BOOK REVIEWS


The book under review presents a detailed survey of the Western feminists' theories on the issue of women. It addresses the problem from the Islamic perspective and has attempted to develop an Islamic response to the issues which have concerned the feminists. In order to illustrate her viewpoint, the author provides examples of women performing different political duties during the early period of Islam and also highlights a few case studies of contemporary women leaders. The author refers to some classical, medieval, modern and also post-modern Western political theorists. These include thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Engels and Michael Foucault.

Though discussed with reference to individual scholars, the ideas basically are:

(a) The way the nature of women, both physical and psychological, was perceived by the different writers across generations has been narrated. This involved the perceived strengths of women as well as their weaknesses (pp. 1–4).

(b) The duties assigned to women in the society by the Western political theorists of the time has been surveyed. The Western political theorists from the classical period to the 18th century believed that women's best place, due to their nature, was at the backyard of social and political affairs.

(c) The nature of interaction between the genders was another area of debate among the philosophers. We see a cyclical pattern unfolding in the prescription of the gender sexual relations. While Plato was criticised by Aristotle and others for advocating an immoral freedom, we also observe a complete return to the platonic advocations by people like Engels who argued for the abolition of the family. Foucault in the later years also asserted the inevitable decline of the family as a concomitant feature of the capitalist social evolution.
The author briefly highlights the fact that the foundation of the feminist political philosophy is built on different schools of thought (p. 27). She identifies some of these schools such as liberalism, Marxism, Socialism, Existentialism, Radicalism, and Post-Modernism. As a result of this phenomenon, the author argues that feminism has so far failed to emerge as a coherent and well-defined philosophy (p. 27).

The author explains that the term "feminism" was a brainchild of Charles Fourier, a French utopian socialist of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

In presenting the views of different feminists, the author refers to the writers and the schools of thought individually. She makes references to the ideas of Karl Marx (for Marxist feminists). Mary Astell, Condorcet, Wollstonecraft, Mill, Taylor, Stanton, Friedan and Macaulay (for Liberal feminism) and Firestone (for Radical feminism). When one examines the writings of the feminists, the whole debate seems to revolve around the notion of equality between the genders. Generally, the focus of the feminists' efforts seems to be the clearing of the image of woman through change in perception. Feminists argue that the nature of women is in no way inferior to that of men. It follows that the patriarchal system is responsible for the conditioned systemic subjugation of women in the society.

In a nutshell, as portrayed in the book, the feminists believe that the undermining of the status of women is a social creation of patriarchy which is reversible. The author points out that as a result of this attitude of the radical groups, they have unwittingly admitted that in order for women to be respected as equal partners of men, femaleness should be abolished. That, the author points out, is a fundamental conceptual contradiction within the philosophy of feminism.

**ISLAMIC RESPONSES TO SOME FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES**

The issues chosen by the author at this stage are equality, the status and role of wives, and the problem of double workload, patriarchy and the issue of biological differences.

To the issue of equality, Zeenath refers to the Qur'ānic verse (Qur'ān 4:1) which clearly states that men and women are all created from the same essence. This refutes all the philosophical assertions in the Western political theory on the inherent inferiority of women. She then refers to the issue of equal intellectual ability and responsibility given to both men and women in Islam. To illustrate this, the author quotes a tradition of the Prophet (peace be on him) to that effect (p. 49). As to equality in political participation, the author explains that Islam has opened equal opportunities to both men and women at all levels of political participation. The author goes on to illustrate her points with examples of women performing different political duties during the time of the Prophet (peace be on him) and that of the rightly guided Caliphs.

With reference to double workload, Zeenath Kausar asserts that the nature of man-woman relationship in Islam is one of complementarity rather than that of confrontation or competition. She then explains that as it is not forbidden for women to hold public offices in Islam, integrity of the family is in no way to be compromised or sacrificed. Women can be leaders but not at the expense of their being good mothers. The whole system has to be approached from a
balanced perspective. The husband and wife have to help each other. She calls this "Bed to Kitchen Islamization".

Zeenath elaborates that although the Islamic society is patriarchal, it is in no way open for male domination over women. This is due to the fact that men, as husbands, have a divine obligation of treating their wives with kindness and to support them as is the obligation of the wife to the husband. Such a complementarity, the author argues, eliminates all chances of oppression of either of the genders by the other.

On the issue of biological differences, the author argues that it is important that a clear distinction be drawn between equality and identity. She highlights that the differences between men and women are meant to complement each other. Since Islam denies any intellectual or biological or even spiritual superiority of any gender over the other (as already discussed), biological differences are in no way a hindrance to the success of either men or women, the author argues.

SOME SELECTED CASE STUDIES
To practically illustrate the truth in the Islamic system of inter-gender relations, the author selects a few case studies of women who held top political responsibilities in their societies. These are Corazon Aquino of the Philippines, Violetta Chamorro of Nicaragua, Golda Meir of Israel and Margaret Thatcher of England.

The author says that though all of them are women, some of them recorded impressive performances during their terms while others were not that successful. References are made to Corazon Aquino and Margaret Thatcher for the former and Chamorro for the latter. This observation denies any correlation between leadership abilities and gender. The biographies of these selected leaders show that those who had strong determination and will to work hard and succeed, trained themselves to do so and succeeded.

The author also makes references to Aquino, Thatcher and Chamorro as mothers who cared and felt for their families. The author here stresses the fact that a woman's duties as a wife and mother and her political responsibility need not be incompatible once she properly plans things.

A BRIEF CRITIQUE
The contemporary situation of the feminist movement clearly supports the author's thesis that the real solution lies in education. In the Muslim societies where poverty rules, illiteracy has been our women's biggest enemy. The lack of proper understanding of Islam by Muslim men in these societies further compounds the problem. The Western political theorists did believe in what they said, and they wrote it. Minds were distorted and civilizations have been built on these misconceived notions, Feminism is one of the outcomes of such constructions.

In a nutshell, the work is a reflection of a commendable effort by the author. Though some parts of it need more elaborate explanation, it is indeed a thought-provoking piece of writing.