

## **Islam and Gender: From Islamic Feminism to Queer Islamic Studies**

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### **Abstract**

The revival of religions in the second half of the twentieth century and the changing geopolitics of the period have led to new readings of the experiences of believing women and their gendered lives. This interest in the lives of religious women forms part of a continuum which comprises black feminism and various other forms of feminisms and it also brings to fore the experiences of those women who were hitherto considered outside the feminist discourse. This complex theoretical turn, with its interdisciplinarity, is an outcome of various influences. Euro- American feminism's disregard for the experiences of the dalits, blacks and Middle East women, and its thrust on a universal feminist discourse make it a rather incompatible methodological tool to analyse religion as a category that genders women's lives in myriad ways. The gender turn taken by Islamic studies and the interest in religion by feminists now borders on a broader theoretical paradigm that includes the sexual minorities and their engagement with religion. This has its twin focus on how the LGBTQ communities experience religion and the Islamic reading of queerness. This paper attempts to trace this shift in the critical approaches to the study of religion and gender.

**Keywords:** Gender, Islam, Sexuality, Queer, Islamic Feminism.

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## Studies

Islamic Feminism is both a critical approach and a mode of activism. Islamic Feminism as a critical tool for analysis became increasingly discernible in the 1990's, though its roots can be traced back to the late 19th century. This phenomenon has given rise to some of the boldest discursive articulations on the relationship between gender and religion. In the 1990's attempts were made to analyse Muslim women's negotiations with religion as well as their lived experiences. Women started negotiating and marking their experiences of gender-struggle within and outside their religious spaces. This accounts for the emergence of new trends in Islamic Feminism. They placed themselves within the larger context of Islam without negating the plurality and uniqueness of their socio political contexts. This focus on the experiences of women in Islam gradually led to the emergence of methodological approaches that foregrounded issues of 'women' and later 'gender', an inclusive term for women, men and other sexual minoritie. Islamic feminism has evolved and is recently emerging as an inclusive methodological approach that can be used to study issues of women, masculinity and sexual minorities. It can be argued that the contours of Islamic feminism, as an analytical discipline, is expanded to encompass the question of gender and thus makes analyses of gendered experiences more holistic.

The complexity and inherent contradiction in the term 'Islamic Feminism' is often a matter of debate. Yet the significance of this discipline and the impact of its readings remain unquestioned. Islamic feminism combines in its analysis aspects of secularization with that of Islamization and thus brings out its political, social and cultural complexity. Islamic feminists are simultaneously waging a struggle against the patriarchal manifestations of Islam and also the Islamophobic manifestations of feminism. Thus they de-traditionalize Islam by re-reading relations between genders. In the past few decades this mode of critical inquiry that combines feminism with religious studies has created new ways of perceiving gender relations. This has its impact on religious practices, judiciary and even policy making bodies in various parts of the world.

Islamic Feminism challenges male dominated readings of Islamic texts and biases in Islam's interpretative traditions. Amina Wadud, a seminal scholar, developed a feminist hermeneutic using which she challenged male-centric readings of Islamic texts. She probed further into the gendered hierarchies rampant in Islamic sources. Wadud's work has inspired numerous studies in the field. These studies led to new understandings of Quranic notions of gender as well as justice and equality. These studies also created new ways of looking at ideas of divinity and religious authority. The impact of these modes of inquiry can be discerned from the emergence of associated debates and studies that has expanded Islamic Feminism's field of inquiry. Principles of egalitarianism in the Quran as well as the impact of the gendered language, narratives, and its effect on the living Muslim communities are also subjected to analysis. The emergent scholarship investigates how interpretative traditions have been shaped by socio economic and historical factors that formed part of patriarchal and androcentric frameworks.

The works of early Islamic feminists were characterized by a critical exegesis of the Quran and other scriptures. In their attempts to reread the Quran, these feminists put forth the problem of interpretation and called out for an even more rigorous feminist engagement with the scriptures. Amina Wadud in her book *Qur'an and Woman* (1992) explicitly states that male interpretations of the scriptures have been biased. She further states that the text is neutral in nature and that the male act of reading and interpretation has led to patriarchal versions of Islam. She further elaborates that the feminist reading of Quran is an attempt to understand the text from a non-traditional and non-patriarchal perspective. She says:

I propose to make a 'reading' of the Qur'an from within the female experience and without the stereotypes which have been the framework for many of the male interpretations.... Because I am analysing the text and not the interpretations of that text, my treatment of this issue differs from many of the existing works on this topic.(3)

Asma Barlas agrees with Wadud's views on the problem of interpretation. Yet she differs from Wadud in her attempts to bring out

the defense of equality intrinsic in the text. She states that the Qur'an is not neutral and contains within it the resistance to patriarchy. Barlas further contends that her reading will show, "recognizing the Qur'an's textual and thematic holism, and thus the hermeneutic connections between seemingly disparate themes, is absolutely integral to recovering its anti-patriarchal epistemology" (8). Like Wadud she seeks the roots of biased interpretations in the socio-political history of Islam, the relationship between "hermeneutics and history" (10). Other Islamic feminists who engage with this question of interpretation includes Fathima Mernissi and Riffat Hassan. Mernissi's *Beyond the Veil* (1975) is a path-breaking study of the relationship between gender and religion. She combines the question of interpretation with sociopolitical concerns. Sa'diyya Shaikh's study is situated at the intersection of Islamic Studies and Gender Studies, with a special interest in Sufism. Kecia Ali, on the other hand, contends that patriarchal overtones are an inherent part of the text and feminist readings should not reduce it as a problem of interpretations.

It can be argued that the question of a feminist re-reading of the Qur'an adopts three major methodological approaches: historically contextualized reading, intertextual reading and sufi reading. The first has its focus on the socio-political context of the period in which Islam originated, while the second approach advocates a holistic view of Qur'an as a text in which the verses are read as 'co-texts' with its focus on the essence of Quran with its emphasis on principles of equality and egalitarianism. The third approach negates all patriarchal claims of male superiority since it is against the spirit of Qur'an's monotheistic doctrines. Man cannot claim superiority over woman for it will be questioning God's supremacy.

Apart from analysing and questioning the gendered assumptions in scriptures and analysing the patriarchal frameworks of texts, Islamic feminists also focus on restoring Muslim women's histories and investigate how and why gendered norms and practices took shape. These Islamic Feminists revisited histories to unearth the long lost histories of women. Leila Ahmed is a pioneering figure in this area. In her ground-breaking *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992). She argues that the early Muslim community enacted more egalitarian gender norms

and that patriarchal practices strengthened in the years following the death of the Prophet. The works of Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed provide a substantial account of the contributions of Muslim women in Islamic history. Those remarkable women remained forgotten till they were brought back by such rereading of history. These studies also reveal how the idea of a single Islamic tradition normalized and legitimised patriarchy and invalidated not only female religious and political power but also women's social and legal status. In doing this, these Islamic feminists invited immense critical attention to such acts of rereading histories for vignettes of Muslim women who played crucial roles in religious histories and Islamic societies. Most importantly these histories thus reconstructed also demonstrate how patriarchy came to be later naturalized as the legitimate Islamic world order.

Islamic feminism's approach is further enriched by theories of sociology and its tools. Everyday negotiations of gender norms and practices in Muslim contexts are thus analysed as significant categories of experience. Muslim women's engagement with Islamic law, irrespective of the fact that this domain of knowledge was legitimately only a male domain, is clearly delineated in the works of historians such as Leslie Pierce and Judith Tucker. Muslim women participated in legal proceedings, and also in the realm of 'fiqh' (the theory or philosophy of Islamic law based on the Quran and teachings of Prophet Muhammed). Their participation has helped to shape the mechanisms and outcomes of Muslim legal proceedings. These works also reveal that Islamic law is a process, constantly evolving, and not a fixed set of rules enumerated in a set of texts or a single text. This stands in stark contrast to the long held notion of Islamic law as fixed and unchangeable. Courts often validate patriarchal systems that place women as inferior to men. Pierce and Tucker reveal in their work how women used the law and the courts to challenge patriarchy by exploring the egalitarianism inherent in Islamic law. These studies have impacted Muslim women's interventions in the public domain, by enabling them challenge the judiciary, state and Shari'ah laws (the religious guidelines in Islam). More interestingly, they also explore Islamic law as a site of contestation which is constantly evolving owing to various socio-political and cultural changes.

Similar to its influence on other feminisms and gender studies, anthropology, its analytical tools and theories are adopted and incorporated by Islamic feminists too. The key areas of inquiry in the study of gender and Islam include the role of agency and authority in determining the experiences of women. Saba Mahmood's landmark study *The Politics of Piety* (2005) is a study of Muslim women's engagement with the revivalist mosque movement in Egypt. This study is a more nuanced examination of female engagement with the Islamic tradition and shows how religious texts and ritual practices together contribute to their embodiment of religious norms. In her study Mahmood argues that the methodological incompatibility in western feminism and Islamic studies needs a thorough revamping in order to accommodate Muslim women's experiences. She states, "women do more than simply conform to, or challenge, prescriptive discourses. Rather, Muslim women possess complex goals and motivations for inhabiting conservative religious norms. Their religious practices and frameworks often complicate liberal feminist concepts such as autonomy and freedom" (25).

Ethnographers have documented both emerging trends in gendered religiosities in the modern world and forms of resistive spiritual practices of women in the past. Muslim women's religious roles shifted significantly in the twentieth century with their increased engagement in the public space. Joseph Hill's book *Wrapping Authority: Women Islamic Leaders in a Sufi Movement in Dakar, Senegal* (2018) tells the stories of spiritual women and explores how they have developed ways of leading and negotiating religion. The ethnographic accounts of the Sufi women of the Tijannya order in Senegal in which women emerge as Muqaddamas (spiritual leaders), document the lives of some Sufi women in West Africa and how they have large groups of urban youth followers. They unconsciously enact gendered piety. Instead of eschewing several gendered practices like cooking and mothering associated with women, these female Sufi leaders embrace them and use them as spiritual memes. They simultaneously negate, resist and ascribe to gender. Motherhood and cooking are two significant tropes. Hill regards their acts a "meta-performatives" that enable "a whole new set of acts" (142). Hill draws on Judith Butler to

show how these piestic performances reiterated leads to a reconfiguration of gender norms.

These later developments in Islamic feminism have helped to situate both the theory and praxis in a larger political landscape. For instance, the problem of interpretation is closely linked to Islamic laws or Shari'ah. These exegetical readings by feminists necessitated analyses of Islamic laws and thus a new focus on Muslim women's lived experiences. This methodological turn is further expanded to encompass questions of colonialism, modernity, decoloniality, nationalism, and secularism. This shift is accompanied with a more inclusive and expansive approach to gender which emphasises a more intense analysis of gendered experiences and practices. Such an analysis is crucial in exploring not just the experiences of women but the complexities of Muslim social worlds in general. Though Islamic Feminists still focus on women, there is a new thrust on how gender structures the lives of men and non-binary people. These approaches and analyses are sanctioned by the conviction that using gender and queer theory to read and understand Muslim lives and contexts can help us have broader insights about not only religion but also law, economics, politics, and culture. Besides, a reading of gender problematises male-centered and androcentric perspectives that are simplistically considered to be both objective and universal. This kind of an approach foregrounds the role of social actors and practices that are often deemed to be insignificant agents of history and culture.

The scholarship that emerges from this new juncture of Islam and queer/sexuality studies opens up several new fields of inquiry. One such field of inquiry is masculinity and religion. Masculinity is closely associated with patriarchy. Yet, until recently, it was not subjected to serious academic inquiry as part of critical analyses of religion and hence holds immense possibilities of research both on how Islam encodes masculinity and lived masculinities of Islamic communities. The Islamic feminists have long been battling patriarchy and this battle hasn't gone unnoticed. This more encompassing approach that extends its analysis to diverse kinds of non-binary masculinities disrupts the notion of a single Islamic masculinity. The following are some of the major approaches discernible within this recent scholar-

ship on the convergences of Islam and queer/sexuality studies.

The study of Islam and gender has only recently begun to use the insights of queer theory to explore Muslim texts and practices. Recent scholarship that marks the convergence of Islam and gender has expanded its inquiry on gender to include men and masculinity. Abdul Khabeer focuses on gendered norms and practices in Muslim Communities and illuminates how men and women appropriate and even surmount patriarchal gendered norms and expectations that can be damaging for both of them. Marcia Inhorn, in her study, shows how new ideals of companionship, marriage and family has influenced Arab marriages. She shows, “how the agency of individual couples has been paramount in the shift toward smaller families centred on the nuclear family unit, which enable women to work outside the home, and for men to assume child care responsibilities, including family planning and struggles with infertility” (12).

Scholars are also analysing masculinities in texts to show how Muslim men also negotiate and subvert gendered norms in an attempt to enact their resistance. Men perform gendered practices and simultaneously resist them. They reread foundational texts to reveal the inherent biases. These studies reveal how male readings of foundational texts make them highly particular or even parochial in their outlook, making them heteronormative texts. Zahra Ayubi’s recent work on ‘akhlaq’ (philosophical ethics) shows how, “elite men were the presumed audience for texts aimed at cultivating ethical refinement. Non-elite men and women were merely instrumental to this project of ethical perfection”(35). Ayubi further demonstrates, “how gendered assumptions in these texts produce tensions between their stated commitment of metaphysical equality of all humans and their conviction that women and non-elite men were simply not capable of ethical perfection.”(35)

Both in the past and present, hierarchies based on gender differences are implicated in the way sexuality and sexual differences are configured. This new focus on the experience of sexual minorities helps scholars to examine connections between gender, sexuality and religion, revealing how they help to constitute broader relations of power in the premodern and modern periods. Ash Geissinger, another scholar,

uses a historical approach to challenge the notion that premodern textual traditions were largely heteronormative and that they prescribed a gender binary based on physical (namely genital) differences. Geissinger draws on gender and queer theory to probe several hadiths (traditions of prophet Muhammed based on his sayings and actions) to demonstrate how non-normative persons and gender minorities, who fell into a variety of social categories, were in fact central to constructions of power, space, and authority in an emerging Islamic empire. He says that his analysis of the premodern sources

demonstrates some of the ways that utilizing questions suggested by gender and queer theory can result in more careful analysis of representations of space, power and authority, social status, and intracommunal boundary negotiations in hadiths and tradition-based classical Muslim sources... As will be shown, minority gender categories or gender presentations as well as what today we would term nonheterosexual desires are not marginal to these particular texts. (10)

**He further adds:**

Utilizing questions suggested by gender and queer theory when analysing classical Muslim texts such as hadith compilations and other tradition-based writings calls attention to a number of significant features of them which have not received sufficient attention. What may at first glance seem to constitute a 'straight' classical tradition which is heteronormative and based on a binary and inflexible genitally determined understanding of gender is revealed as significantly more complex. It becomes apparent that gender categories in texts of this type are not 'natural,' or above history, or monolithic. Nor do they stand alone; they are relational, and as such cannot be studied in isolation. (111)

This historical approach is similar to that of the Islamic feminists who reread the Qur'an and problematised the question of interpretation. Besides, this approach that unsettles the idea of a hegemonic masculinity in Islam, brings to the fore a significantly different set of research questions about various issues ranging from gender and prayer to marriage and family. Lived experiences of Muslim sexual minorities, the question of piety, inclusivity, human rights and state control of their bodies are some of the other areas that come under the

analytical lens of this methodological approach.

In her work Fatima Seedat calls for ‘queering the study of Islam’. This approach demands a closer analysis of both alternative sexualities and Islamic perspectives on it. Seedat emphasises the need to acknowledge ‘difference’ and encourages scholars to “resist seeing the Islamic tradition as essentially ‘straightened’ or absolutely heteronormative”(10). For Seedat, “the challenge of queering the study of Islam lies in the capacity of scholars to analyse the ambiguities around sexual and gender difference without flattening or essentializing them. It holds exciting possibilities for the future of Islam and gender”.(10)

Indira Falk Gesink’s “Intersex in Islamic Law, Medicine and Activism”(2020)examines the lives of a group of gendered minorities known as the ‘khuntha’ and states that the premodern Islamic scholars, jurists, physicians and biographers acknowledged sexual ambiguity as a natural outcome of conception. This study of how later Islamic culture relegated sexual minorities to the margins helps open up a wide array of questions on various socio-political and historical factors that led to the cultural carving of heteronormativity as the only normal. This further invites attention to the issue of intersex rights as well as the problem of inheritance.

Two factors contribute to the marginalisation of these inquiries in academia: one, the notion that the religious identities and experiences of women and non-binary people invite no attention as areas of critical inquiry: two, the often attributed incompatibility of gender theory as a methodological approach to study gender in religion. There is a need to interrogate these areas by adapting and appropriating the theoretical and methodological tools of gender theory for a finer analysis of gendered existence as well as sexuality that can throw some light on how histories have been shaped and the power dynamics that has gone into it. Besides, this can open up a host of new questions on the intersection of the political, religious and the cultural in producing the gendered Muslim in various places and contexts.

This paper presents just a sample of the novel insights that emerge from a focus on gender and sexuality in Islam. The most remarkable outcome of the intersection of sexuality, queer and Islamic

studies can also be found in the emergent scholarly works engaging with Islamic theologies and the permissibility of gender and sexual diversity therein. Discussions of the permissibility of same-sex relations from a theological perspective, homosexuality in Islam, queer acceptance in Islam, human rights law and Islamic legal and social ethos are some of the other emerging areas of inquiry within this critical discipline.

This shift in the focus that emerged out of the convergence of Islam and gender calls for a new focus on complex cultural mechanisms that privilege certain bodies over others and the myriad ways in which religion determines these frameworks of knowing and experiencing gender and sexuality. This emanates from the understanding that religion plays a key role in determining these frameworks within which communities and practices that are often marginalized by the dominant and that their roles were hitherto left unanalysed. These new methodological approaches reconsider gendered categories and ideologies in Muslim contexts as a complex system of representation. Acknowledging the multifaceted nature of these gendered experiences helps scholars to understand not only the interplay between Islam and gender but also how it is constantly being modified by subversive gendered acts of social actors. These approaches open up new archives and new voices in the study of Islam, and they also help in developing expanded and nuanced theoretical and methodological terrains for analysing them.

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