

FEMINISM, LANGUAGE, AND RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Feminism as an ideologically motivated movement sought to change the condition of women and to give them equal rights as men in legal, economic, political, religious, and social aspects. The issue of concern in this article is the way it has influenced Christian religion, the translation and interpretation of the Bible, and language, in general. Though the movement has had an impact on the English language use for one reason or another, it is not applicable to other languages, like Arabic, which does not share the linguistic structure of the English language.

Key words:

feminism, gender bias, androcentrism, patriarchalism

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a belief in the principle that women should have the same rights and opportunities in legal, political, economic, social, and religious aspects as men; in practice, it refers to organized activities on behalf of women's right and interest. Concern for women's right dates from the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution, whereby the dissatisfaction with the

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predominant condition of women led to the so-called **Women's Liberation Movement** and later on **Feminist Movement**. The movement sought equal rights for women and gave them equal status with men and freedom to decide their own careers and life patterns. The growing feminist movement aimed at changing society prevailing stereotypes of women as relatively weak, passive, and dependent individuals who were less rational and more emotional than men.

From its inception up to the present time, feminism has undergone revisions and modifications of its principles, due to the theoretical and philosophical basis chosen, and is divided into different types. **Liberal feminists** view woman as an entity like man, hence there should be equality for all. They see sexism as dysfunctional because it deprives society of one-half of its creative work force. Aivazova & Ruane (1996:54) state:

For the allies of de Beauvoir who focused on the fundamental similarity and even the equality of the essential element in human beings, whether male or female, there could not be such a female **essence** in principle: being a woman was not a calling but a condition. Woman must assert herself like any other human being—in labor, creative endeavor, and self-development.

Conservative feminists criticize the feminists who adopt a male model of achievement as females' goals, whereby women's natural desires and needs for family and children are denied. Contrary to liberal feminists, who seek similarity and equality with men, are **Radical feminists**, who see the

oppression of women as the fundamental form of oppression, which stems from male dominance. They argue that:

All preceding **history** and culture had been structured in accordance with the masculine vision of the world, with masculine tastes and preferences - the world had been "masculinized." To take her own place in **history**, therefore, woman must put up her own feminine standards and stereotypes in opposition to the masculine. Unless they asserted their own special vision of the world, of history, and of culture, women would risk losing their uniqueness and would simply dissolve, disappearing into male society. (ibid.)

They believe that reforms and legal changes, while ameliorating the condition of women and an essential part of the process of emancipating them, will not basically change patriarchy. Some reforms need to be integrated with a vast cultural revolution in order to transform patriarchy and abolish it. **Social feminists** recognize that, in general, men as individuals have benefited from patriarchy, the traditional system of ideas and rules which has exalted men and demeaned women. They believe that the feminist project cannot be limited to reforms that help the individual woman succeed. Social feminists link women's oppression with the class structure and see sexism as a way of rewarding the working class male, for it gives them control over women. Women's work is valued less because it does not produce exchangeable goods.

11. CHRISTIAN FEMINISM

Due to its bearing on the subsequent parts of the study, Christian feminism is considered with more details here. A milestone in Christian feminism, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, is believed to have played a leading role in the women's right movement. She aimed at raising the public consciousness about the evils of gender discrimination in the church and in the way that the Gospel is interpreted and translated from Hebrew and Greek with the language of domination. In the introductory part of her *Women's Bible*, Stanton mentions the motives behind general and critical study of the Scripture and argues that "When, in the early part of Nineteenth Century, women began to protest against their civil and political degradation, they were referred to the Bible for an answer. When they protested against their unequal position in the church, they were referred to the Bible for an answer" (1972:7). But how can women refer to the Bible when:

The Bible teaches that women brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned, and sentenced. Marriage for her was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and anguish, and in silence and subjection, she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home. Here is the Bible position of women briefly summed up. (ibid.)

She attributes gender discrimination in the Bible not to the Word of God, but to male-made patriarchy reflected in its interpretation and translation. Rejecting the picture of women depicted in the Bible, Aivazova & Ruane (1996:49) state:

As much as Eve is the symbol of love as temptation, so is the Virgin Mary the symbol of love as salvation, the face of Mary is illuminated by purity, her name is blessed. She has been extolled as the Mother of her Son, the Virgin immaculate, who willingly bent her knee before Him. It is this act that femaleness acquires, finally, traits of holiness and eternity. Did this symbolism mean that the only way to salvation from sin, liberation from the pressure of birth, the only way to possible incarnation of women in God, was through a renunciation of the flesh...? However that may be, Christianity placed the image of Eve—of natural-ancestral femaleness in opposition to that of Virgin Mary, the feminine that is spiritual, enlightened, personal, and eternal.

The abhorrent idea that "women were made after men, of men, and for men, an inferior being, subjected to men," which Stanton sees in the canon, church, priests, and religious denominations, leads her to write her version of the Bible called Women's Bible, together with Matilda Joslyn Gage, a work rejected by many of the more conservative elements of the movement.

Hence, feminism represents a challenge to Christianity. Having developed its doctrine and its scripture in a world in which women were considered subordinate, the Christian religion is now faced with an egalitarian attitude to women. This challenge confronts the church over the issues of priesthood,

ordination, language and theology, in Hampson's (1990) view. She claims that the Christian religion cannot by definition come to terms with the equality of women.

1. 1. 1. INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AND THE GOSPEL

Feminists believe that language and society reflect one another; hence concern about the use of sexist language is part of their increased awareness about the role that it may play in gender discrimination. They, as McCant (1999:116) puts it, perceive that "patriarchy is a social structure built on the dominator model of social organization; androcentric language supports the patriarchal structures. If language shapes as well as reflects culture, inclusive language will dismantle the myth of male superiority, without which patriarchy cannot survive." Androcentrism, a pertinent concept to patriarchy, as elaborated by Simpson (1993:161), "describes a male-centered worldview wherein male activities are evaluated positively and female activities negatively. The principle extends to explanations of language itself, so that usages which are attributed to men are regarded more favorably than those attributed to women."

For Christian feminists, the church is a patriarchal structure in which andocentric language supports and reinforces the male superiority. As a result of this ecclesiastical patriarchy, women are "marginalized and excluded from church ministry." Yet, they believe that "although the Hebrew Bible and New Testament emerged from patriarchal cultures, some biblical texts, if taken seriously, offer hope for emancipation from patriarchalism" (McCant, 1999: 172). According to Sherry Simon inclusive language is a means to this end:

The deep suspicion with which many feminist scholars continue to view the Bible is reflected in the ongoing debate over inclusive language. Inclusive or non-sexist language aims at replacing non-motivated uses of masculine vocabulary by neutral terms: "father" by "parent" when the sex is not specified, "brother" by "brother or sister" and so on. Such a principle may appear to be totally irreproachable - a sensible and unavoidable approach to Translation. They view the Bible as a document of contemporary relevance, a message which speaks to day with the same force and pertinence as it did in biblical times. This view of actualizing the biblical text, within this very narrow framework of gendered-based language, is totally consonant with their view of their task as Bible translators. (1996:124)

However, Simpson (1993:161) sees a controversy over the relationship between language and gender, i.e., the degree that the system of language projects sexist bias:

One side of the debate views sexism in language as inherent to the system itself, and considers that by using a system which is intrinsically biased speakers and writers actively construct the inequality that exists between men and women in society. The other side proposes that sexism is encoded in language, either consciously or unconsciously, by users of language. In this way, linguistic practices will tend to reinforce and naturalize sexist division in society. An underlying premise, which is shared by both sides of the debate, is the valid assumption that western society is organized in terms of patriarchal order.

According to the first view, language is the mould of thought and it determines one's way of thinking and conceptualizing. The very idea is related to the

concept of **linguistic relativity**, which suggests that the way people view the world is determined wholly or partly by the structure of their language. The concept was first developed by American anthropological linguists Sapir and Whorf, and is known as Sapir - Whorfian hypothesis. Nevertheless, it is now widely recognized that such a view is untenable. Simpson's (1993) remark regarding the problems that exist in a strictly determinist approach to sexism in language is noticeable:

Trying to remove sexual bias from society by altering the lexicon is like trying to cure a patient of measles by painting over their spots. We need to replace determinism with a more functional view of language; a view, which explains the structure of language in terms of the functions which language serves. This does not mean that the analysis of sexism in language becomes any less radical. On the contrary, sexist assumptions and bias are reflected, perpetuated, and naturalized in language use and critical linguistic analysis can bring these discursive practices into sharper focus. The point is simply that it is not the code but the way in which the code is used that is significant, (ibid.: 167)

1. 1. 1. 2. WOMEN'S BIBLE

The fundamental question with respect to the *Women's Bible* is how the feminist's interpretation will leave its mark on the Bible translation? Obviously, the main preoccupation of the feminist linguists and Bible translators is with the notion of **gender**. Belonging to grammatical categories, gender is normally considered among the mechanics of language, hence meaningless. However, there are cases in which grammatical gender can be "invested with meaning,"

and poetic language, according to Roman Jakobson, is a case in point (Simon,1996:18). Feminists' conception of gender is another case where grammatical gender stops being meaningless.

While grammarians have insisted on gender-marking in language as purely conventional, feminist theoreticians follow Jakobson in re-investing gender-markers with meaning. The meaning which they wish to make manifest is both poetic and, specially, ideological. They wish to show in what ways gender differences serve as the unquestioned foundations of our cultural life. (ibid.)

The male-oriented language originated by Bible translators is the target of feminist linguists' attack. By eliminating the use of exclusive language, they aim at using a more inclusive language and seek to read the Bible against its patriarchal frames. The most powerful example, which depicts the feminists' interpretation of the Bible, is the Creation Story. The common understanding of the Hebrew term *adam* is that he was the first created male, and then the female counterpart was derived from him. However, recent interpretation rejects the exclusively masculine identity given to the word. The first Book of Moses (called Genesis i: 26, 27, 28) reads:

And God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over cattle, and over all the earth. 27. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him: male and female image, created he them. 28. And God blessed them and God said unto them: Be

fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth (King James Version, 1976).

With regard to Creation Story, Stanton states:

Here is the sacred historians' first account of the advent of women; a simultaneous creation of both sexes, in the image of God. It is evident from the language that there was consultation in the Godhead, and that the masculine and feminine elements were equally represented. Scott in his commentaries says, "this consultation of the Gods is the origin of the trinity." But instead of three male personages, as generally represented, a Heavenly Father, Mother, and Son would seem more rational. The first step in the elevation of women, is the cultivation of the religious sentiment in regard to her dignity and equality, the recognition by the rising generation of an ideal Heavenly Mother, to whom their prayers should be addressed, as well as to a Father.

If language has any meaning, we have in these texts a plain declaration of the existence of the feminine element in the Godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine. The Heavenly Mother and Father! "God created man in his own image, male and female."

The first account of Creation Story in Genesis i is not in harmony with the account in Genesis ii. Genesis ii (21 -25) reads: *And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept; and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; 22. And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto man. 23. And Adam*

said, *This is now bone of my bone, and the flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man* (King James Version, 1976). Stanton wonders why there should be "two contradictory accounts in the same book, of the same event? It is fair to infer that the second version...is a mere allegory symbolizing some mysterious conception of a highly imaginative editor" (1972:20). She attributes these discrepancies in the Gospel account of Creation Story to the sources that have written these parts. Stanton believes that Genesis i-iii are not a unified whole, they are written by different authors in different periods:

When it is remembered that Jewish books were written on rolls of leather, without much attention to vowel points and had no division into verses or chapters, by uncritical copyists, who altered passages greatly, and did not always even pretend to understand what they were copying, then the reader of Genesis begins to put herself in position to understand how it can be contradictory, (ibid.: 16-17)

Furthermore, she asserts that no one can claim that Genesis was written by Moses. The Bible itself, as Stanton mentions, "declares that all the books the Jews originally possessed were burned in the destruction of Jerusalem" (ibid.). The Bible consists of the following:

- a). The Old Testament: a collection of 39 books consisting of the sacred scriptures of Judaism and written primarily in Hebrew, with a few portions in Aramaic.
- b). the New Testament: 27 books originally written in Greek between AD 50 and 100.

c). the Apocrypha: 12 books taken over by the early Christian Church from Greek version of the Old Testament but not forming part of the Hebrew Bible and not accepted by canonical and orthodox Jews. The apocryphal books, known also as *deuterocanonical*, are accepted by Roman Catholics but rejected by Protestants as a basis for doctrine. (Nida, 1998:23)

The issue of **canonicity**, according to Nida, is particularly pertinent to the choice of the books to be included in the Bible. Another issue of concern for Nida is **textual reliability**, "which is a major issue in the choice of the best readings in Hebrew and Greek texts to serve as the basis for translations into other languages....Most scholars insist that a translator follow the best textual evidence, based not on the counting manuscripts but on weighing their relevance" (ibid.:25).

1. 1. 1. 2. 1. POLYSEMEOUS WORDS

Of particular interest to feminists in Bible translating are polysemeous words. Normally a "word (or better, a lexeme) does not have a single, all-encompassing meaning but rather a range of potential senses (a semantic range). The literary context in which the lexemes occur determines which sense is intended by the author" (Strauss, 1998:240). The word/name *adam* has been widely recognized as having the meanings of "humanity" as a whole, "man," and it may also refer to a proper noun. These senses cannot be used interchangeably, though, using *adam* as a generic term will lead to misinterpretation.

1.1.1.2.2. REPLACING MASCULINE-SINGULAR PRONOUNS

By using more inclusive pronouns in lieu of masculine singular pronouns (he, him, and his), feminist Bible translators aim at more precision and accuracy. Both Hebrew and Greek languages, according to Strauss, use masculine pronouns in generic senses:

When Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44 NIV), the Greek term for "him" (cti)raS) is clearly functionally, referring to both men and women. The issue that pervades the inclusive language debate is whether the English personal pronouns "he," "him," and "his" carry this same inclusive sense... Those supporting inclusive-language respond that generic "he" is declining in contemporary English and sounds exclusive to many ears. It thus obscures the sense intended by the other, (ibid.: 245)

1.1.1. 2. 3. THE USE OF PLURAL FORMS INSTEAD OF SINGULAR ONES

Gender inclusive Bible versions also replace masculine singular generics with plural constructions. Thus, "*He who spares the rod hates his son*" (proverb 13:44 NIV) becomes, in its inclusive rendering "*Those who spare the rod hate their children*" It is ironic that "singular they" was used long before its reintroduction as an inclusive term by feminists. "Before the Act of Parliament (1850) that mandated he as generic, it was perfectly acceptable to say, 'Everyone should bring their lunch.' Significantly, Milton, Bacon, Shakespeare employed the singular they" (McCant, 1999:144).

1.1. 1. 2. 4. THE USE OF FIRST AND SECOND PERSONS IN LIEU OF THE THIRD PERSON

Another technique, used by feminist Bible translators to avoid both generic "man" and "he," is the use of first and second person pronouns, which carry no gender distinction. Two examples cited by Stauss (1998:250) are: "*A man's steps are ordered by the Lord*" (proverbs: 20-24, RSV) changes into "*All our steps are ordered by the Lord*" (first for third person); "*What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean'*" (Matthew 15:11, NIV) changes into "*What goes into your mouth does not make[^]ou 'unclean'*" (second for third person).

1.1.1. 3. CRITIQUES OF INCLUSIVE BIBLE TRANSLATION

It is beyond dispute that the inclusive-language Bible has its own opponents and many critics have leveled their criticisms at it and expressed their disapproval, some out of conviction and some based on their linguistic or philosophical points of view. David Neff (1995) is of the opinion that those who produce the new inclusive translation of the Bible are censoring the Word of God. "When an element in Scripture offends our sensibilities, it should challenge us to understanding it with later testimony of the Scripture. But we must never censor God's words, scissoring our way through Scripture..." (p. 19). Bird (1988: 89) argues that being involved with the sexist language of the Bible through translation, prevents us from critical engagement with the underlying issues. She considers the sexism of the Bible as a sign of its historical and cultural limited nature. Bird, as stated by Simon (1996:131),

Argues for a philosophy of translation which is diametrically opposed to the "functional equivalence" school of Eugene Nida. While Nida argues for an actualization of ancient text, making it to come to speak to the reader as if it were written for a contemporary audience (Nida and De Waad 1986), Bird claims that the aim of the Bible translator is to enable a model audience "to overhear an ancient conversation, rather than to hear itself addressed directly" (1988:91). The translator obligation is not to make her audience accept the author's message, or even identify themselves with the ancient audience... The obligation of the translator is therefore to the source text.

Motivated by her linguistic views, Carolyn Graglia (1998) expresses disapproval over feminists' program to institute gender-neutral language as an indispensable part of feminists' social and political project. According to her, to change society, culture, and forms of thought is an utter misunderstanding about the nature of language and how language changes over time. Graglia rejects the feminist's remark that feminine, as the marked gender, is a less human gender. "This is ridiculous, like arguing that prime numbers are less "numerical" than other numbers" (p. 157). In her opinion, linguistic change cannot occur overnight by prescription. "As feminism has wanted to control, mainly to abolish, the use of gender, it thus puts itself into the pinched shoes of the traditional grammatical martinet-leaving us with the image of a fussy schoolman swatting knuckles with a bar rather than of heroic revolutionary woman leading the way to a better future" (ibid.: 159). Graglia draws on the disappearance of gender in Middle Persian as a phenomenon, which was not motivated by feminists' criticism. "It just happened...as most kinds of linguistic

change do. Modern Persian is a language completely without gender" (ibid.: 158).

2. FEMINISM & LANGUAGE TEACHING

The widespread gender studies soon spilled outside the confines of Bible translation to other disciplines, namely, pedagogical issues. Within the language teaching/learning circle, **language materials**, i.e., grammars, textbooks, dictionaries, and teaching guides, and **processes**, i.e., learning styles and strategies, the interaction between teacher-learner and learner-learner were the areas, which received much discussion and research (Sanderland, 1992: 81). Feminists' concern about **grammar** is concentrated on the elimination of the use of generic "man" and "he." Carolyn Jacobson (1995) relates the first written grammars of modern English to the 16th and 17th centuries. The motive behind writing these grammars was to help boys from upper class families prepare for the study of Latin. According to her,

The male authors of these earliest English grammars wrote for male readers in an age when few women were literate. The masculine gender pronouns did not reflect a belief that masculine pronouns could refer to both sexes. The grammars of this period contain no indication that masculine pronouns were sex-inclusive when used in general references. Instead these pronouns referred to the reality of male cultural dominance and the male-centered worldview that resulted.... "He" started to be used as a generic pronoun by grammarians who were trying to change a long-established tradition of using "they" as a singular pronoun. In 1850 an Act

of Parliament gave official sanction to the recently invented concept of generic "he." (p.1)

Feminists try to give guidelines for eliminating gender-biased language through:

a) the use of "he/she," "he or she," "s/he," or singular "they" in place of inclusive "he": the MAN AND THE WOMAN CAME. each ONE CARRIED HIS OWN PARCELS changes into the MAN AND THE WOMAN CAME. EACH ONE CARRIED THEIR OWN PARCELS.

b) eliminating the pronoun altogether: when he arrives at the scene, the officer assess the scope of the emergency can be changed into upon arriving at the scene, the OFFICER SHOULD ASSESS THE SCOPE OF THE EMERGENCY.

c) recasting the sentence in second person: man never understand his strengths until he has been tested can be changed into you never understand your strengths until you HAVE BEEN TESTED.

Quirk et al (1985:342) draw attention to the masculine and feminine genders and state that the choice between them is a matter of the sex, yet,

Difficulty of usage arises, however, because English has no sex-neutral 3rd person singular pronoun. Consequently, the plural pronoun they is often used informally in defiance of strict number concord, in coreference with the indefinite pronouns *everyone, everybody; someone, somebody; anyone, anybody; no one; nobody*.

Everyone thinks *they* have a right to be here.

No one should pride *themselves* on this result.

The plural is a convenient means of avoiding the traditional use of *he* as the unmarked form when the sex is not determined.

In terms of dictionaries and texts, they try to introduce gender-free terms to embrace both sexes equally. Even the use of forms such as spokeswoman, chairwoman, policewoman and so on is avoided, because these terms draw attention to the sex of the person and away from their jobs or functions. Below are a few de-sexed forms of words:

Chairman	chair or chairperson
Policeman	police officer
Foreman	supervisor
Poetess	poet
man-made fibers	synthetic fibers
stewardess	flight attendant
male nurse	nurse

This way of presenting inclusive words is also acknowledged by Quirk et al and other grammarians.

Some optional terms (poetess, authoress) are no longer in normal use, being replaced by dual gender forms (poet, author, etc.). In order to avoid sexual bias in language, efforts have been made (esp. in AmE) to introduce sex-neutral forms....(ibid.:315)

The American Heritage Book of English Usage, A Practical and Authoritative Guide to Contemporary English (1996), reads that "the reforms involving

gender are explicitly political in intent and represent a quest for social justice rather than a wish for more logic." However, elaborating about sexist language and assumptions it states:

Despite this, the movement to reduce sexism in English has been remarkably successful by historical standards. Whether you agree or not, there is no denying that they are widespread both in speech and writing. A glance at any newspaper or five minutes in front of television news will produce evidence to show that people are changing their language to accommodate concerns about fairness to both sexes.

In language teaching, feminist teachers believe that leaving out generic-male references leads to more precision and accuracy. With regard to the teaching of writing, Griffith (1994:1) reads, "Eliminating generic-male language may have political and social implication. For people concerned about effective communication, however, eliminating generic-male language can help more clear, concise, and accurate writing."

Sanderland (1992) expands the domain of the applicability of feminists' findings to other languages, as well. "And though I will be referring throughout to English as a foreign language, much may apply to teaching and learning of other foreign and second languages.

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