

# The Elements of Islamic Feminism in Non-Islamic Comparative Literature: A Case of Chopin and Megha's Short Stories

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## **Abstract**

A prevailing argument among many groups, including feminists, academics and the press, insists on gender inequalities in accordance with the precepts of Islam is a debatable issue. However, in discussing the issue based on a comparative literature whereby analyzing short stories based on non-Muslim authors is something new. Hence, the researchers embark on this study by analyzing two famous short stories written by outstanding authors, *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin and *Winners Never Quit* by Megha Mukherjee. The qualitative approach in analyzing the short stories were used thought out the study by also referring to past studies and essential opinions by scholars. It is found that the elements Islamic Feminism can be complied in both short stories even though the short stories do not directly mentioned about Islam. Also, the issue of feminism is a global issue and should be discussed in universal manner regardless whatever religions and logistics. It is the issue of equality of human being.

Keywords: Islamic Feminism, Comparative Literature, Kate Chopin, Megha Mukherjee

## **Introduction**

This study of comparative literature discusses the Islamic feminism views from two short stories written by two prominent authors. The purpose of analyzing the short stories is to find the similarities and differences of the authors' idea from the view of Islam. In the "*General Introduction*" to his *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method*, A. Owen Aldridge (1969) thus begins his second paragraph:

*It is now generally agreed that comparative literature does not compare national literatures in the sense of setting one against another. Instead it provides a method of broadening one's perspective in the approach to single works of literature – a way of looking beyond the narrow boundaries of national frontiers in order to discern trends and movements in various national cultures and to see the relation between literature and other spheres of human activity*

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boundaries of national frontiers in order to discern trends and movements in various national cultures and to see the relation between literature and other spheres of human activity” is important to enrich the epistemology from the scope of researchers’ religious belief (Mir-Hosseini, 2007). This is to ensure that the scope of comparative literature would become flourishing and well- worldly accepted.

According to Dr Margot Badran from al-Azhar University and Oxford University (2009), she defines Islamic feminism as the idea of gender equality as part and parcel of the Quranic notion of equality of all *insan* (human beings) and calls for the implementation of gender equality in the state, civil institutions, and everyday life. It rejects the notion of a public/private dichotomy (by the way, absent in early Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh*) conceptualizing a holistic *ummah* (*society*) in which Quranic ideals are operative in all space. Hence, the short stories were used to discuss the issue from both the literary and Islamic studies.

### **Analysis of the Short Stories**

In this study, the theories found in comparative literature analysis would be applied to compare and contrast between the similarities and differences based on two different short-stories written by two authors. The short stories that I have chosen to analyse are *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin and *Winners Never Quit* by Megha Mukherjee. Both authors came from different continents with different cultural backgrounds but share the same ideology on feminism in their work which makes it an interesting topic to discuss.

The theories used to investigate both short stories are based on sociological approach which revolves around the character, society, social status, economy, politics, and relationship between people (Halim, 1993). Sociological approach is able to give the readers an insight view of the society based on the author’s knowledge and attitude towards an issue. Thus, the Asian and non-Asian author’s background will indeed reflect each other in terms of similarities and differences.

In *The Story of an Hour*, Chopin tells the tragic story of a married woman named Mrs. Mallard who is in deep grief upon hearing the news of her husband’s death. Ironically, the intensive grief soon becomes a new-found freedom where Mrs. Mallard anticipates for a new life as a widow. However, her husband was found alive and returned home safely which ‘surprises’ Mrs. Mallard to her death out of ‘joy’ as proclaimed by the doctor.

On the other hand, Mukherjee’s *Winners Never Quit* takes place in the Indian society whereby Antima has to go through a series of misfortunate events in her life due to her gender being born as a female. Antima has suffered from her family’s rejection, gender discrimination, and sexual abuse as the females are regarded as the low-class society after men. Though her life was bitter, she did not succumb to her circumstances as she remained strong and fought back for her rights. In the end, she managed to overthrow her superior who was regarded as an influential man with the support from the women’s organizations.

As mentioned earlier, both short-stories share the same ideology on feminism which is being portrayed through the main characters, Mrs. Mallard and Antima. The society also shares the similar issue on gender stereotyping against women regardless of culture. Women are regarded as low-class citizen where they are expected to be meek and submissive before men.

Thus, women who live in that society are oppressed and dominated by the masculine figure in their life. Due to the oppression by the dominating males for a long period of time, it ultimately resulted in the idea of feminism within the both protagonists.

The stress that the women have to face becomes a force of motivation that drives them to break-free from the men's control and decided to take lead in their own life. This can be noted especially when Mrs. Mallard expresses her sheer anticipation for her new life as a widow despite of the negativities where she repeatedly whispers "free, free, free!" , "Free! Body and soul free!" depict her new found independence in her life. The author further provides an account stating that "There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow creature" suggesting that Mrs. Mallard used to be submissive towards her dominating spouse who could have been oppressing her entire life, leaving her restricted and breathless. As the setting takes place during the Victorian era, women did not have suffrage rights, the right to sue, or the right to own properties. The idea was further executed when the rights of the women were legally given over to her spouse once they got married. As they became part of their husband's properties, they would have lost their money and material goods to their husbands, placing the men in complete control, including the 'ownership' over her body. Nevertheless, mutual matrimonial consent must be achieved first before the marriage as to suggest the contract of a woman to give in herself to her husband voluntarily as he desired. Therefore, with the news of the death of Mrs. Mallard's husband, it was like a termination of the marital contract for her as the power of authority and freedom is to be granted to her automatically where it is believed that it would have change her life from now and then.

Whereas for Antima's case, she was less fortunate compared to Mrs. Mallard as she was hated since the moment of her birth. When it is revealed that she is born as a girl, "many demised instead of rejoicing" suggest the disappointment of the family had due to the masculine culture that they lived in. A masculine culture regards women as inferior and low class due to their social function in the society. Such phenomena in Asia have also led to the belief that a baby girl is considered to bring bad luck to the family as pointed by the author where "Some had not even feared crushing her to death when she snuggled inside the womb of her mother..." On top of that, she was even named Antima (from Antim, a boy's name) by her family just to make themselves get over their disappointment. The same case also happened for Antima like the women who lived in the Victorian era whereby women's fate are to work in the kitchen, get married and have children. Being submissive to men by means also includes having to endure all the pain when being subjected to abuse. Antima was also portrayed to be a widow here just like Mrs. Mallard and soon began to develop the idea of feminism. Again, she was subjected to sexual harassment but she chose not to stay quiet anymore and decided to fight back. The winning of the case has then transformed her into a confident woman who never gives up in her life.

In contrast, according to the sociological approach (Wellek, 1970), the ethnic's culture is what that differs from both stories. *The Story of an Hour* is presented in the Western society whereas the oriental Indian society is represented by *Winners Never Quit*. The protagonist's relationship with people also varies as Mrs. Mallard tend to have a better experience as her

sister is always there to care for her; while Antima receives the least concern from the people around her besides being emotionally hurt by men again and again. The type of politic practiced in the Victorian society does not regard women to have the freedom of speech nor women's right. Thus, it was a taboo for women to express their thoughts freely, especially for the case of Mrs. Mallard on her new found happiness after her husband's death. On the other hand, despite the practice of women's oppression in India, Antima decides to fight back and lodged a complaint against her own boss at her workplace. Her issue has caught the authorities' attention and received a huge wave of support spreading across the nation which ultimately helps her to win the case. Her courage to voice out her issue and the claim of women's right have therefore contrasts with Mrs. Mallard's.

In conclusion, both authors have used sociological approach in their short-stories to convey the idea of feminism through the portrayal of their main character. The idea of feminism cannot be expressed at its best without the association with the society's culture and attitude (Sholkamy, 2010). The surrounding of the environment is what that makes up the characters by nature and affects their life in many aspects. Though both stories shared some similarities at some point, nevertheless, the differences of the author's background has given their work an interesting contrast which uniquely presents their stories in their most familiar style.

### **Analysis from Islamic View**

Evidently, both short stories portrays on the roles and fates of female characters, one the rebellious and brave effort in fighting men's dominance and another one highlights the acceptance of fate of a female character on what she faces. Although all religions were initially founded with the aim of purifying men and women and helping them to lead ethical lives through prayer, it was found in some instances that blind traditions, customs and superstition often resulted in – not the cathartic effects of religion but the spread of communalism, fanaticism fundamentalism and discrimination (Mir-Hosseini, 2007). No doubt feminists' efforts to attain equal rights of women. When we search out the depth of Islamic feminism, so we have concluded in accordance with the dictates of the Quran and Hadith encouraging women to develop all aspects of their personality. However, feminism is a theoretical perspective and a practice that criticizes social and gender inequalities, seeks to transform knowledge, and aims at women's empowerment. Women, and not religion, should be at the center of that theory and practice. According to Mir-Hosseini (2006), it is hard to defend as feminist the view that women can attain equal status only in the context of Islam. This is a fundamentalist view, not one compatible with feminism. And yet, around the world women will pursue different strategies toward empowerment and transformation (Goodwin, 1995). We are still grappling with understanding and theorizing those diverse strategies.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly, the realities of what "Islamic feminism" is, and how it is lived, are wildly complex, and that is as it should be. Comparative study reveals that Islamic feminism stresses that Islam has already its own concepts of women's equality in all fields. It is needed to change societal

attitudes and to focus on the implementation of gender equality (Badran, 2009). The reality of Islamic feminism is a global movement in which women turn to the Quran and Prophetic traditions to argue that women are fully human and equal to their male counterparts. How they express that and how far they take it is up to the women of those specific contexts.

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