

Women in Islam:
Muslim Perspectives and Fethullah Gulen
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ABSTRACT

Women who constitute a fundamental part of the society are--and deserve to be--historical subjects. Many aspects of their experiences cannot be reproduced through histories of the political activities of the ruling elites and intellectuals. Feminist historiography is also unable to represent all aspects of women's lives, but such endeavors open the necessary ways to challenge the general stereotypes of Orientalist and Modernist historiographies.

Until the 1970s, the historians of the Middle East focused on "either the religious, legal, philosophical, and literary texts of Islamic high culture or the political histories of states". Focusing on these areas put the backbones of the society, such as workers, peasants, artisans, small-scale merchants, women and slaves, out of history. History and the status of these people were only represented by the stereotypical western perceptions under the shadow of "gilded" histories of the ruling elites. Whether Islam constructed a framework that demarcated the narrow limits of the freedom of women has been a long-debated subject on the grounds of legal texts; however, an inward analysis of the intellectual debates on Middle Eastern women would reveal much information, which would emancipate the issue from conventional Eurocentric perspectives.

The status of women in Islam has been ideologically central to any discussion between the West and Muslims; therefore, the literature that these debates generated was predominantly a literature of assertion, but not evidence. The Orientalist school, and as its continuation the early western feminists and their clones in the Islamic world have condemned Islam for the alleged inferior status of Muslim women by predominantly relying on the writings of the 18th and 19th century European travelers who narrated the male domination over defenseless women. The responses were very diverse. On the one hand, the conservatives – i.e. Sayyid Qutb- argued that anything coming from the West, including democracy, “unlimited” individual freedom, and egalitarianism in terms of gender were against Islam and its fundamental principles. They promoted a timeless Islamic past with strong family ties and pre-determined effective gender roles, which prospered the whole society. They accused the West of sexual promiscuity, and stated that it was Islam’s orders to the Muslim women to cover their body from head to toe, accept polygamy and their inferior status to men, and refrain from certain public activities that would damage their chastity.

On the other hand, neo-Salafi feminists - i.e. Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed -developed feminist conceptions of an ideal Muslim society in terms of gender relations. They argued that the attitude of contemporary Islam towards women was not authentic; rather, it was a gradually developed version of Islam, highly contaminated with alien customs and traditions. What I argue is that one does not necessarily need to fully accept or reject either the conservative arguments or the modernist/feminist conceptions. The Islamic tradition and the modern concepts are not mutually exclusive, since the Islamic tradition, on the one hand, is flexible enough to open new venues for modern individualistic ways of life, and on the other, modernity favors the principle that each individual has the right to choose any lifestyle that s/he thinks it as the best for her/himself. As a contemporary Muslim scholar, Fethullah Gülen states that Islam is universal with respect to its principles; therefore, it has flexible

areas where Muslims could resume *ijtihad* (intellectual effort) and re-interpret the Islamic tradition (*tajdid*) in a way compatible with the *Qur'an*, and *Sunnah*. Moreover, contrary to the controlling nature of conservative Islamists, Gülen introduces an individualist point of view by arguing that Islam gives people more freedom of choice in personal matters, which is indicated in the principle of “there is no force/coercion in religion”.

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INTRODUCTION

Until the 1970s the historians of the Middle East focused on “either the religious, legal, philosophical, and literary texts of Islamic high culture or the political histories of states”¹. Focusing on these areas put the backbones of the society, such as workers, peasants, artisans, small-scale merchants, women and slaves, out of history. History and the status of these people were only represented by the stereotypical western perceptions under the shadow of ‘gilded’ histories of the ruling elites. Whether Islam constructed a framework that demarcated the narrow limits of the freedom of women has been a long-debated subject on the grounds of legal texts; however, an inward analysis of the intellectual debates on the Middle Eastern women would reveal much information, which would emancipate the issue from conventional Eurocentric perspectives.

The status of women in Islam has been ideologically central to any discussion between the West and Muslims; therefore, the literature these debates generated is predominantly a literature of assertion, but not evidence.² The Orientalist school, and the early western feminists condemned Islam for the alleged inferior status of Muslim women by predominantly relying on the memoirs of the 18th and 19th centuries European travelers who narrated the male domination over the defenseless Muslim women.³ The responses were very diverse. On the one hand, the conservatives – i.e. Sayyid Qutb- argued that anything coming from the West, including democracy, the “unlimited”

freedom of the individual, and egalitarianism in terms of gender were against Islam and its fundamental principles.⁴ They promoted a timeless Islamic past with strong family ties and pre-determined effective gender roles, which prospered the whole society.⁵ They accused the West of sexual promiscuity, and stated that it was Islam's orders to the Muslim women to cover their body from head to toe, accept polygamy and their inferior status to men, and refrain from certain public activities that would damage their chastity. On the other hand, Muslim feminists - i.e. Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed -developed feminist conceptions of an ideal Muslim society in terms of gender relations. They argued that the attitude of contemporary Islam towards women was not authentic; rather, it was a gradually developed version of Islam highly contaminated with alien customs and traditions. They supported the idea that Muslim women were deprived of basic rights of individuals, including equal opportunities in education, equality in social and economic affairs; and criticized Islam's restrictions on women, and rejected women's alleged inferiority and the practice of polygamy.

This article argues that one does not necessarily need to fully accept or reject either the conservative arguments or the modernist/feminist conceptions. The Islamic tradition and the modern concepts are not mutually exclusive, as the Islamic tradition, on the one hand, is flexible enough to open new venues for modern ways of life, and modernity, on the other, favors the principle that each individual has the right to choose any lifestyle that she thinks it as the best for herself. As a contemporary Muslim scholar Fethullah Gülen states, Islam is universal with respect to its principles; therefore, it has flexible areas where Muslims could resume *ijtihad* (intellectual effort) and re-interpret the Islamic tradition (*tajdid*) in a way compatible with the *Qur'an*, *Sunna* (tradition of Muhammad), *Ijma* (scholarly consensus) and *Qiyas* (analogical reasoning).⁶ Moreover, contrary to the controlling nature of conservative Islamists, Gülen introduces a moderate point of view by arguing that Islam gives people more freedom of choice in personal matters than it has been considered.

WESTERN STEREOTYPES OF MUSLIM WOMEN

The Orientalist view of the Middle Eastern women as erotic/exotic harem girls or obedient wives in a timeless, monolithic, and rigid system was merely a reductive perception far from being a scholarly approach. However, Arab women's experiences were heterogeneous. Although Islam, as an all-encompassing way of life, had the major impact on Arab women's lives, other outside effects, such as colonialism, nationalist movements, and women's participation in anti-colonial movements, had visible impacts as well.

Western social science theories bankrupted with their exhausted paradigms in interpreting the Middle Eastern and North African worlds. The outcomes of these theories have been failures as the theories were incapable of depicting the complex structures of Muslim societies. First of all, Western scholars tended to see the status of Muslim women in terms of progress or retrogress, and assessed the circumstances in which Muslim women lived with regards to inequalities between women and men.⁷ They imposed on the non-European world their own conceptions of time, history and social life as opposed to the realities of the local people. They depicted Islam as a reactionary ideology that destroyed the freedoms of women.⁸ For the western media, for instance, veiled women could only be mysterious signs of the backward Islamic culture.⁹ Therefore, as these exhausted paradigms of Western social thought, which initiated furious discussions on Muslim women's rights, led to critical errors in analysis, it became obvious that western liberalism, fueled with the expansion of global capitalism, would not be able to 'emancipate' the Muslim women.

The Feminist and Orientalist portrayal of Islam was illegitimate as what Muslim women thought of themselves was mostly ignored. Indeed, their prescription for taking big steps towards the equality in Muslim women's status vis-à-vis the men might not be something what Muslim women wanted since historically many Muslims regarded any formulation of liberation –either in terms of

women's issues, or other areas- as Western imposition. It was this perception that created, on the one hand, Middle Eastern stereotypes in the West, and on the other, a defensive cadre of conservatives in Muslim world.

RESPONSES WITHIN ISLAM TO THE FEMINIST AND ORIENTALIST ARGUMENTS

The first response to the European stereotypical view of Islamic women came from the conservative cadres. They argued that Islam gave a superior position to the women at the time of the Prophet, and even today many western women still lacked the rights given to the Muslim women by the *Qur'an*.¹⁰ Moreover, they argued that the status of the pre-Islamic women was dismal, and the Islamic revelation and its advent in the next century improved women's status. As conservatives asserted, before Islam, women were regarded as something that could be purchased, sold or stolen as if they were commodities, deprived of all their rights including their rights over their children, inheritance, and even the basic right to live.¹¹ This argument was supported by some western scholars, such as Wiebke who argued that it was Islam that improved women's status in the Arabian Peninsula (*Hijaz*): " ... in the pre-Islamic era there was no question of a woman being an heir."¹²

A more deliberate, as well as confrontational response came from women scholars of the modern Islamic world. Within the past two decades they brought the experiences of Arab women into the contemporary literature along with an innovative scholarship and activism, and an increasing number of Muslim women's literature in English. They critiqued as well as reinforced the liberal discourses of modernity, liberal nationalism and feminism with regards to their applicability in the Muslim context. Furthermore, their works paved the way for the expansion of the methods of feminist analysis, and managed to undo the superficial categorizations of the

western discourses that have imposed on the contemporary scholarship their own views of the Middle Eastern women.¹³

Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi's works have remained the backbones of this new scholarship. Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* and Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil: Female-Male Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* put the issue of authenticity of Islamic Law into question, and argued that the Islamic sources other than Quran were infiltrated by non-Islamic traditions that turned the religion into a patriarchal system.¹⁴

For Ahmed 'considering' the Middle East 'Islamic' was an error as it was a mixture of Islamic and non-Islamic traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and many other local customs. She questioned the legitimacy of the way in which Muslim women were discussed by conservative Muslims, secularists as well as by Western academicians and media, and promoted reconsidering the subject. Starting from pre-Islamic Middle East, Ahmed discussed the origins of Islamic practices, such as veiling and seclusion. She elucidated the continuity of some pre-Islamic customs after the advent of Islam, and discussed how the later generations of Islamic scholars turned it into an indisputable male-dominated realm, where women had a very limited space. Then, she brought the discussion to the twentieth century in which, she argued, the emancipation of women from non-Islamic customs would take place.¹⁵

Mernissi, along with Ahmed, argued that the later generations who incorporated local customs into Islam deformed its structure and turned it into patriarchy, which restricted women's freedom that they were enjoying for centuries during the pre-Islamic era. She did an analysis of the changing position of the women in the Muslim World in general and Morocco in particular, and discussed the changing behavior of the male-female relations from the pre-Islamic period through modern era. She challenged the male domination in current Islamic tradition as it was more egalitarian at the time of the revelation, and argued that male domination in

politics changed the nature of the Islamic life which became more and more repressive towards women's freedom.

Judith E. Tucker, in *In the House of the Law* followed Ahmed's and Mernissi's steps. She first attempted to categorize Muslim intellectuals into certain groups as salafi, modernists, feminists, westernists, conservatives and radicals, although these categories mostly overlapped over each other. Syria constituted the representative of the 18th century Islam in her analysis as she compared and contrasted the regional Islamic practice with the traditions of the past centuries. She argued that Islam evolved in the later centuries contrary to the arguments that it remained stagnant. The door for *ijtihad* was considered to be closed; however, *muftis* and *imams* continued to perform *ijtihads* to resolve legal problems emerging in local communities. From this discussion, Tucker drew a conclusion that Islam was no longer the same as it was revealed to Muhammad; indeed, it was changed, sometimes in expense of and other times favoring women's rights.

Another scholarly work to be mentioned here is Barbara Stowasser's *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* in which she discussed how women who were vaguely mentioned in the Qur'an were given by the Islamic scholars real identities as Mary, Paroah's faithful wife, or as the companions of the Prophets in order to provide role models for Muslim women. Stowasser argued that the identities given to these women figures were not just random products of later thinking, but determined results of the debates over the legal problem of the status of women. She focused on how these interpretations of Qur'an produced today's perception of 'Islamic women' as opposed to the medieval exegetical depictions of women as weak characters who eventually created potential dangers to male dominated society. For Stowasser, these two opposing depictions created a dichotomy that challenged the image of Muslim women today. Stowasser's conclusion is that the prevalent view of the women as 'weak' characters in the Islamic

tradition clearly unveiled the medieval influence on Islamic exegesis that undermined the authenticity of early Islam.

MUSLIM FEMINISTS DISCUSSING WOMEN'S ISSUES IN ISLAM

A common argument central to the works of Muslim feminists was the patriarchal oppression against Muslim women in the history of Islam. They searched for Muslim women's emancipation in Islam. Fatima Mernissi, for instance, argued that the resistance to the oppression of the women in Islamic society would lead to a secular and democratically organized civil society, which in turn would protect civil rights.¹⁶ In her studies, Mernissi avoided blaming Islam, and put the emphasis on certain individuals and local traditions, and argued that to challenge the universalized ideology of modernity Islam needed responses other than the traditional ways of rationalizing the principles of Shari'a and proving infallibility of *Qur'an*.¹⁷ However, her criticisms were nothing different than the reiteration of the Orientalist argument that only a secular modernity would emancipate the Islamic world from deadly paralysis of the medieval society. Nonetheless, she differed from the Orientalist argument in means of bringing secularism to the Islamic world. What she imagined was an authentic Muslim secularism, but not a superimposition of a post-enlightenment European secular world-view on Islamic cultures by simply importing it through Imperialism, which indeed would make it purely Eurocentric.

The assumption that secular modernity would 'emancipate' Muslim women disregarded the fact that religion was not disappearing even from post-industrial societies such as the United States. Secularism would not be a supplement to any religion, especially Islam.¹⁸ As Esposito argued secularism, a by-product of European imperialism, created much resistance among Muslims and paved the way for the rise of political Islam and nationalization of the Muslim world. Thus the secularist model of modern Muslim states proved to be a failure in 'emancipating' people.¹⁹

As Muslim feminists regarded Islam as the main instrument of gender definition in the Middle East, they believed that the first and most important step towards emancipating Muslim women was reforming Islam. They argued that the Islamic gender distinction was maintained by laws and customs that insured women's status as subjugation²⁰, therefore, the emancipation of women could have only been realized if Muslim women renounced their law and custom generated belief that suggested their subjugation as divinely ordained.²¹ They stated that these laws and customs were not inherent to the Arab society as women had better status in the pre-Islamic period. Thus, they praised the pre-Islamic (*Jahiliya*) period, and called for the reestablishment of the pre-Islamic social structure which allowed people more space for freedom, for it was a period of discussion and human rights.²²

Most Muslim feminists regarded authentic Islam as a system immune from inequalities in gender roles. For them the notion of female inferiority was either imported from the local customs and traditions of the conquered lands into Islam or incorporated through misinterpretations of certain Islamic texts.²³ They thought that women's problems under Islam, such as inheritance, polygamy, divorce, seclusion, and lack of education were not inherent to the authentic Islam, however, scholars gradually incorporated into it innovations inspired by local customs and traditions as the Muslim world shifted from memory-based living to a text-based one after the formative period. For Ahmed, for instance, the current social context and unique social and cultural spaces in the newly conquered lands has been the main factor that shaped Islam; and new traditions, such as veiling, a tradition in Syria, was incorporated into the Islamic legal texts, which in turn made it hard to discern whether certain customs were authentic to Islam, or Judeo-Christian heritage.²⁴

A common feminist critique of Islam with regards to the inferior status of women has been about the possible misinterpretations of the revelation by the later generations.²⁵ They believed that if

Islam was unchanged, Muslims would have a more egalitarian society. Al-Saadawi regarded the early period of Islam as a primitive socialism, which faced a set back in terms of the freedoms of women after the *Hijra*.²⁶ Leila Ahmed argued that women's early freedom was abolished after the battle of *Uhud*,²⁷ whereas Mernissi pointed out Muhammad as he was behind this set back by "annihilating certain freedoms based on his personal experience".²⁸ The Caliphal state was blamed to be the instrument for putting these notions into full effect as Muslim feminists believed Islam was reinvented to meet the new needs of this theologically illegitimate patriarchy.

Muslim feminists thought that the recovery of Islamic past cleared from the illegitimate male-dominated interpretations could be useful for the Muslim women in achieving their freedom.²⁹ Taha An-Naim suggested a revolutionary reading of *Qur'an*, which, he thought, was the only way for the enlightened Muslims to emancipate from Orthodox interpretations of Islam and Western imposition of secular modernism. Yet, Naim suggested, *Sharia* was so inflexible that women would be unable to get their legitimate rights.³⁰

Muslim Feminists argued that egalitarianism was inherent in Islamic ethics as most Muslim women did not interpret the *Qur'anic* principles as sexist, and that this kind of reasoning could only stem from a radical reform of the Islamic law through *Ijtihad*.³¹ They argued that the first message of Islam prepared the necessary conditions for emancipation of all peoples from any kind of inequality through a radical reading of *Qur'an*; and this could be the only solution against the impositions of the traditional Islam and Western modernists.³² They defended a "critical redefinition and a thorough reassessment of Islamic traditions, including contesting several entrenched but Islamically questionable assumptions about women" which would be "the proper platform on which to conduct dialogues and movements of liberation in the Islamic world today."³³ As a response to the argument whether Islam was to be allowed to remain representing the features of the early society that it was revealed, or whether the laws of that first stage were to be left and a progress in

religion should be established,³⁴ they argued that the illegitimate patriarchal interpretation of Islam, which proved to be oppressive against women, needed to be destroyed through a revolutionary interpretation of the Islamic tradition that would lead the way to the restoration of the *Sufi* and Qarmati Islam.³⁵

The idea of a radically different, indigenous, and pluralistic interpretation of Islam was supported by many Muslim feminists. They thought that a progressive, in other words a democratic, anti-patriarchal and anti-imperial Islam, which was a model beyond mere reformism, would be an alternative to the traditional Islam. Naim and his disciple Abdullahi went further and called for a total elimination (*Naskh*) of *Sharia* and creation of a new law based upon *Qur'an*.³⁶ Naim's *Naskh* was a more radical departure from the traditional Islam than that of Ahmed and Mernissi's, as his was not a re-interpretation of Islam but a total elimination of the tradition.

Muslim feminists' ideas of radical change should not be mixed with the *tajdid* (revival) movements although both shared the same ground in most of the debates. Defined as a return to an Islamic way of life, Islamic revivalism originated from Muslims' attempt to put Islam at the center of their public and private lives.³⁷ *Tajdid* was neither only the re-interpretation of Islam through *Ijtihad* or *Naskh*, nor a defensive movement supporting the conservative arguments; it was a renewal process that consisted of traditional instruments such as *Icma*, *Qiyas* and *Ijtihad* as well as modern tools such as modern science and technology, humanism, the notion of basic rights. In other words, it was the internal evolution of normative Islam, which developed very late after it was disturbed by the intellectual invasion of the Western scholarship and its influence on issues such as women's status.³⁸

Revivalists had long accepted the feminist idea that Muslim women had certain problems; however, for them the issue was so uncomplicated: women were simply different.³⁹ Revivalists argued that one could understand the female-male relationship from within the Islamic perspective with little effort⁴⁰: *Qur'an* gave men the

responsibility of taking care of the family by providing protection and certain necessities; thus, assuming their authority over women was an outcome of the natural circumstance. For revivalists, this argument did not mean that women were denied rights; the rationale behind this role distribution was simply “the special capabilities felt to be exhibited by the male, but the responsibility thereby placed on men for taking care of their women”.⁴¹ Besides, revivalists argued that most Middle Eastern women were happy that family care was men’s duty; thus, Muslim women thought of their female counterparts in the West as burdened by heavy responsibilities.⁴²

The revivalist argument of ‘natural circumstances’ annoyed Muslim feminists so much that Mernissi responded with an irony by declaring that she accepted the absence of inferiority of the Muslim women in the Islamic societies; and then she stated mockingly that it was nothing more than the laws and customs insuring woman’s status as one of subjugation.⁴³ Based on the argument that veil was in fact an old Mediterranean practice that was assimilated by Islam, Mernissi argued with a metaphor that Muslims were on crusade to veil anything that threatened their faith. Thus, she argued, in a short period of time Islam became patriarchal, anti-historical and anti-feminist.⁴⁴ For her, Western women were not good samples either. She argued that “while Muslim exploitation of the female is clad under veils and buried behind walls, Western exploitation has the bad taste of being unclad, bare and overexposed”⁴⁵ From a different angle, Leila Ahmed argued that veiling and seclusion were introduced by Muhammad not for the common women but for his wives; and the Arabic expression that “[she] took on the veil” meant ‘the person’ became a wife of the Prophet.⁴⁶ Therefore, Ahmed thought, veiling and seclusion were observed only by the Prophet’s wives throughout his life.⁴⁷

Issues of inheritance, polygamy, sexual responsibilities of women after marriage, their limited right to initiate a divorce have been other major aspects that were criticized by Muslim feminists. They argued that the traditional Islam introduced a patriarchal system that did not

exist before and at the early stages of Islam. For them the issue of inheritance was a novel and uncongenial to pre-Islam Medinians; what Islam did was introducing a patriarchal system, and reducing the share of women to the half of her brothers to preserve the communal order and well-being since Islam privileged Muslim identity over individual rights.⁴⁸

Muslim feminists argued that Islam's polygamy, wherein a man married and maintained up to four women in one or more households, was unique to itself, and this have been an innovation of Muhammad since there were no evidences that proved its existence before the advent of Islam. They thought it was the *Qur'an* that brought polygamy into the Arab scene with the verse read "[men could] marry women who are lawful for you [them], two, three or four"⁴⁹. However, conservatives responded to the by accusing feminists of misreading Qur'an. They argued that the first part of the verse gave permission marrying more than one woman, whereas the second part clearly discouraged it.⁵⁰ They also used *A'isha's* response when she was asked about the marriages before and after Islam. Aisha stated that marriage in pre-Islamic period was four types, which allowed limitless spouses for both sexes, and that Islam limited it with four, and banned other types of marriages.⁵¹ Thus, conservative believed that Islam discouraged and limited polygamy and Muhammad's marriages were only for strategic purposes such as building crucial ties with important members of the Muslim community in Medina and with tribal leaders beyond it.⁵²

Another interpretation came from the revivalists. They argued that *Qur'an* promoted the gender equality, and such verses were contextual justifications, not normative codifications. Therefore, they thought that the applicability of these verses was bound to the time of revelation.⁵³ As revivalists regarded the marriage as a contract bounded by the *Qur'an*, they thought both sexes had rights and duties to fulfill the requirements of this contract; thus, for them, some traditions, such as the right rendered to the male guardian of a female to accept a marriage contract on her behalf, unequal distribu-

tion of the inheritance, women's lack of the right to initiate divorce, the requirement of two women to replace a male witness, and men's right to beat their views remained problems that still needed to be resolved.

GÜLEN AS THE REPRESENTATIVE OF MODERATE ISLAM IN TURKEY

The intellectual debates in Turkey on the status of women in Islam have not been different than the rest of the Islamic world. As in any Muslim intellectual circle, feminism and its critics were the topics of many debates among the Turkish intellectuals. Western feminist ideology was represented by the Turkish secular-feminists who argued that Islam, as something of an Arabic origin that repressed women by separating them as if they were secondary beings, never suited to the Turkish way of life. As Islam was considered to be the main obstacle in front of Modern Turkey, it was regarded as the main ideology that prevented Muslim Turkish women from being free individuals and expressing themselves in the public realm. In response to the secular-feminists, conservative Islamists used their conventional arguments that Islamic principles were unquestionably logical and Muslims ought to observe them fully.

Although one may consider Fethullah Gülen a proponent of 'moderate' Islam, Gülen opposes such a notion that there exist different Islams. He argues that there has been one true Islam, represented by the prophet Muhammad, and anything outside of that spectrum, except for scholarly interpretations that are in open contradiction with the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, would fall outside the realm of authentic Islam.

Gülen's thoughts are a fine mixture of traditionalist conservative Islam and modern interpretations. On the one hand he supports the conservative passion to preserve the core principles of Islam, but on the other he thinks that new interpretations are necessary as the conditions require. An in-depth analysis of Gülen's thoughts would

reveal that he could not be identified as only modernist, because the very term connotes a sense of lack in authenticity of the traditions.⁵⁴ For Gülen, a Muslim must question past and present; however, this should be done in a way that would contradict with neither the basic principles of *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*. Gülen thinks that a scholar, who intends to make certain interpretations, should be able to establish the necessary balance between the unchangeable (core principles) and changeable (interpretations) aspects of Islam.⁵⁵

For Gülen, simplistic conservative approaches to Islam such as “taking the tenets of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* just as they are and applying them to people’s lives to solve the problems” contradicts with the core principles of Islam. He asserts that such attempts would be contrary to the universality principle of Islam which requires using a certain logic to interpret the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* with regards to the change over time:⁵⁶

Time and conditions are important means to interpret the Qur'an. The Qur'an is like a rose that develops a new petal every passing day and continues to blossom. In order to discover its depth and obtain its jewels in its deeper layers, a new interpretation should be made at least every 25 years.⁵⁷

Thus, Gülen admires the openness of the Ottoman-Turkish jurisprudence, which was predominantly a combination of the *Hanafi* school of law and the *ijtihad*s of Turkish scholars who were exposed to *Sufi* influence.⁵⁸ He advocates reinterpreting Islamic understanding in accordance with contemporary times, and puts forward a new discourse with regards to “religion, pluralism, jurisprudence, secularism, democracy, politics and international relations.”⁵⁹

Keleş describes Gülen’s reinterpretation of Islam as an incremental *ijtihad* since Gülen develops and communicates his *ijtihad* over many years.⁶⁰ Gülen’s reinterpretation is not only compatible with fundamentals of the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, but also the liberalization process in Turkey and abroad.⁶¹ Gülen’s offer for change by using the method of *ijtihad* targets the *furuat* (secondary matters) but not the core principles of *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* as *furuat* are the issues brought

by time and changing conditions that are to be referred to *ijtihad* for reinterpretation.

In the Islamic tradition *ijtihad* could only be carried out by scholars who had certain qualifications. They have to be very knowledgeable in Islamic sciences, Arabic language and literature, history, and some basic information about the contemporary social and economic life, as well as mathematics and other sciences that would be helpful mostly in the area of jurisprudence. The question here is whether or not Gülen has these qualifications.

Bulaç and Keleş argue that Gülen is *janahayn* (the dual wing), which referred to Gülen's command on not only the Islamic sciences, sources and methodology but also the modern sciences:

Gülen is perhaps the foremost representative of janahayn...[he has a] profound understanding of Islamic sciences; a deep knowledge of biography (ilm al-rijal) in Hadith narration; and a thorough understanding of Islamic methodology (usul).⁶²

Gülen's command on Western philosophies, history, literature and science is apparent through the references he draws from these disciplines. Among the authors he studied are Kant, Descartes, Sir James Jean, Shakespeare, Hugo, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Pulskin⁶³ who normally have never been in the reading lists of traditional Islamic scholars. His general knowledge in natural sciences allowed him to draw attention to thermo-dynamics, big-bang theory, astrophysics, astronomy, mathematics, quantum physics and biology while substantiating his arguments in his sermons.⁶⁴

The basic principle of Gülen's interpretation is "there is no coercion/force in religion."⁶⁵ This principle leaves no room for dogmatism, which Gülen describes as accepting and copying anything blindly without leaving any room for free thought.⁶⁶

... [Islam] is the collection of Divine principles that guide people to what is good, not by force but by appealing to their free will. All principles that secure our spiritual and material progress, and thereby our happiness in both worlds, are found in religion.⁶⁷

Despite this very nature of Islam, as Gülen contends, Islam has suffered some dogmatist approaches, i.e. the Zahiriyah approach. As a sub-branch of the Kharijite movement, Zahiriyah approach takes only the literal meanings of the *Qur'anic* texts, and rules accordingly.

Gülen's interpretation of Islam is a more person-oriented way of life, which addresses the individuals rather than the community on certain issues. He argues that the *Qur'an* teaches people to use their own judgments. This new approach does not mean that Gülen approves of the type of individualism in the liberal thought, which suggests a virtually unrestricted freedom to the individuals; rather Gülen's person-oriented approach suggests moral restrictions on the individuals since everything, including their own bodies, are God's sacred trusts to the people so that people are required to take good care of them. Moreover, Gülen does not approve liberalism's preference of the individual over the community. He regards the community as an organic body and suggests individuals regulate themselves for the well-being of the community.⁶⁸

Accepting the moral responsibilities of the individuals towards their respective communities, Gülen argues that the development of individuals –which is regarded as a threat by the conservatives towards their communal approaches- is indisputably important for the community, for the *Qur'an* regards each individual as a *species* vis-à-vis the other *species*. For Gülen, training individuals is the crucial part of this development as each person will eventually realize the importance of social and communal life when they reach a certain level of understanding.⁶⁹

Gülen's person-oriented approach has not been formulated as an alternative to the conservative arguments that depicted Islam a political ideology. Rather, Gülen thinks that, Islam is not an ideology but only a religion: If Muslims adopt it as a political ideology, Islam would lose its universality that is manifested by its all-encompassing characteristic, and people would start quarrelling about its values for personal benefits, which would bring enmity rather than peace and reconciliation.⁷⁰ Therefore, according to Gülen, Islam

has nothing to do with any type of government, whether it be theocracy or monarchy.⁷¹

Gülen does not accept the argument that Muslim women should be emancipated from Islam through secularism. He argues that secularism could neither be an enlightenment project nor ‘emancipate’ the so-called suppressed people of the Muslim world since there was no place for suppression in the spirit of Islam. He describes secularism as a legal term that defines the status of the government vis-à-vis the religion; therefore, for Gülen, a state could be secular, but an individual could not. He asserts that it would be a fallacy if secularism is regarded as depriving the social and individual realm of religion; indeed, both secularism and religiosity could co-exist in a democratic setting; and the overlapped areas would be regulated through demarcating the limits of governments’ responsibilities and individual freedom.⁷²

On women’s rights issues Gülen criticizes the ‘western champions of women’s rights’ although he agrees that in some parts of the Muslim world Islam has been contaminated with local customs and traditions that oppressed the women. In his words “most champions of women’s rights and freedom only excite women with physical pleasure and then stab her spirit.”⁷³ Gülen thinks that for the sake of so-called freedom, women even were used as objects of pleasure, means of entertainment, and materials for advertisement⁷⁴, which reduced ‘freedom’ to sexual liberty.

Gülen’s articulation of an ideal Muslim woman as somebody observing the religion and turning her way towards immortal values does not mean that women could not work outside their homes. He does not promote exclusion of women from the public sphere. He states that the contribution of women in certain fields is inevitable and is not banned in Islam as long as the working conditions suit women. He argues that there is no such limitation on women’s lives in Muslim communities; if so, the source of that specific practice should have been a local customary practice.⁷⁵

Gülen discards the patriarchal judgment that men's desire is women's mistake.⁷⁶ To an interview question whether or not women could be administrators, Gülen responds that there is no reason why women should not be administrators; besides, in *Hanafi* jurisprudence, women were allowed to be judges since they would understand and make better judgments over certain matters related to female issues.⁷⁷ Gülen argues that in Islamic societies where the religion has not been contaminated with non-Islamic customs or traditions, Muslim women live a free life, and have been full participants in daily life. Using the traditional argument⁷⁸, he asserts that women engaged in businesses, led armies, prayed in the mosques together with the men, and were able to express themselves to an extent that they could even oppose the caliph in a judicial matter on women's right to assess the value of the dowry, whereas in contemporary Europe there have been debates over whether or not women have spirits or are devils or human beings.⁷⁹

Gülen utilizes the story of Lady Montagu, who accompanied her husband on his embassy to the Ottoman capital in early eighteenth century, as she admired the status of the Ottoman women and their roles in Muslim society:

Even the premodern veiled women of polygamous harems were both sexually and economically freer than their European contemporaries. When Lady Mary Wortley Montagu traveled to Turkey in the eighteenth century, she wrote that she "never saw a country where women may enjoy so much liberty, and free from all reproach as in Turkey"..... Indeed, as late as the nineteenth century, English women continued to report on the superiority of Turkish women in almost every sphere of social life, including hygiene, economics, and legal rights.⁸⁰

None of these rights has been granted to the British women until the end of nineteenth century. It was a time when exotic images of Muslim women as depictions of *harem* scenes were in circulation among the British intellectuals. Lady Montagu's admiration of the Ottoman society was an open challenge to European stereotypes

of Muslim women and the English patriarchal society as the contemporary British common law denied the married women the right to own property upon marriage.⁸¹

On gender roles, Gülen thinks that there is no obstacle in front of women in having equal rights and responsibilities with men; however, women and men have been physically and emotionally different so that gender roles have had to suit these differences. However, in contrast with the conservative point of view, he thinks that these differences could not be used as bases for hierarchy. Islam does not separate men and women since both are human beings and have fundamental rights; however, in another sense, men and women are not equals, but they complement each other like two sides of a coin. Men have been physically stronger and apt to bearing hardship, while women are more compassionate, delicate and self-sacrificing. Therefore the responsibility of motherhood is given to women, so that they naturally become the first nurturers, educators, and trainers of the new generation. This makes women the first teachers of the humanity, which is a unique position bestowed upon them by God.⁸²

On the issue of polygamy, Gülen thinks that although it was allowed by the Prophet Muhammad; there is no record in the *Qur'an* or *Hadith* that Islam requires Muslims to marry more than one woman as a fulfillment of a religious duty. *Qur'an* mentions polygamy only as a permission under special circumstances, and marrying just one woman is recommended and encouraged. Therefore, Gülen does not consider marrying more than one woman as a fulfillment of a *Sunnah* or any religious law.⁸³ Instead, Gülen sees the act of 'presenting polygamy as an Islamic way of life' the most abominable misrepresentation of Islam since it is nothing more than a temptation to fulfill carnal desires if there is no 'real reason'.⁸⁵ Islam, as a universal system, made polygamy possible so that no women should be left alone without protection when they are widowed, and this have helped a lot especially during the wartime, which brought misery, chaos and many hardships to the women and children.⁸⁶

Gülen rejects the idea that Islam regarded women inferior before the law when it comes to inheritance law and testifying before the court. He argues that Muslim women had equal rights with men such as freedom of religion, expression, finance and freedom to live a decent life, and were equals before the law. The rule of two women as witnesses was issued for oral testimonies regarding the financial agreements, which was a business act usually out of most of the women's scope in the earlier times. This rule was not effective for only the women, but also for the Bedouin, who were not accustomed to the city life and had little knowledge in financial issues.⁸⁷ The issue of inheritance was a totally different issue. It did not have anything to do with women's inferiority; rather it was a financial decision aiming at helping male inheritors to have more means (lands etc.) to support their own families.⁸⁸

For Gülen, veiling is compulsory for women in the Islamic tradition; however, it has never been an issue of primary importance.

There are no formal rules in Islam concerned with the way one wears one's hair, the style of clothing or anything else related to external appearance. What is important in Islam is that followers must present an Islamic identity, interpret its spirituality, and represent in a good manner the beauty of Islam in their life. Rather than making rules on what should be worn, Islam teaches people how to be modest.⁸⁹

For Gülen, any kind of covering, whether it is turban, beard, or veil, are *furuat*, which are 'of secondary or lower importance', and one who did not follow the *furuat* does not become an infidel.⁹⁰ Veiling and wearing loose clothes [for women] are among neither the essentials of faith nor the pillars of Islam therefore; they are of secondary importance although they are compulsory for all Muslim women, and disobeying would not render anyone blasphemous. Turban, robe and beard [for men] are only details of lower importance and were not compulsory; therefore, nobody should drown into these small details.⁹¹

CONCLUSION

Opposing the conservative arguments by emphasizing the flexible nature of Islamic tradition and proposing an individualist approach to Islam to resolve contemporary problems on the one hand, and criticizing the Feminist ideology for degrading the core Islamic principles regardless of *Qur'an* and *Sunna*, Gülen's ideas have eventually become a convenient interpretation of Islam suitable to the needs of the global Muslim society. Gülen neither offers a new version of Islam nor disregards and transforms its fundamental principles; his suggestion is reutilizing the tool of *ijtihad* to find suitable solutions for the contemporary problems in the light of *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*.

Gülen's arguments have fundamental differences with that of Muslim feminists and revivalists, and conservative scholars. First of all, he disagrees with Muslim feminists on the issue of the authenticity of the interpretations made by the first generation and the 'great scholars' of Islam. He suggests that Muhammad's interpretation constitutes the unchangeable principles of Islam; and that neither the first generation nor the 'great scholars'* of the following centuries erred in interpreting the revelation; they were all authentic, but different according to time and conditions. Since time and conditions has changed, scholarly interpretations – or in Gülen's terms *ijtihad*s- of the first generations could be revised and changed by the contemporary scholars.

Gülen agrees with the revivalists that certain local traditions contaminated Islam with rules that were totally against the basic rights and freedoms of the people. The point that he disagrees with the argument is that Islam deteriorates women's status in favor of men; he suggests that the unrestricted freedom of pre-Islamic women did not mean a real freedom. Gülen opposes the revivalist idea that Islamic regulations toward protecting women led to a real lack of freedom; indeed, what revivalists see as lack of freedom - lack of educational, economical and social opportunities- were consequences of infiltration of foreign elements into Islam. In the

fist centuries of Islam, women were participants in social, economic and even political life, which is definitely a contradiction with the ideas of conservative Islamists.

For the issues of modern Muslim women Gülen suggests the individualist approach to Islam as a new way of tackling with the problems. He argues that basic principles of Islam that are mentioned in the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* are not meant to be altered or reinterpreted in a way that people could disobey them. However, thinking that each individual is responsible for his/her own actions would open the way to the freedom of observing or disobeying the religious laws in their private lives. This would neither contradict with Islam nor modern norms and values. It is the community's responsibility to teach and encourage people to observe the religion and facilitate it, but no coercion could be used. For instance, veiling is an unchangeable principle of Islam which was suggested by the *Qur'an* and defined by the Prophet; thus no-one could argue that Islam did not describe how to cover. But this never entails that the government should force its people to cover-up – in other words 'obey the law of veiling'. It is an issue of individual choice; veiling is a must and obeying it is preferable; however it is a matter of personal choice to obey or disobey it.