

Between Authenticity and Outlandishness: An Evaluative Reading of Islamic Feminism

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Abstract:

Islamic feminism reveals itself as a vibrant hybrid form of activism that addresses issues of emancipation and gender equality within Arab Muslim societies by propagating the compatibility of Islam with feminist ideology. In this regard, its advocates seek to emphasize the importance of independent reasoning in offering a modern feminist-oriented reinterpretation of certain Islamic jurisprudence provisions. Despite its appeal, however, this framework has always been met with rejection and doubt from Islamists and secularists alike, both highlighting the incompatibility of Islam with feminist principles. Thus, through an exploration into the complexities of hybridity theory and the core tenets of Islamic feminism, this article aims at analyzing the realities of this framework, its perception, and the possibilities of its existence within these societies between authenticity and outlandishness.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, hybridity theory, Islamic jurisprudence, feminist ideology, reinterpretation, authenticity, outlandishness

ملخص:

تقدم النسوية الإسلامية نفسها كنوع حيوي وهجين من العمل النضالي الخاص بقضايا التمكين والمساواة بين الجنسين في المجتمعات العربية المسلمة مروجة بذلك لانسجام وتوافق بين مبادئ الإسلام والأيديولوجيا النسوية. انطلاقاً من هذا، يسعى أنصارها إلى التأكيد على أهمية الاجتهاد الشرعي ذي التوجه النسوي في تقديم قراءة تأويلية وإعادة تفسير

معاصرئ لبعض أحكام الفقه الإسلامي. لكن على الرغم من جاذبية هذا الإطار، إلا أنه ظلّ دائماً مرفوضاً من قبل الإسلاميين والعلمانيين على حد سواء، مع تأكيد كلا الفريقين على استحالة توافق الإسلام مع النسوية. وعليه، فإن هذا المقال يهدف ومن خلال استكشافه لتعقيدات نظرية التهجين والأسس الجوهرية للفكر النسوي الإسلامي، إلى تحليل واقع هذا الإطار وتصوراته وإمكاناته وجوده في هذه المجتمعات بين الأصالة والشذوذ.

كلمات دالة: النسوية الإسلامية، نظرية التهجين، الفقه الإسلامي، الايديولوجيا النسوية، إعادة تفسير، أصالة، شذوذ

1. Introduction

Feminism is a worldwide socio-political movement that celebrates all types of resistance against the discrimination and marginalization of women. Yet, in Arab Muslim societies, such a framework has always been regarded as a White-dominated ideology propagating the values of the Western colonial ‘other’ while challenging the prevailing norms and cultural particularities of the region that are inspired by notions of Islam and Arabness. Accordingly, feminist discourse addressing issues of emancipation, gender¹ equality, and justice has also been rejected for it intimidates the relationship between men and women and their roles as presented in Islam and ignores the established societal and cultural structures of these societies.

In an attempt to reform the status of women in the Arab world and challenge the traditional gender roles within a socially and religiously acceptable framework, Islamic feminism emerged as a movement and a discourse during the last decade of the 20th century. Presenting itself as an alternative intersectional hybrid product that blends Islamic principles with feminist ideology, it aimed to look at ‘Islamic heritage’ in the light of modernity, trying to provide a current up-to-date understanding and rethinking of Islamic jurisprudence provisions, particularly those related to women. To achieve that, advocates of this paradigm called for the integration of progressive hermeneutic reinterpretations to the verses of Quran and the traditional sayings of Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, commonly known as Hadiths, from a feminist perspective, claiming that the common traditional ones are based on an androcentric point of view that oppresses women.

Yet, such demands were faced with refusal, criticism and doubt. Islamists as well as secularists in the Arab world condemned the efforts of Islamic feminists to address women’s issues of equality and emancipation by

reconciling Islamic religious principles with feminist ideals, both arguing that Islam and feminism can never be compatible with each other.

Hence by exploring the complexities of this concept dubbed “Islamic feminism”, this paper aims to critically assess whether a convergence between Islam and feminism is truly possible or not. The paper also seeks to examine the extent to which this framework might be perceived as an authentic alternative or an outlandish concept to the traditional gender norms within the Arab Muslim world. For that, the paper first embarks on the discussion by probing into the complexities of the concept of hybridity, offering an understanding to its theoretical foundation and historical antecedents. It moves, then, to discuss the concept of Islamic feminism, providing an in-depth analysis of the paradigm, its history, and its core rationales. Finally, the paper provides a critical examination of the concept and the possibilities of its existence with regard to the Islamic and secular perspectives.

2. The Politics of Hybridity: A Theoretical Approach

Making “difference into sameness” as Robert Young describes it (1995, p. 24), hybridity, in culture, in its simplest terms refers to the creation of an element out of the fusion of two distinct forms, styles or identities. Since its introduction in the late 20th century, hybridity, or hybridization², has become one of the most prominent, most celebrated, and most pervasively adopted concepts in cultural studies, most notably in connection to topics of globalization, diaspora, and postcolonialism (Ashcroft et al., 2013; Barker, 2004). The concept, which was first adopted as a common theme in English-speaking countries, has also gained substantial recognition in the Latin American and Caribbean realms, accounting for its extensive growth (Guignery, 2011). The concept is most frequently attributed to the Indian-American scholar, sociologist, and postcolonial theorist Homi M. Bhabha who is highly regarded as the father of the hybridity theory. In his 1994 magnum opus, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha offered a more nuanced and refined understanding of the term, stressing out the power dynamics underlying the traditional postcolonial Manichean dichotomies of colonizer vs. colonized, center vs. periphery, the Self vs. the Other...etc (Acheraiou, 2011; Ashcroft et al., 2013).

2.1. The Historical Evolution of Hybridity

While the concept is one of our era’s prominent hallmarks, it is not a novel idea. Apparently, it has always been practiced inadvertently for millennia in ancient civilizations such as the Sumerians, the Egyptians, the Greeks and others though not as self-consciously aware as current societies

(Acheraïou, 2011). Hybridity, thus, is a global phenomenon stemming from events such as migration, exile, conflicts, invasions, slavery, intermarriage, and trade (Kraidy, 2005). Moreover, long before its formal introduction as a theoretical framework in cultural studies, hybridity surfaced as a central theme in 19th and early 20th centuries European scientific, racial, literary, and linguistic discourses, manifesting through various labels including métissage, mestizaje, syncretism, creolization and miscegenation among others. In 1837, Charles Darwin first used the term to describe his botanical experiments on cross-fertilization. At that time, the term was exclusively employed in scientific discourses, implying its fixed essence (Acheraïou, 2011; Guignery, 2011). Eventually, such discourses made their way into cultural and racial narratives on hybridity, especially in the mid-19th century, a period in which European colonialism reached its peak and Darwinian evolutionary models of human hierarchy grew into prominence.

These hierarchy models were part of the Great Chain of Being, a theoretical structure that placed Europeans at the top of the chain and Black Africans at the bottom, next to the ape (Young, 1994). Accordingly, miscegenation³ between White Europeans and the indigenous peoples of Asia, Africa, and America was perceived unfavorably. Though such a practice was encouraged by colonial regimes throughout the 16th and 17th centuries as a means of racial cleansing and political control⁴, in many 19th century colonial bio-political discourses the idea of racial mixing was seen as a threat to White racial purity and moral supremacy (Acheraïou, 2011). In other words, fears of racial and moral degeneration justified by discriminatory scientific discourse depicted miscegenation as a challenge to essentialist beliefs whose roots were nurtured by notions of social hierarchies and racial homogeneity. Hybridity, as a result, was frowned upon in colonial discourses. The irony was that such supremacist race discourses were promoted alongside Enlightenment ideologies of universal human rights, equality, and scientific rationalism.

In the early 20th century, hybridity evolved beyond its initial biological and racial connotations to encompass linguistic and cultural dimensions thanks to the efforts of the Russian linguist and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (Guignery, 2011). Bakhtin's linguistic version of hybridity was praiseworthy as it succeeded in linking the term to the ideas of polyphony, dialogism, and heteroglossia⁵. The process of hybridization, for Bakhtin, signified the blending of two different voices, languages, or discourses within a single framework (Guignery). This duality highlights how languages can simultaneously convey multiple meanings and perspectives. For that, he

differentiated between two processes of hybridization, which he labeled intentional and unintentional.

Yet, one might wonder, if the concept has already been recognized all this time, what novel insights and perspectives did Homi Bhabha, the father of the hybridity theory, and all scholars within postcolonial studies, bring to the table?

2.2. A Comprehensive Exploration of Hybridity within Postcolonial Discourse

Amar Acheraïou (2011) addresses the aforementioned question, in his book *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism and Globalization*, by explaining that by appropriating the term, Bhabha strips hybridity of its colonial connotations that were formerly associated with ontological and racial inferiority. Indeed, his concept of hybridity fundamentally challenges traditional notions of identity and culture by rejecting essentialist views that associate identity with fixed homogeneous categories (Acheraïou). Simply put, hybridity in postcolonial context served as a vital emancipatory instrument that liberates representations of identity and culture from the constraints of purity and supremacy that underpinned colonialist, nationalist, and essentialist discourses.

In his theory, Bhabha argues that cultural identity arises from a metaphorically complex and contradictory hybrid space he dubbed the "Third Space of enunciation" (1994, p.37) where a member of a marginalized community (a colonized, a refugee, a slave, a woman...etc) fully resists to embrace, or mimic, the culture of the other, yet struggles to maintain his own. Eventually, this hybrid entity finds itself floating in a liminal position of in-betweenness; staggering here and there between obedience and resistance, mimicry and mockery, conflict and negotiation, homeliness and unhomeliness, selfness and otherness until it finally transcends beyond these rigid binaries (Bhabha, 1994). Hybridity is, thus, a space that disrupts essentialism, purity, and conventional Manichean boundaries. It is also a site of ambivalence, contestation and negotiation where the hybrid resists complete assimilation while also not fully returning to his pre-hybrid identity.

This disruptive, challenging, and non-conformist ability of hybridity to undermine binaries, essentialism, and purity is precisely why many postcolonial and postmodern scholars, like Bhabha, advocate for this concept. Acheraïou (2011) argues that hybridity discourse is indeed appealing in the realm of identity and cultural politics because of its ability

to accommodate a range of diverse opposing viewpoints, cultures, subjectivities, and discursive practices, sometimes even those that transmit apparently fundamentally irreconcilable political and ideological persuasions. This ability contributes to hybridity's discursive elasticity, its epistemological fluidity as well as its ideological open-endedness and exhibits the concept and its discourse with highly structural resilience (Acheraïou). Still, this same celebratory tone of fluidity, elasticity, ambivalence and open-endedness serves as a source of critique and dissatisfaction against hybridity within academic circles.

Kraidy (2005), for instance, professes that the concept should be taken with a pinch of salt. Hybridity, in his word, reveals itself as a concept "whose definition is maddeningly elastic, whose analytical value is easily questionable, and whose ideological implications are hotly contested" (p.3). Jonathan Friedman (2015), the American anthropologist and sociologist, as well as Aijaz Ahmad (1995), the Indian-American Marxist scholar, argue against hybridity as well by harshly mapping it as a fanciful idealized elitist approach emerging to serve the interests of a coterie of privileged bourgeois middle-class diaspora intellectuals who are living and working in the western metropolis; totally disconnected from the daily identity struggles of the masses. Ahmad, in particular, is an avid opponent of the celebratory narratives of the concept.

In a similar fashion, Haim Hazan (2015) scrutinizes, in a more lenient style, the dominant celebratory tone of most postcolonial and postmodern scholars of hybridity discourse. He reveals that postmodern narratives portray hybridity as a positive and praiseworthy state, neglecting the non-hybrids; those who do not fit into this celebrated framework of fluid identities. Hazan (2015) further expostulates by clarifying that such a tone may create a certain cultural dynamic where those who do not conform to the hybrid ideal are rejected, ignored, and diminished to a less valuable position, contributing therefore to the reinforcement of ongoing social inequalities and power imbalances. Most importantly, he criticizes how cultural hybrid identities, interactions, and experiences are shaped and influenced by market forces and consumerism, labeling this as the "commodification" of the concept of hybridity.

Hazan (2015) explicates that media, advertising, and capitalist agenda have succeeded in shifting the position of the hybrid to become the norm. In this postmodern world of unclear boundaries, the once-feared frowned-upon hybrids have now become the celebrated antihero figures⁶. Unfortunately, not only does such a product of mediatization and commodification incites a

shallow inauthentic understanding of cultural fusion and interaction that fails to appreciate the profound, multifaceted, and intricate nature of human experiences and particularities, it also paints the “unmitigated universals” (p.5), those individuals who resist aspects of globalization, hybridization, and glocalization⁷ through their essentialist distinct identities, as a threat to the social order of this era of postmodernity that values fluidity and anti-essentialism. In a paradoxical manner, these cultural entities that withstand the pervasive reach of the postmodern society—the “cultural rudiments” as he labeled them (p.5), become the postmodern “specter of otherness” (p.4).

In *Hybridity and its Discontents*, Salman Sayyid (2000) aligns himself with Hazan’s view when he orients his criticism toward the anti-essentialist approach of hybridity. With emphasis on Muslim communities, Sayyid argues that some cultural elements are, indeed, fundamentally resistant to fit into a framework that prioritizes fluidity and fusion, calling for a need to acknowledge and respect the integrity of these non-hybrid entities without diminishing their realities. He criticizes, for example, the policies of the European Union that attempted to assimilate their Muslim minority populations within mainstream society by decentering certain Islamic practices through restrictions such as the restrictions on *hijabs* and mosques. Such policies, according to Sayyid (2000), create an impression of Muslim communities as merely passive recipients of cultural input, stripping them of their autonomy and distinctiveness.

The paradoxical relationship between hybridity’s approach of anti-essentialism and universalism⁸ is another target of criticism in Sayyid’s work. Sayyid (2000) asserts that, in its quest to decenter the formation of cultural interaction, the boundaryless anti-essentialist approach of hybridity vouches for the dominance of a “particular universal” cultural framework, a Western one he emphasizes, that absorbs all others. He goes on to clarify that this overt consumption can only occur in contexts of power imbalance. In other words, “what makes a particularity a ‘universal’ has less to do with its content and more to do with its power.” (p.261) In this case, universalism is no longer the opposite of particularity; rather it represents a byproduct of imperial authority and a tool to reinforce Western cultural hegemony. Unfortunately, this approach depicts the discourse of hybridity as a platform to advance certain political agendas that elevate particular identities above others to maintain established power inequalities.

A last well-argued criticism against hybridity that seems to harmonize with the aforementioned perspective, though in a relatively blunt style, is highlighted in Acheraiou’s book, *Questioning Hybridity, Postcolonialism*

and Globalization. Acheraïou (2011) addresses the fervent tendency of postcolonial scholars to promote hybridity and its discourse. According to him, from a geopolitical perspective, the idealized promotion of the framework of hybridity may come across as suspicious. It raises questions about its alignment with some Western-led global entities of power like the World Bank, the International Chamber of Commerce, and the International Monetary Fund. These hegemonic institutions serve a pivotal function in shaping and managing global relations, and their influence can replicate the historically-engraved dual patterns of colonial racism and imperial dominance (Acheraïou).

Overall, hybridity is indeed a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it exhibits a valuable framework for the understanding of global cultural interactions, relations, and experiences. On the other, its application at a superficial level while neglecting the underlying power structures and material implications such as race, class, and gender can blur the realities of cultural domination and resistance (Acheraïou, 2011). Because of that and with a special focus on the interactions between Western and Eastern (namely Muslim) cultures, the introduction of such models of representation to address local particularities is often approached with a hint of doubt and hostility. Among these models, Islamic feminism is the most problematic and will be explored in detail in the following section.

3. Islamic Feminism: Navigating the Complexities

It would be unfair to initiate an in-depth examination of the reasons and arguments underlying this heated debate against Islamic feminism without establishing a comprehensive definition of the concept and its theoretical framework first.

3.1. Understanding the Concept

Entailing an extensive body of theoretical narratives as well as a socio-political dimension to it, feminism is often regarded as a movement and a concept. It aims at analyzing women's roles in society, promoting their interests, eradicating patriarchy, reshaping society, and fostering a culture that fully embraces women's desires and goals (Barker, 2004). While these goals are common knowledge among different feminist discourses, there are various forms of feminist theory navigating different angles of oppression—such as liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, socialist feminism, Black feminism, African feminism and others—that the term is sometimes referred to as feminisms (Barker). Islamic feminism is another fresh wave of feminist discourse that has recently blossomed in the Arab and Muslim world,

provoking a considerable volume of criticism, debate, and skepticism both within the academic and religious circles and among the general public.

Due to the novelty of the concept, however, a standard detailed understanding of its nature and its complexities remains elusive. Instead, a plethora of definitions from the pioneers, activists, and commentators of this paradigm is extensively documented. In fact, scholars and authors such as Valentine Moghadam, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Nayereh Tohidi, Amina Abu Bakr, Leila Ahmed, and Margot Badran have been at the forefront of conceptualizing and promoting the term as both a distinct academic field and a grassroots campaign (Ameri, 2023). Their work and their contributions have been instrumental in shaping and expanding the body of literature within this field. While their positions on the subject are diverse, their works reflect common themes and approaches.

In the words of its advocates, Islamic feminism is a holistic women-led movement and approach operating within an Islamic framework while advocating feminist discourses of full gender egalitarianism in the public and private spheres by dismantling patriarchal structures, advocating women's rights, and integrating human rights concepts with Islamic values. In pursuit of this goal, Islamic feminists encourage the application of modern hermeneutical approaches to reinterpret (*tafsir*) Islamic scriptures (Quran and/or Hadiths⁹) and transform certain Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) sections by emphasizing the importance of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*). A key objective of these scholar-activists is to uncover how androcentric interpretations performed by male elite Muslim scholars and jurists as well as cultural norms throughout the years have tarnished and altered the core teachings of Islam (Ameri, 2023; Badran, 2008; Barlas, 2008; Mir-Husseini, 2019).

In light of this, Islamic feminists assert that they can offer a more authentic, relevant, and culturally sensitive alternative framework for intellectuals who advocate women's rights and social justice while effectively pertaining to the particularities of their Muslim societies; staying loyal to their religious identities¹⁰ (Tohidi, 2003). To elaborate, from the standpoint of global politics the Islamic feminist framework manifests a radiant convergence of Islam and feminism that aligns Islamic teachings with contemporary notions of modernity, democracy, and gender egalitarianism, successfully exhibiting a women-friendly tone while challenging, in tandem, both the traditional "male authoritarian" discourse on Islam and the Western-dominant discourse on feminism.

3.2. Understanding the History and the Rationales

An understanding of the concept necessitates a thorough exploration of its historical trajectory and evolution as well as the underlying reasons behind its emergence. Two facts need to be highlighted here. First, there is almost an unspoken consensus that Islamic feminism first appeared as a term and a theoretical framework in the writings of Iranian scholars such as Shahla Sherkat, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and Afsaneh Najmabadi in the Iranian magazine *Zanan*, Persian for women, in the early years of the 1990s (Ameri, 2023; Mir-Hosseini, 2019). Second, concurrent with its emergence as an academic discourse, Islamic feminism made an appearance as a sociopolitical movement notably in response to the rise of political Islam, or Islamism, which endorses male-centric interpretations of the sacred texts and confines women to domestic roles as claimed by the proponents of the movement (Badran, 2008; Tohidi, 2003). Furthermore, the impact of globalization accompanied with the work of diasporic Muslim intellectuals, UN-sponsored conferences and roundtables on women's issues, major texts such as Amina Wadud's 1999 book *Qur'an and Woman*, and major events such as September 11 and the subsequent "war on terror" all sparked the interest of the West in the issues of the Arab and Muslim region, most notably the relationship between Islam and women's oppression. It was within this atmosphere that Islamic feminism succeeded in transcending across borders with transnational activism, revealing itself as an alternative response operating from within the Islamic context (Badran, 2008; Mir-Hosseini, 2019; Tohidi, 2003).

The Arab region was no exception to these fervent transformations as the concept gained momentum nearly at the same time it did in regions such as Iran, Turkey and the diaspora. Scholars like Fatima Mernissi, Asma Lamrabet, Muhammed Shahrou, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd were among the key figures of this movement and framework in the Arab world (Ameri, 2023). However, the discourse on gender and gender politics has not always been articulated within an Islamic framework. Islamic feminism, in fact, represents a transition from the earlier secular feminist models of discourse that emerged in the Arab and Muslim world in the mid-20th century. Feminist vocabulary first appeared in the region in the mid to late 19th century during which most of the Arab-speaking world was under colonization.

Tainted with Euro-centric prejudices and rooted in secularist and modernist methodologies that failed to appreciate the particularities of the

region, Western ideas of human rights and gender equality were first introduced in the Arab world by colonial powers, often through intimidating means. The tone of these ideas was often anti-Islam for the latter was regarded as a patriarchal and oppressive force to women compared to these emancipatory ideas (Ameri, 2023). Even though the discourse was met with hostility and resistance from traditional structures of Islam, many Arab figures of the era like Rifa'a at-Tahtawi, Muhammad Abduh, Qasim Amin, Taha Hussein, and Huda Sha'arawi to name a few were influenced by this discourse. They, later on, emerged as Muslim reformists who sought to reconcile Islamic teachings with modernity (Afsaruddin, 2014; Badran, 2008; Tohidi, 2003). Interestingly enough, their experience with Western feminism often entailed a complex interaction, wavering between adopting certain ideas and rejecting others that were deemed as foreign impositions.

With the anti-colonial wave of the mid-20th century, the feminist approach, though still secular in its tendency opposing any role to Islam in the public sphere, was influenced by nationalist, modernist, and humanitarian discourses. By playing the dual oppression card, secular feminists argued that colonial powers intersect with traditional patriarchal structures to create the anti-emancipatory realities of women (Afsaruddin, 2014). They aimed to challenge these forms of oppression, advocating for women's rights as part of the broader struggle against colonialism, by aligning with broader national liberation movements. They argued that the empowerment of women was essential for the progress of the nation, thus linking gender equality with national identity and development. The period, also, saw a push for professional opportunities and political participation for women and an interest in issues of poverty, health, and education framing them as humanitarian concerns that required urgent attention (Afsaruddin, 2014; Badran, 2008). This discourse continued to dominate the political and social scene even in the post-colonial era in many localities within the region.

One of the most prominent manifestations of this discourse that was apparent during the era of the late 1970s was the absence of Islamic symbols in public facilities. Hijab, for example, which is the most significant and charged Islamic symbol, was nearly absent in most public spaces. It was quite uncommon to see a woman wearing a hijab in public environments like universities and workplaces in most Muslim-majority countries. At that time, the prevailing belief among intellectuals across the political spectrum, among feminists and academics and within the general public was that religions, including Islam, would gradually diminish in influence and that

political modernization would eliminate religious symbols and expressions from public life (Mir-Husseini, 2019). All of this changed, however, with the influence of major developments. Events such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its aftermath in the 1980s, and the emergence of political Islam in the mid-1980s all managed to shake the global power dynamics. In parallel, the impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 was unrivaled in Western academia. It contributed, down the line, in shaping feminist scholarship and shifting the discourse on Oriental women in the academic circles (Mir-Husseini, 2019). Secular discourses were now criticized for their failure to recognize the specific cultural and religious contexts of Muslim women, their limitation to go beyond the public sphere, and their ignorance to the ongoing debate regarding the clash of civilizations thesis (Afsaruddin, 2014; Ameri, 2023; Tohidi, 2003). With this recognition, the discourse on women's rights and emancipation shifted, by the end of the 20th century, toward a religiously-grounded discourse that seeks to reinterpret Islamic texts for the sake of gender equality.

With the dawn of the 21st century, this religiously-driven paradigm, dubbed Islamic feminism, was bolstered by the establishment of global movements for justice and equality like *Musawah* and *Sisters in Islam* and the formation of transnational networks, playing crucial roles in bridging academic research and activism and fostering a collective global platform for Islamic feminists to advocate for gender equality. Today, this global movement validates its position through its commitment to focusing on the necessity of reinterpreting Islam's sacred texts and reforming the patriarchal structures within society while adhering to the universal values of feminism (Badran, 2008; Mir-Husseini, 2019). By means of this action, this paradigm reveals itself as a unique form of hybridity that celebrates authenticity and particularity while propagating that a convergence between the principles of Islam and feminist ideology is possible and legitimate. But, is that truly the case?

4. Between Islam and Secularism: An Evaluative Approach to Islamic Feminism

Since its appearance in the last decade of the 20th century, Islamic feminism has been target to continuous criticism, doubt, and scrutiny. It is always labeled as an oxymoron by both Muslim and secular scholars, who believe that a blending between Islam and feminism is problematic as these two notions exhibit two inherently contrasting viewpoints (Ameri, 2023;

Blogging Theology, 2023; Dalaman, 2021; Tohidi, 2003). For that, the perception and acceptance of the term “Islamic feminism” within the academic circles as well as among the lay public is still debatable. This section endeavors to showcase and outline the key arguments of both ends of the spectrum in opposition to this concept.

The secular stance on the issue of gender equality and liberation is distant from any association with religions. Particularly, this approach explicitly opposes any involvement of Islam on issues of gender relations, questioning, at times, the authority of the Quran (Blogging Theology, 2023; Dalaman, 2021). In her dissertation, *Feminism, Secularism, and the (Im)Possibilities of an Islamic Feminism*, Akbar Akhgari (2020) admits that the interplay between secularism and Islamic feminism is indeed complex; however, she affirms that secularism as an approach for issues of gender equality fosters a more universal view since it is unbound by any religious constraints. By contrast, harmonizing activism for gender equality within a religiously-driven paradigm may potentially restrict the scope of feminist discourse, hindering its ability to address more extensive societal problems faced by women.

The Tunisian lawyer Neila Driss (2018) was more direct in her opposition to the framework. She argues that feminism and Islamism are fundamentally incompatible, rendering the concept of Islamic feminism as contradictory. She confesses that adhering to Islamic beliefs implies an acceptance of female subordination and compliance with male authority emphasizing that women who embrace these notions stand at odds with feminist principles of equality and liberation. Thus, those who claim reconciliation between the two is possible are deluded (as cited in Dalaman, 2021).

Hammed Shahidian (2002), the Iranian sociologist and scholar, broadens the scope of this notion by asserting that Islamic feminists tend to brush aside Islam’s ontological doctrines; those principles that are immune to change, making it difficult for any possible alterations or reinterpretations of Islamic scriptures to align with or prioritize feminist ideals. Shahidian goes even further by amplifying that sexual identity in Islam is fixed to either male or female. This unchallenged notion means that society will subsequently assign people specific gender identities based on their biological sexes (as cited in Akbar Akhgari, 2020). Such a principle contradicts feminism’s core beliefs of equality and goes even against hybridity’s doctrine of anti-essentialism. In the words of Akbar Akhgari (2020), feminism should not be tied to a worldview like Islam's for it

confines people to live within cultural and social limitations that are imposed by Islam's religious norms. She bewilderedly wonders: What kind of feminist theory excludes women with homosexual orientations? How can a feminist theory be genuinely inclusive if it does not embrace individuals with diverse sexual inclinations and gender identities (2020)? This, as a result, limits the scope of the Islamic feminist paradigm because of the Islamic prefix attached to it.

At the other end of the spectrum lies the Islamic point of view regarding Islamic feminism, which despite its alignment with the secular view in rejecting this paradigm, does so based on fundamentally different arguments and principles. First and foremost, labeling the blending of Islam with feminism as incompatible from the Islamic perspective stems from the fact that feminism is a man-made earthly philosophy while Islam is a divinely revealed religion. In her interview with Paul William on his YouTube channel, Dr. Haifaa Jawad, the Iraqi scholar and senior lecturer at University of Birmingham, explicates this argument by emphasizing that while feminism is an ideology formulated by individuals based on reason and social values, Islam is a comprehensive system of life that derives its authority and resolutions on different matters, including those of gender roles and relationships, from Divine Revelation, or al-Din, as she calls it. Pertaining to this, Dr. Jawad stresses that Islamic teachings should take precedence in discussions about gender roles, rather than secular feminist perspectives (Blogging Theology, 2023).

To be more direct, the message of Islam and the message of feminism are totally different. Feminism is an ideology that revolves around gynocenterism—a view that prioritizes women and their interests—in the words of the Egyptian sociologist and theorist Abdelwahab El-Missiri (as cited in Ameri, 2023), Islam, on the other hand, in its literal meaning stands for the submission and total obedience to Allah, the Creator. In this respect, Islamic principles and views cannot be bent to conform to the feminist framework. Nor can the postmodern notions of freedom, justice, and liberty, which stem originally from Western philosophy's critique of the Christian religious institution, be the filter through which cultures around the world are judged and assessed. Hybridizing a framework that represents the distinctiveness of the Arab and Muslim region with a Western-born discourse for gender equality places Islamic feminists in a quandary as to where their loyalties should lean. In light of the current power imbalance of today's world where Western cultural hegemony is the norm, the quest for decentering the cultural structure of the region that is inspired by notions of

Islam and Arabness invites the dominance of another. This authority of the dominant culture, in the words of the Tunisian author and scholar of comparative religions Sami Ameri (2023), will forever paint feminism as an outlandish paradigm and concept.

Drawing on this outcome, a further issue is added to the discussion. The Islamic philosophy on the relationship between men and women does not stem from the principle of equality, but rather from the concept of equity. It is crucial, then, to emphasize that in Islam men and women are fundamentally equal in terms of their essence of creation, human dignity, religious obligation and its requirements, the legitimacy of possessing rights, reward and merit as well as in the Qur'anic and Islamic discourse. Still, due to their distinct physiological structures, behavioral patterns, and unique characteristics, both are assigned distinct roles, functions, and positions within society reflecting a complementary relationship, not a Darwinian competitive struggle for survival. This differentiation in positions does not imply a hierarchy or a disparity in value or status; it simply reflects the unique set of rights and duties associated with each gender (Ameri, 2023; Kheir Musa, 2021; Mutamasak, 2008; Rajeh 2022). As such, women should strive for the recognition and protection of their own rights, tailored to their unique experiences, rather than seeking to replicate the rights of men.

Another point of criticism against Islamic feminists stems from their advocacy for the implementation of a contemporary feminist-oriented *ijtihad* concerning provisions of Islamic jurisprudence, notably those related to issues of gender equality and family structure (Badran, 2008; Mir-Husseini, 2019; Tohidi, 2003). Some, like Badran (2008), go even further emphasizing a need for the transformation of Islamic discourse itself rather than its reformation. First of all, none of the scholars operating within this kind of feminist approach can be recognized as a true theologian or jurist or possesses an extensive knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence to credibly indulge in the exegesis of Islamic texts (Quran and Hadiths). Most of them are either sociologists, anthropologists, scholars of comparative religions and philosophy or experts in gender and feminist studies. In addition, despite their assertion to the contrary, they all incorporate and adhere to the Western methods of analysis, induction, and terminology (Ameri 2023; Blogging Theology, 2023). Second, *ijtihad*, or independent reasoning, is indeed a right granted for all Muslims (males and females) at any time, yet the use of the term by Islamic feminists does not accurately capture its true meaning. In their explanation to the androcentric claim against the interpretation of Islamic scriptures, they define the *ijtihad* of the male religious scholars

(*ulema*) and jurists (*muftis*) as the insertion of personal opinions into legal judgments to find room for individual biases.

Initially, the jurisprudential rule in Islam stipulates that no room for *ijtihad* is permitted in the presence of an explicit Qur'anic verse or Hadith. When permitted, *ijtihad* is governed by a set of regulations, conditions, and guidelines. Tasneem Rajeh (2022), the Syrian scholar and academic of Islamic studies and Islamic jurisprudence, illustrates the nature of this concept. She elucidates that *ijtihad* in Islam is a meticulous process akin to surgical operations that requires, along with other minor requirements, knowledge of the Four Schools of Islamic jurisprudence (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali), deep familiarity with various Islamic disciplines (Fiqh, Tafsir, Aqidah, Hadith studies...), extensive research and investigation, training, preparation and insight, resilience and perseverance, and an understanding of people's realities. It is, thus, specific to scholars who have reached a high degree of proficiency in deducing and interpreting Sharia rulings.

Still, even with such an extent of professionalism, entrusting the matters of Sharia to a single person who claims to be a *mujtahid* so that people would believe and follow his commands has never been the norm. Instead, any scholar who issues a *fatwa* must provide evidence and outline the method by which he derived the rule. Also, his work is always assessed and reviewed by other scholars, making the Islamic jurisprudence immune to subjective interpretations or personal preferences (Kheir Musa, 2021; Rajeh, 2022). Despite this complex and meticulous process, Islamic feminists contend that interpretations for the sacred texts should not be definitive and that alternative interpretations that take the egalitarian notion into account should be allowed (Mir-Husseini, 2019). Yet, with such reasoning, it can be argued that such an interpretation is but a drop in the ocean of many possibilities and that the male-centric perspective, which is claimed by Islamic feminists, is another valid aspect that has its own degree of legitimacy.

Hence, refuting the claim of a male-centric interpretation of the Islamic jurisprudence and the patriarchal structure within society constitutes the last argument against Islamic feminism and its advocates from an Islamic point of view. Though not overtly expressed, in the view of many Islamic feminist scholars men are inevitably inclined to favor their own gender, and since jurists are predominantly male this bias is reflected in their interpretations (Rajeh, 2022). They emphasize that the paradigm of Islamic feminism came to challenge this bias. Nayereh Tohidi (2003) contends that

contemporary Islamic feminists are not primarily challenging the symbolic language of the Quran, but rather its interpretations by male scholars. This male-dominated control over Qur'anic exegesis and *ijtihad*, according to Tohidi (2003), has significantly influenced the development, implementations, and practice of Islamic law, contributing to the subjugation of women.

From an objective standpoint, a number of pertinent questions arise within this context: Have the meanings of the Qur'anic (and Hadith) texts been so obscure that they have escaped the comprehension of all Muslim jurists and scholars for the past fourteen centuries, only to be addressed by contemporary feminist scholars of the 1990s? Was there a coordinated effort by all Muslim scholars throughout these years to marginalize and oppress women with no opposition from any segment of society at all? Would such a criticism not threaten the sanctity, validity, and legitimacy of the Quran as a divinely revealed scripture and challenge the importance and influence of the Prophet's Hadiths and Sunnah in Islamic *fiqh*?

The Palestinian scholar of Islamic jurisprudence and Sharia Muhammed Kheir Musa (2021) contends that such a perspective offered by Islamic feminists stems from an intellectual backdrop, borrowed from Western philosophy, which frames the relationship between men and women as an inherent competitive struggle, where each party endeavors to exert dominance over the other and advance its own interests. In such a context, it becomes natural for disputes to arise across diverse fields of human thought exhibiting a binary struggle where men are consistently portrayed as strong and dominant and women as weak and helpless, as if society exists in a reality of mutual conspiracies between men and women (Rajeh, 2022).

The other side of the Islamic feminists' argument professes that the Islamic jurisprudence is androcentric because of the absence of female scholars and jurists who would display and shelter the egalitarian essence of the sacred texts (Barlas, 2008; Mir-Husseini, 2019). In addressing these assertions, it is essential to underscore that the number of female scholars and jurists has indeed been lower, sometimes even nonexistent, in comparison to their male counterparts. Still, this discrepancy should not be regarded as an Islamic restriction or a male conspiracy against women to pursue religious knowledge as there are many examples of female pioneers of Islamic jurisprudence and its disciplines; the most renowned is Aisha Prophet Muhammad's wife. Nor should it be viewed as a defect or a deficiency of women, but rather as a reflection of the natural human differences among men and women as the pursuit of knowledge in earlier

times was considerably more challenging (Rajeh, 2022). Even in other fields of study like social sciences and humanities, medical sciences, physics, chemistry, engineering and others, the gender disparity has been evident throughout history and in many parts of the world. Kheir Musa (2021) elaborates this notion even further by contending that the pioneering female jurists and scholars throughout the history of Islam exceed in their number the female scholars in social sciences and humanities and other domains of research. In view of these points, is it not more appropriate to interpret and attribute this phenomenon to women's personal choices or to other social and political conditions such as colonial eras or discriminatory cultural practices and norms, acknowledging at the same time that the lower participation of women in many fields is still persistent to this day?

Finally, a distinction has to be made between patriarchy, a term that is linked to anthropologist and feminist discourses and has roots in the ecclesiastical Christian system, and Qiwanah, an Islamic concept that denotes men's guardianship and responsibility over their families. Patriarchy, according to Barker (2004), refers to the ongoing and systematic dominance of all men over all women across various social structures, inherently implying notions of male control and superiority. This concept has been criticized not only for indicating that all men are oppressors and all women are oppressed in the same manner, but also for portraying women as helpless and powerless (Barker), a notion that has already been discussed in the article above. Qiwanah, on the other hand, is a Sharia-based legal directive that embodies both nurturing and leading the family without oppression or humiliation while engaging the wife in matters of opinion and consultation (Ameri, 2023). Thus, Qiwanah in Islam is a form of responsibility and compulsory duty of men toward their wives and other family members, not a form of prestige or an instrument for implementing tyranny.

5. Conclusion

Islamic feminism, as a conceptual framework and movement, has presented itself as a hybrid product that combines the teachings and principles of Islam with feminist discourses and methodologies to address and elevate the limitations placed on women in the Arab and Muslim region. This hybrid combination, according to the advocates of the paradigm, challenges the fixed, essentialist, and male-monopolized interpretations of the Islamic scriptures (Quran and/or Hadith) that were propagated for fourteen centuries toward more gender-egalitarian and women-friendly

interpretations, based on contemporary notions of modernity, democracy, and social justice. The aim of this article was to critically examine whether this convergence between the two concepts is possible or not, examining at the same time, its degree of acceptance within the academic circles as an authentic alternative or an outlandish discourse. To achieve that, the article engaged first in an investigation of the concept of hybridity and its conceptual foundations. It has been concluded that despite its celebratory tone in defeating notions of purity, binarism, and essentialism, hybridity failed to address the global geopolitical realities and challenges that govern modern discourses, relations, and interactions. The major argument against hybridity has been addressed by scholars such as Acheraïou (2011), Sayyed (2000), and Hazan (2015) who have emphasized that its discourse does, in fact, reinforce Western cultural hegemony and capitalist agenda while neglecting, rejecting, and diminishing the value of the non-hybrids; those entities and communities that are willing to preserve their distinct essentialist traits and refuse to fit in this boundaryless framework of fluidity.

In light of this, Islamic feminism has been approached with a great degree of hostility and skepticism by secular and Islamic scholars alike, both labeling it an oxymoron. The secular feminist side posits that the struggle for gender equality and liberation should never be tied to a patriarchal religion, whose ontological principles block any possible alterations or interpretations of the sacred texts. Islamic scholars like Ameri (2023), Jawad (2023), Kheir Musa (2021), and Rajeh (2022), on the other hand, critique the proponents of Islamic feminism who attempt to identify as both feminists and Muslims, questioning how they reconcile these two differing frameworks. They highlight the impossibility and incompatibility of Islam as a Divine Religion with a human-made ideology whose initial foundational principles represent a byproduct of Western-born philosophies and perspectives that came as a response to the Christian derogatory restrictions and perceptions of women. In the end this article has shown, through evidence and objective argumentation that the idea of reading and interpreting Islam and its scriptures through a gendered lens stands at odds with the comprehensive view of Islam which acknowledges the innate nature (*fitrah*) of human beings and extends beyond any racial, ethnic, or gendered considerations and distinctions.

To recapitulate, it is indisputable to acknowledge the existence of various forms of injustice and oppression against women in Arab and Muslim societies. Nevertheless, such manifestations of oppression should not be directly attributed to the tenets or doctrines of Islam. These practices,

in fact, arise from various reasons such as the blatant deviations and misuses of Sharia rulings and its jurisprudential framework, the entrenched cultural and social attitudes as well as a range of other geopolitical and historical realities. Additionally, women of diverse faiths around the world also endure similar experiences of oppression, marginalization, and injustice. So, why is Islam often depicted as a religion that oppresses and discriminates against women?

To ameliorate the situation, Muslim scholars, activists, jurists and ulema within these societies should not seek to reform (*Islah*) or transform (*Tahweel*) the teachings of Islam to align with postmodern notions of freedom, justice, and liberty. Nor do they need to assimilate alien methodologies and forms of activism that fail to recognize the distinctiveness of the region. Instead, what is truly needed, according to Dr. Jawad (Blogging Theology, 2023), is a renaissance of authentic Islamic teachings—a traditional Islamic concept and practice highlighted by the Prophet (peace be upon him) that entails an inner revival (*tajdeed*) of Islam from within and has always been associated with notable *mujaddids*. Finally, a renewed understanding of the ultimate purpose of human existence as well as a redefinition and reevaluation of the inherent roles and positions of men and women that shy away from the consumerist and materialistic notions of success and achievements need also to be addressed.

6. Endnotes

1 Throughout this article, the word gender is used synonymously with the word sex to refer to the same concept. The only exception is in (page 14) where they are differentiated to support the argument presented.

2 Though the two terms are often used interchangeably, the difference between them can vary depending on the context and focus. Hybridization, in the context of cultural studies, refers to the ongoing process of combining two different cultural elements together while hybridity represents the final outcome or condition (Guignery, 2011).

3 Miscegenation refers to the “interracial contact that resulted from overseas conquest and population displacement in Britain, France, and the United States” (Kraidy, 2005, p.48). The term was invented in 1864 and was used in pejorative contexts to condemn the “amalgamation” or fusion between races, particularly in the colonies (Young, 1995).

4 Driven by distinct political, ideological, cultural, and racial motives, colonial authorities of the 16th and 17th centuries encouraged a calculated form of hybridism for two reasons. The first was to produce hybrid

descendants who could act as intermediaries between dominant, ostensibly superior Western cultures and the so-called stagnant, inferior cultures of the colonized while the second was to potentially eradicate colonized races through biological amalgamation (Acheraïou, 2011).

5 As going deeper into Bakhtin's pinnacle contributions to linguistics is beyond the scope of this article, please refer to Bakhtin, M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (M. Holquist, Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). University Of Texas Press, for more insight on his version of hybridity as well as his ideas of polyphony, dialogism, and heteroglossia.

6 Figures such as witches, monsters, strangers and traits such as the unhomely, the abjection, and the taboo have found a place within the familiar realm of daily media and cinematic representations, embodied in labels like transexuality, hyphenated nationalities, mixed races, anthropomorphized animals, cyborgs, and aliens—all of which are now accepted and celebrated aspects of postmodern life. The formerly-rejected marginalized hybrid, which was portrayed as a source of moral panic and racial degeneration, has now become the heart of social interactions, and areas, previously viewed as irrational, savage, or unpredictably chaotic, have been redefined into a normalized part of cultural order (Hazan, 2015).

7 Emerged as part of business terminology in the 1980s, with origins in Japan, the term glocal and the related process of glocalization are created by combining the words global and local. In postcolonial studies, their application emphasizes the agency of local cultures in resisting the perceived dominance of global culture (Ashcroft et al., 2013).

8 Universalism, or universality, is the belief that the experiences, values, and expectations of a prevailing culture are applicable to all of humanity regardless of the specific influences, values, and circumstances of other local cultures. Because it fails to recognize or appreciate cultural differences, the concept is regarded as a key element of imperial dominance supporting the spread of imperial narratives over local ones (Ashcroft et al., 2013).

9 Some scholars of this paradigm, such as the Pakistani scholar Asma Barlas and the African-American scholar Amina Wadud, argue that the reinterpretations of Islamic jurisprudence and Sharia as a whole should be reliant on Qur'anic verses only for they represent the sacred revelation of the Creator (Badran, 2008; Barlas 2008). Others, like Ziba Mir-Hosseini from Iran and Fatima Mernissi from Morocco, criticize the traditional interpretation of both Islamic texts, the Quran and the Hadiths (Badran, 2008; Mir-Hosseini, 2019).

10 Badran (2008) argues that Islamic feminism offers a solution to those who are invested in gender justice but not at the expense of their religious identity. Among these scholar-activists is Asma Barlas who refuses to identify as a feminist, describing herself as a believing woman whose aim is to offer an alternative framework that has no association with Western feminist paradigms (Barlas, 2008).

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