CONTEMPORARY WESTERN THOUGHT AND PAKISTANI WOMEN: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSE

Salma Razzaq[*]

Abstract

The gaps in compliance with Islamic principles enable contemporary western thoughts about women to constitute a unique threat to muslim societies like Pakistan. This study investigates the sociocultural milieu of Pakistani women, focusing on the factors that have allowed secular western thought to penetrate the minds of muslim women in the country. The research established that patriarchal Pakistani society hampers the practical application of Islamic teachings in women's rights, creating a space for western ideas to gain traction among Pakistan's muslim female population. The research identifies challenges in sociocultural and ideological/religious contexts posed by contemporary feminist thought. It offers recommendations to reign the desire for unchecked liberty and the quest for gender equality. Qualitative methodology with an analytical research approach has been used to examine the internal dynamics through available data about the sociocultural environment in Pakistani society juxtaposed contemporary western thought on women regarding Western authors concerning women for identifying the challenges.

Keywords: Pakistani Women, Feminist Thought, Society, Gender, Empowerment.

Introduction

Culture emerges as a result of the dominance of thought over routine behaviour. Hundreds of different civilisations now live side by side in today's global community. Though every culture has its quirks, two or more aspects of one civilisation can coexist in another. Because its members' ideas determine a group's culture, these shared ideas make peaceful coexistence possible. Modern concepts are having an ever-increasing influence on the social lives of people all over the globe because of the increased contact between people of various regions and faiths in today's globalised world. Over time, western perspectives on women have shifted from a religious foundation to a more secular one in which individuality and gender equality take centre stage and religion is relegated to the margins. Since its emergence in the seventeenth century, when the European elite spoke out in defence of personal freedom and rights, the concept of "freedom" has had a prime place in western philosophy. The motto ultimately helped people win social rights for themselves, including greater independence from the government. The industrial revolution allowed women to leave the house and pursue economic freedom. The most popular slogan was "female equality," after protests about salary and workplace discrimination rather than voting and property rights. Western women's yearning for independence has given rise to a radical women's liberation movement known as "feminism," which many see as a threat to established societal norms. The positions,

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[*]Dr Salma Razzaq is Assistant Professor at Air University Islamabad. The authors' email address is wajisuperb@gmail.com.

status, and concepts of sensuality held by modern women have changed significantly over the last several decades. It's no secret that the feminist caravan has slammed into the western model of the family, and now it seems to be making its way through the Muslim world. Modern western ideas about women challenge muslim cultures like Pakistan due to the lack of compliance with islamic standards. Therefore, there is a need to examine the cultural context in which Pakistani women live, emphasising the variables that have enabled secular western philosophy to permeate the brains of Pakistani muslim women. Moreover, the patriarchal nature of Pakistani culture creates an opening for western thought to acquire momentum among Pakistan's muslim female population by making it more challenging to put islamic teachings into practice around women's rights.

Pakistan figures out very low on the women's situation and is projected as a repressive society in various surveys and gender studies at the global level.[1] Against this above backdrop, this paper looks at the distinctive features of the environment in which Pakistani women live to identify the gaps that enable/encourage contemporary feminist thought to penetrate female minds, leading to severe challenges for muslim women. The research objectives are determined to study the above-stated problem:

- To examine the internal dynamics of the sociocultural environment in Pakistani society concerning women.
- To identify the challenges of contemporary western feminist thought to Pakistani muslim women.
- To respond to modern western thought's challenges to Pakistani women and society.

To identify the issues that contrast with modern Western ideas on women, this study used a qualitative technique with an analytical research strategy to explore the internal dynamics using accessible data regarding the sociocultural environment in Pakistani culture concerning women.

Internal Dynamics of Pakistani Society and the Women

Historically and geographically, Pakistan being part of the pre-independence Indian subcontinent, draws its culture from Hinduism (going back to the pre-Islamic era) and islam. Realising that Pakistan has a more significant national culture that is acceptable and common across the country's regional or provincial divides is crucial to comprehending the culture of Pakistan and women's role within it. It may be challenging to identify one area or province of Pakistan from another because of the distinctive contributions made by each to Pakistani national culture. However, there are certain regional/tribal customs and values which impact the women folk. Family, patriarchy with male domination[2], hierarchy, tribal and feudal social systems, class and caste divisions, and the fact that most people in Pakistan live and work in the countryside and agriculture all contribute to the country's unique culture.[3]

Notwithstanding the negative shades, it is observed that Women in Pakistan have had the right to vote since 1956, and women have played essential roles in the

country's growth and politics ever since. At the federal level, women have been appointed to federal ministerial and judicial posts. In addition, they have held commissioned positions in the armed forces and even served as prime minister, national assembly speaker, and opposition leader.[4] However, women's advancement is contingent on the general progress of society and national development. Here, an attempt has been made to show women's actual situation in Pakistan regarding their social, cultural, religious, economic, and mental lives.

The latest numbers from Pakistan show that women make up around half of the country's population. Pakistani society is not strictly following islamic values, while islam has given women a very high social position. Islam recognises the rights and privileges of women in society and does not impose any restrictions that hinder women's social growth and development. Women are vital community members; given a chance, they can play a more positive role in national development. However, the rural woman has to endure intolerable domination by other sections of society. Numerically, women are equal to men in Pakistan and live in the most diverse tribal, feudal, or urban environments. She is expected to get financial and emotional support from her brothers and father if she gets divorced from her husband.

The most prevalent types of families in Pakistan are nuclear families, semi-nuclear families, joint families, and extended families. In rural parts of the country, families typically consist of many members. This places new responsibilities on women, who are now expected to exhibit higher levels of respect and tolerance. If this is not done, it may lead to conflict and instability within the family, disproportionately negatively impacting women.[5]

Unlike western societies, the prevalence of marriage in Pakistan's predominantly muslim society is one of the country's defining characteristics. Even though divorce is accepted on a social and religious level in Pakistan, the local culture does not look favourably upon the practice. In Pakistani culture, it is an offence, a significant infraction, or a mistake committed by a person, particularly a lady.[6] Typically, men are seen as the protagonists and the recipients of positive attributes like power and respect. The highest rate of male domination is in the rural sector, indicative of Pakistani society's deeply rooted patriarchal ethos and the desire for male progeny.[7] A strong need for male heirs drives this preference for male offspring.[8] Female education, significantly higher education, is viewed as a lower priority in many conservative families.[9]

Cultural Taboos and the Pakistani Women

Dress is an essential part of the culture in any society; however, Pakistani women's dress code also functions as an unambiguous statement of social, religious, and, most significantly, cultural discussion. It is based on islamic concept of Sattar and Hijab.[10] Many women in Pakistan wear the 'purdha' when leaving their homes or mixing with men in social settings. The concept of 'purdha' or veil separates women from the male in society. Women are not prohibited from working but are also asked to keep in line with Islamic values. Due to the 'pardha' system, most women, significantly less educated, have

to work at home to contribute financially to the household.[11] However, the designers have introduced dresses that violate Sattar to some extent, while Western dresses are commonly worn in a corporate environment and higher educational institutions.

Though the family structure is patriarchal, within the household, there is a clear division of work between women and men, segregating women in the private sphere of the house and relegating males to the public arena outside the home.[12] The phrases "domestic violence" and "emotional abuse" refer to behaviours used to exert power and control over another person in a romantic or intimate relationship. Such incidents are frequently reported in the media. Most common among these are burning by acid and explosion of gas heaters.[13] However, mistreatment and manhandling incidents go unreported in conservative families. Child marriage, sexual abuse, domestic violence, abduction, and harassment are only some violent acts against women that are illegal in Pakistan. However, these regulations are not being followed, and there is little understanding of resolving concerns effectively.[14] Dowry is one of the social evils that negatively impacted women's marital life and opportunities.[15] In Punjab and Sindh, women work alongside men in the fields, collect fuel and, in some places, work on construction sites—most women in rural areas do housework and other jobs to earn money.

Women are reported to suffer due to the influence of tribal customs and traditions like Vani, Swara (giving females in compensation to settle the feuds) and Karo Kari (honour killing), which are observed in certain rural regions of tribal and feudal cultures in Pakistan.[16] Besides, the property right is denied under the custom of *Haq bakhshish*, giving up the right to marry to save the property division in the family.[17]

Socio-religious Impediments to Women's Empowerment

Orthodox religious scholars in Pakistan are considered responsible for causing harm to women on the ideological front, which results in their suffering. These religious scholars have infused sexism into our culture by using a variety of religious allusions as a weapon against women playing any role in society in the modern day.[18] They have denied a more prominent role to women by arguing that women should not be allowed to participate in public life.[19] Therefore, the pursuit of gender equality is predicated on the fundamental ideals of social justice and the fair distribution of economic opportunities, which are observed to be on the lowest side (31.6%) and the income of an average woman is below 16% of that of an average man, as per World Economic Forum.[20] However, it is noted that a body of religious leaders in Pakistan, the All Pakistan Ulema Council, has declared a Fatwa (religious edict) condemning honour murders.[21] The Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) has unanimously approved a draft bill aimed at eliminating the inhuman customs of marrying a woman to the Quran and "Haq Bakhshwan" The council in its 157th meeting recommended to the government to award life imprisonment to those who married their sisters and daughters to the Quran.[22] Female madrassas are believed to be imparting education that teaches women to compromise in social life, hence termed oppressive by secular proponents of contemporary thought on women.[23] Feminist

ideology is gaining ground in Islamic civilisations because women in these communities do not have the same rights as men despite legal provisions.[24]

Analysis of Environment in the Context of Women

To sum up the discussion on the life of women in Pakistani society, it is noted that Pakistani society desires to see women who should be nurturing children at home, providing comfort and peace for their husbands, and acquiring comfort from their husband's existence while protecting their sanctity and chastity in the outdoor environment during their presence in academic, social, and other spectrums.

On analysing the possible avenues through which modern thoughts might impact Pakistani Muslim women, it is established that there are gaps in the social environment surrounding women that allow such an occurrence. Consequently, it can be pinpointed to stemming from political, economic, religious, and cultural spheres and the individual's psyche. Islamic teachings on women's rights juxtaposed with modern feminist ideology, the study found that the latter is the cause of the gender gap since it advocates for women's complete freedom. It has been established that in islam, men and women are viewed as having equal rights but different roles and duties. In addition, the study shows that islamic precepts are not yet being put into practice in Pakistan concerning women's rights, creating an opening for modern ideas to gain traction among Pakistani muslim women.

It is clear from the above discussion that the wave of westernisation tends to threaten muslim societies like Pakistan, where the gaps in understanding islam allow contemporary thought to slip into the minds of muslim women, where reluctance to follow the Islamic principles of justice and social responsibilities concerning women nurtures the thought in the innocent minds with the allure of women's empowerment, gender equality, and freedom, thereby undermining Islamic values. At the same time, society is not inclined to allow her the rights provided by religion and even the law of the land. Therefore, the theory of feminists finds space in Pakistani society, which relates to political beliefs and positions that women have traditionally been subservient to males. However, it is promising to see efforts being made to open doors for the next generation of women to pursue careers; far fewer women than males want to make a living in professional fields and prefer a family-oriented life pattern. The westernised school of thought stresses action for women's independence and empowerment in all spheres of life. It propagates the belief that women are in disadvantaged circumstances and that these circumstances should not be maintained but should be altered for the greater good of society. The challenges emerging under the influence of contemporary thought are discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

Contemporary Feminist Thought

Contemporary thought on women originates in the west, where religion has been pushed out to the periphery and freedom is taking the central position. This thought has evolved over the decades because of the denial of human rights to women. Modern

Western society is based on various pleasant and unpleasant changes since Europe's birth.[25] However, the turn of the century and its many developments, particularly industrialisation, provided many women with opportunities to work outside the house. According to Coolidge, "not a few" of these women could tap into their natural intellect and began to challenge and reject the conventional role of women in western culture.[26] With time, a gradual change happened, and "the new woman" emerged between the two world wars. Economic and financial independence was a primary goal for this modern woman. This kind of liberty gave additional rights: the freedom to marry or remain single, the right to seek work, and the right to sexual expression, to name a few. What was most important to "the new woman" was intellectual freedom; women wanted self-realisation, the ability to use their academic skills and talents to find their true selves and identities. As one might expect, this new woman challenged male-dominated cultures and provided authors with plenty of material. As a result of the burgeoning feminist movement, women in modernist literature are typically portrayed as strong protagonists who demand the autonomy to choose between a professional life and a family life if they so choose.

The "new woman," in the eyes of the western philosophical canon, highlights the universal qualities and concerns shared by all people. She recognises the diversity inherent in true equality but also knows that it need not be based on gender lines but on what each person contributes to society. However, the "new woman" was not a perfect human being; she had aspirations and behaviours that were not universally admired. According to June West, this is "a result of women's failure to adapt to freedom of choice".[27] These horrors stoked a noticeable increase in hostility, which gave rise to a new school of thought known as the enlightenment, which rejected the authority of scripture in favour of reason. This new school of thinking ultimately contributed to the development of modern civilisation. It was founded on atheistic and secularist principles like modernism and secularism and then liberal ideals like atheism, humanism, and liberalism, all of which were propelled by the urgent rallying cry of human liberation and equality. As a result, a wide range of social, economic, religious, and cultural standards was subjugated in an intellectual battle against sexism. It appears that these ideas and attitudes are priming young women for sexual encounters and encouraging them to acquire skills that would give them a sense of mastery over their bodies that they may have felt they had lost. With liberalism's help, the feminist movement's aims have progressed to the incontestable conclusion that no universally applicable principles exist. Slavery will naturally come to mind when considering women's role in this system.[28]

The Globalisation of Contemporary Thought on Women

Nairobi (1985), Beijing (1995, 2000), Mexico (1975), and Copenhagen (1975) have hosted significant international conferences on women's problems (1980). Women's rights were advocated for at these conferences, which began with discussions on women's education, access to healthcare, women's representation in politics, etc. Later, attention switched from women's issues to the concept of gender parity and the recognition that the social order required a rethinking of the role of women and men. It was stressed that women could not achieve equality until there was a structural shift. These conferences

played a significant role in transforming women's rights into a movement for unchecked liberty.

There is no doubt that, in the context of anti-woman biases and the depressing treatment of women in ancient Western society, her struggle was legitimate to ask for her fundamental rights in the social, economic, and political context. But this recommendation involuntarily attempted to remove 'the wife' from the family system. Muslim women, who had already gained rights from an Islamic perspective, also became part of this feminist manifesto. Unfortunately, the governments of muslim countries did not resist giving the benefits of the rights set out in islam because they were not being practised in letter and spirit in muslim societies. Hence, muslim women supported the western concept of feminism in principle.[29]

Why the Influence of Contemporary Western Thought?

Samuel Huntington, in his famous book Clash of Civilization, writes, "To be successful, you must be like us; our way is the only way. The argument is that the religious values, moral assumptions and social structures of these (non-western) societies are at the best alien and sometimes hostile to the values and practices of industrialism".[30]

Despite achieving freedom, most of the Muslim world's colonial past is still under the influence of the psychological and political dominance of the west. The first kind of dominance is based on the west's superior intellectual resources and capacity to influence other nations' ideas and worldviews. This type of dominance, referred to as cultural dominance, teaches people to value the same sorts of facts and principles that it does and encourages them to pursue those values. As a result, these people are more likely to accept its way of life. The second kind of dominance happens when the west grows so strong that other nations cannot protect their political and economic independence. Thus, there are two types of hegemonic subjugation that we suffer from our weakness. One is psychological turmoil, and the other is political confusion.[31]

The interplay of western and islamic civilisations, instead of being a missionary tour, a travelogue, a reform movement, a zeal for human progress, etc., is grounded in history. The dialectics of success and loss and power are central to this relationship. The western world's interactions with the Islamic world have traditionally taken place at the sharp end of a sword, but the west now holds the upper hand because of the power of the written word. Due to these many centuries of contact, Muslim communities and people today live under the constant threat of annihilation at the hands of the West. One doesn't need to use one's brain to figure it out; it's completely intuitive. The primary cause of our continued loss and western dominance is that we have not yet fully internalised the experience of defeat and domination. Many of us continue to be influenced by the myth that the colonialists just came to teach us how to write an english petition or recite a poem by the poet wordsworth rather than tackling the much-needed development that India's muslim rulers had ignored.

Since colonialism cast a shadow over muslim cultures and provided a gateway for modern and Western ideas, practices, and institutions to penetrate, the earliest modernisation of muslim civilisations occurred in the context of defeat, subjugation, and cultural dominance. Interfering with muslim intellectual activity, or their "desire for westernisation," means failure and servitude to a docile mentality. In oppressed muslim communities, accepting westernisation was the fundamental problem, not comprehending the west. As a result, the moral justification for such a longing was called into question. Because of this, we now need more contemporary religious interpretations. Our historical and modern understandings of our religion have been heavily influenced by past and present political oppression. As a result of the necessity doctrine, any action may be justified in the eyes of God, and right and wrong no longer matter. As a result of these trends, people are openly discussing the moral justification for adopting a Western way of life. Due to the oppressive nature of the current condition of things, religion is no longer a viable reason for the westernisation process. The west's fixation with making a living, advancing power, and shaping popular culture has given rise to a newfound legitimacy that can be rooted in religion if necessary. Still, religion is increasingly becoming a thing of the past and considers an individual matter. Therefore, religious and cultural conceptions of truth and falsity, two of the most fundamental pillars of traditional religion, have fallen into disuse. We have previously established that western civilisation is presumed to be based on islamic principles; now, the question is how long it will be until an islamic label is affixed to every aspect of western culture.

According to Samuel Huntington, "religion is a central defining characteristic of civilisations"[32]. Thus, the identity of muslim culture prevails over christian civilisation, despite the latter's rejection of religion's place in social life. Without a shadow of a doubt, most muslims today still hold on to the conviction that islam is faithful and intends to be Muslim. However, more and more people's thoughts are drifting away from islam and toward western civilisation's concepts and practices. The academic and intellectual influence of the West has dominated the mental space of the entire world, regardless of political dominance, and it has changed the angles of the eyes in such a way that it has become difficult for the viewer to look at things in the Islamic way and think in the islamic style. Given that this trend will continue until the contemporary renaissance occurs among Muslims, it is clear that islam desperately needs one. The world has moved on from the old Islamic intellectuals and researchers, and they can no longer afford to compete. It is no longer conceivable to get back to where islamic civilisation was 600 years ago, although it was universal, moderate, logical, tolerant, integrated, and balanced in its approach. Thinkers and researchers inside the Muslim community are the only ones who, with the power of intellect, investigation, and exploration, can fight against the impact of Western civilisation by assaulting it at its root, allowing Islamic culture a chance to reclaim its position as a global leader. To achieve social justice, it was necessary to acquire contemporary knowledge, follow the absolute path of the Prophet ﷺ via ijtihad and set up a mutually advantageous political framework.

Contemporary Feminist Thought and Pakistani Muslim Women – Challenges

It is established in the preceding discussion that contemporary western thought, riding the wave of westernisation, has made inroads into Pakistani society due to gaps in understanding islamic life principles and their marginal application in society. The impact of contemporary thought on muslim women in social context leads to various sociocultural attitudes noticed in Pakistani muslim women, including adopting irrational behaviour and an individualised attitude to living one's life. The individual's predispositions (intellect) view a morality open to varying interpretations as a decline in the standards of modesty and morality. The reduction of traditional family values has contributed to lowering the importance of marriage and the family unit as a whole. The primary driver of economic independence is the aspiration to amass a significant amount of material wealth and reduce dependence on male members of the family. Hence, there is a tendency to evade household responsibilities by going back on a promise that one has made to one's partner through Nikah or to one's obligations around the house. In such an individualised lifestyle, resultant isolation from one's peers is associated with an increased risk of anxiety and other forms of mental illness. Moreover, there is a growing tendency to blame repression on those whose worldviews do not align with modern ideas. Therefore, it has become a fashion to praise the values of the west while concurrently acting in a manner that is contrary to the expectations of one's own culture.

The agents of contemporary thought find it easy to lead to ideological displacement through the glitter of universal values like "justice" and "equality," which are part of the Western heritage. It is because there is a lack of adequate religious education and awareness about the rights and privileges granted by islam. As a result, some of the difficulties that Muslim women face may be attributed to the influence of non-muslim ideas, attitudes, practices, and customs, considering that the most prevalent mode of thought in modern times is that of the west. The development of a more secular perspective on the world results from such a worldview. Therefore, instead of ensuring that women are provided with their rights, there is an attempt to provide a flip to gender equality. The available economic opportunities encourage attempts to increase male and female interactions in public while celebrating made-up western events such as mother's day, valentine's day, and other days of the same ilk. Her fresh, radiant beauty is one of the media's most potent and widely used weapons. Her appearance in the media serves as a commodity in a market where attractiveness is bought and sold. Women who choose to expose themselves locally, nationally or even worldwide are seen as unethical and have compromised principles, particularly in Pakistan.[33] The tendency to disregard the societal norms that are generally recognised is seen through the promotion of "love marriages" by non-governmental organisations and the coverage provided by the media. The image of a repressive society causes degradation of the reputations of women and their status in society whenever occasional news of honour killings, wanni, or sawara (giving women compensation to settle feuds) comes to light. Giving preference to a male over a girl leads to devaluing a woman's value while denying women's rights to property through various customs and traditions poses a severe challenge.

Suggestions

The following suggestions are offered in the Pakistani context to guard against the negative impact of contemporary western thought on women.

- We should build a social order at the individual/family/society level following Shari'a in the contemporary environment, thus integrating islam into our lives on a deeper level.
- Motherhood must be prioritised in grooming Muslim women to perform domestic affairs and child-rearing following Islamic teachings and our values.
- Women's rights organisations and activists should pave the way for women's progressive involvement in socioeconomic growth while emphasising on safety, security and dignity of women following islamic values for tremendous success.
- Muslim intellectuals and scholars, including females, must reclaim the space in the social system for female issues currently occupied by secular defenders of women's interests by understanding the challenges posed by the contemporary social environment.
- The role and activities of civil society organisations working on women's emancipation should be closely monitored to avoid the furtherance of ulterior motives based on undesirable western thought.
- Electronic media should create awareness about the negative impact of contemporary western thought on our own social and religious values through well-articulated programmes for all genders and age groups.
- Social media platforms should be used to disseminate accurate Islamic teachings on social and cultural issues to educate women about their rights and responsibilities.

Conclusion

Without prejudice, it is possible to conclude that economic independence, social liberty, equality in the workplace and in jobs, and the like, all contribute to a sort of interaction in which men and women are considered competitors. It is evident from the discussion that the wave of westernisation tends to threaten muslim societies like Pakistan, where the gaps in understanding islam open the door for contemporary thought to slip into the minds of muslim women, where reluctance to follow the islamic principles of justice and social responsibilities concerning women nurtures the thought in the minds of innocent minds with the allure of women's empowerment, gender equality, and freedom, thereby posing a threat to muslim societies. The gaps in understanding Islam allow contemporary thought to slip into the minds of an inventory of the problems that have been recognised in the environment of Pakistan and demand the society, intelligentsia, academia, institutions, media and state to realise severity of these challenges and undertake corrective/defensive measures, before it is too late.

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