

On Islamic Feminist Texts and Women Activism

Hosn Abboud and Dima Dabbous

In the early nineteen nineties, when Arab and Muslim women in the diaspora began to speak of the linguistic construct "Islam" and "feminism," the two terms were not yet closely connected. The discourse was rather about Islamic feminism as a trend or as a different form of gender awareness and renewal in Islamic thought (Badran, 2009). With the start of the twenty first century, a large group of Muslim women scholars and activists working on feminist issues, researchers on Islam, theologians, and social scientists from Senegal, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iran, Morocco, Malaysia, France, and the United States met for a conference in Barcelona (October 26-30, 2005) under the title "Junta Islamic Catalonia". The Iranian Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Pakistani Refaat Hassan, Afro-American Amina Wadud, Pakistani Asma Barlas, and many other voices were heard officially discussing "Islamic feminism", knowing that the phrase itself was used earlier in the journal *Zenan*, in post-revolutionary Iran. Their feminist criticism focused on Muslim women's right to re-interpret religious texts, study the origin of Islam and the Qur'an, and share their knowledge and experiences with the religious establishment. Their methodologies encompassed feminist critique, historical and literary criticism, psycho-analytical theories, social and anthropological sciences, and aimed to put an end to the long history of male-centered interpretation of the foundational texts of Islam (i.e the Qur'an and Hadith).

In post-revolutionary Egypt (i.e. following the revolution of 25 January 2011), a similar conference was held in Cairo bringing together Muslim women from the Arab world and Europe under the title "Feminism and Islamic Perspectives: New Horizon of Knowledge and Reform" (February 17-18, 2012). In this conference, "an-nisswiyya al-islamiyya", the Arabic expression for "Islamic feminism", was declared both as a trend and a theory of knowledge to be developed by Muslim women scholars and academicians. Omaima Abou-Bakr, from "the Women and Memory Forum" in Cairo, explained why it is necessary to adopt the idea and project of Islamic feminism, while Amani Saleh from the "Women and Civilization Forum for Muslim Women Studies", in her presentation on Islamic feminism, used concepts like "the metaphysics of gender", "feminist epistemology", and "the methodology of Islamic feminism" (Amani Saleh, in Omaima Abou-Bakr, 2013). In the European context, Islamic feminist consciousness was discussed by Malika Hamidi and Mulki al-Sharmani, and a long annotated bibliography by Hosn Abboud about the basic

literature on Islamic feminism of Arabic origin, written mostly by women scholars from Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, and covering publications which appeared in the last two decades, proved how rich this new scholarship on Islamic feminism is (Abboud in Omaima Abou-Bakr, 2013).

The origin of the term “an-niswiyya” (feminism), from the Qur’anic *niswā*, means “a gathering or a group of women” and is now connected to the term “Islamic”. Last year, Sawsan el-Sharif’s book (*al-haraka an-niswiyya al-islamiyya fi misr*) about the Islamic feminist movement and its relationship to the jurisprudential opinions in Egypt connected for the first time “an-niswiyya al-islamiyya” (Islamic feminism) to “al-harakiyya” i.e., activism.

The main discourse of the Islamic feminists focuses on the features of gender inequality in the Islamic jurisprudential system on women (*al-manzuma al-fiqhiyya an-niswiyya al-taqlidiyya*) in various matters related to marriage, divorce, polygamy, and inheritance which are in need of reform. To achieve such reform, these feminists assert that it is necessary to reclaim women’s rights in Islam through a method of rereading Islamic history and Scriptures and reinterpreting them in light of gender equality, while delineating a feminist liberation approach that does not, in the process, place these feminists outside the limits of religion and faith (Jadaan, p. 42). This concept of Islamic feminism should become a type of intellectual resistance. It should enable scholars and activists to perform multiple acts of epistemological resistance: to resist patriarchal and orientalist interpretations of Islam (two interpretations which are often intertwined); male-centric religious knowledge; the marginalization of Muslim female voices and their exclusion from leadership positions and interpretive and jurisprudential religious activities; the monopoly exercised by Western institutions in the field of women issues and Islam; the extremism of secular feminism which excludes all religious frames of reference in the quest for equality and justice; and finally to resist all forms of injustice and attack on human dignity (Omaima Abou-Bakr in *an-niswiyya wa-l-dirassat al-diniyya*, 2012).

It should be stressed that any feminist thinking that aspires to be Islamic (*islami*) must have Islam as its frame of reference. In that respect, Amani Saleh’s conditions that need to be met in order to have an Islamic feminism are summarized below and are worth examining and critiquing:

1. This type of Islamic feminism must have as its starting point the Islamic identity and the Islamic frame of reference.
2. The Islamic frame of reference is based on and limited by “constants”, which are the foundational texts (i.e. the Qur’an and the Sunna), to be distinguished from the interpretations derived from these Scriptures.
3. Having an Islamic frame of reference also entails the adoption of two approaches when seeking to produce feminist knowledge based on an Islamic perspective: the first one consists of critiquing existing interpretations (based on exerting effort in the renewal of exegesis and jurisprudence (*al-ijtihad al-tafsiri wa-l-fiqhi*) in matters related to women. Such interpretations must be examined to see the extent to which they adhere to the Qur’an and Hadith, and whether they

respect exegetical methods and approaches. Second, existing interpretations must be critiqued from a sociological/epistemological perspective, in order to expose the historical origins of the biases they contain.

4. The launch of an Islamic feminist exegetical endeavor should not lead to a biased alternative. Both men and women should join forces in order to present a view or interpretation that is as free as possible of gender bias, and that is respectful of the foundational texts (*usul*) and of what God intended for his followers.

In this Islamic feminist epistemology, according to Saleh, similar to any ideological and religious system, social and legal theories must derive from big theological issues such as divinity, creation, the relationship between Creator and created, and God's purpose for human beings and life on earth. Another epistemological consideration when developing Islamic feminism has to do with Islamic values, and the dialectical relationship between the values of justice, freedom, and equality. Ideas, rules, and regulations related to women should be able to reflect the true potential and role of women in life and society, as well as the concept of justice and balance in rights and responsibilities for men and women.

As the highest source of Scripture for Muslims, Saleh asserts, the Qur'an fully acknowledges the principle of gender equality — both on the philosophical and ontological levels. Moreover, from a sociological perspective, equality between men and women in Islam is based on difference, not sameness.

Hind Mustafa Ali, who also participated in the same conference ("Feminism and Islamic Perspectives") in which Saleh spoke as a keynote speaker, offered her own critical reading of Islamic feminism by asking the following question: *Why is Islamic feminism exclusively engaged with jurisprudence and interpretation of Scriptures?* By doing so, she adds, it is reproducing the prevailing cultural trend that restricts Islam to its jurisprudential aspect, to the exclusion of all other cultural, societal, economic, and moral issues that are equally important and interconnected in Muslim cultures and societies.¹

The present issue of Al-Raida includes studies (some of them originally written in Arabic) from Egypt, Lebanon, and Tunisia on Islamic feminism (*an-niswiyya al-islamiyya*) as an emerging trend of knowledge and activism in the Arab world. The authors are academicians and scholars of social and political sciences, and Islam and Islamic philosophy, who examined a variety of issues related to women's rights in the region: male secular and Islamist discourses on women (H. Raouf Ezzat), the existing discourses on Islam and feminism (H. Abboud), the women preachers (*wa'izat*), jurists (*mujtahidat*), and advocates (*da'iyat*) of Muslim women's rights in the media (A. Grami), and the life of the first Islamist advocate "da'iya", the Egyptian Zaynab al-Ghazali, (L. Carminati). Also included is a case study on the process of recruitment in the case of reserved quota seats for women on the Moroccan national list (L. Bouasria).

In addition to these research articles and studies, the issue includes book reviews, two of which dealing with the topic of Islamic feminism and feminist epistemology:

the book by Fahmi Jadaan on “rejectionist” Islamic feminism in Europe, Kharij al-Sirb (2010); the book by Hosn Abboud on the figure of Mary, mother of Jesus, in the Qur’an (2014); the piece by Omaima Abou-Bakr on the feminist and Islamic perspectives conference held in Cairo in 2012; and the review of Sawsan el-Sharif’s study of the Islamic feminist movement in Egypt and its relation to the jurisprudential opinions (2015). The reviews of these books and conference proceedings were included in order to document the nascent Islamic feminism as an intellectual endeavor and form of activism in the Arab world.

In her article “Women and Ijtihad: Towards a New Islamic Discourse”², Heba Raouf Ezzat (1999) examines the phenomenon of extreme polarization between the Islamist and the secular camps in Egypt with respect to women issues. She criticizes the Islamists’ discourse on women for being rooted in textualism and traditionalism, and for being limited to a specific historical period during the Prophet’s life. According to Raouf Ezzat, this discourse is characterized by a lack of revisionism and self-criticism, and by a neglect of the Islamic jurisprudential system and the recent developments in personal status laws in some Muslim countries. As for the secularists’ discourse on women, she argues it is characterized by an absence of ijtihad and a genuine interest in Islam, a rejection of the family as a basic unit, and ignorance of the role of local norms and conventions. Raouf Ezzat concludes her criticism of the secularists by posing the following question: what will guarantee that the development of the Arab feminist movement will not follow into the footsteps of Western secular feminism? In the second part of her paper, in an attempt to map calls for renewal in the discourse on women by famous Islamists and religious leaders, Raouf Ezzat summarizes the views of Sheikh Muhammad al-Ghazali and Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who are generally considered to be moderate when it comes to women’s rights and contemporary issues affecting women in Islamic societies. After presenting the thoughts and arguments of both sheikhs, Raouf Ezzat offers two suggestions in order to advance equality using an Islamic feminist perspective: First, the importance of the women’s role within the family as a fundamental social unit should be accompanied by a discussion on the importance of men’s roles and duties within the family as well. Only then can men and women be both involved in the public and private spheres, without any of them exercising monopoly in either one of the two spheres. Second, she argues, ijtihad should be applied in the future in ways that bridge the gap between social and Islamic legal sciences (al-‘ulum al-ijtima’iyya wal-‘ulum al-shar’iyya) since both al-Ghazali and al-Qaradawi did not link the results of field research with fiqh and fatwas — an endeavor which has become necessary nowadays. As she concludes, there should also be comparative-contrastive analyses between the Islamic vision on the role of women and the secularist/feminist theses.

In “The Arab Women Discourses on ‘Feminism’ and ‘Islam’: Fear of an “Oxymoron”³ Hosn Abboud presents an overview of the contributions of three Muslim feminist scholars and activists in the American diaspora who have written about women’s rights in Islam based on their own area of expertise: Aziza al-Hibri as a scholar of Islamic Law, the late Fatima Mernissi as a social scientist, and Leila Ahmed as a historian on women and gender in Islam. All have published in English or French and their publications are considered pivotal in the area of women’s rights in Islam,

before the phrase “Islamic feminism” was ever heard of. Although two of the three scholars studied and taught at American universities, the audience they address is the English and French speaking world, in addition to the Arabic speaking readers from Egypt and Morocco, since their major works have been translated into Arabic in their own country of origin. Abboud argues for the necessity of studying feminist works by Arab women who have made use of their academic disciplines and experiences in order to enrich the study of Islam and feminism on the local as well the global scenes. In her concluding comment about the political reality we live in, she notes how Islam has simultaneously become the problem for some and the solution for others.

In “Women’s Breakthrough into the Walls of Religious Knowledge: Women Advocates (da’iyat) – Masters in Islamic Law (muftahidat) – Preachers (wa’izat)”⁴, Amel Grami’s main subject matter opens our eyes to the achievements of Muslim women in public space. While women during the Arab renaissance period wore the face veil (niqab) and wrote in the seclusion of their homes (min wara’i hijab) mostly on interconnected issues such as female education, gender roles, and Islamic reform (Malak Hifni Nasif, 1910), Muslim women advocates of the late twentieth century and of the twenty first century are lecturing publicly on Islam, using all kinds of social media platforms, preaching in the mosques and on television, and issuing legal judgments. Women scholars on Qur’anic exegesis and prophetic Hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, and missionary work in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Syria are contributing to scholarship in religious sciences (al-’ulum al-diniyya), independent reasoning/interpretation of Scriptures (ijtihad), and missionary activity (da’wa) by teaching and preaching and issuing legal judgments/rulings (fatawa).

This study by Grami reminds us of Saba Mahmoud’s (2005) ethnographic study of the women’s piety movement and Islamic revival in the mosques of Cairo. Grami, however, is critical of some of the female preachers and advocates who lack religious knowledge and are promoting superstitious ideas while concentrating on suffering in the afterlife. She differentiates between women advocates and women scholars and researchers. Although the second group differs from the first in constitutional, geographic affiliation, age, ideology, and the scale of productivity, both agree on the need to build the independent self and individual identity and the importance of linking the knowledge of the religious texts with awareness of women’s rights. Also, both stress the need to expose structures of domination and forms of expression and tyranny. Some of the famous Egyptian female preachers and television advocates in religious media that Grami introduces in her article include Abla al-Kahlawi, Amna Nosseir, and Suad Saleh.

Lucia Carminati’s article, titled “Zaynab al-Ghazali’s Women, Marriages, and Contradictions: Her Life as an Archive”, introduces us to a pioneering and controversial figure in the field of Muslim women’s da’wa in Egypt, Zaynab al-Ghazali, through archival research that covers her views on women, marriage, and politics. This article makes good use of famous American women Arabists who either studied the work of al-Ghazali or interviewed her: Margot Badran, the historian of the Egyptian Feminist Union (1995); Beth Baron, the scholar on (nineteenth century)

women's awakening in Egypt and the press (1994); Marilyn Booth and her locating women's autobiographical writing in colonial Egypt (2013); miriam cooke and Valerie Hoffman's studies of the Memoir of al-Ghazali in Prison first published in 1972 and their interviews of al-Ghazali; and Saba Mahmoud's Politics of Piety (2005).

Zaynab al-Ghazali (2005) was an orator, public figure, writer, and founder of the first Society of Muslim Women (1937) who joined forces in 1948 with the Muslim Brotherhood movement (al-ikhwan al-muslimin). She was the first woman to be called preacher (da'iya) in Egypt, and the first among the Muslim Brothers to write a memoir (Ayyam min hayati, 1972) on her torture in the six years she spent in men's and women's prisons during Abdel Nasser's regime. She is a controversial character due to the fact that her Islamic agenda superseded her feminist consciousness and activism. This study of Zaynab al-Ghazali's character, writings, and activism reveals how this pioneering Islamic woman did not commit herself to the traditional/conservative Islamic agenda she preached regarding the complimentary, dependent role of women in the family, society and politics. Instead, she applied more egalitarian standards when it came to her own life (both in the private and public sphere).

In "Discourses about the Eligibility of Women on the Moroccan National List: The Gender Foundations of Electoral Inequality", Leila Bouasria draws mainly on semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 17 female interviewees from various political parties in order to reflect on the role played by the gender quota in order to promote the candidacy of women on the Moroccan electoral lists. The study concentrates on the national elections of 2011 and was carried out during a period of polemics around the making of national lists.

Morocco, along with Iraq, Tunisia, Jordan, and Algeria are among the few Arab countries that have adopted the gender quota system. The gender quota, which reserves thirty seats for women candidates, was introduced in Morocco for the first time during the 2002 legislative elections by memoranda addressed to political leaders by a group of women's organizations. These organizations were created on 26 May 2006 and were working for democratic development and women's access to decision-making positions, namely the "Mouvement pour le Tiers des Sièges Élus aux Femmes vers la Parité" (MTSF).

Bouasria's article shows that the gender quota is not only a matter of increasing the percentage of women on the lists, but is also a complex process loaded with "symbolic value and importance in terms of the redistribution of power" (Bouasria, p. 81).

The decision to include an article on the gender quotas in the Morocco election of 2011, after Al-Raida dedicated an entire issue on "Gender Quotas and Parliamentary Representation in the Arab world", is meant to highlight the exemplary role played by the Moroccan feminist movement in advancing women's rights in various key areas, from the introduction of the gender quota in national lists and the new Family Status Law (moudawana), to the vibrant jurisprudential system and the ongoing intellectual debates on women's rights that are taking place there.

In order to supplement the present issue with additional information on the more recent contributions by Muslim women scholars in the academic study of Islam and women's rights, we included a number of reviews of books published in Arabic, as well as a short piece about the proceedings of a conference that is relevant to the theme of our issue. The purpose is to provide English speaking researchers and activists with the opportunity to know and read more about Arab women scholarship and activism on the main theme of the present issue, i.e. Islamic feminism.

Al-haraka an-niswiyya al-islamiyya fi misr wa-'ilaqatuha bi-l ara' al-fiqhiyya: ru'ya tahliliyya naqdiyya (2015), authored by Sawsan El-Sherif and reviewed by Sherine Darwish, is the first book of its kind to document the most recent Islamic feminist movement in Egypt and its relationship to the existing jurisprudential opinions. In the nineties of the last century, Muslim feminists in American academia, many of whom were immigrants from Islamic countries, were the first to introduce feminist epistemology in Islam. In her book, El-Sherif introduces us to the work of a different group of feminists who live in Egypt, write in Arabic, conduct research in Islamic theology (*kalam*), and are re-interpreting Qur'anic ordinances and prophetic Hadith for the sake of implementing change in the traditional Islamic jurisprudence system and contributing to the renewal of Islamic thought in general. Her book discusses the work of Omaima Abou-Bakr, Amani Saleh, Hind Mustafa, Zaynab Abu-l Majd, Amna Nosseir, Mulki al-Sharmani and others. El-Sherif argues that it is important to capitalize on the recent debate between Islamic jurists (*fuqaha'*) and feminist groups because the more light is shed on the issue of women in Islam, the more it will positively affect women's personal status law within Muslim societies.

Mary in the Qur'an: A Literary Study by Hosn Abboud (Routledge, 2014), reviewed by Bilal Orphali, offers us the first in-depth study of the major paradigmatic female figure in the Qur'an: Mary mother of Jesus. It makes extensive use of classical and modern linguistic and literary theories in the academic study of the Qur'an as Scripture. It succeeds in providing an inter-textual study of two Qur'anic chapters (*suras*) covering the journey Mary made into the maternal and her infancy story, unraveling the multifaceted structural, linguistic, liturgical, and narrative nature of these texts. As Angelika Neuwirth confirms in the introduction of the book, Abboud's study on the figure of Mary is the first of its kind in the field: "Whereas the range of works on the Christian Mary is broad, there is no monograph on the Qur'anic Mary yet; even more recent attempts at a synopsis of the image of Mary in the Christian and Muslim tradition have little to say about her appearance in the Qur'an itself. Hosn Abboud's work thus comes as a most desirable attempt to fill a desideratum" (xiv). The importance of this work to Islamic feminists is the insight it offers on elements of the feminine and the maternal, and on gender politics in the Arabic culture of the Qur'an.

In *Kharij al-sirb: Bahth fi-an-niswiyya al-islamiyya ar-rafida wa-igra'at al-huriyya*, the author Fahmi Jadaan (2010), reviewed by Hosn Abboud, offers us a definition of the concept "Islamic feminism", in addition to a classification of the well-known Islamic feminist trends in the twentieth century: The "reformist" (*al-islahiyya al-islamiyya*), the "interpretive" (*al-ta'wiliyya*) and the "rejectionist" (*ar-rafida*). He focuses on the last trend as a phenomenon of globalization and consequently

presents the thought and work of four women whom he refers to as belonging to “rejectionist Islamic feminism” (an-niswiyya al-islamiyya ar-rafida), due to their rejection, to various degrees, of Islam as a source of liberation for women: Taslima Nisreen, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, and Necla Kelek.

Although Jadaan examines the thought of these “rejectionist Islamic feminists”, describing it as exclusionist, reductionist, provocative in its use of language, expressing a shallow understanding of the Islamic religion, and oblivious to the importance of hermeneutics and of re-interpreting Scriptures, he is not apologetic about and equally critical of antiquated, patriarchal Islamic jurisprudential rulings about women. He thus denounces the prevalent gender inequality and the existing misogynous interpretations in areas such as polygamy, court witnessing, punishments in the wahhabi school of thought, men’s leadership in political and religious affairs, veiling of women (and not of men), forced marriages, and the emphasis on women’s sinful nature while being silent on sins committed by men.

Finally, we have included an overview by Omaima Abou-Bakr, who summarized the background history that led to the publication of the book proceedings titled an-niswiyya wa-l manzur al-islami: Afaq jadida lil-ma’rifa wa-l islah (translated into English and published as *Feminist and Islamic Perspectives: New Horizons of Knowledge and Reform* (2013). Abou-Bakr recounts how the original idea for the conference on Islamic feminist knowledge and reform was discussed in 2011, i.e. during the period of popular uprisings in Egypt (the 25 January 2011 revolution). She explains how the idea became an event/conference in March 2012 during the one-year rule in Egypt by the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis. The most important factor in holding this conference — in addition to the importance of advocating for an Islamic feminist perspective in the reform project — was bringing together Muslim scholars living in the Arab world and Muslims scholars living in Europe, and the ensuing cooperation between different institutions such as “The Women and Memory Forum”, “The Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Institute” (DEDI) and “The Danish Center for Research on Women and Gender” (KVINFO). Abou Bakr, who is considered today a pioneer scholar and an activist on the project of Islamic feminism, and who served as the editor of the Arabic and English proceedings, confirms in her piece that the conference provided a bridge for Muslim feminists in Arab and European societies to explore common issues and concerns related to feminist knowledge and Islamic reform.

The reader may wonder why we chose to include in the present issue articles by Hiba Raouf Ezzat and Amel Grami, knowing that both authors do not label themselves as “Islamic feminists”, though for different reasons: the first for fear that the concept “feminism” might be linked to and evoke “Western feminism”, and the second for perceiving Islamic feminism as a new “mix” or synthesis (tawlif) used defensively by some women when faced with the Western, stereotypical view of Islam and Muslim women.

The choice of Raouf’s and Grami’s studies is meant to offer the English-speaking readers access, through translation, to the ongoing struggle between “the religious” and “the secular” discourses on women rights as these two notions still need to

be revisited, and to help them re-think the old hypothesis that Muslim women are absent from shaping and developing Islamic thought on women's rights.

We do not believe that this issue does justice to the timely and important topic of an-niswiyya al-islamiyya or "Islamic feminism" — an intellectual endeavor and form of activism mostly found in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. However we do hope that the present issue will serve as a useful introduction to and food for thought on this still under-researched subject.

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ENDNOTES

1. See Hind Mustafa in Omaima Abou-Bakr, 2013.
2. This article appeared first in Arabic, under the title "Al-mar'a wa-l ijthad: Nahwa khitab islami jadid" in Alif: Al-Junussa wa-l Ma'rifa: Siyghat al-Ma'arif bayna al-ta'nith wa-l tadhkir, American University of Cairo, Journal of Comparative Poetics 19, 96-117.
3. This article appeared first in Arabic, under the title "Al-khitabat al-mutabayina "lil-niswiyya wa-l Islam" wa-l khawf min-l izdiwajiyya fi-l ma'ayir", in Bahithat: Al-nissa' fi-l khitab al-arabi al-mu'assir, 9 (2004-2005) 357-381.
4. This article appeared first in Arabic, under the title "Ikhtiraq al-niswaa aswar al-ma'rifa al-diniyya" in An-niswiyya al-islamiyya: Al-jihad min ajl al-adala, Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Centre, 47(2010) 11-37.

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