

Women in the Western cultural tradition and the caricature of Islam as misogynistic

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Abstract: Partly because of the Christian doctrine of Original Sin and partly because of a long patriarchal history in which women and men were not viewed equally, pre-twentieth-century Western culture was replete with misogynistic rhetoric and references. Many well-established European philosophers and writers with misogynistic tendencies are still highly regarded and their writings intensely studied. Their negative attitudes and male chauvinistic ideas apparently do not stand in their way of being admired and recognized as scholars. Ironically, turning a blind eye to the highly unacceptable portrayal of women in the European cultural tradition, many Western commentators seek to associate Islam with misogyny and that without adequate understanding of the religion. Given this backdrop, this study will discuss the misrepresentation of women in the Western cultural tradition in order to show the untenability of blaming Islam for gender inequality.

Keywords: Western cultural tradition, conduct books, misogyny, women in Islam, Islamophobia.

Introduction

The woman question is discussed across academic disciplines and has remained a matter of overarching concern both in the Islamic world and the West. Over the years, gender studies have taken various approaches and dimensions including an anti-religious stance (see Brouwer, 1992; Warne, 1993; 1995). In mainstream feminist theories, religion is generally considered a contributing factor to women's vulnerability and to their lack of economic and political advancement. Especially, Islam is regarded as a gender-inegalitarian religion and as a belief system that is slanted against women (see Bullock, 2002).

Remarkably, in the contemporary discourse of gender issues, an exclusive focus is placed on Islam as part of efforts to characterize it as insidious and as an

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overriding cause of women's marginalized status or otherness in a patriarchal society. Conversely, misogynistic ideas and elements in the Western cultural tradition that reinforce women's inferior status are given relatively less attention in current debates; and that despite the fact that the first significant Western feminist work – Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) – was a rebuttal to and refutation of, contemporary misogynistic texts widely circulated in Europe. Given this background, this article will provide an account of the treatment of women in the writings of a number of Western philosophers and literary giants, and thus assess the degree of criticism – in the question of women's status – levelled against Islam as compared to that against those Western writers. This article does not touch on the representation of women in the entire Western cultural tradition. However, it analyses a selection of mostly pre-twentieth-century philosophers and literary authors who have exerted a profound influence on Western social and political thoughts as well as intellectual practices, and hence are remembered with much admiration despite their misogyny, negative views of women and the consequent cultural barriers and structural impediments to female advancement in the West for a very long time.

Discussion on self-sustaining stereotypes of women in the Western misogynistic tradition seems to be increasingly overwhelmed by the putative Islam-misogyny nexus in the current media and literary landscape. Therefore, such set-shifting and heightened attention to misogynistic elements of mainstream western culture is perhaps needed in order to counteract the tendency to scapegoat Islam on the question of women's rights. The portrayal of Islam as oppressive to women pervades popular culture and literature, especially in the West. This article does not embark on an exhaustive analysis of the negative representation of Islam as misogynistic.¹ It rather highlights the relative silence in the dominant feminist discourse on the question of misogyny in established Western culture and the systematic fetishization of Islam as the sole reason for women's backwardness as well as the singular source of discrimination against them.

Representation of woman in Western literature

Not long ago, the Western world harboured absurd and unfounded misgivings about woman's human identity and questioned whether she had a soul or not. As

¹ A detailed discussion of the negative portrayal of Islam as gender oppressive is available in Kidwai (2000) and Hasan (2012).

was the case in many other societies, in Europe she was regarded simply as a sexual being whose existence was thought to be necessary *only* to meet the emotional and carnal needs of men and to ensure the continuity of the human race. A common notion was that woman was obsessed with a strong sexual urge and that her body was the site of irresistible libidinal temptations and hence full of filth and impurity. She was considered responsible for all sexual perversions in society and was detested on the plea that she tempts man and thus misguides him. As Place (1998: 47) comments on the representation of woman in Western culture: "The dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress who tempts man and brings about his destruction is among the oldest themes of art, literature, mythology and religion in western culture." The Christian concept of Original Sin that largely determined Western society's perception of women contributed to such sexist notions. It was responsible for the exacerbation of self-reproach among women in the Christian West. As, commenting on the portrayal of women in the canon of English literature, Poovey (1988: 9) states:

This is the representation of women as Eve, 'Mother of our Miseries'. As late as the 1740s, woman was consistently represented as the site of wilful sexuality and bodily appetite: whether figured as that part of man responsible for the Fall, as was characteristic of sixteenth-century texts, or represented as man's foil, as in eighteenth-century texts like Swift's and Pope's poems, women were associated with flesh, desire and socialized, hence susceptible, impulses and passions.

Even though the doctrine of Original Sin postulates that all humans – men and women – collectively inherit a depraved nature, the image of Eve as the temptress in the Bible as well as in popular literature resulted in an extremely negative impact on women in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Consequently, "all women were believed to have inherited from their mother, the Biblical Eve, both her guilt and her guile.... [And] menstruation, pregnancy, and childbearing were considered the just punishment for the eternal guilt of the cursed female sex" (Azeem, 2005). Subsequently, Western philosophers and literary giants spread the idea of women's inferiority and thus had a big share in promoting such notions that undoubtedly conduced and calcified the formation of negative attitude towards women.

The French-speaking Genevan philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) was among the leading literary figures who promoted misogynistic sentiments through particularly powerful and influential texts. According to him, a woman is

naturally weak and hence advises her to practise intrinsic seductive power to charm and subdue the man. He recommends:

She should learn to penetrate into their [men's] real sentiments from their conversation, their actions, their looks and gestures. She should also have the art, by her own conversation, actions, books, and gestures, to communicate those sentiments which are agreeable to them [men], without seeming to intend it. Men will argue more philosophically about the human heart; but women will read the heart of man better than they (Rousseau, 1783/1763: 234-35).

In Rousseau's worldview, women are simply receptors of men's sexuality; and ironically, he seems to suggest that women's sexual desire is constant, strong and insatiable. Since he regards sex as women's forte, he is against equal educational opportunity for them and believes that their active pursuit of education will diminish their actual (sex) power over men. Therefore, in *Emilius and Sophia: Or, A New System of Education* (1763) he advises the female protagonist Sophia to remain submissive and be coquettish in order to keep her husband Emilius' affection. He believes that woman is naturally a coquette. He states:

The fame turn of mind which makes woman of fashion excel in the art of entertaining company, makes a coquette expert in the art of amusing a number of admirers. It even requires a more exquisite discernment to excel in coquetry, than in politeness; for if a well-bred woman behaves politely to everyone, she has done all that is required of her; but a coquette would soon lose her dominion by such an awkward uniformity (Rousseau, 1783/1763: 227).

What Rousseau suggests through such statements is that, since man is physically strong and woman weak, it is natural that man will commit violence and aggression (of whatever kind) to a woman and the onus is on her to take pre-emptive measures to shield herself from his inevitable and predictable assaults. He observes: "Hence arise the various modes of attack and defence between the sexes; the boldness of one sex and the timidity of the other; and, in a word, that bashfulness and modesty with which nature hath armed the weak, in order to subdue the strong" (Rousseau, 1763: 4). Evidently, Rousseau's world is a veritable lawless jungle where the relationship between men and women is based on rivalry and on the difference of roles only, and not on justice or a sense of egalitarianism in society. In his view, it is simply a question of survival-of-the-

fittest that determines women's status in society and the fitness of women principally involves using sex power.

Rousseau expresses such ideas also in *Emile, or On Education* (1762). He insists "clearly that the *Emile* is his best and most important book" (Reisert, 2013: 181). More importantly, *Emile* "influenced child-rearing practices in eighteenth century France. Rousseau's educational theories continued to influence theorists and philosophers throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (Pound, 2006: 6). All these facts suggest that Rousseau's views were accepted in Europe and were not considered fringe or marginal by the mainstream. Rousseau was clearly against institutional education for women and regarded them as incapable of mental exercise. He states:

All the ideas of women, which have not the immediate tendency to points of duty, should be directed to the study of men, and to the attainment of those agreeable accomplishments which have taste for their object; for as to works of genius, they are beyond their [women's] capacity; neither have they sufficient precision or power of attention to succeed in sciences which require accuracy: and as to physical knowledge, it belongs to those only who are most active, most inquisitive (Rousseau, 1783/1763: 233-34).

Women's preoccupations were meant to be directed merely towards serving men and ensuring their happiness. He says:

On women too depend the morals, the passions, the tastes, the pleasures, aye and the happiness of men. For this reason, their education must be wholly directed to their relations with men. To give them pleasure, to be useful to them, to win their love and esteem, to train them in their childhood, to care for them when they grow up, to give them counsel and consolation, to make life sweet and agreeable for them: these are the tasks of women at all times for which they should be trained from childhood (Rousseau, 1911/1762: 135).

Therefore, the acquisition of refinement and accomplishment was at the centre of women's domestic training, and that to please men. Women were not permitted to earn education beyond that point. In the person of Sophia, Rousseau presents a paradigmatic example of an ideal woman. He trains Sophia "to be an extension of her husband's will" (Spring, 2012/2001: 96). He marvels at Sophia's ignorance the following way: "What a pleasing ignorance! Happy is the man destined to

instruct her. She will be her husband's disciple, not his teacher. Far from wanting to impose her tastes on him, she will share his" (Rousseau, 1956/1762: 153).

Rousseau's work resonates with a long tradition of conduct books of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries written mostly by men for women and very popular at that time, especially in Britain. Some notable conduct books are: James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1765, corrected edn. 1766), Dr John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), Hester Chapone's *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773), Thomas Gisbourne's *An Inquiry into the Duty of the Female Sex* (1797) and Jane West's *Letters to a Young Lady* (1811). Written by giant philosophers and moralists of the time, these books exclusively address women and were designed to advise them to behave as sexual beings by preserving and employing physical attractiveness to please men, which was considered their primary duty.

Fordyce (1720-1796) was a Presbyterian minister and moralist. In his *Sermons to Young Women*, he advises women not to engage in any serious contemplation, that is, intellectual exercise. He regards meekness as "the proper consummation, and the highest finishing, of female excellence" and believes that it "has its foundation in the softer composition of the sex" (Fordyce, 1767: 220). He believes that intellectually men and women are different, stating that "there is a sex in minds" (Fordyce, 1767: 221). Upon emphasising the importance of the attribute of meekness for women, Fordyce provides a list of other qualities that he expects women to nurture and hone. As he says:

But along with that we expect to find, on other subjects, a timidity peculiar to your sex; and also a degree of complacence, yieldingness, and sweetness, beyond what we look for in men. Neither do we, so far as I know, ever rank amongst feminine qualities, valour, strictly so called. A woman heading an army, rushing into the thickest of the foe, spreading slaughter and death around her, or returning from the field of battle covered with dust and blood, would surely to a civilized nature suggest shocking ideas (Fordyce, 1767: 222-23).

What Fordyce suggests is that women's lives should be devoted to standards of conduct different from those applicable to men. By gendering the horrors, death and destruction of war, he regards women's involvement in them as scandalous; but, at the same time, he indirectly normalizes men's participation in violent and

adversarial acts in the battlefield. Moreover, he wants women to develop certain attitudes and character traits like 'timidity' and 'complacence' which are considered abominable for, and unbecoming of, men. What is more, like Rousseau, Fordyce recommends women to be mindful of men's preferences and to serve their interests. He advises women thus:

Your business chiefly is to read Men, in order to make yourselves agreeable and useful. It is not the argumentative but the sentimental talents, which give you that insight and those openings into the human heart, that lead to your principal ends as Women (Fordyce, 1814: 211-12).

Rousseau and Fordyce, like many other Western philosophers, are more concerned with the female body, as woman's mind was simply left to "rust". Women's chief preoccupation was to be of use for men. Their success was dependent on their ability to win the heart of men. They were expected to employ decorative beauty and sex appeal and be occupied only with the pleasure of men. Fordyce's advice to women heavily focuses on women's sexual appearance and their feminine obligation to attract men through bodily enhancements and gestures. In most conduct books, there is an overwhelming pressure on women to look agreeable to men and to obtain male approval by being appealing and subordinate to the male gaze.

Literary authors did not see the role of women much differently from the way writers of conduct books did. Since most published writers were men, the representation of women was conceivably biased. In what follows, I will discuss the views of some canonical writers of English literature and comment on their attitude to women. Thus I seek to offer a stimulating critique of the negative portrayal of women and sexist opinions about gender roles and women's place in society. As the female body was considered full of sexuality and hence full of evil and impurity, woman had to undergo, without question, some sort of punishment to control her fleshly desire. Showalter (1978: 116) provides a description of such chastising practices in Victorian England thus:

Whipping girls to subdue the unruly flesh and the rebellious spirit was a routine punishment for the Victorians, as well as a potent sexual fantasy; as late as the 1870s the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* conducted an enthusiastic correspondence column on the correct way to carry out the procedure.

In England during the Victorian period, the female body was thought not only to be impure and full of lust and moral corruption but also the source of many diseases. Along with literary books, many medical treatises advanced such notions. Shuttleworth (1996: 75) observes:

The discourse of disease in the Victorian era drew directly on notions of polluted internal space. Cholera, which seemed to pass mysteriously and invisibly across all known barriers, was associated with syphilis which could lurk invisibly within the female body, turning even the innocent wife into a diseased receptacle who would unwittingly poison her children [...]. Sexuality, and specifically female sexuality, appeared to lie at the heart of the corruption of the industrial social body. These associative connections are given fictional embodiment in Dickens' novel, *Bleak House*, where the mouldering diseases of capitalism and female sexual passion are drawn into one circle.

Such negative notions about the personhood of women invalidate the very idea of women's equal rights. In order for women to have self-esteem and attain a sense of human dignity, the recognition of their equal human identity is important. Logically, as woman was primarily considered a sexual being, and not a human being in the sense man is, she was denied many human rights and privileges. For the same reason, female literacy was not considered necessary. Education and skills were considered necessary to engage in public life more efficiently. Since the very purpose of women's existence was thought to please men in the private sphere, institutional training for them was not deemed necessary. Such cultural mythologies prompted Catherine Macaulay (1731-1791) to argue for female education in her "Letters on Education" (1790). In this "religious work", Macaulay argued that "women needed rational education before they could be judged moral beings; if they were regarded primarily as sexual, they could not be fully human. Feminine frivolity and triviality could only be remedied by the cultivation of feminine intellect" (Todd, 2008: xvi).

In a nutshell, opposition to female education was based on the theoretical premise that, as sexual beings, women's chief duty was to please men who for them were viewed second to God. As Eve addresses Adam in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (iv. 634-38):

To whom thus Eve with perfect beauty adorn'd.

My Author and Disposer, what thou bidst
 Unargu'd I obey; so God ordains,
 God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more
 Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise.

According to Milton, compared to men the status of women is so low that Adam complains that God gave him such an inferior life mate, that is, Eve:

Hast thou not made me here thy substitute?
 And these inferiour far beneath me set?
 Among unequals what society
 Can sort, what harmony, or true delight? (*Paradise Lost*, viii, 381-85)

Milton was an integral part of a long cultural tradition that degraded women as submissive sexual objects. Therefore, his notion of women's inferiority went down well with contemporary readers. Milton was perhaps the ablest exponent of the theory that women are essentially inferior and subordinate to men. Since women were bound to act as foils to men, the putative inferiority of the former was necessary to establish the superiority of the latter.

In pre-twentieth-century Europe, education for men and women was sharply polarised. As men and women were thought to have different responsibilities, the education of the former was considered poles apart from that of the latter. While men could explore and discover all the treasures of knowledge, women's educational opportunities were restricted to the extreme end of deprivation. Female education stood for instilling 'accomplishments' and refinement in women, which was necessary for them to please men. In other words, since women had no important involvement beyond the four walls of the house, the need for their formal education was not even considered. Accordingly, writers who talked about female education argued that women needed practical training for the better execution of their domestic roles only.

The English poet Lord Byron (1788 – 1824) once suggested that women should "read neither poetry nor politics – nothing but books of piety and cookery" (Byron, 1833: 248). Such ideas were well-received because there was a wide consensus that women's roles were confined to the domestic sphere and that they were not expected to work outside the home. In Jane Austen's celebrated novel

Pride and Prejudice (1813), a major character named Charles Bingley and his eldest sister Caroline Bingley express admiration for the ‘accomplishments’ of the daughters of the Bennett family. Their conversation goes as follows:

It is amazing to me, said Bingley, how young ladies can have patience to be so very accomplished as they all are.

All young ladies accomplish! My dear Charles, what do you mean?

Yes, all of them, I think. They all paint tables, cover screens, and net purses. I scarcely know anyone who cannot do all this, and I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time, without being informed that she was very accomplished (Austen, 2016/1813: 27).

Thus women were totally preoccupied with bodily embellishments and orienting their lives as men’s pleasing companions. Women and intellectual exercise were considered an oxymoron. Dr John Gregory goes even further than that and recommends women to hide their learning even if they happen to have any share in it. He advises:

Be even cautious in displaying your good sense. It will be thought you assume superiority over the rest of the company—. But if you happen to have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding (Gregory, 1789/1774: 31-32).

Milton regards women’s intellectual exercise as dangerous, as he believes that learning is unsafe in the hands of women:

All higher knowledge in her presence falls

Degraded. Wisdom in discourse with her

Loses discountenanc’d, and, like Folly, show;

Authority and Reason on her wait (*Paradise Lost*, viii. 551-54).

English writers Jonathon Swift (1667-1745) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744) share almost the same notion about female intellectual capacity. Jonathon Swift begins his *The Furniture of a Woman’s Mind* (1727) thus:

A set of phrases learn’d by rote;

A passion for a scarlet coat;

When at a play, to laugh or cry,
 Yet cannot tell the reason why;
 Never to hold her tongue a minute,
 While all she prates has nothing in it;
 Whole hours can with a coxcomb sit,
 And take his nonsense all for wit;
 Her learning mounts to read a song,
 But half the words pronouncing wrong;
 Has every repartee in store
 She spoke ten thousand times before (Lines 1-12).

Alexander Pope (1743) maintains:

Woman and fool are two hard things to hit;
 For true no-meaning puzzles more than wit (Epistle II— “To A Lady: Of the
 Characters of Women,” lines 113-14).

In Victorian England it was believed that woman’s pursuit of intellectual study could cause suppressed menstruation, which might eventually trigger the eruption of nymphomania. Such arguments were later used to bar women from entering higher education, as their pursuit of higher institutional learning, the physicians argued, could lead to a complete breakdown of female health (Shuttleworth, 1996: 77). Similarly, creative work was not thought appropriate for women and was treated as a taboo subject for them. In 1836 Charlotte Bronte (1816 – 1855) sent to the Poet Laureate Robert Southey (1774 – 1843) a packet of her poems and sought his comments on them. The advice that came from Southey was:

Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity (quoted in Bock, 1992: 167).

Because of such negative notion about the female literary career, women writers had difficulty publishing their work. Married women needed the authorization of their husbands to publish while many of them could not publish in their own

names. Such social discouragement and stiff opposition to women's creative practices compelled the three Bronte Sisters – Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte (1818 – 1848) and Ann Bronte (1820 – 1849) – to resort to masculine pseudonyms. In order to start writing creative pieces in 1846, they had to take pseudoandronyms – Currer Bell, Ellis Bell, and Acton Bell – whose initials correspond to their real names. In the same way, the French romantic writer George Sand (Amandine-Aurore-Lucile Dupin [1804-1876]) and following her, the British writer George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans Cross [1819-1880]) most notably used a kind of male impersonation to gain entrance into the male preserve of the literary career.

While in the intellectual arena women were crippled by many restrictions and impediments which contributed to their abject dependence on men, the case of men's relatively superior physical strength – brawn power – was used to further subjugate women in gender relations. Through the introduction of his evolution theory, Charles Darwin made a serious blow to women, as it supports the idea of the survival of the fittest on the basis of physical strength. Darwin (1989/1871: 621) says:

Man is more powerful in body and mind than woman, and in the savage stage he keeps her in a far more abject state of bondage than does the male of any other animal: therefore it is not surprising that he should have gained the power of selection. Women are everywhere conscious of the value of their own beauty; and when they have the means, they take more delight in decorating themselves with all sorts of ornaments than do men.

If the human value is determined by physical strength, in most cases women will remain in perennial slavery to men. As the fourteenth-century Italian literary giant Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75) voices through the character of a queen in “Novel IX” or “Ninth Day” of *The Decameron* (1353):

Whoever rightly considers the order of things may plainly see the whole race of woman-kind is by nature, custom, and the laws, made subject to man, to be governed according to his discretion: therefore it is the duty of every one of us, that desires to have ease, comfort, and repose, with those men to whom we belong, to be humble, patient, and obedient, as well as chaste; which is the great and principal treasure of every prudent woman (Boccaccio, 1820/1353: 500).

Since it was taken for granted that the physically strong and dominant man would naturally do violence to the weaker sex, as discussed before, the latter was expected to learn a bit of cunningness to survive. Women's supposedly inherent cunningness is reinforced by the English satirist Samuel Butler who says: "Brigands demand your money or your life; women require both" (quoted in Prochnow, 1955: 332). The fact that this quote is included in Prochnow's *Speaker's Handbook of Epigrams and Witticisms* (1955) points to the favourable reception of such ideas among sections in Western society even in the second half of the twentieth century. Similarly, highlighting the notion of inherent cunningness of women, Jonathon Swift states:

Improving hourly in her skill,

To cheat and wrangle at quadrille ("The Furniture of a Woman's Mind", lines 25-26).

Cunningness was thought to be an innate characteristic of all women, as Rousseau (1956/1762: 140-41) suggests:

I should not be sorry if sometimes she were educated to exercise a little cunning, not to elude punishment but to escape having to obey. Guile is a natural gift of her sex; and being convinced that all natural dispositions are good and right in themselves I think that this one should be cultivated like the rest. The characteristic cunning with which women are endowed is an equitable compensation for their lesser strength. Without it women would not be the comrade of man but his slave. This talent gives her the superiority that keeps her his equal and enables her to rule him even while she obeys.

The Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud represents woman as a mysterious and most ludicrous being. Towards the end of his career, he confessed to his "one-time analysand and, then friend and benefactress, Marie Bonaparte" (Peebles, 2004: 87) that the mysterious nature of women failed him. He said to her: "The great question, which has never been answered and which I have not been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is 'What does a woman want?'" (quoted in Peebles, 2004: 87). The British novelist W. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) depicts an image of women in the following manner:

Gentlemen, woman is an animal that micturates once a day, defecates once a week, menstruates once a month, parturates [sic] once a year and copulates whenever she has the opportunity (Maugham, 1954: 12).

More importantly, all such normal bodily functions of women were regarded as their physical inadequacies. A similar idea of women's physical inferiority was rife in medical books of the English Victorian period. Medical scientists espoused to establish that, since it undergoes the monthly cycle, the female body is most fragile. On the basis of such theories, they concluded that women were most susceptible to mental disorder. Sally Shuttleworth (1996: 4) points to this male chauvinist notion thus: "Psychiatry, or as it was then known, mental science, was another emergent area of knowledge which similarly focused on female hysteria and insanity and the unstable processes of the female body." In this regard, Shuttleworth quotes George Man Burrows (1771-1846) who says: "Everybody of the least experience must be sensible of the influence of menstruation on the operations of the mind. In truth, it is the moral and physical barometer of the female constitution" (Burrows, 1828: 146). Thus for centuries, misogynistic commonplaces remained pervasive in Western culture and were promoted by male writers "in a wide variety of texts designed for very different audiences: sermons, conduct books, theological works, maxims, proverbs, textbooks, encyclopedias, medical texts, ethics manuals, devotional treatises, hagiographies, romances, lyric poetry and history" (Finke, 1999: 12).

If we analyse literature of other European countries, the picture that we may piece together of women's representation may not be much different from what transpires above, as Western writings are replete with theories that women are by nature cunning and mysterious, which questions their equal human status. The German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche (1844 – 1900), one of the most powerful intellectuals of late nineteenth-century Europe who undoubtedly exerts enormous public influence on the Western (secular) mind, perceives women thus: "But she does not want truth: what is truth to woman? From the beginning nothing has been more alien, repugnant and hostile to woman than truth – her great art is the lie, her highest concern is mere appearance and beauty" (quoted in Yeğenoğlu, 2003: 550). Because of his negative remarks about women and femininity, even though there are debates about his actual view about women, Nietzsche "has the reputation of being a virulent misogynist" (Oliver & Pearsall, 1998: 2).

As stated before, the scope of this paper does now allow for an exhaustive list of Western misogynistic philosophers and writers or a complete account of their

male chauvinistic attitudes. Nor is this article intended solely to portray a negative picture of the Western cultural tradition, as many non-Western pre-twentieth-century cultural traditions share similar misogynistic attitudes and streaks of thought. Rather, the brief discussion of this article on misogynistic views in the western cultural tradition is meant to show that such misrepresentation of women and their abilities is not adequately discussed in contemporary debates especially in the media. Nor have the misogynistic tendencies of these Western philosophers and writers stopped them from being celebrated in the Western intellectual tradition and beyond. Inadequate attention to this long-established misogynistic tradition has remained, to some extent, the elephant in the room. Dominant Western feminist and literary discourses rather direct their rage and hatred against Islam, and that with little understanding of, or intellectual engagement with, the religion which is discussed in the following section.

The caricature of Islam

From the preceding discussion, it can be safely concluded that the representation of women in dominant Western culture until the first half of the twentieth century was overwhelmingly negative and an embodiment of male chauvinist culture. These point to a huge task of addressing such misogynistic stereotypes and of disabusing the public mind of those prejudices against women. There have been many honourable Western scholars like Mary Wollstonecraft (1759 – 1797) who fought against existing sexist notions of her time almost single-handedly by way of providing feminist arguments as spelled out in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In a relatively more recent time, Mary Kinneer produced a book titled *Daughters of Time: Women in the Western Tradition* (1982) that “describes, analyzes, and assesses the roles of women at various times in Western history, in those European and North American societies which inherit traditions forged in Greece, Rome, and Palestine” (Kinneer, 1982: 2). Later works critiquing the negative portrayal of women in Western culture include, among others, Poovey (1988) and Shuttleworth (1996).

However, surprisingly and ironically, despite the appalling picture of women in dominant Western philosophy and literature, the most malevolent shaft of criticism is generally hurled at a scapegoat, that is, Islam. Turning almost a blind eye to an astounding list of misogynistic Western writers, many in the West launch unjustified, malicious attacks on Islam on the question of women. Thus

Western obsession with Islam to fetishize it as a misogynistic religion has become common knowledge.

The British-Trinidadian writer V. S. Naipaul (1932 –) is a Nobel laureate in literature, a literary celebrity and polemical writer with a reputation as a fierce critic of Islam. His *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1981) and *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples* (1998) are testaments of his biased attitude to, and caricature of, Islam and Muslims. His hatred for Islam and its followers is manifested in many ways, one of which is to make degrading remarks against Muslim women. While commenting on a hijab-wearing Muslim woman, Naipaul (1981: 16) states:

Another evening, on another programme, an Iranian woman came on with her head covered to tell us that Islam protected women and gave them dignity. Fourteen hundred years ago in Arabia, she said, girl children were buried alive; it was Islam that put a stop to that. Well, we didn't all live in Arabia (not even the woman with the covered head); and many things had happened since the seventh century. Did women—especially someone as fierce as the woman addressing us—still need the special protection that Islam gave them? Did they need the veil? Did they need to be banned from public life and from appearing on television?

His pejorative remark about Muslim girls in headscarf reads:

... I thought as we drove through the town that I saw signs of the new Muslim aggressiveness: in the new Muslim school, with the girls in white head dresses that emphasised their Mongoloid appearance denied them individuality, and made them, when they were in groups, look like little shoals of blanched big-headed tadpoles (Naipaul, 1998: 84).

Perhaps, Naipaul's overgeneralized, simplistic and erroneous observations about Muslim women do not merit any intellectual response. Islam offers solutions to many of women's entrenched gender-based inequalities and disadvantages. At the centre of the religion of Islam is the primordial principle of justice which ensures equitable treatment of men and women. Wadud (2002) states: "[Islam] prohibits wanton violence towards women and girls and is against duress in marriage and community affairs. Women and men equally are required to fulfil all religious duties, and are equally eligible for punishment for misdemeanours." Many of the mistreatments of women including female infanticide prevalent in Arabia around

the time of the advent of Islam persist in parts of today's world albeit in different forms and degrees, and with shifting boundaries and varying intensity. So deriding Islam as irrelevant to gender issues of our time smacks of both ignorance and arrogance.

However, what Naipaul's celebrity status and his license to caricature Muslim women suggest is that, even though in current intellectual culture Western writers as a whole do not make degrading remarks about women, such a change of attitude does not seem to apply to the portrayal of Muslim women. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Naipaul perhaps would not dare to caricature Western, white non-Muslim women. If he did, the feminist outcry against him would be overwhelming. However, he has exercised excessive liberty to portray Muslim women in such a negative way – “little shoals of blanched big-headed tadpoles” – that seems to close down alternative meanings of their selves and choices. What is more, Naipaul's wanton and senseless caricaturing of hijab-wearing Muslim women did not stop him from receiving a knighthood from the British monarch in 1990 and the lucrative award from the Nobel Committee for literature in 2001.

Another contemporary British writer with pathological hatred of Islam and Muslims is Martin Amis (1949 –). Like Naipaul, Amis also uses the women in Islam issue to vent his venom against Islam. He states: “I don't think that we can accommodate cultures and ideologies that make life very difficult for half the human race: women” (quoted in Donadio, 2008). On a different occasion, he added: “I feel an intellectual distance to Islam. There are great problems with Islam. The Koran recommends the beating of women. The anti-Semites, the psychotic misogynists and the homophobes are the Islamists” (quoted in Clark & Yaqoob, 2007). Amis' wholesale criticism of Islam shows his ignorance about a vibrant interpretive culture and hermeneutic endeavours within Islam and about the diversity within the Muslim community. It also manifests his historical amnesia as he fails to manifest an awareness of the misogynistic tradition in mainstream European culture. He lacks, in the words of T. S. Eliot, “the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (Eliot, 1919). While caricaturing Islam as a misogynistic religion, writers like Amis seem to turn

a blind eye to the long tradition of male chauvinist writing in the Western intellectual tradition.

Is Islam misogynistic?

Although the vast majority of Muslims believe that Islam has provided women with equitable rights, in many Muslim societies their gendered sufferings have remained unabated. As a consequence, critics of Islam blame the religion for women's oppression. However, defenders of the religion associate women's rights abuses in Muslim societies with socio-cultural mythologies and with misinterpretations of Islamic texts, the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Today's Muslim world is beset with many problems – political, social, economic and cultural. The colonial past and the current neo-colonial interventions have left the Muslim world in disorder. Women's plight is one of the many problems that have engulfed Muslim societies. Therefore, if women's position in Islam is assessed only on the basis of the reality in Muslim societies today, one may reach a wrong conclusion and may not appreciate the fact that women suffer in Muslim societies for reasons extraneous to Islam.

The main reason for widespread misunderstanding in Western thought about women's position in Islam is the misapprehension of the religion and, to some extent, prejudice against it. There is historical ignorance about Islam and about the Muslim world in Western societies. Some aspects of wrong information among Westerners about Islam and Muslims are baffling.

Once I had to correct a British friend and tell her that we Muslims do not worship Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and that he is not our God. In Germany, I incidentally interviewed four of my friends – all students of a prominent university. None of them could tell me where Bangladesh is; and that after knowing me for months. Another western friend of mine of liberal intellectual stature made a bewildering mess involving my current country of residence (Malaysia) and Myanmar. Ignorance about Islam and about the Muslim world has tremendous implications with regard to the perception of various issues involving Muslims including women's position in Islam. Perhaps an ordinary Westerner will get almost everything wrong when it comes to the question of women's status in Islam, and that despite the presence of a sizeable number of Muslims in the West.

The German diplomat and Christian-turned-Muslim scholar Murad Wilfried Hofmann (1931 -) makes a succinct remark in this regard.

Non-Muslims usually assume that women are not allowed into the mosque or on pilgrimage. Some people even still believe that women in Islam are thought to have no souls. How disturbed can man's relationship to reality become! How grotesque that such legends continue to live on in the face of clear evidence to the contrary!

In Islam, women are not only seen as possessing a soul; they also enjoy the same religious status as men, and therefore must, if possible, perform the pilgrimage. According to David Long, *The Hajj Today* (Albany, N. Y., 1979), in 1972, 170,864 of the 479,339 pilgrims to Makkah, namely 34.6%, were female. And while it is true that when praying in a mosque, women do not mingle with men, this is very much like Catholic women who used to occupy only the left side pews when attending mass.

In other respects too, Muslim women have enjoyed during the last 1400 years a legal status that their European sisters only obtained with difficulties during the 20th century.

As a matter of principle, women are not barred from any usual profession. During the Battle of Uhud (627), Muslim women fought as combat support troops, and the Battle of the Camel (656) was even pro forma commanded by a woman: Aishah, the Prophet's wife.

There are other debatable points concerning the equality of sexes in Islam. Nevertheless, the critic should absorb the facts that are mentioned here before he or she launches a wholesale attack on Islam in pursuit of women's emancipation (Hofmann, 2001: 112-13).

Ordinary Westerners cannot be blamed as they have to depend largely on media reports fed by the establishment. However, Western scholars with orientalist inclinations view the Islamic world as static and tend to reduce it to certain essentialist characteristics or stereotypes. They blame Islam for women's subordination and vulnerability. Unfortunately, such voices are dominant and get greater attention from the mainstream media. As Abu-Lughod (2016: 601) states, "[O]nly certain feminist voices—those that blame Islam for misogyny in Muslim cultures—get authorized in the mainstream public spheres in Europe and the United States."

Conversely, in the Western intellectual tradition, there have always been scholars who are in search of truth and objectivity. Many Western scholars of the

past and present made efforts to look beyond the official narrative concerning women's condition in the Islamic world and thus came to realise the truth about the women-and-Islam question. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (1927 – 2008) is one of them. She made extensive journeys throughout the Muslim world to understand Muslim women's condition and treasured her experiences in a monumental work titled *In Search of Islamic Feminism: One Woman's Global Journey* (1998). While she was travelling in Kuwait she interviewed a female Muslim soldier, Lubna. This is how she narrates her conversation with Lubna:

Lubna was one of eight Kuwaiti women who fought in the Gulf War. I don't remember reading anything at all about Kuwaiti women's participation, although American female soldiers were a regular feature on the news broadcasts and reports in the United States. I said as much.

Lubna said, 'Well, B. J. [Betty Jane, Fernea's nick name], don't you think that's part of America's problem with the issue of Muslim women?'

Yes, but there you were, in uniform, in combat. There. How could they miss your presence?

'They didn't. But they chose not to mention us.'

It was Lubna and an American woman sergeant who discovered the forty wailing babies, unharmed but starvingly hungry, left behind in an orphanage as the Iraqi army retreated. It was Lubna and her American friend who rescued the babies, found them all temporary homes, and cadged dried milk from American army rations to feed them.

And then Lubna told me a story about an American reporter who was covering the liberation of Kuwait and was passing along the lines of American soldiers entering Kuwait City. He paused before the two women, dark-haired Lubna and the blond young American sergeant. The reporter began asking questions of the American sergeant, "So my friend said, 'You should interview Lubna, she was in my company.'

'This Arab girl here?'

'Yes, this Arab girl here. We fought side by side.'

The reporter had looked startled. 'You're telling me Kuwaiti women were actually in combat? I don't think so somehow.'

Then my American friend got really annoyed. ‘Look,’ she said, ‘I don’t know who you are, but I’m telling you I served with Lubna and she was damn good. She knows as much about weapons as I do.’

The reporter folded up his notebook, put his pen behind his ear, and prepared to move down the line.

My friend grabbed his arm and said, ‘Why won’t you write down what Lubna did? It’s part of the story. It’s a good story.’

But the reporter said, ‘Sorry, lady. Our view in America is that Arab women are behind our women, and they wear veils. That’s what makes news, not what your Arab lady friend supposedly did. Negative sells in this area and I’m a stringer and need to make money’ (Fernea, 1988: 191-92).

It is true that many in the West have poor knowledge of, or prejudice against, the Muslim world and lack the right understanding of women’s position in Islam. However, that does not accord Muslims the license to be complacent and think that their knowledge of the subject is adequate. On a personal note, I can say that my experience forbids me to profess that the general run of Muslims – both educated and uneducated – are knowledgeable enough about the correct status of women in Islam. Perhaps, the inadequacy in the West in this regard has an indirect bearing on the poor understanding of Muslims about this subject. The West being the main centre of contemporary knowledge production, exchange and dissemination, many educated Muslims unquestioningly and uncritically accept misconstrued notions of Islam and of women’s position in the religion that they receive from Western sources.

Almost all my Muslim friends with whom I happened to share my understanding of Original Sin from an Islamic perspective were taken by surprise when I explained to them that Islam does not support the doctrine of Original Sin and does not subscribe to the idea that Eve tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit hence she is primarily responsible for his pitfall of disobeying God’s command. There are many other areas relating to gender issues about which most Muslims do not have the correct Islamic understanding. For example, the questions of women’s consent in marriage, wife-beating, women’s witness, inheritance, mahr, polygyny, child marriage, the divorce procedure, and similar other issues.

To appreciate the actual position of women in Islam, many Muslim scholars had to make an intellectual odyssey. The scholar Abd Al-Halim Abu Shuqqah had embarked on a project of writing a biography of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Along the way, he changed his research focus altogether and wrote a different book in Arabic, that is, *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah fī-'Asri al-Risālah* (Liberation of Woman in the Era of Prophethood [Early Islam]) in 6 volumes (1990-1994) which has been translated into other languages. While undertaking a thorough research on the Prophet's life, Abu Shuqqah was amazed to notice – contrary to the usual perception of women's status in Islam – the exemplary freedom women enjoyed during the Prophet's time, as he was equally shocked to see the widespread wrong understanding about women's rights in Islam.

Like Shuqqah, I also experienced amazement, shock and surprise when I started studying women's status in Islam methodically under the guidance of a mentor. To my surprise, I realized that most of my earlier perceptions of women and their status in Islam had been influenced by preconceived cultural values and assumptions, the suspension of which was needed for me to grasp the correct understanding of the subject. Unfortunately, there are still many educated Muslims who do not have the right perception of women's rights in Islam. Exhaustive and systematic research by Muslim scholars on women's position in Islam is still dreadfully and unforgivably inadequate, even though they have a moral, religious and cultural responsibility to employ sincere and painstaking efforts to lift the veil of misunderstanding of women's status in Islam. Once truth-seeking academics from both the West and the Islamic world engage in researching and disseminating women's position in Islam, people in general, will have a greater understanding of the subject.

Conclusions

This study provides a glimpse into the way women were represented in the European cultural tradition. It did not discuss extensively the status of women in Islam. What has been shown is that, despite a long tradition of negative representation of women in Western literature, there is a critical lacuna at the heart of Western discourse on gender issues; and the misogynistic chauvinism entrenched in the Western tradition is not adequately highlighted. The Western philosophers and writers I have discussed in this article constitute part of the Western canon. They are often presented as cultural icons and their works are taught and studied within the groves of academia and beyond. Their unacceptable

negative portrayal of women does not seem to have decreased their standing in the public rank hierarchy. Rousseau, Gregory, Fordyce, Milton, Pope, Swift, Byron, Southey, Nietzsche and other philosophers and writers with misogynistic tendency are still highly regarded in the Western cultural tradition. Feminists are largely quiet about male chauvinist elements in the works of these writers. For instance, there is no organized campaign to abolish these writers and philosophers from university curricula. Nor should there be any. Despite their misogynistic thoughts and ideas, their scholarship and contributions to various fields of knowledge are undeniable and should be discussed in the academic sphere.

In other words, this study is not intended to discredit these Western writers. Their literary merit and scholarship are well-established, well-documented and quite rich in the range of other issues they explicate in their writings. What this research has done is to show the diametrically opposite treatment that Islam receives both in the academic and popular discourses on gender issues in the West. Instead of addressing the horrendously misogynistic tradition in Western culture, many commentators single out Islam for criticisms and attacks on the question of women's status, and that without adequate knowledge and understanding. In the question of gender egalitarianism, Islam will come clean if pitted against philosophies propounded by the likes of the Western writers discussed in this article. A detailed discussion of women's position in Islam was also not the focus of this article. The central thesis and argument of this study is that Western writers with a chronic tendency to blame women's oppression on Islam do not address the misogynistic tradition in Western culture, and this smacks of academic bias and speciousness.

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