

Introduction

MASOODA BANO

The scholarship on women and Islam is at a significant turning point, characterized by its depth, diversity, and energy. This volume brings together voices and perspectives that highlight the richness of this field, reflecting on its recent achievements while highlighting promising areas of future research. Despite prevalent media narratives and policies, such as France's ban on the hijab and *abaya* (Islamic robe-like dress) in public schools, which often depict Muslim women as uniformly oppressed by Islamic principles, these oversimplified views no longer dominate academic debates. The era of Orientalist portrayals of Muslim women in Western academia, with its focus on harems and female submission, which began facing significant critique starting in the 1970s, has decidedly ended. This shift, however, is quite new. As recently as 2002, Lila Abu-Lughod's seminal work "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?,"¹ published in *American Anthropologist*, challenged the implicit biases in the portrayal of Muslim women in public policy but also within academic discourses. Writing in the wake of the US decision to invade Afghanistan after the events of September 11, 2001 – an action that was partly justified as an effort to free Afghan women from Taliban oppression – she presented a persuasive critique. She illustrated how these biased perceptions not only serve to further Western imperialistic goals but also inform Western liberal scholarship, including feminist narratives. These discourses consistently fail to recognize the autonomy and agency of Muslim women.

Today, these assumptions are in no need of exposition, as the expansive scholarship that has emerged in the two past decades, to which this volume aims to introduce the reader, has made earlier simplistic claims about the limited agency of Muslim women, and Islam as a religion,

¹ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–790.

untenable. On one hand, a growing generation of scholars and their resulting publications argue persuasively, through close study of the Qur'an and hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad) – the two pivotal sources that shape religious debates in Muslim societies – that Islamic legal and moral ethics emphasize equality regardless of gender. Concurrently, there is a steady stream of anthropological studies showcasing how a majority of Muslim women voluntarily adhere to classical readings of Islamic gender norms and experience a sense of empowerment and exhibit agency, which they find more empowering than ideals associated with Western feminism. Has the field reached its peak if all of this has already been accomplished? The answer is unequivocally no. The proliferation and analytical breadth of publications over the past two decades have not only corrected foundational assumptions but also established a robust framework. This development is allowing researchers to now shift their focus towards posing more specialized questions, which will contribute to the field's maturation. A process of fine-tuning and refinement has commenced. Should this work continue for another decade or two, the field will fully mature, with its theories beginning to influence other areas of study.

The expanding interest in women and Islam is due to several factors, a key one being the expansion in the geographical spread of Muslim communities across the globe. Islam and Muslim women are no longer viewed merely as exotic, foreign subjects onto which various assumptions are projected. Despite the significant diversity among Muslim countries and the large global Muslim population, the increased visibility and vocal presence of Muslims in the Western world have notably influenced academic scholarship in this area. The notion of a "clash of civilizations" has limited utility in societies where multiple faith traditions must coexist under a democratic framework. This mixing has led to a heightened interest in moving beyond simplistic stereotypes to achieve a deeper understanding of others. The growth of Muslim communities in Western countries, such as Europe and the US, has thus triggered research studies exploring why Muslim women adhere to their faith even when exposed to secular environments. The interest in this subject is also mirrored by the growth of faculty positions in American academia that support Islamic feminist scholarship. The work of many scholars occupying these positions is referenced in this volume. Additionally, there is an increasing body of work on Muslims living as religious minorities in non-Western countries like India, China, and Russia. This includes scholarship on Muslim women's dynamic engagement with their faith and the broader society, even in contexts where their faith may face hostility.

As the editor of this volume, my objectives are twofold. First, I endeavor to offer a comprehensive resource for academics at all levels, from seasoned scholars to undergraduate students venturing into this field for the first time. This resource is designed to navigate the intricacies of existing scholarship while spotlighting the most vibrant areas of current research. The scholarly vigor in this domain is dynamic, characterized by recent contributions that not only refine our understanding but also set the stage for promising future explorations. Secondly, my goal is to also make this work accessible to any curious reader, not just those who are students of this field, who is interested in gaining a deeper understanding of Islam and the experiences of Muslim women. My intention is to present a nuanced view that reveals the complexity and diversity of these experiences, moving beyond the reductive narratives of pervasive oppression frequently portrayed in mainstream media. Such an effort also has relevance for policymakers and can potentially generate reflection on why evidence-based academic insights have limited impact on shaping public perceptions and policy discussions in the West regarding Islam and Muslim women. A reflection that is much needed.

The titling of this Companion volume as *Women and Islam*, rather than *Islam and Women*, is reflective of these ongoing developments in the field. While grammatically similar, the choice of word order subtly alters the emphasis and nuance, foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of women in the context of Islam. Both phrasings suggest a focus on women actively involved in Islamic religious or cultural practices, their experiences within Islamic communities, or their depiction in Islamic literature and art. However, the sequence of words hints at differing levels of women's agency. Positioning Islam at the forefront places the religion as the main focus, potentially reinforcing the perception, as critiqued in Orientalist literature, of Islamic texts as overly prescriptive and dominating. Conversely, leading with "women" shifts the focus to them as the primary subjects, highlighting their engagement with Islamic texts and their deliberate choice to embrace specific teachings. This approach challenges the assumption that their faith is merely the result of indoctrination, instead emphasizing their informed and voluntary commitment to Islam.

Within this framework, our analysis extends beyond examining the agency of Muslim women in advocating for or transforming women's rights within Muslim societies. We also emphasize the importance of recognizing that the relationship between Muslim women and their faith is fundamentally an expression of human agency. This perspective acknowledges that spiritual identity, along with moral and ethical

commitments, not only significantly influences an individual's self-conception and their place within a social collective but also shapes their understanding of a fulfilling life. Moreover, this agency is expressed in various, sometimes conflicting, manners, influenced by such factors as socio-economic status and educational backgrounds. This diversity underlines the multiplicity inherent in any religious tradition, including Islam, and accounts for the wide range of experiences among Muslim women across different periods and locations. Throughout this volume, we will observe that Islam, characterized by its unique belief system regarding gender norms, plays a crucial role in the decisions of devout Muslim women. However, the interpretation and application of specific gender-related rulings significantly vary, influenced by each woman's socio-economic background, family history, and dedication to religious devotion.

Additionally, these practices are influenced by the broader socio-political and economic conditions prevailing in their respective communities. Adopting diverse positions does not, however, entail the rejection of core principles that might conflict with Western notions of agency – a stance taken by some Islamic feminists. Rather, it involves interpreting these principles in a manner that aligns with their contemporary realities, making the rulings relevant and applicable to their current lives. Throughout history, we observe Muslim women from specific socio-economic backgrounds exercising significant agency in shaping their expressions of piety, as well as influencing broader societal outcomes as activists, political leaders, writers, patrons, and peacemakers, but equally in their role as revered mothers. Simultaneously, as societies experience socio-economic modernization, interpretations that allow women increased participation in the public sphere – while adhering to fundamental Islamic principles – become more popular, even in traditionally conservative societies. The recent social transformations in Saudi Arabia, which I have observed first-hand, serve as a compelling example of this trend.²

Acknowledging the diversity within Islamic tradition and the varied experiences and rationales of Muslim women across classes and societies should not distract us from recognizing that Islam, as observable in lived faith traditions and a dominant belief system, proposes an alternative model of gender equality. This model, grounded in classical Islamic scholarship with the Qur'an and hadith as its foundation, presents

² Masooda Bano, *Saudi Social Awakening: What Explains the Rapid Change in Social Norms* (forthcoming).

a unique perspective on gender norms that contrasts sharply with the principles of equality that underpin liberal feminist thought. Unlike Western feminist ideologies, which often view the family as a patriarchal unit, champion sexual liberty, and advocate for absolute equality without considering biological differences, the classical Islamic view emphasizes the significance of family, sexual restraint, and biological distinctions. These different starting assumptions, as well as desired end goals, result in very different reasoning as to what constitutes a fair distribution of rights and responsibilities between men and women.

Islamic feminists have largely sought to highlight Islam's liberating potential by re-reading the traditional texts through a feminist lens. What sets this Companion volume apart is its focus on explaining the concepts and rationale behind gender norms as outlined in classical Islamic scholarship and its resonance with Muslim women from diverse backgrounds, while also recognizing the contributions of Islamic feminists. As we will see in this volume, the two cater to quite different audiences. Understanding why Muslim women make certain choices, such as wearing the hijab or abstaining from sex outside marriage – the latter expectation also applying to Muslim men – requires an appreciation of the traditional logic. True respect for the choices of Muslim women extends beyond merely recognizing their agency: it entails a concerted effort to understand the value they find in traditional teachings. Without this understanding, merely acknowledging their agency can inadvertently reinforce Western biases, suggesting that their faith compels them to settle for less-than-optimal life choices.

This volume is organized into fifteen chapters, divided into three sections. Part I invites readers to explore the rationale behind classical Islamic teachings on gender norms and presents a concept of women's well-being and gender equality that significantly diverges from Western feminist ideologies. In Part II, the focus shifts to specific examples of women exercising their agency in the quest for piety by adhering to the classical interpretations of gender norms, as well as those engaging in reinterpretations of the texts. These chapters illustrate that pious agency is not merely passive compliance with the most stringent religious laws. Rather, they highlight how women actively engage with and adapt Islamic teachings to their daily lives, a flexibility that is central to Islamic legal tradition without compromising its fundamental principles. Part III expands the discussion of Muslim women's agency beyond personal piety and family life, acknowledging the historical and ongoing significant contributions of Muslim women to the development and

shaping of states and societies. This section examines expressions of agency that align more closely with the traditional Western feminist framework. To truly grasp the sophistication of current scholarship, it is crucial to explore the evolution of both textual and ethnographic scholarship, with a special focus on advancements made over the past two decades and areas ripe for future exploration. This comprehensive approach allows for a deeper appreciation of Muslim women's roles and the dynamic interplay between faith, agency, and societal conditions.

REDEEMING ISLAM: RE-READING THE TEXTS

In her pioneering 1975 study, *Beyond the Veil: Male–Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society*,³ Fatima Mernissi – a Moroccan sociologist and a foundational figure in the field of Islamic feminism, as explored in this volume – adopted a method known as multiple critique. Through this approach, she eloquently critiqued both the disempowering portrayals of Muslim women prevalent in Western scholarship and the patriarchal dynamics within Muslim societies. This early sociological work laid the foundation for her subsequent efforts to reinterpret Islamic texts from a feminist perspective. Mernissi's scholarship made a decisive contribution to the core argument of Islamic feminist scholarship: that Muslim women's disempowerment, contrary to Orientalist portrayals, is not rooted in Islamic principles but rather in patriarchal control over the production of classical Islamic scholarship. This endeavor to defend Islamic interpretations – while critiquing both Western viewpoints and traditional Islamic exegesis – has given rise to a vibrant area of scholarship commonly known as Islamic feminism. Like any feminist movement, scholars grouped as Islamic feminist diverge in their methodologies and points of departure – some even try to avoid the label due to its Western connotation.⁴ Yet, as a body of scholarship the field is today quite visible and distinct.

Notable figures in the field, following Mernissi's lead, include Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas, and Amina Wadud, who contributed significant foundational texts in the 1980s and 1990s. While Nina Nurmila showcases the diverse and rich landscape of Islamic feminist scholarship and the foundational contributions of these early scholars in Chapter 9, their influence also becomes apparent to the reader through frequent

³ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male–Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975).

⁴ Margot Bardan, *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009).

references to their work across numerous chapters. Together, these scholars have scrutinized gender-related rulings in Islam affecting women in various spheres, including religious practices, domestic roles focusing on marital duties and obligations, and participation in the public arena, ranging from mosque leadership to political authority. In their analyses, they have primarily engaged with the two central sources of Islamic scholarship: the Qur'an and hadith. Their engagement with the Qur'an encompasses both direct interpretations and the study of *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis). When examining hadith, their focus has predominantly been on assessing the authenticity of these traditions and their coherence with Qur'anic interpretations. A related method employed by these scholars involves examining gender norms through studying the life and actions of the Prophet Muhammad (*sira*), not solely through the study of hadith but by examining his actions and interactions with women in his life, whether as a husband, father, or leader within the community of female believers. An associated focus has been on the lives of Muhammad's wives, who hold esteemed positions for being addressed in the Qur'an as the "mothers of the believers" (Q. 33:6) and exemplars of faith. By studying their actions and roles, scholars aim to challenge, and question established norms, offering insights into the lived realities and potential interpretative flexibility within Islamic traditions.

Over the last two decades, the foundational work of these scholars in the field of Islamic feminist scholarship has seen significant growth and diversification. This period has been marked by a deepening of inquiry, with questions becoming more nuanced and detailed analyses emerging. This surge in scholarly activity has enriched the discipline, expanding the range of topics and perspectives explored. Kecia Ali, representing what could be considered the second generation of scholars in this domain, has made a notable impact. She engages with texts within the Islamic legal tradition from an Islamic feminist perspective. In her book, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*,⁵ Ali navigates the intricate debates on sexual ethics in Islam, addressing such sensitive topics as marital obligations, divorce, homosexuality, and extramarital relations. As an Islamic feminist scholar, Kecia Ali delves into the criteria for lawful and ethical sexual conduct in Islam, broadening the scope of inquiry by incorporating diverse readings across different periods and disciplines. Similarly, in

⁵ Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam,⁶ Ali notes that early jurists from the Maliki, Hanafi, and Shafi'i schools of Islamic law likened marriage to a purchase transaction and divorce to manumission, sparking rigorous debates. These deliberations sought to harmonize scriptural mandates, historical precedents, and societal norms with the imperative for logical coherence. Over time, this discourse subtly shifted towards an analogy that positioned husbands in a role akin to masters, and wives comparable to slaves, reflecting the complex interplay between legal theory and social practice within Islamic jurisprudence.

Kecia Ali's work exemplifies the refinement of inquiries within legalistic analysis in Islamic feminist scholarship. Simultaneously, the field has broadened its analytical horizons by incorporating additional genres of Islamic scholarship beyond the Qur'an, *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), hadith, and *sira* (biography of the Prophet). Notably, there has been growing interest in exploring gender dynamics within Islam through the lens of mystical tradition associated with the field of Sufism. In *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*,⁷ Sa'diyya Shaikh, for example, engages with the work of the thirteenth-century Sufi poet and scholar Muhyi al-Din ibn al-Arabi. By engaging with his mystical ideals, as compared with the stricter readings offered by the legal jurists, Shaikh's approach sheds light on Ibn al-Arabi's nuanced understanding of gender as it relates to human existence and moral considerations, illustrating the diverse ways in which Islamic thought can engage with contemporary discussions on gender. This analysis delves into the potential of Sufi metaphysics and theology, as interpreted by the author, to enact significant shifts in Islamic gender ethics and legal practices. It addresses contemporary concerns such as women's rights within marriage, the practice of veiling, and the possibility of women leading prayers. By challenging the conventional separation between the spiritual and political spheres, the author aims to make a meaningful contribution to both Islamic feminism and feminist ethics. This is achieved by re-evaluating notions of selfhood, spirituality, and social justice within the Islamic tradition. The work stands out for critiquing traditional approaches not by directly reinterpreting Qur'anic verses or questioning the validity of hadith, but rather by engaging with the writings of a mystical scholar. These mystical perspectives are presented as offering more inclusive and moderate approaches to gender

⁶ Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁷ Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

issues in Islam, showcasing an innovative pathway for reconciling religious tradition with contemporary feminist values.

Similarly, Zahra Ayubi's *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*⁸ has garnered notable attention for its innovative approach to rethinking Islamic philosophical ethics through a feminist critical lens. As opposed to engaging with the legalistic or mystical writings, Ayubi advocates for a philosophical shift in the analysis of gender within Islam, highlighting the potential for gender equality found within feminist engagements with Islamic ethical traditions. By examining the works of three prominent Islamic philosophers, Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, Nasir ad-Din Tusi, and Jalal ad-Din Davani, Ayubi critiques their conceptualization of masculinity and femininity. She points out that their definitions often position the ethical human as an elite male, thereby marginalizing women and slaves. Arguing that these philosophical ethicists have acknowledged women's equality in the moral domain but argue for women's natural and ontological inferiority in this world, she delves into the conceptualization, definition, and justification of gender identity and differences at the most fundamental level of existence, significantly shaping views on gender roles, equality, and hierarchy in Muslim contexts. She argues that Muslim ethicists' gendered perceptions of existence and metaphysics have led them to formulate virtue ethics entrenched in inequality, thereby rendering these ethical frameworks incompatible with the ideals of equality inherent in their own philosophical traditions. Ayubi observes that despite their hierarchical perspectives, these ethicists offer insights into ethical conduct that reveal more intricate understandings of gender and human relationships, challenging their own established hierarchies. By arguing for noting an egalitarian thread within Islamic philosophy she questions the patriarchal readings, arguing for that philosophy's inherent compatibility with principles of gender justice and human flourishing.

These scholarly endeavors underscore the vibrant dynamism within the field, characterized by conceptual expansions, methodological innovations, and challenges to traditional narratives. However, despite their pioneering nature and cross-disciplinary approaches, these works are not immune to critique. A persistent critique, common throughout the evolution of this discourse, concerns their practical impact. While these scholarly debates have broadened in scope and even catalyzed a few

⁸ Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

national or transnational movements under the banner of “gender jihad,” as discussed by Nelly van Doorn-Harder in the context of Indonesia in Chapter 13, they have yet to significantly influence societal behavior or alter religious practices at a broader scale. This disconnect between academic discourse and tangible societal change highlights the complex interplay between scholarly innovation and real-world application, pointing to an ongoing challenge within the field of Islamic feminist scholarship. There are indications that the relevance of this scholarship is slowly increasing among young, university-going Muslim women in the US, as suggested by some of the authors in this field. However, concrete shifts in attitudes or practices aligned with these progressive interpretations remain limited. Initiatives such as women leading mixed-gender prayers, a practice championed by Amina Wadud based on her reinterpretation of classical views on who can serve as an imam, have resonated with only a small segment of the community, even in the US.⁹ Consequently, since its inception, the field has faced scrutiny regarding its reach and the demographic it engages. This ongoing dialogue reflects the nuanced challenge of bridging scholarly innovation with widespread community acceptance and practice.

Relatedly the field is perceived to have arisen in response to the demands of the Western audience and the desire of a few Muslim women scholars to engage with it, whether motivated by the aim to shield Islam from prejudiced views or by genuine discontent with the inequalities observed within their religious teachings. Such motivations are thought to delineate the boundaries of discourse, positioning Western feminism as the benchmark for optimal gender equality and prompting the re-examination and reinterpretation of Islamic texts to align with these ideals. This critique, consistently refuted by Islamic feminists, nonetheless persists as a valid point of discussion. In contrast, as we see in the next section, ethnographic accounts reveal a swift proliferation of Islamic networks that adhere to traditional Islamic teachings on gender norms, as evident in the doctrines of these groups.¹⁰ This observation is not meant to undermine the value of the field in question but rather to provide readers with a broader perspective. While focusing solely on texts that highlight Islam’s liberal potential might illuminate one aspect of the religion for readers, it does not fully

⁹ Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, eds. *Women, Leadership, and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012); Juliane Hammer, Kecia Ali, and Laury Silvers, eds., *A Jihad for Justice: Honoring the Work and Life of Amina Wadud* (ebook, 2012), <http://unc.academia.edu/JulianeHammer>.

¹⁰ Bano and Kalmbach, eds., *Women, Leadership, and Mosques*.