barlas, 2002).

4.1.3 Patriarchal Structures

The memoir vividly portrays the pervasive influence of patriarchal structures that extend beyond formal political institutions into the fabric of Egyptian society, family, and personal relationships. These structures manifest as deeply ingrained norms, expectations, and attitudes that privilege male authority and subordinate women. Even within families supportive of the revolution, women often faced pressure to conform to traditional gender roles once the political fervor subsided. For instance, families might expect women to prioritize marriage and child-rearing over career or continued activism. This resonates with Ahmed's (2021) historical analysis of how patriarchal interpretations became dominant in Islamic societies, impacting women's societal roles.

Husna, a young woman lamented the constant societal scrutiny:

"It's not just the government. It's everyone. Your family, your neighbours, even strangers on the street. They constantly remind you of 'your place,' of what a 'good girl' should do. And if you step outside that, you're an outcast" (p.67)

This highlights the informal yet powerful mechanisms of patriarchal control. Islamic feminism argues that such societal pressures often stem from cultural norms mistakenly attributed to religious injunctions. While Islam emphasizes family and community, it does not mandate a static, hierarchical gender order that stifles individual potential or denies women agency. Instead, it promotes mutual respect and shared responsibilities within the family unit (Mir-Hosseini, 2004). The struggle faced by these women illustrates the ongoing battle to distinguish between genuine Islamic principles and culturally ingrained patriarchal practices.

4.1.4 Power Dynamics

The narratives in *Women of the Midan* underscore the unequal power dynamics that govern gender relations in Egypt. These dynamics are evident in the political sphere, where male leaders dominated the post-revolutionary landscape, but also in everyday interactions, decision-making processes within families, and professional environments. Power imbalances meant women's contributions were often undervalued, their voices silenced, and their agency curtailed. This is a common theme in studies of gender in the Middle East, where power is often consolidated in male hands across various sectors (Kandiyoti, 2009).

Fauzia, reflecting on the post-revolutionary climate, observed:

"They were happy to have us marching alongside them, but when it came to making the real decisions, the powerful men, religious or secular, decided everything. Our ideas, our visions, simply didn't matter to them in the end. We couldn't break into their circles of power" (P.105).

This observation reveals the deep-seated nature of male-dominated power structures. Islamic feminism challenges such inherent power imbalances, emphasizing the Quranic concept of often mistranslated as male 'headship' as mutual responsibility and protection rather than absolute authority. Wadud (1999) and others argue that true Islamic governance should be based on equitable power-sharing and consultation, where competence and justice, not gender,



determine leadership roles. The persistent exclusion of women from circles of power thus represents a significant deviation from what Islamic feminists would consider a just and equitable Islamic social order.

4.1.5 Legal and Institutional Barriers

Despite some reforms over the years, legal and institutional frameworks in Egypt continue to pose significant barriers to women's equality. Issues such as discriminatory family laws, challenges in legal recourse for violence, and bureaucratic hurdles for women in entrepreneurship or public service are evident in the narratives. These barriers often reflect and reinforce patriarchal structures, limiting women's autonomy and opportunities. Scholars like Mir-Hosseini (2004) have meticulously documented how family laws in many Muslim-majority countries often disadvantage women, reflecting traditional interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence rather than universal principles of justice.

A woman recounted the frustration of navigating the legal system:

"When I tried to get a divorce, even with clear grounds, the system was against me. It was designed to protect the man, to make it impossible for a woman to leave an abusive situation without losing everything. The judges, the lawyers, they all seemed to operate from the same old book" (p.98).

This poignant statement highlights the practical implications of legal disparities. Islamic feminism critically examines such legal frameworks, arguing that many contemporary personal status laws are products of specific historical legal interpretations rather than direct Quranic injunctions. It advocates for legal reforms that align with the Quranic spirit of justice and compassion, ensuring equitable rights for women in marriage, divorce, and child custody. The struggle of women against these legal barriers is, therefore, a struggle for a more just and truly Islamic legal system.

4.1.6 Economic and Social Disparities

The memoir also touches upon the economic and social disparities faced by women, particularly in the post-revolutionary period where economic opportunities became scarcer. Women, even those highly educated and professionally capable, struggled with securing employment, achieving financial independence, and facing societal biases in the workplace. Socially, they might face increased pressure to marry, produce children, or adhere to specific dress codes or behaviors that limit their public engagement. Researchers like Al-Ali (2012) have shown how women's economic participation is often intertwined with societal expectations and the broader political economy. Razla, a highly educated woman shared her professional frustrations:

"After all my education, all my efforts in the revolution, I still struggled to find a decent job. Men were always preferred, even if they had less experience. And if you did find a job, you were paid less, or expected to tolerate certain behaviours. Society still sees women as dependent, even women like me" (p.87).

This reflects a systemic disadvantage. Islamic feminism argues that Islam explicitly encourages both men and women to work, acquire wealth, and engage in economic activity, emphasizing the principle of earning financial independence. Furthermore, the Quran grants women independent financial rights and ownership. Therefore, economic disparities and social pressures that limit women's professional aspirations or independent living are viewed as cultural distortions that contradict the egalitarian economic spirit of Islam (Ahmed, 2021).

4.1.7 Marital Disputes

Marital disputes, including issues of domestic violence, divorce, and child custody, are deeply personal but are often shaped by broader societal norms and legal interpretations. *Women of the Midan* implicitly and explicitly portrays how women navigate difficult marital situations, often facing pressure to endure hardship for the sake of family Honor or children, or finding themselves disempowered by legal systems that Favor men. Such personal struggles exemplify the most intimate forms of gendered conflict.

While direct quotes about highly personal marital disputes might be less prominent due to the interviewees' focus on public life, the general undercurrent of societal expectations for women within marriage is palpable. One woman, discussing her decision to remain unmarried due to revolutionary commitments, implicitly critiques the traditional marital expectations:

"They say a woman isn't complete without a husband. But I found my completeness in the revolution, in my work. It's hard to find a man who respects that, who doesn't want you to just be a wife and mother" (p.73)

This speaks to the broader societal framework impacting marital choices and dynamics. Islamic feminism, in its re-reading of Islamic family law, emphasizes *qawamah* as mutual responsibility and protection, not male dominance. It advocates for equitable divorce procedures, just child custody arrangements, and absolute condemnation of domestic violence, which is fundamentally un-Islamic. Scholars like Mir-Hosseini (2006) demonstrate how classical fiqh has often been interpreted to institutionalize gender inequality in marriage, a pattern that Islamic feminists actively challenge by advocating for reform based on Quranic principles of justice and mercy.



4.1.8 Access to Education

While *Women of the Midan* largely features educated women, the themes of gendered conflict related to education might not be about *lack* of access but rather the societal expectations and challenges faced by educated women. This can include: the pressure to use education primarily for enhancing marriageability rather than professional independence; the underutilization of women's educational qualifications in the workforce; and the limitations placed on their public roles despite their intellectual capabilities. One woman, reflecting on her education, noted:

“My parents invested so much in my education, but then society expects me to stay at home, or only use my degree for a 'suitable' female job. It's as if education is just a formality for women, not a tool for true empowerment or leadership” (p.34).

This highlights the societal dissonance between promoting female education and then restricting its full application. Islamic feminism celebrates the pursuit of knowledge as a fundamental Islamic imperative for all Muslims, men and women alike. Historical examples of prominent female scholars and jurists in early Islamic history are often cited to counter the notion that women's education should be limited or serve only domestic ends. Restricting the professional or public application of women's education, therefore, is viewed as a cultural limitation rather than an Islamic one, undermining the potential and contributions of half of the Muslim community. The struggle for these educated women is not for access, but for the full recognition and utilization of their intellectual capacities in a society that too often limits them.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this research reveal that Muslim women, despite their active roles, faced systemic discrimination and violence in various forms, including sexual violence, restricted political agency, economic disparities, and legal barriers. The memoir *Women of the Midan* provides a detailed account of these conflicts and the struggles of Muslim women to resist and overcome them. The theoretical lens of Islamic Feminism offers a framework for re-interpreting Islamic texts and traditions to advocate for women's rights and gender justice, demonstrating how many forms of gendered conflict are rooted in cultural misinterpretations rather than core religious principles. The urgent need for a transformative approach to gender relations in Islamic societies is underscored by the findings of this research, which highlight the resilience and struggles of Muslim women.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, several recommendations can be made to foster greater gender equality in Islamic societies. These recommendations include challenging patriarchal structures and societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality through education and awareness campaigns. There is also need for promoting the participation of women in political decision-making processes and ensuring their voices are heard and taken seriously and addressing economic disparities that limit women's access to education, employment, and financial independence through targeted policies and programs. Further, reforming legal systems to ensure equal rights and justice for women, including access to education, employment, and financial independence might lead to encouraging the development and implementation of Islamic Feminist perspectives in religious and educational institutions to promote gender equality and justice.

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