

# The Arab Women Discourses on Feminism and Islam: Fear of an Oxymoron?

Hosn Abboud

The academic discourse that deals with feminism and Islam<sup>1</sup> makes some people cautious given the inherent double standards or oxymoronic nature of the combination of the following terms: “feminism” and “Islam”. Hence questions arise as to whether it is worthwhile for women to study Islam from a women’s issues perspective, or whether the religious monotheistic tradition and the patriarchal system it entails can coexist with the feminist standpoint. Do feminist Muslim women actually exist? Is Islamic feminism just “a trend” since Islamic discourse is en vogue and is widely discussed and dissected?<sup>2</sup>

In the beginning of the last century, one used to read newspaper articles under the title “al-nissa’iyyat” (1910) written by Bahithat al-Badiya, [aka Malak Hifni Nassif]. Those were mainly articles dealing with social issues such as the necessity of wearing the veil or not, raising girls and educating them, marriage, polygyny, as well as the relationship between men and women, and the difference between Egyptian and Western women.

At the time, al-nissa’iyyat, the title of her journalistic columns, dealt with issues related to Egyptian women, the umma, and national liberation (Nassif, M.H., 1998). It was a discourse on the liberation of women as articulated by Egyptian women that did not address Muslim women alone but included Copt women as well. When in 1967 Bint al-Shati’, [aka Aisha Abdul Rahman] lectured on the Islamic conception of women’s liberation (Abdul Rahman, 2009) she distinguished between the Islamic and the non-Islamic concept of women’s liberation, thus defining her own premise, and at the same time, acknowledging the right of others to use other premises on which to base their concept of liberation. The Islamic revival in the Arab and Islamic countries led to the rise of an open and fervent Islamic religious model, and many academic Muslim women, as well as activists in the field of women’s rights started dealing with women’s issues themselves. Many conditions favored women taking this initiative, one of them is that women are more concerned with their own problems and the issue of their marginalization because of the patriarchal system that is aligned with corrupt and undemocratic political systems. Moreover, Arab women in the Arab world or in the diaspora are nowadays educated enough and have the adequate knowledge base that enables them to question and to discuss the various types of oppression and their roots. Hence the beginning of a feminist discourse by women<sup>3</sup> tackling women’s issues

openly, instead of discussing them under the guise of reforming Islam or struggling for national independence.<sup>4</sup>

The study of feminist writings published by women in Egypt (e.g. Bint al-Shati'), in the United States (Aziza al-Hibri and Leila Ahmed), and in Morocco (Fatima Mernissi), is of great help in investigating some aspects of the feminist discourse in Islam as well as its development. These aspects have contributed to the creation of the academic and scientific discourse on "Feminism and Islam" that widened its framework to include discourses on "Gender and Islam". The inclusion of "gender" provides a wider scope of knowledge about women as a gendered self within a social and historical framework, rather than a biological and essentialist one.<sup>5</sup>

This study is concerned with Arab feminist writings by women scholars. The first part deals with the Islamic concept of "men being in charge of women (or al-qiwama) according to the late Bint al-Shati' and Aziza al-Hibri. The second part is concerned with Fatima Mernissi's feminist critique which attempts to move the concept of authority away from the sacred and closer to the human dimension. In the third part, I will explain the sources of the concept of "gender in Islam" according to Leila Ahmed's study. In the fourth part, I examine the various connotations the term "feminism" takes when used by those activists and the legitimacy of their theses. In the last part, I will introduce the concept of "Islamic feminism" as discussed by Margot Badran and Amani Saleh. The present study aims at analyzing the main arguments on "Feminism and Islam" in order to put an end to the ambiguous relationship between the two concepts. Does the relationship refer to a feminist knowledge of Islam, or is it a strategic move taken by new generations of women activists who cling to their religious identity as a means of self-defense? Or is it a discourse that enables women to politicize their issues to achieve liberation and democracy?

### The Quranic Concept of al-Qiwama According to Bint Al-Shati' and Aziza al-Hibri

In her lecture titled "The Islamic Conception of Women's Liberation", given at Umm Durman University (Khartoum, Sudan) in 1967, Bint al-Shati' (Aisha Abdul Rahman d. 1998)<sup>6</sup> tried to re-interpret some Qur'anic concepts related to women that were previously (mis)interpreted by men, in ways that suited them. She was keen from the beginning to reaffirm that women have genuine rights in life that are independent of and not associated with men's will, and not tied to their ability to procreate or to produce male heirs (Abdul Rahman, 2009). She also detailed the perfection of women's humanity, with all the rights and consequences related to this humanity. Bint al-Shati' did not call for full equality between men and women, according to the following logic: "Equality is bound by the existing differences in nature which does not recognize absolute equality either between a man and another, or between a woman and another, or between the different sexes". She then asserts that her definition of the right for equality goes back to an Islamic origin determined by the clear verses in the Qur'an which never state that "a woman is not equal to man", but rather state: "Say: Not equal are things that are bad and things that are good" (Qur'an 5: 100) and "Not equal are the Companions of the Fire and the Companions of the Garden" (Qur'an 59: 20), and "Not equal are those who know and those who do not know" (Qur'an 39: 9).<sup>7</sup> Thus the main factor for determining gender equality or lack of it is not being

male or female. Rather, it is whether one is good or bad, believing or disbelieving, practicing true religion or deviating from the right path, knowledgeable or not. This approach to gender equality based on moral and religious qualities in men and women as determined by the Qur'an that Bint al-Shati' adopted is of a different nature from the shari'a laws that have granted men authority regarding such issues as al-qiwama, the right to divorce, and to polygyny, etc. In what follows I will examine how Bint al-shati' analyzes the issue of al-qiwama which remains the primary concern of Muslim feminists when tackling "feminism and Islam".

Bint al-Shati' asks the laywoman to recognize a man's legitimate and natural right of being in charge of her, citing the following verse: "And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them. And Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise" (Qur'an 2: 228). However, she reminds men that it is about time to understand that al-qiwama is not just mere male domination, as in the case of inheritance for example, where the Qur'an states that "to the male a portion equal to that of two females". Rather, al-qiwama according to Islam is a responsibility that falls on men (i.e. a right related to manhood): "[...] we, as Muslim liberated women, would like nothing better than to willingly and gladly accept this guardianship by our men" (Abdul Rahman, 2009, p. 41). Also, she warns men that it is also about time for them to understand that "their legitimate right of guardianship over us [al-qiwama] is neither absolute nor is it for all men in general over all women" (Abdul Rahman, 2009, p.41). It is a conditional right "because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means" (Qur'an 4:34). In case a man could not meet these conditions, he loses his right to al-qiwama. Here one notices two things: first that Bint al-Shati' distinguishes between manhood (or rujulah) and masculinity (or thukurah) as presented in the Scriptures without explaining the two concepts; second she distinguishes between the absolute and the conditional, which means that the concept of al-qiwama does not apply to men who do not assume their household responsibilities or support their wives financially. Further, such concepts as manhood and masculinity, and womanhood<sup>8</sup> and femininity, as embodied in the Scriptures, deserve to be reconceptualized and expressed using more appropriate terms.

In 1982, Azizah al-Hibri edited a book titled *Women and Islam*, which included the following articles: "Feminism and Feminist Movements in the Middle East" by Leila Ahmed; "Virginity and Patriarchy" by Fatima Mernissi; and "A Study of Islamic Herstory: or How Did We Ever Get into This Mess?" by Azizah al-Hibri. The importance of the book is that it brought together Muslim female academicians (al-Hibri, Mernissi, Ahmed) in addition to Western scholars who are involved in the field of Islamic studies as well as women's studies (al-Hibri, p. 212, 1982).

In her editor's article titled "A study of Islamic Herstory", al-Hibri goes back to the early times of Islam, as the analysis of this period of time paves the way for new interpretations of relevant concepts and their reformulation. She relates stories on the prevalence of the patriarchal order in Arab societies during the pre-Islamic era (or jahiliyyah), in spite of some remnants of matriarchal practices, such as worshipping the goddesses "Allat, 'Uzza, and Manat", as mentioned in the Qur'an. She also mentions the participation of women in wars among other practices as remnants of that matriarchal

heritage. She also adds that a dynamic conflict had taken place one hundred years before the advent of Islam, between the patriarchal and the matriarchal orders but that women lost their prominent position in this struggle. She puts the blame on patriarchy which allowed men to acquire war and trade techniques that were made available to them thanks to the conflict between the Byzantines and the Persians, while women were confined to weaving, herding, and raising the children. Thus, according to al-Hibri, it is all about who fights and wins the economic and military battles. Moreover, she compares this fight to that between the developed countries that are in possession of high end technologies with the Third World countries that lack economic and military means. My question is the following: Does it all boil down to a conflict of power and economy, knowing that the message of Mohammad was a monotheistic one calling for religious, linguistic, and political unification? Al-Hibri pinpoints to the connection between a new patriarchal order and a strong tribal structure based on paternal lineage:

The tribe as a whole was itself defined on the basis of patrilineage. All paternal uncles and their descendants belonged to the same tribe whose head was the absolute ruler. In case of war, tribes sought help from their paternal relatives. Only on rare occasions did they turn to the maternal uncles for help. [...] Since the tribe was the highest political, economic, military and legal authority, without which the individual had no significance whatsoever, it followed that the 'paternal bond' became the supreme bond in the society of jahiliyyah, permeating all its facets, and founding all power within it. It became the core and essence of that patriarchal system. (al-Hibri, 1982, p. 212)

Azizah al-Hibri enumerates the positive contributions brought about by Islam, based on their Qur'anic origins (and in a few cases based on Islamic jurisprudence). She recalls the following reforms: Islam has allowed men to desert the conjugal bed for a limited period of time only, and has forbidden women to mourn their men for a year. It has also restricted polygyny to four wives at a time when men did not restrict themselves to any given number of wives, and recognized women's and children's right to inheritance. It prevented men from considering women as part of their inheritance and from owning them like any household item, whereby a son could inherit his stepmother and marry her after the death of his father. Furthermore, Islam banned the trafficking in women for sexual pleasure. More importantly, according to al-Hibri:

All these are well known facts to any good Muslim. However the major contribution of Islam towards the ultimate defeat of patriarchy does not lie in any such list of reforms. Rather, it lies in the fact that Islam replaced the 'paternal bond' of jahililyyah totally by the religious bond within which everyone — male or female, black or white, young or old, rich or poor — is equal. (al-Hibri, 1982, p. 213)

Al-Hibri says that the Prophet Mohammed made a brave and successful attempt when he decided to reduce male power in the existing patriarchal system in order to reintroduce and consolidate rights that women had lost. After the Prophet's death, patriarchy prevailed again among men in power, at a time when women did not have

the opportunity to win their rights back, and thus the old cycle of male hegemony prevailed again. What al-Hibri is saying applies to other religious messengers who, in the beginning, were able to rally men and women around the new religion and around the idea of equality among all human beings — ideas that were soon disregarded during the institutionalization phase of the new religion. Parallel to the strong ties between the tribal order and the patriarchal one (as al-Hibri indicated), there is a similar relationship between patriarchy and monotheism that constituted the core of the Islamic call (ad-da'wah), but al-Hibri does not discuss this relationship or the reasons for it.<sup>10</sup> Instead, al-Hibri discusses the disadvantages of Islamic patriarchy as well as those of Arab patriarchy.

Al-Hibri identifies three problematic issues whose patriarchal interpretation should be discredited and which have to be considered based on the Qur'anic text. She disregards the issue of the veil justifying this by the fact that its non-Islamic roots have already been thoroughly discussed. Al-Hibri reduces the major problems concerning Muslim women to polygamy, divorce, al-qiwama, testimony, and inheritance, whereby all of these are strictly legal or jurisprudential issues that can be revisited by going back to their origin in the Qur'an. I am going to discuss her analysis of the concept of men's guardianship, al-qiwama, in order to evaluate the changes in thinking about this concept from the time of Bint al-Shati to that of al-Hibri's, keeping in mind that a short period of time separates the two articles.

Al-Hibri explains al-qiwama on the basis of the right moral guidance and caretaking. She shows that many men interpreted al-qiwama verse as one which puts men in charge of women's affairs because men were created by God as superior to women (in strength and reason), and because they provide for women (they spend their money on them). This interpretation, as al-Hibri states, is the standard one but is "unwarranted and inconsistent with other Islamic teachings (al-Hibri, 1982, p. 217). She argues that nowhere in al-qiwama passage is there a reference to the male's physical or intellectual superiority. Secondly, "since men are 'qawwamun' over women in matters where God gave some of the men more than some of the women, and in what the men spend of their money, then clearly men as a class are not 'qawwamun' over women as a class (al-Hibri, 1982, p. 218). According to the literal meaning of the verse, the condition of men's al-qiwama (guardianship) depends on the husband having more material means than his wife, and on him supporting her financially. In another article, al-Hibri adds that "men are not qawwamun over financially independent women, and that ignorant men are not qawwamun over educated women" (al-Hibri, 2000, pp. 63-64). She then blames the men who have interpreted this particular verse as if it were a general one with absolute and universal implications. She mentions that the verse was unfortunately used by men to assert their superiority over women and to argue that this superiority is based on divine decree or orders. Then she draws attention to the fact that this interpretation of the verse contradicts the content of other verses that say the following: "The believers, men and women, are protectors [awlyaa', plural of wali] of one another" (Quran: 9:71). After explaining the meaning of the term "wali" (protector or responsible for others) and of its equivalent "qawwamun", she raises the following question: "If men were superior to women in matters of physical strength and intelligence, how can some women be able to be their wali (i.e. responsible for them in matters of faith)?"<sup>11</sup>

## Fatima Mernissi and the Transformation of Authority from the Sacred to the Human

When the English version of Fatima Mernissi's famous French book: *Le Harem politique: Les Femmes et le Prophète* (1987) came out in 1991 under the following title: *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, it was a phenomenon in many respects. I will never forget the way Mernissi was introduced at the 1994 North Carolina "Middle Eastern Studies Association" conference, as if she were being crowned on the throne of the Queen of Sheba. I will also never forget how one of the Muslim students warned others against reading her book lest their faith be put in doubt. The importance of her work lies in the fact that first of all, it is a feminist study like we have never seen before, coming from a Muslim female scholar. Second, it is a book with a feminist, critical methodology that was being applied for the first time on Islamic sacred texts, especially the Hadith collections,<sup>12</sup> particularly the ones that are prejudicial to women's dignity as well as to their mental, religious, and psychological abilities. Mernissi's feminist concern in this work is mostly focused on the critique of women's poor participation in Islamic politics. She attributes this poor participation to a long history of:

- Men's rejection of women's political participation in the Arab-Islamic culture.
- Manipulation of sacred texts and fabrication of false Hadith.
- Intertwining the political with the sacred to such a point that there is no possibility of discerning one from the other, which renders the task of reading the texts a difficult one.
- Discouraging individuality and considering any private initiative as *bid'a* or "errant behavior". (Mernissi, 1991)

Indeed, Mernissi seeks to conceptualize authority as human and not sacred, and to dissociate it from an absent or transcendent divine existence to make it accessible to ordinary beings:

As an exiled, masked, veiled symbol, woman occupies a central position in the debates on the political scene. The traditional enthronement of woman — of her who incarnates the very principle of inequality, the basic element of the hierarchy, the *alif*, the beginning of being, who only exists in terms of a relationship of submission to authority — has forced the Muslim in a few decades to face up to what Westerners took centuries to digest [...]: democracy and the equality of the sexes. To call into question social, political and sexual inequalities all at the same time is enough to make one's head spin. (Mernissi, 1991, p. 23)

Then Mernissi starts by explaining the importance of the Prophetic Hadith collections, which are next in importance to the Holy Qur'an, and they constitute, along with it, the main source of law and the standards for distinguishing the true from the false and the permitted from the forbidden, which continue to shape Muslim ethics and values. Then she digs her teeth into the study of two of the *ahadith* that have been attributed to the Prophet and that are prejudicial to women's political rights. For that purpose, she uses the methodology known as "the science of authentication of Hadith transmitters" (*'ilm al-jarh wa atta'dil*), also known as the "science of men" (*'ilm ar-*

rijal), whose purpose is to critique the credibility of the (usually) male transmitters of Hadith. Hadith scholars have employed various methods by which to evaluate the transmitters of Hadith. The aim of this specific methodology is to determine, among other things, the following: the date and place of birth of the narrator of Hadith, his family relationships, education, teachers and followers, knowledge-related trips, economic-social activities, moral uprightness and religious commitment, scholarly precision, literary work, and date of death. This investigation around the person of the narrator of the Hadith or about ahl as-sanad (the chain of men who transmitted it from the source), was the criterion used by the traditional Hadith scholars to ensure the authenticity of transmitted prophetic sayings, because many false and fabricated ahadith have been attributed to the Prophet. Naturally, women have often been the subject of these false ahadith which continue to be problematic today: ahadith are to be rejected in principle if they contradict the Islamic gender egalitarian message, even if they have become part of authoritative collections, such as Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, the two most important and authoritative collections of sayings by the Prophet. In that respect, Mernissi is the first Muslim woman to use the “science of men”, “ilm al-rijal”, i.e. the same tool used by men themselves to refute any Hadith erroneously ascribed to the Prophet Mohammad.

Then Mernissi starts her investigation of Abu Bakra, Nafi' ibn al-Hareth, the narrator who ascribed the following Hadith to the Prophet: “Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 49). This Hadith was narrated by Abu Bakra, a Companion of the Prophet who had known him during his lifetime and who spent enough time in his company to be considered trustworthy of reporting ahadith. This Hadith, as stated by Mernissi in her ‘Introduction’, “is the sledgehammer argument used by those who want to exclude women from politics” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 4). Then Mernissi started investigating Abu Bakra and his accuracy as a narrator, using the same methodology that Muslim scholars use for that purpose, i.e. ilm al-jarh wa atta'dil. In the process, she discovered that Abu Bakra remembered this Hadith twenty five years after the death of the Prophet, during the Battle of the Camel where Aisha, the daughter of Abu Bakr as-Siddik and the Prophet's wife, joined the battle against Ali ben abi Talib (son-in-law of the Prophet). Abu Bakra remembered this Hadith after Ali had retaken the city of Basra, and after Aisha had lost the Battle of the Camel. But the fact that Abu Bakra remembered the Hadith after a quarter of a century, at a time when Aisha, the Prophet's Companion and the daughter of Abu Bakar as-Siddik had lost the battle to Ali ben abi Talib, another Companion, constitutes enough evidence to consider him an unscrupulous, opportunistic man. However this is not enough to consider him untrustworthy or dishonest as a narrator of ahadith.

But Mernissi was soon to discover in some of the biographies<sup>13</sup> that the Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab accused Abu Bakra of giving false testimony in a case of alleged fornication, (or zina), involving an eminent political figure, and one of the Companions of the Prophet as well, al-Moghira bin Shu'ba. As a result, Abu Bakra was accused of slander, and was flogged upon the orders given by the Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab, who was very keen to protect the honor of the family and on inflicting punishment on those who maliciously slander people. Therefore, according to the conclusions reached by Mernissi, and based on her criticism which applies the methodology of the 'ilm ar-

rijal and Maliki jurisprudence, Abu Bakra does not constitute a trustworthy source for transmitting the Hadith that belittles women's political rights.

If we were to trace the opinion of contemporary Muslim scholars on the issue we notice some changes in their stance regarding the political participation of women. Islamist Mohammad Amara argues that Abu Bakra's episode works against women's participation in politics only at the top level of public office, or wilaya 'amma. According to him, there is a consensus among Muslim scholars that manhood (rujulah) is a pre-condition to occupy such a high position (Amara, 1994). Otherwise, women can participate in politics at all levels. As for Heba Raouf Ezzat, author of *al-mar'awa al-'amal as-siyassi: ru'ya islamiyya* (1995), she does not see any consensus among Muslim scholars regarding this issue, and the divergence she sees in the scholars' points of view stems from the different interpretations of the legal evidence based on al-qiwama verse, i.e. the same verse that was interpreted by women scholars such as Bint al-Shati' and Azizah al-Hibri. Apparently, this consensus is based on the anticipation of a conflict resulting from a clash between the duties of women who are in high political positions on the one hand, and women's domestic tasks and duties on the other hand. It is also based on the jurisprudential principle of sadd al-thara'i' (or the concept of "eliminating pretexts"), that does not allow Muslim women to appear in public or to mingle with men in order to preclude sinful acts.

What Mernissi did to Abu Bakra is no less than what she did to Abu Hurayra who narrated hundreds of the Prophet's ahadith and to whom were attributed many others as well, some of them very prejudicial to women. According to one such Hadith: "The Prophet said that the dog, the ass, and women interrupt prayer when they pass in front of the believer, interposing themselves between him and the qibla".<sup>14</sup> Mernissi also cited Aisha, daughter of Abu Bakr as-Siddiq and the Prophet's wife as well, who refuted Abu Hurayra's misogynist Hadith: "You compare us now to asses and dogs. In the name of God, I have seen the Prophet saying his prayers while I was there, lying on the bed between him and the qibla. And in order not to disturb him, I didn't move" (Mernissi, 1991, p. 70). Aisha was a reputed, prolific Hadith narrator who clarified the ahadith of many Companions of the Prophet as well as other traditions that were attributed to the Prophet Mohammad, by virtue of her sharing his life. Some of Aisha's rectifications were even reported by al-Imam az-Zarkashy.<sup>15</sup>

While Mernissi did not bring anything new with regards to discrediting some narrators who were also Companions of the Prophet (as-Sahaba) (many scholars have previously done so before her, such as Mahmud Abu Rayyah in his critique of Abu Hurayra), she should be given credit for putting, for the first time, the critique of the Hadith at the service of feminism. This is an endeavor which will pave the way for new interpretations of Scriptures concerning women's participation in the political sphere as well as in other domains.

### Leila Ahmed and the Roots of Gender Issues in Islam

Following Mernissi's examination of some of the texts that oppose women's political participation in Islam, gender issues started to play a major role in Arab/Muslim women's studies, and to occupy a considerable place in various modern discourses as well. Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) is considered to be one of the



pioneering studies dealing with the historical roots of this controversial issue in Islam. I am going to mention some insightful studies in the first two parts of Leila Ahmed's work that reveal the cultural context of the birth of Islam as a basic step that helps in understanding the foundation of Islamic concepts and social practices related to marriage and family matters, some of which are still perpetuated. I am not going to go over Ahmed's discussion on the political uses of the idea of women being persecuted by Islam, or on the issue of adopting the colonial discourse on Women and Islam in the Arab mainstream discourse. However, I recommend opening up the debate on this issue especially between Leila Ahmed and Margot Badran, the historian of the Egyptian feminist movement.

Leila Ahmed imputed the origins of the patriarchal system as well as the biased vision of gender to the pre-Islamic civilizations that used to prevail in Mesopotamia as well as in the Hellenistic and Christian cultures which considered the patriarchal family and female subordination as key components of their socio-religious vision. This historical review of the region's ancient societies permitted the researcher to study women's subordination and their inferior social status in the context of an institutionalized framework within the rise of civil societies, as well as the founding of the ancient State system, and not from the perspective of "natural" biological differences. Ahmed was successful in many ways when going back to the practices of some of the region's civilizations in order to understand the foundations and influences of Islam which arose in the 7th century C.E. and which explicitly identified itself as a monotheistic religion in the tradition of Judaism and Christianity, and as a renewal of those older faiths. Ahmed discussed the strict gender bias against women in the immediate pre-Islamic era in the Christian tradition:

The value placed on virginity in early Christianity by religious thinkers in particular was to a certain extent an expression of a rejection of physicality, of the body, and in particular of sexuality, and it was a rejection that comprehended an element of misogyny in that notionally women were seen as more implicated in physicality and the body than men — they were by cultural definition essentially sexual and biological beings". (Ahmed, 1992, p. 24)

As for the founding discourses on women and gender in Islam, an overview of the dominant types of marriage in the Arab region during the pre-Islamic era and the early times of the Islam gives a better understanding of the changes that occurred in the status of women and of the restrictions that were imposed on women with the rise of Islam. For instance, patrilineal marriage was not yet institutionalized as the sole legitimate form of marriage<sup>16</sup> but started gradually to become the dominant type of marriage. The evidence suggests that matrilineal customs based on the affiliation to the wife's family as well as the affiliation of the children to the mother's tribe were practiced along with patrilineal marriages. But the presence of matrilineal customs did not necessarily mean women had greater power in society or greater access to economic resources, nor did these customs correlate with an absence of misogyny, as suggested by the Qur'an with respect to the practice of girls' infanticide which was prevalent in some tribes. The matrilineal system which prevailed for a period of time persisted partially through the affiliation to the mother, as well as in her autonomy to dispose of her wealth and even to undertake trading activities as was the case with Khadija bint Khuwaylid, the

Prophet's first wife. She was affiliated to her maternal grandmother's lineal descent, and owned a trading caravan between Mecca and Syria.

Leila Ahmed was aware of the changes that occurred regarding marriage practices in pre-Islamic (*jahiliyya*) society when she made the comparison between Khadija, the Prophet's first wife, and Aisha bint Abi Bakr as-Siddiq, his second wife. Between the first marriage that reflects pre-Islamic society and the second marriage with Aisha, women's autonomy and monogamy became absent from the lives of the women that Mohammad married after he became the established Prophet of Islam and the leader of the *umma*. The control of women by male guardians and the practice of male polygyny became formal features of Islamic marriage, knowing that polygyny was not a new custom in Arab society. Moreover, the seclusion of the Prophet's wives was imposed, and men were granted the right to divorce, to enjoy slaves, and so on.

Islam improved the women's status by organizing once loosely regulated marriage and divorce provisions<sup>17</sup> and by prohibiting marriage practices or relationships that did not reflect the socio-economic transformations that occurred in Mecca or the patriarchal system that was more in tune with the new post-migration society in Medina.

According to Leila Ahmed (1992), the claim that the laws that took shape under Islam improved the status of women is simplistic and imprecise.

Leila Ahmed (1992) notes that Islam:

selectively sanctioned customs already found among some Arabian tribal societies while prohibiting others. Of central importance to the institution it established were the preeminence given to paternity and the vesting in the male of proprietary rights to female sexuality and its issue. Accordant customs, such as polygamy, were incorporated while discordant or opposing customs were prohibited. Through these changes Islam fundamentally reformulated the nexus of sexuality and power between men and women. (p. 45).

Ahmed reiterates the importance of Islam's ethical vision which is egalitarian, and is based on the respect of equality between the sexes,<sup>18</sup> and as such is in tension with, and might be even said to subvert the hierarchal structure of marriage pragmatically instituted in the first Islamic society (Ahmed, 1992). However, throughout history, it has not been those who have emphasized the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the religion who have held power. The political, religious, and legal authorities in the Abbasid period in particular, whose interpretative and legal legacy has defined Islam ever since, valued only the androcentric voice in Islam and interpreted religion as intended to institute androcentric laws and an androcentric vision in all Muslim societies throughout time (Ahmed, 1992).

Ahmed raises the issue of exegesis with respect to the foundational religious texts, and the importance of the exegete, since our relationship with the texts is an indirect one and is shaped by the interpreter/exegete who plays the role of the intermediary.<sup>19</sup> The Qur'anic suras, the structure of the verses, the historical background of the Qur'an (Meccan and Medinian suras), the evolution of Arabic calligraphy, and the multiple meanings and polysemy of the Qur'anic text are beyond the grasp of the novice reader. During the institutionalization of Islam, women did not produce texts (Aisha

was a narrator and an interpreter of the early period of Islam), so we had to wait until the end of the twentieth century for women to start being interested in the Qur'anic studies. Nowadays, we have feminists working on texts that are prejudicial to women. This re-reading highlights texts that promote the ethical equality between the sexes, and reveal the negative influence of the interpreter on texts that lend themselves to change and evolution with respect to the original message. These feminists may even reveal the contradiction between the misogyny of the jurisprudential system and the spiritual equality between the sexes as stated in the Qur'an, and in the end deconstruct the misogynist exegetical legal discourse derived from the Qur'an.

Unfortunately, the crucial role of interpretation and interpreters is clear in the misogynist reading that was attributed to Islam. Such a reading did not take into consideration the female perspective in the Qur'anic discourse, because men were either not naturally predisposed to it, or because the interpreter ignored it because it did not express the mores of the dominant elite, as was the case with the Sufi and Khawarji interpretation of Scriptures.

Dealing with the issue of the interpretation of foundational religious texts is quite important and makes it easy for women to refuse decisions that relegate them to a weak and inferior position that is justified by traditional Islamic jurisprudence. In this respect, Leila Ahmed has an important remark as well, which might have caused a polemic at the moment of releasing the Arabic version of her book, seven years after issuing the English version.<sup>20</sup> She maintains:

...divergence from the orthodox on a comprehensive range of matters, religious, political, and social, [...] emphasized the ethical message and viewed the practices of Muhammad and the regulations that he put into effect as ephemeral aspects of Islam relevant primarily to a particular society at a certain stage in its history. (Ahmed, 1992, p. 95)

As Ahmed suggests, "a reading by a less androcentric and less misogynist society, one that gave greater ear to the ethical voice of the Qur'an, could have resulted in — could someday result in — the elaboration of laws that dealt equitably with women" (Ahmed, 1992, p. 91).

### The "Feminism" of al-Hibri, Mernissi, and Ahmed and the Legitimacy of their Theses

Do al-Hibri, Mernissi, and Ahmed consider themselves feminists?

Al-Hibri refuses to be called a "feminist", in order for her to distinguish her own feminism from American feminism. As for Mernissi, she has recently communicated her willingness to use any terminology linked to Western feminism (Abboud, H., personal communication, 28 June, 2013). I do not know Ahmed's personal stance vis-à-vis this term that some women reject in order to distinguish their own brand of feminism from Western feminism. The three women are Muslim, and although they write in English (al-Hibri and Ahmed) or in French (Mernissi), they address two different publics: the European or American reader, and the Arab Muslim reader. Al-Hibri is a Professor of Law and Islamic Jurisprudence at the University of Richmond Virginia in the United States. She is also an Islamic women's rights' activist in North

America, and one of the founders of “KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights.” As for the late Fatima Mernissi (d. 2015), she was a professor of sociology at Mohammed V University in Rabat, Morocco. Her book, *Le harem politique: Le Prophète et les femmes*, appeared in French before its Arabic version came out six years later and was considered a big scholarly event. For the first time, Mernissi presented interpretations and analyses of the Qur’anic verses dealing with the veil, inheritance, disobedience of the wife, and slavery, from a feminist perspective. She even discredited some of the Prophet’s Companions such as Abou Bakra and Abou Hurayra in a way that many would disapprove of.<sup>21</sup> She is also an activist working on issues related to Moroccan and Arab women’s human rights, and she has participated in many workshops and networking centers to assist, empower, and protect women in the Maghreb countries. As for Leila Ahmed, she studied the historical background of gender in Islam during a period of ten years, and she is a professor of women’s studies and religion at the Harvard Divinity School, where she was also the director of the women’s studies program.

Al-Hibri, Mernissi, and Ahmed have this in common: they do not come from an Islamic Studies’ background, which makes delving into this area of scholarship quite difficult. They have reviewed, studied, and analyzed the early times of Islam in their attempt to reread the texts, and particularly the Qur’an, from a female, legal, jurisprudential, and political rights perspective, in order to deconstruct the traditional discourse which is biased against women. Their areas of interest vary according to their area of expertise. Al-Hibri is concerned with the personal status laws (or family laws), and she tries through her approach to give a number of suggestions to some Islamic countries in order to change and improve their family laws.<sup>22</sup> But al-Hibri expresses some reservation regarding the term “feminism” and accuses some feminists of secularism without taking into consideration the inherent connection that exists between Islam and secularism.

As for Mernissi, the author of *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1991) and the expert on deconstructing the hostile discourse on women in the Arab and Islamic culture, she is critical of the Western fear of moderate Islam and writes for two types of readers: a Muslim public and a public that does not know anything about Islam or about women. Her approach engages the reader, but she also constitutes a source of concern to some Muslim women who might not accept her boldness as well as her criticism of the Prophetic ahadith, and may agree with Abdul Halim Abu Shiqqa in his book *Tahrir al-mar’a fi ‘asr ar-rissala* (Kuwait, 1990). In this book, he justifies the misogynist Hadith “an-nissa’ naqisat ‘aql wa din” (i.e. women are of a lesser mental and religious capacity [than men]).

Fatima Mernissi is simply impatient with texts that are no more acceptable linguistically and rationally in modern times. As for Leila Ahmed, she did fill a gap with her pioneering historical study on gender in Islam. Her historical references to the Hellenistic, Byzantine, Arab, and classical Islamic cultures is of great importance to the reader, in addition to her anthropological references (Robertson Smith), her references to the patriarchal system (Gerda Lerner), and to Orientalism (Edward Said). The various scientific backgrounds from which these researchers have come give legitimacy to their arguments. This is a globalized discourse that comes from Arab Muslim women (both

academicians and activists) in a non-Arabic language in the diaspora (especially in the United States).

### Badran and Saleh and “Islamic Feminism”

What about “Islamic Feminism”? This is a movement initiated by women academicians and activists in Iran, Europe, and North America (Jadaan, 2010) and women academicians in the Arab World (Abu Bakr, 2013). In her article titled “Toward Islamic Feminisms: A Look at the Middle East”, Margot Badran (1999) suggests that “the new radical feminism in Muslim societies – and I include diaspora societies – as we begin the twenty-first century will be ‘Islamic feminism’” (Badran, 1999, p. 219). Her argument for this suggestion is based on the following:

1. Islam is becoming a paramount cultural and political paradigm.
2. Muslim women, who are more highly educated in greater numbers than ever before, have begun gender — progressive readings of Islamic sacred scripture that will achieve — and indeed have already achieved — significant “feminist” breakthroughs.
3. Only the language of an “Islamic feminism” can potentially reach women of all classes and across urban-rural divides — or, to put it slightly differently, the majority of Muslims can associate only with a “feminism” that is explicitly “Islamic.”
4. Because of increasing globalization and growing Muslim diaspora communities, Muslim women who practice Islam and want to embrace feminism need an “Islamic feminism”.
5. The globalized media and technology revolution produces a decentered and denationalized feminism, and connects Muslim women both inside and outside predominantly Muslim nations or communities with each other. (p. 219)

Badran (1999) believes that “Islamic feminism” will play a salient role in (1) the re-visioning of Islam; (2) the constitution of a new modernity in the twenty-first century; and (3) the transformation of feminism itself (pp. 219-220).

But we ask Badran the following question: how can the term “al-nissa’iyyat” (which was used in the early 20th century by Malak. H. Nassif), as well as the discourse on women’s liberation (promoted by Arab Renaissance authors like Qasem Amin), and the discourse of the modern Arab woman (i.e. “Arab feminism”), be reduced to a discourse on “religious feminism”, keeping in mind that, in my own opinion, feminism is a strategy of reform and change that directs the cause of women towards an independent and liberated self-identity? Even during Malak H. Nassif’s times (the days of reformist Islam), and in Bint al-Shati’s times (the days of revivalist Islam), the discourse of feminism was a mixture of secularist and nationalist discourses. Why is the religious discourse taking precedence over these discourses as Badran is suggesting? Have secularism, national liberalism, and the leftist movements regressed to leave the floor to religious revivalism and to make Islam the dominant discourse, or is Islam re-imposing itself as a culture and as a civilization in reaction to Western American hegemony on the region’s culture as well as on the people’s political identity? Or is Badran speaking of a discourse that promotes a modern Islam — an Islam that is not hijacked by politico-religious fundamentalism and extremism and an Islam that calls for renewal and the reformulation of concepts?

According to Amani Saleh, two different reasons are behind the need to generate an Islamic feminist knowledge. The first reason is related to the essence of the dominant or hegemonic Western knowledge which has led to feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction within a large section of non-Western women because it contradicts their own perception of the world and the desired objectives of the women's movement, or because it is in contradiction with their basic frames of reference. One such cause of alienation is the prevalence of the radical feminist tendencies within the feminist movement as a whole: it calls for the overthrow of existing structures of the society — the most important one being the biological family, instead of attempting to fix the existing structures. According to Saleh, this extremist trend is also obvious in the radical feminist attempt to replace the injustice of patriarchal systems with other types of injustice.

The second reason is more related to the diagnosis of women's conditions and problems in the Islamic world, and the culturally specific nature of these problems. If feminist knowledge seeks to free science and culture from misogyny and to look for arguments that favor the concepts of justice and human equality and stop the injustice against women, then this definition in itself necessarily requires an Islamist feminist knowledge: injustice inflicted on women in the Islamic world is due to a cultural system (both populist and elitist) and a knowledge base that is interwoven with religion and has consequently acquired a sacred status despite the human dimension of religion and the historicity of human knowledge. In brief, we can say that the process of doing justice to women cannot be achieved except through separating the historical and human from the foundational religious texts, i.e. by purifying Scriptures (the Qur'an and Sunna) from "the human" interpretations that rely on customs and human prejudice. The following are some of the characteristics of feminist knowledge as stated by Saleh:

1. The Islamic feminist knowledge is, in terms of classification, closer to the liberal and Marxist feminist approaches than to the post-modern feminist ones that reject pre-feminist knowledge.
2. From the Islamic perspective, feminist knowledge is essentially critical, with a reformist agenda.
3. The Islamic feminist knowledge is an independent approach to intellectual, cultural, and social reform, and its purpose is to emphasize the unity of and cohesion between society and culture, and not their division on the basis of gender or ethnicity.
4. The Islamic feminist knowledge is governed/bound by Islamic methodological criteria and limits. Such limits, for example, include the moral dimensions of knowledge that are expressed in Islamic terms through the concept of al 'ilmu an-nafi' [useful knowledge], a mechanism for seeking the truth that balances different positions.
5. The Islamic feminist knowledge essentially seeks to liberate the individual from the absolute authority of other individuals or any hegemonic system in general. From the Islamic point of view, freedom means liberation from the "created" and not from the Creator, because Islam sees a direct, unmediated relationship between the responsible individual and the omnipotent Creator. As for the Western modern concept of freedom which ignores the reference to an absolute Creator and replaces it with that of the centrality of the human being, from an Islamic perspective this is a deluded, chaotic trend that harms the

individual, disconnects him/her from society, and alienates him/her as well. Furthermore, it does not liberate the individual, but rather submits him/her to human authority.

6. The development of a feminist knowledge is dependent upon the development of a cultural jurisprudential movement that also integrates the Islamic knowledge and culture. It is a call for the revival of a culture of interpretation [ijtihad] and renewal in all areas related to Islamic knowledge.

This "Islamic feminist" knowledge, as it appears from Amani Saleh's arguments, stems from the reality of the Islamic societies. It seeks to include both a metaphysical and ideological dimensions. Although there is a commitment to feminist criticism, it is a call for reform and not for change. In this respect, I do not know the reasons for this fear of the term "change". But there is definitely a fear of schism and of non-integration within a mono-cultural society, as if Saleh assumes that multiculturalism within a single society will inevitably lead to social disintegration. And this is evidenced in the persisting fear of the loss of identity which is expressed by many societies, including European ones (such as France).

With respect to feminist knowledge, Saleh applies the Islamic methodological concepts of "useful knowledge" (al 'ilmu an-nafi') as well as that of "justice" (al-'adl), which does not exclude "the other" (here, man). But these methodological restrictions or frameworks are not exclusive to Islamic epistemology: in the West, "feminist studies" have shifted to include "gender studies" because of similar conceptual restrictions. Regarding her call for interpretation and renewal in the Islamic thought and culture, this is an indispensable matter, especially in times of crisis. This call for feminist knowledge as identified by Badran and defined by Saleh corresponds to international calls made by Muslim women all over the world who started to adopt feminist stands of their own and who had no problem at all with calling themselves "Islamic feminists". Among these women are the Afro-American Amina Wadud Muhsen in her book *Qur'an and Woman* (1999), the Iranian women who co-published *Zanan* magazine in Iran (1992), the Egyptian Omaima Abou-Bakr,<sup>23</sup> as well as some Turkish academics such as Yesim Arat, Farida Akar, and Nilufer Gul in her book *The Forbidden Modern* (published in Turkish in 1991 and in English in 1996).<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

I hope that this study has revealed that academic and activist Muslim women lobbying in favor of an Islamic feminism do not have double standards, and are adopting a scholarly approach and methodology in order to secure more rights for Muslim women. This study has also shown that Muslim women have started raising the right questions that can help develop an Islam that is more concerned with freedom, justice, and women's rights. Because it is not possible for Arab women to relinquish the entire Islamic heritage or to adopt another culture as a last resort, the study of Islam and women's role in it has become a necessity.

The theses presented by Bint al-Shati', Mernissi, Ahmed, Badran, and Amani have helped us to follow the evolution of the terminology generated by the discourse on women's issues (or an-nisa'iyya), feminism (or al-nisswiyya), gender (al-gendara), feminist perspective (al-manzur al-nisswi), and feminist knowledge (or al-ma'rifa

al-niswiyya). The choice of this group of academicians is justified by the fact that their work is considered to be a watershed in the effort to theorize and study the various discourses on “feminism and Islam”. The early female activists who lobbied in favor of the human rights of women were able to contribute to the development of feminist knowledge, even though in the beginning they were hesitant and had some reservations. Bint al-Shati’ did not call for a complete gender equality, and her argument was that any equality is strictly dependent on the logic and law of nature that knows no complete equality among men, among women, and among the different sexes. Moreover, Bint al-Shati’ did not explain the meaning of “innateness” (or fitra) and the laws of nature — concepts which were criticized by the feminist scholars when they argued that inequality has nothing to do with the laws of nature, as well as when they distinguished between what is essential and between what is historical or social. Bint al-Shati’ gave the equality in responsibilities and the ethical dimension a large share of attention when dealing with gender equality because of her interest in feminist theology. However, she did not deal with this equality in the context of unequal hierarchal structures in marital relationships as Leila Ahmed did later, when awareness concerning these issues started to grow. Bint al-Shati’ acknowledged men’s right to al-qiwama (or male guardianship), which she considered to be legal and natural because of its Qur’anic source (Qur’an 2:228). However, she understood al-qiwama as a right related to manhood and not to masculinity (as explained earlier), in addition to it being a relative, and not absolute right. Here Bint al-Shati’ made a distinction between manhood as an act of responsibility and masculinity as a component related to essence, without delving, however, into these concepts that became later an integral part of gender studies.

As for al-Hibri, she separated, intentionally or unintentionally, patriarchy from Islam which, as a monotheistic religion, adopted the patriarchal system that granted men several legal rights, while reducing those of women with respect to marriage and legal rights. Whereas Bint al-Shati’ quoted the verse that grants men a measure of superiority over women (or daraja), al-Hibri quotes the verse that grants both men and women mutual caretaking and guardianship roles regarding each other in matters of faith (awlya’ ba’dahum al-ba’d). Thus we see how it is possible to invoke verses that contradict each other, because the Qur’anic discourse deals with different situations, with some verses being applied to issues related to divorce, while others are used regarding everyone’s responsibility in matters of faith, and not just regarding al-qiwama which is traditionally reserved to men.

Both Bint al-Shati’ and al-Hibri have focused on the verse of “al-qiwama”, which has become the “legitimate excuse” that a man can invoke conveniently in order to demean women and to prevent them from political participation. We have seen how Mernissi, in her critique of the ahadith that constitute another factor in women’s political exclusion has critically examined this main source of legislation for Muslims. She is right in accusing misogynous men and the traditional culture of manipulating Scriptures, of mixing concepts (the political with the sacred and the jurisprudential with the ethical) and of eradicating individuality. As for Leila Ahmed, her main contribution is contrasting the Qur’anic’s gender equality (in faith, ritual participation, reward and punishment), with the authoritarian hierarchal perspective (in marriage, divorce, inheritance, ...), and making a distinction between timeless norms and norms



that can and should be modernized through *ijtihad*. By doing so, she relieves the Muslim woman from any feeling of contradiction she might have vis-à-vis her religion when she realizes that her religion alone (as represented by the existing jurisprudential laws dealing with women) does not protect all her legal rights, and that some norms must be modernized through interpretation.

The “Islamic feminism” that Badran refers to and that many women of different nationalities advocate cannot be discussed briefly here, due to the variety of its themes and its geographical spread: from Malaysia, the United Kingdom, to the United States. This type of feminism may or may not be in contradiction with the academic discourse on “Feminism and Islam”, but the concerns remain the same. If we accuse this new feminism of following a certain ideology, we should also bear in mind that even pure academic discourse is not free from ideology, especially with respect to the relation between power and knowledge.

In this paper, I analyzed the main arguments of a group of Muslim women scholars who wrote on feminism and Islam, and identified the relationship between these arguments and the rising Islamic feminist movement. But there is a need for more work to be done. Following the Arab Spring, the popular movements for social change, and the emergence of violent Islamic movements such as ISIS, the situation demands multiplying efforts in all fields of knowledge concerning Islam as a world religion: comparative study of religions; anthropology of religion; and Islam, feminism, and gender studies.

Finally, the way of thinking that considers traditional Islam to be a problem, and the new Islamic epistemology to be the solution, reflects today’s conflictual relationship between the local and the global, the Islam of openness and the Islam of terrorism. When one contemplates these contradictory political viewpoints, no wonder the following question comes to mind throughout this research: How can Islam simultaneously be the problem and the solution?

Translated by Dima Dabbous & Nazih Khater

Hosn Abboud is a researcher and lecturer on Islamic studies, gender issues, and Arabic feminist writings at the American University of Beirut and Haigazian University. She is also a member of The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers (Bahithat).  
Email: hosnabboud@gmail.com

## ENDNOTES

\* This article appeared first in Arabic, under the title "Al-khitabat al-mutabayinat lil niswiyya wal islam wal khawf min al-izdiwajiyya fi al-ma'ayyir" in Bahithat: Lebanese Association of Women Researchers Women in contemporary Arab discourse vol. IV, 2003-2004.

1. See the history of the terms "feminism" and "feminist" in the Egyptian Feminist Union, in Margot Badran, 1995, pp. 19-20. The term "feminism" was first used in the 1990s of the twentieth century, whereas Arab women previously used the terms al-nissa'yyat, and women's liberation, then the cause of the Arab women, etc... As for the term "gender" we use either the Arabized form for gender or siyaghat al-ma'rifa bayna al-ta'nith wa tathkir.
2. The Arabic term "niswiyya" refers to "nisswa" (or women, term an-nisswa, found in Qur'an: Surat Yusuf ) and to women coming together for a common purpose.
3. I make the distinction between feminist discourses put forth by men (for ex.: Qassim Amin) and a feminist discourses by women (for ex.: Malak Hifni Nassif).
4. Islamic reform, led by Sheikh Mohammad Abduh, the Egyptian Nationalist movement led by Saad Zaghlul, and the women's movement led by Hoda Shaarawi in the beginning of the twentieth century were connected to each other. See Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 1995.
5. See, *Al-jounousa wal ma'rifa: siyaghat al-ma'aref bayna al-ta'nith wa al-tathkir*, published by ALIF, AUC, p. 19, 1999.
6. Bint al-Shati', a professor of Qur'anic Studies, was the first to start working on Qur'anic exegesis on tafsir and to write biographies of the Prophet's wives.
7. All translations from the Qur'an are by Yusuf Ali.
8. In the views of the author of the present article, "manhood" or (rujulah) is a concept derived from the Qur'anic verse on al-qiwama and refers to the status of men being responsible financially for their household. Masculinity refers to a set of behavioral characteristics assigned to men by culture. As for the term muru'a , whose etymology is the word (mar') or "man" in Arabic, it encompasses several positive virtues that Arabs were known for such as generosity, courage, virtuousness, and loyalty, and can apply, in theory, to both men and women. However, in practice the term muru'ah has only been used in connection with men. There are calls to start applying the term to women as well (here translated as "womanhood"), in order to create for women a lexical equivalent to the term "rujula" used to refer to men. Both these concepts express positive social and cultural values and have no connection to being male or female, i.e., the biological differences.
9. Ghada Karmi says that the Qur'an acknowledges and legitimizes the patriarchal structure through a set of laws that put men at the head of the family and society". See G. Karmi, "Women, Islam and Patriarchalism," in Mai Yamani, 1996, p. 79.
10. See Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Oxford, 1986.
11. According to the Qur'an, women and men have the mutual responsibility to look/watch after each other in matters of faith (awlya' ba'dahum al-ba'd). (Qur'an 9:71)
12. The Hadith collections are works that record in minute detail what the Prophet said and did. See Mernissi, F. (1991). *The veil and the male elite: A feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam* (M. Jo Lakeland, Trans.). U.S.: Wesley Publishing Company, p. 1.
13. See Ibn Al-Athir, *Usd al-ghaba*, vol. 5, p. 38.
14. "Qibla" is the direction of the Ka'aba in Mecca, which Muslims face when they pray.
15. See Imam az-Zarkashy, [al-ljaba li-irad ma istadrakathu 'Aisha'ala as-sahaba, introduction by Saïd al-Afghani, al-Maktab al-Islami, 1980.
16. The point of view according to which these two phenomena (the affiliation to the father and the affiliation to the mother) remained in the beginning of Islam belongs to Montgomery Watt, and is argued in his book *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1956.
17. See Hosn Abboud, "The Need for Elements of Stability in Marriage Relationships in Early Islam: Mecca and Medina", unpublished MA paper submitted to the department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, University of Toronto, 1993.
18. The Qur'an has an egalitarian ethical stance regarding men and women vis-à-vis the creation from a single soul (Qur'an 4:1 and 53:45-46), lowering their gaze (to avoid looking at forbidden or sinful things) and not to show off their adornment (Qur'an 24: 30-31), and in forgiveness and mercy (Qur'an 33:35 and 3:195). However, there is a hierarchical stance regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, punishment for adultery, disobedience, in conformity with the prevalent patriarchal system and the monotheistic way of thinking.
19. See Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid, *Mafhum an-Nass*, 3rd edition, Beirut 1996, pp. 160-161.
20. See Wael Abdul-Fattah, 'awdat scenariowat al-takfir, al-Mustaqbal, 26, p.18.
21. See Khayriyah al-Saqqah, *adwa'ala kitab al-harem al-siyassi*, Dar al-Fikr, Damascus, 1997.
22. See Aziza al-Hibri's *A critique of Personal Status Codes in Select Arabic Countries*, United Nations series entitled *Studies on Women and Development*, no. 25 (New York 1997).
23. Omaira Abou-Bakr edited the proceedings of the conference on "Feminist and Islamic Perspectives: New Horizons of Knowledge and Reform", organized by the Women and Memory Forum in cooperation with the Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Institute [DEDI] and The Danish Centre for Research and Information on Gender, Equality and Diversity [KVINFO], 2013.
24. See Margot Badran, "Islamic Feminism: What's in a name?" *al-Ahram Weekly*, 17-23 (2002, January), Issue 569.

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