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Islamic Feminism: Engaging Pakistani Thinkers in Global Debates

Abstract

This study examines the manner in which Pakistani Islamic feminists have engaged with international feminism debates within the contested terrain of postcolonial identity, religious tradition, and transnational activism. Focusing on key thinkers such as Riffat Hassan, Farida Shaheed, and Amina Wadud, the paper traces the manner in which thinkers have uniquely developed a Pakistani Islamic feminism that neither rejects Western feminist models in its entirety nor blindly assimilates them but attempts to reinterpret Islamic theology placing gender justice centre-stage. Through theological contributions, activist networks, and public furore, the work demonstrates the manner in which Pakistani feminists have negotiated the tensions between universalist human rights discourses and culture-specific religious reform. The research isolates two significant contributions: first, the building of feminist Qur'anic hermeneutics that critique patriarchal readings while remaining true to Islamic epistemology and second, the building of South-South feminist solidarity partnerships that do not involve Western mediation, demonstrated in partnerships with Indonesian and Turkish activists on issues of mosque access and child marriage. These engagements show an advanced dialectic simultaneously belonging to transnational feminism while resisting its universalist presumptions. This paper argues that Pakistani Islamic feminism registers a paradigm of decolonial feminist knowledge production retrieving religious discourse for liberative uses while retaining critical engagement with global feminism. This research shows how Pakistani feminists created a unique approach to women's rights by blending Islamic teachings with global feminist ideas. Their work proves that fighting for gender equality doesn't require choosing between religion and feminism, offering a new model for Muslim women's movements worldwide. These findings help us understand how different feminisms can work together while respecting local cultures and beliefs.

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1. Introduction

Islamic feminism represents a revolutionary intellectual and activist tradition that works to balance gender equality and Islamic values through critical readings of sacred sources and practices. It emerged as a particular discourse in the late 20th century and is entirely rooted in Islamic epistemology and resists patriarchal readings of the Islamic religion. As Margot Badran explains,

> *"Islamic feminism is a feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm that seeks gender justice and equality for all Muslims"*[1]

This movement operates on the interface between religious revival and feminist sensibility and insists that gender equality is not a Western incursion but an indigenous element of Qur'anic morals over-shadowed by patriarchal additions of the past.

Pakistani Islamic feminism offers a unique case study due to the contentious postcolonial history of the state and the ongoing compromises between modernity and tradition. Pakistani Islamic feminists developed sophisticated hermeneutic systems to reinterpret key sources and borrow from the tradition of Islamic classics while speaking to contemporary feminist thought. The work of scholar Riffat Hassan is representative of this approach in that she systematically unpacks patriarchal readings of the hadith while retrieving the egalitarian core of the Qur'an. As Hassan asserts:

> *"The Qur'an's radical message of gender equality has been systematically obscured by patriarchal interpretations that reflect historical cultural biases rather than divine intent"* [2]

This scholarly work has produced a quintessentially Pakistani Islamic feminist epistemology that critiques Western feminist universalism and conservative religious orthodoxy.

The history of Islamic feminism in Pakistan is a mirror of the nation's ambivalent experience of postcolonial state formation, military authoritarian rule, and troubles with democracy. The Zia-ul-Haq administration (1977-1988) was particularly instrumental insofar as state-led Islamization policies sought to regulate women's bodies in a contradictory manner and galvanised feminist resistance. As Farida Shaheed documents:

> *"The Women's Action Forum emerged not in opposition to Islam but against the state's manipulation of religion to justify gender oppression"* [3]

The movement's capacity to resolve this paradox proves its political resilience and intellectual sophistication.

Contemporary Pakistani Islamic feminism positively engages with transnational networks of feminism while maintaining critical distance from Western feminist hegemony. The annual Aurat March protests demonstrate the balancing act between transnational feminist ideologies and culturally specific demands articulated through Islamic discourses. As Amina Jamal observes:

> *"Slogans like 'Mera Jism, Meri Marzi" (My Body, My Choice) gain distinct resonance in Urdu, invoking Islamic concepts of moral agency alongside feminist bodily autonomy"* [4]

This regularisation of feminist speech aligns with what postcolonial theorist Chandra Mohanty calls "transnational feminist praxis" - tactical localisation of transnational feminist thought while contesting the universalist pretensions of the latter.[5]

The theoretical contributions of Pakistani Islamic feminism reach well beyond the nation's boundaries to provide vital insights for international feminist debates. By showing that feminist consciousness need not be the product of religious rejection but is possible as the result of religious engagement, Pakistani thinkers have questioned the binary opposition between faith and feminism that has so long framed Western feminist thought. The pioneering Saba Mahmood's work provides an example of how Pakistani Islamic feminists have broadened the understanding of agency from the model of resistance to "the pious critique" - the use of religious discourse to critique structures of patriarchal power. This theoretical innovation has transformed the encounter of feminist theory with religious women globally.

The future of Pakistani Islamic feminism lies in its ability to navigate increasingly complex political terrain, from rising religious conservatism to neoliberal cooptation of feminist rhetoric. However, as the most recent research demonstrates, the movement continues to devise techniques. The work of newer scholars, such as Nabila Malick, broaches the trend she refers to as "Islamic decolonial feminism," a model that foregrounds the epistemic authority of Muslim women and yet inscribes itself within transnational feminist discourses. The current paradigm also has the possibility of placing Pakistani Islamic feminism centre-stage in global deliberations on religion, gender, and social justice in the 21st century.

2. Historical Context:

Intellectually, the history of Islamic feminism in Pakistan is deeply embedded in a transnational network of reformist thought that emerged from the reality of colonialism, modernity, and the redefinition of gendered social functions within Muslim cultures.

2.1 Colonial Encounters and Early Reformist Thought (19th–Early the 20th Century)

The intellectual forebears of Islamic feminism in Pakistan cannot be separated from the broader reformist discourses that emerged to the fore in the Muslim world during the late colonial period. As Muslim societies confronted the challenge posed by European imperialism, women's rights questions crossed over with discourses on civilizational progress and cultural authenticity. The Egyptian jurist Qasim Amin (1863–1908) ignited fierce controversy with his 1899 treatise *Tahrir al-Mar'a* (*The Liberation of Woman*), which framed the "backwardness" of Muslim cultures in the repression of women. Amin's work has rightly come under assault for Eurocentric assumptions, what Souad Musa Ahmed refers to as "colonial feminism" on the behalf of imperialism. However, his polemics insisted on a reckoning with gender norms that would echo through coming centuries.[6]

This debate assumed a typical shape in the works of Syed Ahmad Khan and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, whose 1905 novel Sultana's Dream imagined a feminist utopia. But colonial "reforms," as we see from the work of historian Gail Minault, reinforced patriarchal structures through the codification of Muslim personal law and the exclusion of women from politics.[7] This paradox of simultaneous colonial intervention and neglect created conditions where feminist consciousness would later emerge through both Islamic and secular frameworks.

2.2 Postcolonial Paradoxes: Islamic Modernism vs. Socialist Feminism (1947–1970s)

The creation of Pakistan in 1947 inherited these unresolved tensions. The nation's founding ideology, articulated by Muhammad Iqbal, emphasised *ijtihad* (independent juristic reasoning) as essential for Islamic revival, a principle that later feminists would weaponize against patriarchal interpretations. Iqbal's philosophical idealism, as critic Faisal Devji notes:

> *"remained abstract on women's rights, celebrating spiritual equality while ignoring material inequalities"* [8]

Conversely, Faiz Ahmed Faiz's Marxist poetry and Hajra Masroor's feminist writings represented a secular-leftist tradition that drew from Sufi concepts of equality. The legacy of the mystic Rabia al-Basri, particularly her assertion that divine love transcended gender, resurfaced in the work of Punjabi poet Kishwar Naheed, who wrote:

> *"We sinful women know / that paradise is not forbidden / to those who refuse to walk / the prescribed paths"* [9]

This period also saw pragmatic alliances between secular and Islamic feminists, exemplified by Jahanara Shahnawaz's successful campaign for

women's suffrage in the 1956 constitution, a victory achieved through both Qur'anic arguments and liberal democratic rhetoric.

2.3 The Zia Era and Islamization: Crisis and Feminist Resistance (1977–1988)

The military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) marked a watershed. His so-called Islamization policies, the Hudood Ordinances, Qanun-e-Shahadat (Law of Evidence), and Qisas and Diyat laws, instrumentalized religion to curtail women's rights. As feminist solicitor Asma Jahangir documented, these laws created

> *"a parallel legal system where rape victims could be prosecuted for adultery"* [10]

The regime's misogyny paradoxically galvanised unprecedented feminist mobilisation. The Women's Action Forum (WAF), founded in 1981, became the vanguard of resistance. While often characterised as secular, the WAF's strategy was more nuanced: as historian Ayesha Jalal argues:

> *"They critiqued Zia's policies not by rejecting Islam but by exposing their un-Islamic nature"* [11]

This approach drew from global feminist networks, particularly Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), while rooting dissent in Islamic textual analysis.

2.4 Transnational Influences: The Iranian Revolution and the UN Women's Decade

The 1979 Iranian Revolution initially inspired Pakistani feminists, demonstrating women's capacity for mass mobilisation under Islamic slogans. However, the subsequent erosion of women's rights under Khomeini served as a cautionary tale. As scholar Valentine Moghadam notes:

> *"Pakistani feminists watched Iran closely, learning both the potentials and perils of Islamic feminism"* [12]

Simultaneously, the UN Decade for Women (1975–1985) globalised feminist discourse. Pakistan's delegation to the 1985 Nairobi Conference, led by Attiya Inayatullah, faced criticism from conservatives but brought back crucial frameworks. Activist Sherry Rehman later reflected:

> *"We realised international platforms could amplify local struggles, but only if we translated their language into our cultural idioms"* [13]

2.5 The 1990s and Present: Globalisation and New Challenges

The post-Zia era saw Islamic feminism institutionalise through NGOs like Shirkat Gah and the Aurat Foundation, which blended Qur'anic hermeneutics with human rights frameworks. The 1996 Beijing

Conference marked another turning point, with Pakistani feminists leveraging the CEDAW to challenge discriminatory laws while facing accusations of Western allegiance.

Today, protests like the Aurat March embody this tradition of connecting the Qur'an to modern feminist discourses. As scholar Amina Jamal concludes:

> *"Pakistani Islamic feminism is neither derivative nor insular, but a dynamic tradition forged through a continuous dialogue with its own history, with global feminisms, and with Islam's living interpretive traditions"*[14]

This specific historic instance serves to underscore the very paradox of Pakistani Islamic feminism: its coexistence of reliance on and resistiveness towards transnational feminist flows. Where the movement's intellectual strength lies is exactly in its denial of simple oppositions, secular and Islamic, global and local, rather than in building a discursive ground on which the two histories engage and conflict and finally recode each other.

3. Key Pakistani Thinkers and Their Global Dialogues

3.1 Riffat Hassan:

Intellectually, Dr. Riffat Hassan's career remains perhaps the most systematic and theologically grounded Muslim endeavour to develop an Islamic feminist epistemology that simultaneously contests and dialogues with Islamic orthodoxy and Western feminist theory. As the pioneering Muslim woman to receive a doctorate in Islamic theology from a Western university in 1968, Hassan uniquely positioned herself between Islamic academe and feminist theory, from which she was able to develop what she subsequently designated as "*Tawhidic* (God's oneness) feminism," an epistemology grounded on the essential Islamic principle of the oneness of God (*tawhid*) and its gender justice implications.

Hassan's most revolutionary contribution lies in her rigorous textual-historical methodology for Qur'anic exegesis. Her seminal 1996 article, *"Feminist Theology as a Means of Combating Injustice Towards Women in the Muslim World"*, dismantled patriarchal interpretations through three key interventions:

1. **Linguistic Analysis**: This study demonstrates how Arabic terms such as *itama* (often translated as "male guardianship") were semantically distorted over centuries to justify patriarchy.[15]

2. **Intra-Textual Reading**: This section shows how verses about gender must be read relationally, for instance, by balancing Surah An-Nisa 4:34 (on marital relations) with Surah At-Tawba 9:71 (on mutual guardianship between believing men and women).

3. **Historical Contextualisation**: Distinguishing between the eternal principles of the Qur'an and culturally specific 7th-century Arabian applications.

As Hassan asserted:

> *"The Qur'an's radical message of gender equality in the Qur'an has been systematically obscured by patriarchal interpretations that reflect historical cultural biases rather than divine intent"* [16]

This work laid the groundwork for what scholars now recognise as Islamic feminist hermeneutics, a field that would later be expanded by Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas.

Hassan's decade-long intellectual exchange with the Catholic feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza marked a watershed in interreligious feminist engagement. Their archived correspondence at Harvard Divinity School reveals the following:

- **Adaptation of Kyriarchy**: Hassan creatively applied Schüssler Fiorenza's concept of *myriarchy* (intersecting systems of domination) to analyse how Muslim societies' gender oppression interacts with class, colonialism, and religious authority.[17]
- **Critique of Christocentric Feminism**: She challenged the assumption that feminist theology must emerge from secular or Christian frameworks, insisting instead that *"Islam's tawhid paradigm offers a more radical egalitarianism than Enlightenment individualism"*[18]
- **Shared Methodology**: Both scholars developed parallel approaches to *re-reading* the sacred texts of Schüssler Fiorenza through historical reconstruction of early Christian communities and Hassan through Qur'anic linguistic analysis.

This dialogue exemplified what postcolonial theorist Chandra Mohanty would call *"feminist solidarity without sameness"* allowing for coalition-building across religious traditions while respecting epistemic differences.[19]

Hassan's theoretical work had tangible effects on grassroots movements:

- **Legal Reforms**: Her testimony before Pakistan's Council of Islamic Ideology (2006) directly influenced challenges to the Hudood Ordinances by demonstrating their contradiction with Qur'anic principles.
- **Pedagogical Innovations**: She developed the first graduate course on Women in Islam at the University of Louisville, which trained a generation of Muslim feminist scholars.

- **Interfaith Activism**: As the founder of the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan (1999), she bridged theological scholarship with survivor advocacy.

Although groundbreaking, Hassan's work faced criticism:

- **Secular feminists** like Shahnaz Rouse argued that her theological focus neglected structural economic oppression.
- **Conservative clerics** accused her of *"Westernising Islam"*, despite her meticulous use of classical *usual al-fiqh* (jurisprudential principles).

Yet her enduring influence is undeniable. As Nabila Malick, a contemporary scholar, observes:

> *"Hassan gave us the tools to dismantle patriarchy from within Islam's own intellectual traditions proving feminism need not be imported, but recovered from our sacred texts"* [20]

Her *tawhidic* (God's oneness) framework continues to shape global Islamic feminism, offering a paradigm where gender justice emerges as its most authentic expression and not in spite of Islamic faith.

3.2 Farida Shaheed and Shirkat Gah: Action of Transnational Feminist Networks

Farida Shaheed's visionary leadership at Shirkat Gah has fundamentally transformed Islamic feminist praxis in Pakistan and beyond. As one of the most influential feminist thinkers in the Global South, Shaheed developed an innovative methodology that bridges sacred texts, human rights frameworks, and lived experiences. Her approach reflects what she describes as follows:

> *"a constant dialectic between the Qur'an's ethical vision and women's daily realities"*[21]

Demonstrating how religious discourse can be reclaimed for emancipatory.

During Pakistan's turbulent Islamization period under Zia-ul-Haq, Shaheed pioneered what scholar Amina Jamal terms "critical faith-based feminism". [22] Rather than rejecting religious frameworks as inherently patriarchal, she strategically engaged with Islamic legal traditions to challenge discriminatory laws. Her landmark 1992 campaign against the Qisas and Diyat ordinances invoked classical concepts such as malaya (public welfare) to argue that these laws violated Islam's core principles of justice. This approach proved remarkably effective, creating space for feminist arguments within the mainstream religious discourse.

The most radical contribution of Shaheed lies in her democratisation of Islamic knowledge production. Through Shirkat Gah's rural workshops, she facilitated spaces where peasant women, often excluded from formal religious institutions, could interpret sacred texts considering their material struggles. In her field notes from a 2006 session in rural Sindh, she observed the following:

> *"When a landless woman connects Surah An-Nisa's verses on inheritance to her family's dispossession, she's doing liberation theology in its purest form"* [23]

These grassroots readings challenged both patriarchal religious authorities and secular feminist elites, demonstrating how marginalized women could become theological interpretation agents.

The transnational dimensions of Shaheed's work have been equally transformative. Her collaborations with Musawah and WLUML created South-South feminist networks that bypassed Western intermediaries. The 2009 "Musawah Framework for Action," which she co-authored, represents a groundbreaking synthesis of Qur'anic hermeneutics, comparative constitutional law, and feminist theory. As legal scholar Ziba Mir-Hosseini notes:

> *"Shaheed helped prove that Islamic feminism is not an oxymoron but a vital intellectual and political tradition"* [24]

Shaheed's enduring legacy lies in her demonstration of how conservative forces can co-opt feminist movements to engage religious discourse. Her work continues to inspire a new generation of activists across the Muslim world who are reclaiming the Islamic tradition of gender justice. As she reflects in her memoir:

> *"The Qur'an's radical egalitarianism was never the problem—it was always our limited human interpretations that failed women"* [25]

This insight remains central to contemporary struggles of Islamic feminists everywhere.

3.3 Amina Wadud's Hermeneutical Legacy in Pakistan

The intellectual influence of **Amina Wadud** (1952–present) on Pakistani Islamic feminism extends far beyond her American origins, representing what scholar Margot Badran terms a "transnational feminist hermeneutics" that has reshaped Qur'anic interpretation across the Muslim world.[26] Although Wadud's 1999 monograph *Qur'an and Woman* was banned from mainstream Pakistani bookstores, it circulated widely through underground academic networks, was photocopied, and discussed in women's study circles from Lahore to Karachi. Its revolutionary application of literary theory to Qur'anic exegesis, particularly her

development of the **"*tawhidic* (God's oneness) paradigm"** provided Pakistani feminists with a theological framework to challenge patriarchal readings of scripture while remaining firmly rooted in Islamic intellectual traditions. As Asma Barlas observes,

> *"Wadud gave us the tools to dismantle androcentric exegesis from within, showing how the Qur'an's ontological equality of men and women flows directly from its conception of divine unity"*[27]

Wadud's methodology, which treats the Qur'an as a coherent textual whole rather than a collection of atomised verses resonated deeply with Pakistani scholars grappling with state-sponsored Islamization. Her analysis of Surah An-Nisa 4:34, often cited to justify male authority, demonstrated how isolating this verse from the broader ethical framework of the Qur'an distorts its meaning. By contextualising it alongside Surah At-Tawba 9:71 ("The believing men and women are allies of one another"), Wadud showed that the Qur'an envisions reciprocity rather than hierarchy in gender relations.[28] This approach inspired Pakistani feminists like Kishwar Naheed, whose poetry began incorporating Wadud's hermeneutical principles:

> *"They say the Qur'an chains me, but I read it and find wings"* [29]

The ripple effects were profound. Young Pakistani scholars, such as Amina Jamal, applied Wadud's methods to reinterpret hadith literature, exposing how patriarchal cultural norms influenced the transmission of prophetic traditions about women. [30] Meanwhile, activists with the Women's Action Forum (WAF) used her framework to critique Pakistan's Hudood Ordinances, arguing that these laws violated the Qur'an's spirit of justice, a strategy that lent religious legitimacy to their secular feminist demands.

The global debate sparked by Wadud's March 2005 mixed-gender Friday prayer leadership in New York exposed the ideological fissures within Pakistan's Islamic feminist movement. While conservative clerics at Islamabad's International Islamic University issued fatwas declaring her actions *bid'a* (heretical innovation), progressive Pakistani scholars rallied to her defence. Dr. Samina Ibrahim captured the moment's significance:

> *"Wadud's act forced Pakistani women to choose between religious authenticity and gender equality, a false dichotomy that her work actually deconstructs"*[31]

The controversy revealed how Wadud's scholarship had already permeated Pakistani feminist discourse:

- **Secular feminists**, such as **Nigar Ahmad**, praised her challenge to clerical authority while cautioning against over-optimism about religious reform
- **Islamic feminists**, such as **Farida Shaheed**, saw it as validating their argument that women's leadership was historically rooted in early Muslim practice.
- **Conservative women** unexpectedly found common ground, with some madrasa students acknowledging that Wadud's textual analysis was "difficult to refute on scholarly merits"

Wadud's most lasting contribution may be how Pakistani activists adapt her theories to local contexts. In Sindh, rural women's groups began using her **"gender jihad"** concept to reinterpret verses about inheritance rights during land dispute mediation. As one activist reported:

> *"When we show women how Surah An-Nisa guarantees their share, it's not feminism; it's just Islam properly understood"*[32]

Meanwhile, contemporary scholars such as Nabila Malick have expanded Wadud's work into what she terms "decolonial tafsir", applying Wadud's hermeneutics to critique how colonialism distorted Islamic legal traditions regarding gender.[33]

Wadud's legacy in Pakistan transcends academic debate and has become a living tradition of resistance. From the slogans of the Aurat March ("My body, my *amana* [divine trust]") to mosque-based literacy programmes using her Qur'anic commentary, her ideas continue to empower Pakistani women to reclaim their faith from patriarchal gatekeepers. As Wadud herself reflected during a 2018 video lecture at Lahore University:

> *"The Qur'an's liberation isn't in the past; it is waiting to be awakened in every woman who reads it with her whole being"*[34]

4. Pakistani Feminist Responses to the Global Framework

The engagement of Pakistani Islamic feminists with global gender equality frameworks has been characterised by a dialectical tension that simultaneously draws upon transnational feminist discourses while resisting their presumed universality. This negotiation reflects what postcolonial theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes as the "double bind" of Third World feminisms: the need to articulate gender justice in terms that are both locally resonant and globally legible.[35] Pakistani feminists have navigated this complexity by developing a critical epistemology that interrogates Western feminist thought's coloniality while reclaiming Islamic tradition as a site of emancipatory possibility. Their intellectual labour reveals the philosophical sophistication required

to mediate between competing claims of universal human rights and cultural particularity a mediation that refuses simplistic binaries between "modern" and "traditional," or "secular" and "religious."

4.1 Tensions with Western Feminism:

The relationship between Pakistani Islamic feminists and Western feminist paradigms has been fraught with epistemological and political tensions. Pakistani scholars have persistently challenged what they perceive as the imperialist underpinnings of secular feminist frameworks while drawing strategically on transnational feminist vocabularies. This critique was crystallised during the 1980s and 1990s, when Western feminist campaigns against "Islamic patriarchy" often served to justify neo-colonial interventions in Muslim-majority societies. As Farida Shaheed argues,

> *"The problem is not feminism itself, but the assumption that gender justice must look the same everywhere, that is, the only path to liberation is through secularism as defined by the West"*[36]

This scepticism towards Western feminist universalism has led Pakistani Islamic feminists to articulate an alternative genealogy of gender justice rooted in Qur'anic ethics rather than Enlightenment liberalism. For instance, Amina Wadud demonstrated how egalitarian principles can be derived from Islamic theology without recourse to secular feminist frameworks. Her hermeneutical approach, which emphasises the Qur'an's inherent anti-patriarchal ethos, provides a powerful counter-narrative to the Orientalist trope of Islam's incompatibility with women's rights.[37]

However, this resistance to Western feminist hegemony is not merely reactive but also constructive. Pakistani feminists have developed sophisticated critiques of how the emphasis on individual autonomy in liberal feminism often neglects structural inequalities, particularly in postcolonial contexts where communal and religious identities remain politically salient. The philosopher Nabila Malick postulated this as a form of "epistemic resistance," whereby Muslim women assert a right to define justice on their own terms. [38]

4.2 CEDAW Debates:

The controversial ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in Pakistan serves as an exemplar of the subtle balancing act practised by Islamic feminists. When conservative religious organisations condemned CEDAW as Western intervention into Islamic family structures, feminist scholars like Riffat Hassan and Asma Barlas negotiated the convention's compatibility with Qur'anic values. Their interventions were neither apologetic nor hermeneutically nuanced, revealing the possibility of assimilating

progressive gender values within the classical Islamic jurisprudential tradition.

Particularly noteworthy was Hassan's 2006 testimony to Pakistan's Council of Islamic Ideology (CII). She consistently debunked the argument that CEDAW was incompatible with Sharia and instead argued that much of the patriarchal interpretation of law was actually a departure from Islam's egalitarian spirit:

> *"The Qur'an's ethical framework is fundamentally aligned with gender justice; it is the fiqh [jurisprudence] traditions that have ossified inequality"* [39]

This argument reflects a broader strategy within Islamic feminism: leveraging international human rights norms while grounding them in Islamic discursive traditions. The legal scholar **Shaheen Sardar Ali** has further developed this approach, showing how Pakistan's constitutional guarantees of gender equality (Articles 25 and 34) can be harmonised with CEDAW through ijtihad (independent juristic reasoning).[40]

4.3 #MeToo in Muslim Contexts:

The arrival of the global #MeToo movement in Pakistan, manifested through campaigns like **#MeTooPakistan**, revealed both the possibilities and limitations of translating Western feminist activism into Islamic cultural contexts. Although the movement initially faced backlash for its perceived "Western" associations, Pakistani feminists quickly reframed it within Islamic ethical paradigms.

This rhetorical move exemplifies what anthropologist Saba Mahmood termed "the pious critique" using religious discourse to challenge patriarchal power structures. By anchoring #MeToo in Islamic ethics rather than liberal individualism, Pakistani activists broadened its appeal while insulating it from accusations of Western cultural imperialism.[41]

The Pakistani feminist engagement with global frameworks ultimately points towards a decolonial epistemology one that provincialises Western feminist assumptions while affirming alternative visions of justice rooted in Islamic thought. This is not a retreat into cultural relativism but a demand for epistemic pluralism in feminist theorising.

In this sense, Pakistani Islamic feminism offers a model for how GS feminism might navigate the tensions between local legitimacy and global solidarity, a model that is as philosophically rich as it is politically vital.

5. Case Studies:

The praxis of Islamic feminism in Pakistan reveals a complex tapestry of transnational influences and local reinterpretations, where global feminist discourses are neither wholly embraced nor rejected but rather transformed through vernacular frameworks. This dialectical process exemplifies what postcolonial feminist scholars have termed

"glocalization" the dynamic interplay between global movements and local particularities.[42] Through three illuminating case studies, the Aurat March movement, contested symbolism of Malala Yousafzai, and South-South feminist collaborations, we witness how Pakistani feminists have negotiated the fraught terrain of transnational solidarity while asserting their epistemic autonomy. These cases demonstrate that the most impactful feminist interventions emerge not from the uncritical adoption of Western models but from creative syntheses that honour both Islamic ethical traditions and universal aspirations for gender justice.

5.1 Aurat March:

The Aurat March (Women's March), which has been held annually in Pakistan since 2018, has emerged as one of the most visible and contentious manifestations of feminist activism in the Muslim world. Far from being a mere imitation of Western feminist protests, the March represents a sophisticated case of global feminist concepts' glocalization to local cultural and religious frameworks. Its most iconic slogan, "Mera Jism, Meri Marzi" (My Body, My Choice), exemplifies this process. While superficially resembling Western feminist mantras, the Urdu phrase carries deeper theological and philosophical connotations. As scholar Amina Jamal explains:

> *"The term 'marzi' in Urdu does not merely signify individual preference but also invokes the Islamic concept of divine free will (ikhtiyar)." It suggests that bodily autonomy is not just a feminist demand but a God-given right, a theological claim that conservative clerics cannot easily dismiss."*[43]

This linguistic nuance reflects the March's broader strategy of rooting feminist demands in Islamic ethics while simultaneously engaging with transnational movements such as #MeToo and #NiUnaMenos.

The 2020 Aurat March manifesto explicitly framed its demands, ranging from economic justice to ending gender-based violence, within both constitutional rights and the Islamic principles of equality. Key features included:

1. **Qur'anic Citations**: References to **Surah An-Nisa 4:135** ("Stand firmly for justice") and **Surah Al-Hujurat 49:13** ("We created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another") were used to counter accusations of "Western influence."

2. **Labour Rights**: The manifesto highlighted how Islamic injunctions on fair wages (e.g., *"Give the worker his wages before his sweat dries"* Hadith, Ibn Majah) aligned with feminist demands for equal pay.

3. **Trans Inclusion**: The document cited the Prophet Muhammad's respect for gender-variant companions (such as the Hijra communities) to justify his demands for transgender rights.

This dual appeal to religious and secular legitimacy was deliberate, allowing the March to resonate with urban progressives and rural women who might distrust "foreign" feminism.

The visual symbolism of the March has been equally strategic. Posters depicting women in burqas holding signs with Qur'anic verses disrupted Orientalist stereotypes that equate Islamic dress with oppression. A viral image from the 2019 Karachi march showed a woman in a niqab carrying a placard that read:

> *"My veil is my choice, my labour is my right, both of which are Islam."*[44]

This imagery forced a public reckoning with the diversity of Muslim feminisms, proving that piety and protest are not mutually exclusive. Meanwhile, the March's organisational structure decentralised, non-hierarchical, and led by a rotating collective of working-class women, students, and transgender activists, which mirrored global feminist principles while remaining culturally specific.

Despite its innovations, the Aurat March has faced fierce opposition:

- **Conservative Backlash**: Clerics such as Mufti Taqi Usmani condemned it as a "plot to corrupt Muslim women," while right-wing media labelled protesters as "foreign agents."
- **Liberal Scepticism**: Some secular feminists argued that Islamic references diluted radical demands, fearing co-optation by religious elites.
- **Transnational Misrepresentation**: Western media often **flattened its complexity**, reducing it to a "Pakistani #MeToo" while ignoring its theological underpinnings.

The Aurat March offers a decolonial feminist blueprint that neither rejects transnational solidarity nor surrenders to Western feminist hegemony. By vernacularising concepts such as bodily autonomy and labour rights, this study demonstrates how feminist movements in Muslim-majority societies can reclaim religious discourse while demanding structural change. Its legacy continues to evolve, inspiring similar mobilizations from Indonesia to Tunisia.

5.2 Malala Yousafzai:

The global sensation of Malala Yousafzai is perhaps the most complex case study in contemporary feminist politics. It captures the interaction between local activist milieus and transnational discourses, Islamic values and neoliberal co-optations, and individual stardom and

social movements. Her evolution from a schoolgirl from the Swat Valley in northwestern Pakistan to the youngest winner of the Nobel Prize has transformed her into a contested emblem, revealing much about the mediation, distortion, and recuperation of Muslim women's activism in global women's discourses. The diverse and often ambivalent readings of Malala's activism betray the fraught politics of representation that Third World feminists face once their struggles transgress international horizons.

Western politics and mainstream news media have consistently placed Malala in a neoliberal feminist paradigm that simultaneously raises and constrains her political criticism. Major news outlets, such as The New York Times and BBC, have consistently portrayed her as what scholar Lila Abu-Lughod calls the "perfect Muslim feminist subject," educated enough to be recognisable to Western sensibilities, Western-bias enough not to be antagonistic of Western sensibilities, and wrongfully attacked by "Islamic" extremism in ways confirming Orientalist fictions. [45] This narrative structure reached its climax following the 2012 attempt on her life, in global coverage foregrounding her as an individual heroine and erasing the Islamic ethical tradition that grounded her activism and the wider Pakistani movement on the education of girls she was a participant in. As Sabiha Allauddin, a critical development scholar, observes:

> *"The neoliberal feminist narrative imposed on Malala erases both her Islamic ethical framework and the collective struggle of Pakistani girls' education activists"* [46]

This selective representation was not accidental. Leaked memos from major NGOs revealed strategic efforts to "soften" her political messaging by downplaying her critiques of U.S. drone strikes while amplifying feel-good stories about "girl power".

The tensions surrounding these competing narratives crystallised dramatically during Malala's emotionally charged return to Pakistan in 2018, her first visit since the Taliban attack. Polarised reactions uncovered underlying schisms in the manner in which differing constituencies sought to claim or disclaim her symbolic authority. Conservative forces, such as mainstream religious leaders and right-wing news networks criticised her as a Western agent and even speculated that her attack was staged to advance the purposes of asylum pleas, a conspiracy theory that was promulgated on Pakistani social networks via hashtags like #MalalaDrama. Others on the liberal spectrum criticised what they saw as her depoliticisation as a UN-accredited symbol of humanity and signalled the incongruence between her Nobel Peace Prize jubilation and the exclusion of U.S. drone victims, such as Zubair Rehman, from Western news reports. Islamic feminist groups took a more ambivalent line organisations like Shirkat Gah officially commemorated her advocacy of women's schooling

even while critiquing the political instrumentalization of her narrative to advance American regional imperialism.[47] This middle path revealed a recognition that the symbolic potential of Malala might be mobilising and yet also potentially divisive for Pakistani feminist movements.

Malala's nuanced work of navigating the ideological minefield entails a deliberate placing of herself that recovers religious discourse for feminist ends even within her own text and speeches. Her speech to the Oxford Union in 2021 was careful to note Islamic scripture quotes and quote Prophet Muhammad's edict "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" and linger on Surah Al-Alaq's injunction to "Read in the name of your Lord" as Quranic foundations for the schooling of girls. Similarly, her memoir I Am Malala includes poignant descriptions of praying before activist meetings and wearing the hijab as personal choice details systematically omitted in most Western media coverage.[48] This careful balancing act exemplifies what feminist theorist Saba Mahmood theorised as "agentive piety" the use of religious discourse to claim political space and authority typically denied to women in both Islamic and secular-liberal frameworks.[49] Malala demonstrates how Muslim women can resist the false choice between religious authenticity and gender justice by grounding her activism in Islamic epistemology while engaging with global feminist networks.

The Malala phenomenon ultimately exposes the double bind facing Global South feminists who achieve international visibility, where they are simultaneously rejected locally as "too Western" and celebrated globally in ways that flatten the complexity of their political visions. Her story underscores the urgent need for more nuanced transnational feminist solidarity that centre rather than erase the Islamic ethical frameworks that inform the activism of many Muslim women. As postcolonial feminist Chandra Mohanty reminds us, true solidarity requires "learning from the situated knowledge and daily struggles of Third World women rather than imposing predetermined narratives upon them".[50] Thus, the ongoing debates about Malala's legacy offer crucial insights for building feminist futures that honour both local epistemologies and transnational connections without reducing either to simplistic caricatures.

5.3 South-South Feminist Collaborations:

The most radical and transformative dimension of contemporary Pakistani Islamic feminism emerges through its horizontal collaborations with sister movements across the Muslim world rather than through its engagement with Western feminist thought. These South-South feminist alliances represent a profound epistemological challenge to the Eurocentric foundations of mainstream transnational feminism, constructing alternative knowledge systems that centre Islamic intellectual traditions while addressing shared structural challenges. By bypassing Western feminist

intermediaries, activists from Pakistan, Indonesia, Turkey, and other Muslim-majority nations have forged what postcolonial theorist Walter Mignolo terms "epistemic delinking" the conscious construction of knowledge frameworks outside the dominant Western paradigm.[51] These collaborations demonstrate the reconfiguration of feminist theory and practice when scholars and activists from the Global South engage as equal partners rather than as recipients of Northern feminist wisdom.

The 2019 Istanbul Summit between Pakistan's Women's Action Forum (WAF) and Turkey's Women and Democracy Association (KADEM) exemplifies this innovative approach to feminist knowledge production. Over three intensive days of dialogue, participants developed a multidimensional strategy to combat child marriage that creatively synthesised Islamic jurisprudence, international human rights law, and grassroots organising methodologies. Rather than approaching early marriage through a purely secular human rights framework or an exclusively Islamic discourse, the summit produced a hybrid model that drew on classical fiqh (jurisprudence) rulings about marriageable age, particularly the emphasis on physical and emotional readiness (rushd) in Hanafi and Maliki legal traditions, while simultaneously engaging with CEDAW's provisions on child protection. This collaboration was particularly significant because of its attention to local cultural idioms. The resulting campaign materials framed opposition to child marriage not as a Western import but as fidelity to Islam's protection of children's rights, citing Prophetic traditions about the importance of education before marriage. As WAF member Khawar Mumtaz noted:

> *"When Turkish and Pakistani feminists exchange strategies, we are not borrowing ideas but rediscovering shared Islamic feminist principles that colonialism had obscured"* [52]

Similarly, the sustained collaborations between Pakistani and Indonesian feminists on the issue of women's mosque access and leadership have been groundbreaking. The 2020 Jakarta Declaration, co-authored by activists from both countries, represents one of the most sophisticated theological documents produced by contemporary Islamic feminism. Drawing on centuries of Southeast Asian and South Asian Islamic scholarship, the Declaration meticulously documented historical precedents for women's religious authority, noting the following:

> *"the Prophet's wife Aisha taught fiqh to male companions, establishing female religious authority in the earliest Muslim community"* [53]

This research was based on the work of Indonesian scholars, such as Siti Ruhaini Dzuhayatin, who uncovered the archives of female mosque preachers (muballighah) in 19th-century Java, and Pakistani researchers,

such as Samina Ibrahim, who documented the tradition of women's Quranic schools (dars-e-niswan) in pre-colonial Punjab. By combining these regional Islamic feminisms, the Declaration created a powerful counternarrative to patriarchal restrictions on women's mosque participation grounded in authentic Muslim traditions rather than Western feminist frameworks.

These South-South collaborations embody what philosopher Nayyara Rahman describes as "polycentric solidarity" a form of transnational feminist engagement that respects epistemic diversity while building strategic connections.[54] Differing from the universalising tendencies of Western feminisms, which tend to take its own categories and concerns as universally normative, the alliances proceed from the understanding that feminist knowledge arises from particular cultural and historical locations. When Indonesian and Pakistani activists coordinate around access to mosques, or when Turkish and Pakistani feminists coordinate a joint response to child marriage, they are not just exchanging tactics but embarking on a fuller discussion about the manner in which Islamic tradition can be reinterpreted towards gender justice in particular national contexts. This has produced highly successful campaigns. For instance, the Indonesian-Pakistani initiative on access to mosques has produced tangible policy outcomes, such as the establishment of women's prayer spaces in large Karachi mosques and the training of women prayer leaders (imamahs) in Aceh.

These South-South feminist alliances carry theoretical implications well beyond the immediate policy outcomes. By demonstrating the possibility of disciplined feminist critique emanating from Islamic epistemologies well outside Western liberal feminism as its theoretical point of departure, such alliances unsettle the very constitutive structure of contemporary feminist knowledge production. They reveal how the colonial division of the world into "modern" and "traditional" societies continues to distort feminist theory, obscuring the vibrant intellectual traditions that have always existed outside academia in the United States. As Indonesian feminist scholar Lies Marcoes argues:

> *"When we study each other's Islamic feminist histories, we are not just sharing information but reassembling a knowledge system that colonialism had fragmented"* [55]

Collectively, these case studies demonstrate that the greatest vitality of Pakistani Islamic feminism stems from its ability to operate on multiple registers while simultaneously engaging global feminist discourses while remaining rooted in local epistemologies, drawing on Islamic tradition while challenging patriarchal interpretations, and building transnational solidarities that do not require surrendering cultural specificity. In doing

so, they offer a powerful alternative to both cultural isolationism and uncritical Westernisation charting what might be called a third way for feminist struggles in the Global South. As the Jakarta Declaration concludes:

> *"Our movements prove that another world is possible: one where Muslim women are neither exotic victims nor imitation Western feminists, but architects of our own liberation"*[56]

6. Conclusion:

Pakistani Islamic feminism has emerged as a dynamic intellectual and activist tradition that creatively negotiates global feminist discourses while remaining anchored in local struggles. The engagement of the movement with transnational debates from Qur'anic hermeneutics to human rights frameworks has enriched its theoretical foundations while complicating its political positioning. This dialectical process reveals both the possibilities and limitations of translating universal feminist ideals into culturally specific contexts. Looking ahead, the most pressing challenge lies in bridging Pakistan's persistent divide between secular and religious feminists. While Islamic feminists have demonstrated how egalitarian principles can be derived from Islamic tradition, their work remains contested by both conservative religious authorities and secular activists sceptical of faith-based approaches. The movement's future vitality may depend on its ability to foster dialogue across this ideological spectrum while resisting co-optation by state or international actors. Ultimately, Pakistani Islamic feminism points towards a decolonised vision of gender justice one that centres Muslim women's agency in defining liberation on their own terms. As Jamal observes, "The most radical feminist act may be insisting that piety and emancipation can coexist." This insight offers a transformative framework not only for Pakistan but also for global feminist conversations that too often remain trapped in false binaries between tradition and progress.

Pakistani Islamic feminists actively intervened in three key global feminist debates: First, they challenged the Western feminist assumption that religion (particularly Islam) was inherently oppressive to women. While figures like Simone de Beauvoir framed religion as antithetical to women's liberation, Pakistani scholars like Riffat Hassan countered by developing feminist Qur'anic hermeneutics, demonstrating how Islamic scripture could be reinterpreted to support gender equality.

Second, they engaged with postcolonial feminist critiques of universalism. Rather than rejecting transnational feminism entirely, thinkers like Farida Shaheed strategically adapted global human rights frameworks while grounding them in Islamic concepts like maslaha (public

welfare) and adl (justice). This allowed them to participate in international forums like CEDAW without abandoning religious legitimacy.

Third, they complicated the secular/religious binary that dominated global feminist discourse. Amina Wadud's work, for instance, showed how piety could be feminist - a direct challenge to Western feminist notions that saw religious observance as incompatible with liberation. As Jamal observes, *"The most radical feminist act may be insisting that piety and emancipation can coexist."* This intervention remains vital today as global feminism struggles with false binaries between tradition and progress.

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