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A Postmodern Theorization of Islamic Feminism: Constructing Alternative Discourses of Difference and Plurality

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Abstract

This article aims at studying how Islamic feminism has enriched and pluralized feminist research through underscoring its particularity and ability to address the Muslim woman's quest for equality based on the Islamic referentiality and away from the Universalist feminist discourse. Thus, this paper argues that Islamic feminists draw their agency first from devising female-inclusive hermeneutics of the Islamic foundational texts which enables them to deconstruct the canonized dominant religious patriarchal discourses and second from manifesting the ability to depart from the mainstream Western feminism. I use the postmodernism –especially the features of the waning of affect and the weakening of the role of public history– to explore Islamic feminism's heterogeneous alternative approaches to the sacred texts and the Muslim woman's empowerment. This paper finds out that Islamic feminism is itself endowed with plurality and difference as it utilizes diversified approaches.

1   INTRODUCTION

The problem of Muslim women and their quest for freedom and agency were not likely to be solved by the Western feminist movement which has proved to be effective in the West but which has been ill-received in the Muslim world[1] as it often reminds of the colonial project and its threat on the Islamic identity. Of all its trends –classical, radical, difference, Marxist, etc.– feminism could not smoothly and easily voice out Muslim women's ills. In her article, 'Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provencializing Feminism as a Master Narrative', Asma Barlas explains her refusal of Western feminism in the following words: 'what? How can people call me a feminist when I'm calling myself a believing woman? She further says, 'I derive *my* understanding of equality and of patriarchy from the Qur'an not from any feminist text!'' (Barlas, 2008). Therefore, as Jackson Stevi and Jackie Jones say, feminism 'is not, and has never been a static phenomenon' (Stevi and Jackie, 1998). A number of

feminist trends appeared for the simple reason that Western feminism excludes a wide range of women especially non-white and non-Western ones. Postcolonial feminism (Mills, 1998) and third-World feminism (Mohanty, 2003) were, for instance, reactions to the Eurocentric vision of Western feminism.

Muslim women, too, were in dire need of a feminist approach which conforms to their Islamic identity, and which can methodically criticize the mainstream patriarchal religious discourse. Islamic feminism simply gives Muslim women the right to the Islamic texts, and the right to denounce gender inequalities that find their roots in the interpretations and understandings of these very texts. Islamic feminism, then, represents the safe-haven of Muslim women who bear feminist ideas but who are not willing to relinquish the very particularity of their Islamic identity and not willing, at the same time, to be accused of aligning to the West by adopting the Western feminist approach.

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The first explicit Islamic feminist consciousness appeared as early as the nineteenth century. Zaynab Fawwaz (1860-1914) criticized the authenticity of some misogynistic prophetic sayings, and called for women's equality with men (Zeidan, 1995). Nazira Zayn al-Din (1908-1976) also shaped Islamic feminist discourse especially in her book, Veiling and Unveiling (1928) in which she refutes the obligation of the veil, and 'The Girl and The Sheikhs' (1929) in which she stresses the importance of women's involvement in interpreting religious texts that address them to counterbalance the male domination of this field.

Unequivocally, this autonomous trend of feminism has taken a huge leap with prominent figures such as Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas, and many others. In general, their scholarship is about decentering the male domination on the Islamic foundational text all through reconstructing the politics of female inclusion in the process of their interpretation, and delegitimizing the constructed misogynistic discourses on the Muslim woman. However, Islamic feminism is itself endowed with the plurality of the perspectives of its contributors. They each have different motives, objectives and sometimes political orientations which certainly define and shape their academic and activist contributions.

The reactions against Islamic feminists have often been tough especially with the access of the Muslim Arab reader to this scholarship. What Anouar Majid says in his book, 'Unveiling Traditions: Postcolonial Islam in a Polycentric World' explains in a way this reaction, 'an almost universal consensus exists that any criticism of freedom of speech and human rights as universal goods must be regarded as hypocritical and indefensible gestures whose goal is to perpetuate Third World authoritarianism' (Majid, 2000). The backlash against Muslim women who call for gender equality is often accompanied with a total denial of the existence of any injustices locating their call under the conspiracy theory against Islam and the Muslim world. The Moroccan Khadija Al-Battar's book, *Fi Naqdi al-Bukhari* (Criticising al-Bukhari) in which she criticizes the canonized compiler of prophetic traditions, was considered a war against all religious scholars (Lahlou, 2003). In 2018, the Moroccan Islamic feminist, Asma Lamrabet, was severely attacked by the conservatives due to her call for equality in the inheritance law, one of the most sensitive issues that have been recently raised in Morocco.

What is interesting about Islamic feminism is not only the fact that it claims its own referentiality away from Universalist discourse but also the fact that it produces a plurality of feminist trends that claim the religious approach as their ultimate reference. They adopt different approaches and are driven by different political and ideological motivations. For Rhouni, Islamic feminism includes the example of Fatima Mernissi and the example of the Moroccan Islamist Nadia Yassine who belongs to al-Adl wa al-Ihsane (the

Justice and Spirituality group). They both believe that women's subjugation is due to the patriarchal exegesis but their approaches to arrive to gender justice are way too different. The differences among Islamic feminists[2] attest to the polyphony of this trend and its inclusive alternative feminist discourses.

The postmodern theory is of great use to the understanding of the unfolding and diversified inputs of Islamic feminism. Frederic Jameson defines it as 'a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features' (Jameson, 1991). Contrary to modernism's centrism on grand-narratives and ideologies, postmodernism criticizes universal ideas of truth through the inclusion of 'difference'. All truths are relative and plural. Theorizing on postmodernist architecture, Jenks underlines the following key features of the postmodern theory: 'the typical Post-Modern building speaks on several levels at once, to high and low culture and acknowledges the global situation where no single culture can speak for the entire world' (Jencks, 2012). Certainly, architecture is a different field but Jenks' statement is so powerful insofar as it underlines the importance of including features of high and low cultures which cannot but promote the principles of pluralism and difference. Even though Islamic feminists' scholarship does not aim at contesting the sanctity of the revelation, it indulges in the project of rethinking the interpretation of the Qur'anic verses, examining the veracity of certain circulating hadith, and also by highlighting the importance of historicizing some Qur'anic verses or hadith that address women directly. It is this project of rethinking the religious modes of knowledge production that aligns with the postmodern logic of refuting absolutism.

Postmodernism is an essential theoretical framework for Islamic feminism in the sense that it grants liberating and diversified venues of thought. It also grants them the possibility of deconstructing the canonized and mainstream religious knowledge that has been in circulation for centuries and that has defined the status of the Muslim woman in the Islamic thought. Islamic feminists, now, regardless of the different approaches and methodologies, contribute to the intellectual field by advancing forward the female perspective of the religious message.

Islamic feminists approached the religious field with a well-grounded intellectual background which endows their scholarship with legitimacy and credibility. In 'Qur'an and Woman', Amina Wadud re-interprets the religious text based on the linguistic approach, which is just one of her hermeneutical methods. She calls this 'the grammatical composition of the text' which enables her to stress the linguistic gender equality in the Qur'an. Fatima Mernissi, in her turn, rereads the Islamic thought based on the sociological approach as she ventures also into the psycho-analytical approach. In her book, 'The Veil' and the 'Male Elite', she criticizes Abu-Hurayra, the prophet's companion and a transmitter of Hadith, for

having transmitted false hadith on women. Mernissi delved into the analysis of the relationship of Abu-Hurayra with women, which was obviously marked with tensions. What is of much importance about reading Islamic feminism through the post-modern theory is its ability to underline the differences and diversity of the approaches developed by Islamic feminists.

'The waning of affect', which is one of the features of postmodernism, refers to the subversion of the aesthetics of expression and its externalization marking 'the end of the bourgeois ego' and its pathologies (Jameson, 1991). The explicit expression requires the existence of the individual subject that monopolizes knowledge productions. Within postmodernism, the expression is 'free-floating and impersonal […] dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria' (Jameson, 1991). The production of impersonal and plural knowledge was done at the expense of the demise of the creator of the singular explicit expression. 'The waning of affect' is so explicit in the works of Islamic feminists who both revolted against the totalizing discourse of Western feminism and the absolute and singular religious patriarchal discourses. They attempt at subverting the canonization and idolization of religious scholars or what Jameson calls 'the charismatic leader'.

In addition to the 'waning of affect', the weakening of the role of public history is another feature of postmodernism. Public history is 'devised for whatever legitimizing purpose by this or that national tradition' (Jameson, 1991). Islamic feminists capitalize on the hermeneutics of historicization and de-historicization to retrieve the egalitarian line of the religious sacred texts and to produce alternative readings to history based on the female perspective.

In his book, From Modernism to Postmodernism: Concepts and Strategies of Postmodern American Fiction*,* Gerhard Hoffman states that 'pluralism and multiplicity of perspectives change the relations of dominance in a spirit of liberation, a sense of joy at being released from the stifling traditions and ideologies' (Hoffmann, 2005). For Islamic feminists, who prefer neither to renounce their religious identity nor to surrender to 'stifling' dominant readings, the possibility that the text can hold different plural meanings is redeeming.

Discussing Islamic feminists' endeavors to challenge the absolute patriarchal knowledge produced by exegetes calls on Roland Barthes 'The Death of the Author' which criticizes positivism for having placed the author as the most important person in writing. This manifests in the writings of Islamic feminists as they try to supersede the writer and highlight other surrounding factors by focusing on the implementation of a multidisciplinary approach like contextualization, historicization, linguistics, anthropology, etc.

This article sought to conduct a qualitative research which aimed at critically analyzing the discourses of the existing literature on Islamic feminism and at comparing and contrasting the diversified perspectives and concepts of the contributors of this research field. This

methodology enabled me to generate an in-depth insight into Islamic feminist hermeneutics through the analysis of definitions and tasks, the empowering aspects of the approaches of Islamic feminism which seek to unravel the patriarchal foundations of the religious interpretations and also the limitations of Islamic feminism which restrict its independent development.

I divided this article into two major sections. The first sections deals with Islamic feminism's definitions, tasks and the different perspectives and contributions of Islamic feminists to this field. The second section demonstrates how Islamic feminists have been able to developed female-inclusive hermeneutics and methodologies to deconstruct the religious texts in a way that demystifies the religious and cultural motives of patriarchy. This article does not miss discussing the limitations of Islamic feminist scholarship.

2   PROBLEMATIZING ISLAMIC FEMINISM THROUGH THE POSTMODERN LOGIC OF PLURALITY

Islamic feminism, a sub-branch of feminism, has been gaining a tremendously increasing attention over the past years. A number of critics, both non-Muslims and Muslims, consider Islamic feminism an oxymoron. Westerners reckon that Islam and feminism cannot rhyme because of the essentialist belief that women's subordination is inherent in the Islamic texts and, therefore, it is oxymoronic to claim women's rights on Islamic grounds. Muslims, on the other side, stick to the idea that feminism is a western import and cannot be applied to Muslim societies due to its ideas and demands that are incongruent with the teachings of Islam.

To argue against both positions, I suggest a post-modern reading to Islamic feminism. I argue hereof that Islamic feminism vacillates between the failure of Westerners to relinquish their essentialist views on gender in Islam and their arrogance as the only ones capable of devising a liberating theory, and the failure of Muslims to free feminism from its western envelop and to acknowledge it as a 'traveling theory' that can take multiple shapes like other theories. This paper addresses the four tasks of Islamic feminism in order to demonstrate the heterogeneity of this trend. Also, it addresses Islamic feminists' interaction with this sub-branch of feminism and their resistance to the label aiming at establishing a theory and a movement with an independent, original and distinguished identity.

Feminism is believed to be a movement that has started during the Enlightenment era with feminists like Christine de Pizan and her contemporaries. Both, Enlightenment and feminism are criticized for their denial of pluralism, a deficit maintained by the West. Western feminism spoke on behalf of all women regardless of their different backgrounds. Likewise, it proved its inability to go beyond its whiteness and universalism which, like Enlightenment and humanism, deals with individuals in terms of sameness. It is this exclusion which prompted non-western women to resist white feminism by implementing the core of feminism, which is, as I loosely like to describe it, the support of

gender equality and the struggle against discrimination in regard to women– according to their own religious, cultural and traditional backgrounds. Resistance is articulated when these Islamic feminists (or as they wish to be called Muslim women supporting gender equality from a religious standpoint) pursued their own convictions while being aware that they share neither the same cultural and religious identity nor the same trajectories and therefore, their struggle in this specific area should stem from this awareness.

Postmodernism sets itself in opposition with sameness and monolithic thinking and knowledge. It is, rather, 'a philosophical movement that rejects 'grand-narratives' (that is, universal explanations of human history and activity) in favour of irony and forms of local knowledge' (Baker, 2004). So, in this sense, it places itself against 'the enlightenment philosophy of universal reason'. Furthermore, post-modernism seeks to question the presumptive interpretations based on monolithic knowledge by embracing 'local, plural and heterogeneous knowledge' (Baker, 2004).

Like postmodernism, Islamic feminism rejects sameness and universalism. Also, the notion of 'interpretation' which is primordial in the postmodern thought is also primordial in Islamic feminism. Islamic feminists re-visit the male interpretation of the foundational texts of Islam, the Holy Qur'an and the Hadith and show how patriarchal it was/is in preserving the prerogatives of men at the expense of women's dignity, freedom and agency. They open up the scope of interpretation onto a pluralistic form being unsatisfied with the supremacist phallocentric interpretations. Raja Rhouni, in her book, Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi', argues that Islamic feminists, like Fatima Mernissi and Amina Wadud, are refreshing the Islamic thought by involving gender as a new category of analysis (Rhouni, 2010).

Related to the notion of interpretation, some Islamic feminists are critical not only of the male interpretation but also of the Qur'an and the Hadith and sometimes try to re-locate women's position in Islam. We can invoke here the example of Fatima Mernissi and more specifically the first phase of her writings which is considered radical in comparison to her later works. Some others cannot be critical of the foundational texts but they also try to re-locate the dignified position of women in Islam and to exonerate Islam from the heavy accusation of misogyny.

Amina Wadud, as a case in point, is among the women who subscribe to the category of Islamic feminists who re-read the Islamic texts from a female liberating perspective while at the same time answering back Western accusations to Islam as the chief reason behind women's low status in Muslim societies. This discussion leads us to ask the following questions: Does Islamic feminism mean approving of the Qur'an's language or also contesting and disapproving of some Islamic articulations that concern gender issues? This is very much related to defining Islamic feminism which is not as easy a task as it seems.

In her flexible definition, Raja Rhouni (2010) says that Islamic feminism does include the example of Fatima Mernissi and Nadia Yassine[3] even though the former is secular and does not support the project of the Islamic state while the latter is an Islamic activist working within an Islamic group, *Al-Adl wa al-Ihsan* (Literally, Justice and Charity). Margot Badran in her article 'Islamic Feminism: What's in a Name' states that:

> The producers and articulators, or users, of Islamic feminist discourse include those who may or may not accept the Islamic feminist label or identity. They also include so-called religious Muslims (by which is typically meant the religiously observant), so-called secular Muslims (whose ways of being Muslim may be less publicly evident), and non- Muslims (Badran, 2002).

For Badran, contributors to this paradigm might be from various backgrounds not necessarily Muslims or devout Muslims. They might even be non-Muslims, like Badran herself. But can we call any contributor to the field an Islamic feminist? The label is confusing in terms of uses. Following Margot's reasoning even contributors to the field who might denigrate Islam as being the oppressor of women can be counted Islamic feminists.

Islamic feminism performs at least four tasks which I divided here in two categories: inward criticism and outward criticism. The first task is defending women's rights by subverting the male interpretation of divine texts which resulted in the submission and the dehumanization of women in the name of Islam; the second task is defending women's rights by subverting the infiltration of secular reforms jeopardizing the Islamic identity; Islamic Feminists talking from a faith position like Nadia Yassine do not only attempt at correcting the image of women in Islam but also at attacking the Muslim secular feminists who are most of the time accused of aligning to the western model of feminism. The Islamic feminism of these women stems from the strong desire of retrieving their Islamic identity by seeking solutions based on the Islamic legacy as they strongly believe in its exhaustiveness and its capacity to answer all contemporary questions.

The third task is to show that Islam is not a misogynist religion by clarifying that the foundational texts and the male interpretation of these texts are not always in harmony since some interpretations that address women proved to be in favor of men because they were meticulous in preserving their prerogatives. These interpretations of the Qur'an and the Hadith are not divine; they are man-made and so should not be taken for granted.

The purpose of the outward criticism is to provide a counter-discourse to the Western mainstream discourse which believes in Islam's antagonism to women. To do so, they consider the Qur'anic revelation only as a starting point for 'the ethical development of the human being' (Rhouni, 2010). Likewise, humans'

endeavors to find a smooth interface between the Islamic teachings and social problems including gender will cease to be a closed area of analysis and *Ijtihad* (the intellectual effort to decode and rethink religious texts) will be the sole solution. So, Islam should be seen, as Rhouni says, as an 'unfinished project of social justice and gender equality' that needs human intervention (*Ijtihad*). The second way to provide a counter-discourse is to consider the situation of the pre-Islamic period, *Jahiliyya*, which Islam came to reform. In this context, Rhouni states that the androcentric language of the Qur'an that the Western discourse clings to cannot be denied and should be addressed confidently and without apologies. But it can be redeemed if we consider that it is a 'product of the mentality and the worldview of the first recipients of the Qur'anic message rather than the reflection of the authorial intent' Rhouni, 2010). If we follow this reasoning, we realize that Islam came to reform the engraved patriarchal traditions and customs of the pre-Islamic period not shockingly so that the first recipients could accept Islam as a religion of faith. To redeem the androcentric language of the Qur'an, Rhouni asserts confidently that this language is just minor while in fact equality and justice are core values in the Qur'an (Rhouni, 2010).

There is actually a constant debate related to these questions: Is the Qur'an patriarchal? Is the Qur'an a feminist text? There are often extreme answers to these extreme questions. It is either a bright or a dim picture. Leila Ahmed in 'Western Eurocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem' blames gender inequalities on the three monotheisms, and argues against the rosy picture that enshrines discussions on women in Islam. She argues that: 'it seemed to me that this [the three monotheisms attitude(s) to women] still did not warrant playing down Islam's blatant endorsement of male superiority and male control of women, or glossing over the harshness for women of, in particular, its marriage, divorces, and child custody laws' (Ahmed, 1982). Leila Ahmed, like Rhouni, does not hide that the foundational texts can contain patriarchal signs due to the influence of the pre-Islamic culture or the culture of the converts.

The fourth task is somewhat related to postcolonial feminism. This is first because it also emerged in the postcolonial era after the growing dissatisfaction with the failure of nations to install democracy and economic prosperity (Rhouni, 2010). The second factor is that it also rebels against and criticizes the universalism of western feminism which does by no means represent the very particularity of women in Islamic societies or women with Islamic backgrounds. So Islamic feminism introduces 'another element of diversity' and decenters and decolonizes feminism as a western product (Rhouni, 2010).

These tasks help define and understand Islamic feminism and clarify the confusion related in the first place to the different positions and arguments of Islamic feminists. The four tasks do not limit Islamic feminists' freedom to criticize and question the Qur'an's and the Hadith's language that addresses women. Raja Rhouni is a case in point. Although she states that she talks from

the position of a believer, she admits the androcentric language and provides cogent ways to redeem it and this admittance, for her, does not weaken the struggle for women's rights in Islam (Rhouni, 2010). She insists on the importance of considering the temporality of interpretation (Cooke, 2001) and also the temporality of the revelation taking into account the impact of the traditions and the practices of the pre-Islamic period on Islam and its legislations.

A number of the women who speak from the position of the 'believer' refuse to be called 'feminist' or 'Islamic feminist' even though they share the same duty as feminists: defending women's rights and restoring equality (Rhouni, 2010). Referring to this refusal explains how Muslim women strive to establish a self-reliant theory and movement that does not align to any foreign influence. This refusal is due to a number of reasons. The first one that comes to mind is that 'feminism' as a concept and a label was born in the West, a non-Muslim place. This fact makes people return to the history of feminism and how it rose with the enlightenment which relegated the role of religion to the margin. More than that, after the emergence of feminism in women's writings calling for education, equality and various legislative reforms, other brands were born and some of them are notorious and can by no means be accepted in Islamic societies; one of these brands is 'lesbian feminism'. In Muslims' imagination, feminism is related to the disconnection with religion and to other 'odd' phenomena that the West could cope with and gradually accept. This explains partially Muslim women's reluctance to use the term 'feminism' and worse 'Islamic feminism'.

If feminism, as Miriam Cooke defines it as one that 'highlights the role of gender in understanding the organization of society' (Rhouni, 2010), denounces gender discrimination and analyses constructed hierarchies, why isn't it accepted among Muslim women who are committed to the same endeavors aiming at liberating women? Then, these endeavors must have a name though it will be synonymous to feminism by the end.

Nadia Yassine, a Moroccan affiliate to the justice and Charity Islamic group, states:

> 'Islamic feminism' is the oxymoron *par excellence*. It is about the combination of two concepts that are already problematic and the ideological combination of two complex phenomena that are antithetical according to the general perception forged by the media (Yassine, 2009).

Nadia Yassine (2009) expresses her astonishment concerning this combination. She refuses this label even though her acts can be named feminist despite her working within a highly patriarchal circle. Yassine lobbied for the creation of the 'women's branch' which discusses women's rights and position in Islam and which also encourages female affiliates to re-write the history of Muslim women known for their heroic deeds. However, this is not feminist for her, because feminism

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'has its own field of investigation that is based on openness, fascination by the status of the occidental woman, and universalism (from May Ziade to Nawal Saadaoui)'.

In regard to the refusal of the label, feminist, Anne McClintock says:

> If all feminisms are derided as a pathology of the West, there is a very real danger that Western, white feminists will remain hegemonic, for the simple reason that such women have comparatively privileged access to publishing, the international media, education and money (Cooke, 2001).

McClintock's argument goes in line with the previous argument which views that Arab and Muslim women have failed to liberate 'Feminism' from the western domination because they consider it 'Western' and refuse to give it an Islamic stamp. This also validates the argument that they failed to consider feminism a heterogeneous movement and theory taking various shapes. Among these shapes is the Islamic one. Miriam Cooke, in 'Women Claim Islam', uses 'Islamic feminism' and 'Islamic feminists' without hesitance because, as she states, even when she looks for alternative words, she finds that they have the same function; this is because Cooke does not judge feminism as a culturally or geographically specific theory (Cooke, 2001).

As early as the nineteenth century, Muslim women were already establishing the framework of feminist demands and arguments based on the Islamic teachings; among these women is Zaynab al-Fawwaz. Approaching women's problems in society based on Islamic norms was done to avoid being accused of imitating or aligning with the West (Cooke, 2001). Avoiding this accusation might be another reason why they refuse the label 'feminist'. In addition to al-Fawwaz, the Lebanese Nazira Zayn al-Din (1908-1976) refuted Islamic scholars' insistence on the veil in her book, 'Veiling and Unveiling' (1928) and stressed that women are the ones concerned with interpreting the Qur'anic verses that address them in her book 'The Girl and the Shaykhs' (1929) (Cooke, 2001). This is, undoubtedly, feminist since these women and others were trying to discover and unravel the roots of gender inequalities from an Islamic point of view. These are feminist manifestations but not in the Western mode. With these women, feminism proved to be a malleable approach that can adapt to different particularities.

In her article, 'Engaging Islamic Feminism: Provencializing Feminism as a Master Narrative', Asma Barlas provides a series of reasons why she completely refuses the label 'Islamic feminist'. Concerning the first reason, Asma Barlas asks: 'what? How can people call me a feminist when I'm calling myself a believing woman?' She further says: 'I derive *my* understanding of equality and of patriarchy from the Qur'an not from any feminist text!' (Barlas, 2008). What is implied in the distinction between being a feminist and a believing woman is that these two identities cannot exist in one

woman. For Barlas, feminists cannot be believing women and so since she is a believing woman, she cannot accept to be called 'feminist'.

The second reason Barlas provides is concerned with feminisms' ignorance and exclusion of non-white women. This exclusion made it difficult and even impossible for her to celebrate feminism as emancipatory. For her, a movement that already used/uses exclusion and discrimination against other women is not worth relying on. To some extent this is true and convincing. But from another angle, we can find that feminism is in constant mutability, transformation, and innovation. When the Marxists or third world women (not necessarily Muslims) realized that they are not represented by the other already existing feminisms, they invented their own alternative of approaching the problem of women and took feminism as a label, an approach and a theory and projected their own concerns on it. Even though Marxism is itself a Western approach and ideology, Marxist feminists felt the need to create a brand that represents them according to their ideology. Therefore, feminism is not a closed and fixed area that the west has invented but an open and fluid one that can be tailored according to one's concerns.

Barlas' reasons speak of some kind of resistance especially when she admits that her refusal is also due to her postcolonial resistance and her personal stubbornness (Barlas, 2008). This indicates that Islamic feminism shares some commonalities with postcolonial feminism. Some of which are the affiliation to the history of colonialism and the resistance to the colonizers imports. The difference between the two is that postcolonial feminism is more tolerant towards the use of the term. It only ascribes the postcolonial identity to it. The religious sensibility adds also to the postcolonial one. She believes that feminism in all its forms uses 'epistemic violence' when it associates oppression to Islam (Cooke, 2001).

As I mentioned earlier, it is not only Muslim scholars speaking from a faith position who consider Islamic feminism oxymoronic. There are critics and thinkers who argue that Islam does not support gender equality. Haiedah Mogheissi (1999) argues that Islam contradicts feminism because it is impossible to talk about gender equality in a religion which is based on gender hierarchy. But again, as Cooke argues, Mogheissi's argument is problematic because she confounds Islamic fundamentalism and Islam. She talks about them as if they were the same (Cooke, 2001).

Islamic feminists face multiple challenges indeed. They have to deconstruct patriarchal practices like all feminists do. But, they also have to show distance from Western feminism in order not to be accused of aligning to the West; this is also another reason why some Islamic feminists refuse the label altogether beside the idea of the exclusion of white feminism to non-white women. They are in perpetual search for legitimacy to conceptualize women in religion, a very sensitive area in Muslim societies. This is the most common and usual

accusation to secular Muslim feminists which withholds their credibility. Another challenge is the scathing criticism of the clerics, who consider the religious field a male space. The last challenge is the Western audience who still cannot fathom how feminism can be espoused to Islam which is known to them as a misogynist religion. These challenges are perhaps some of the reasons why Islamic feminism has been gaining an incredible attention lately. Islamic feminists gained much credit, equally, thanks to their ability to delve into the Islamic foundational texts by devising female-inclusive hermeneutics which have democratized the field of religious interpretations and opened it onto a plurality of routes and a plurality of understandings.

3 ISLAMIC FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS: THE PRODUCTION OF ALTERNATIVE READINGS AS A SUBSTITUTE TO GRAND-NARRATIVES

Islamic feminism necessitates that Muslim women be intellectually well-equipped and to gain access to the religious field on solid grounds. As mainstream canonized readings of the Qur'an and Hadith have been historically produced by men, a number of Islamic feminists have granted themselves the right to Islam's foundational texts in order to deconstruct religious patriarchy and to highlight the female perspective that has been long silenced. In her seminal work Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective, Amina Wadud attempts to re-theorize gender in Islam. To do this, Wadud devised three hermeneutical models: the grammatical composition of the text, contextualization and the world view of the text.

Capitalizing on the same tool which is language, Wadud decodes the seemingly ambiguous verses for one reason: to un-read the readings of some exegetes in order to validate her argument that women's position in the Muslim world is not Islamic. Arguing against the only-one-valid-divine interpretation is an incentive towards providing an alternative: female religious knowledge production. For instance, to deconstruct the idea that women were created inferior, she takes up the interpretation of the Qur'anic verse of human creation in which God says: 'And *min* His ayat (is this:) that he created you (humankind) *min* a tsingle *nafs*, and created *min* (that *nafs*) its *zawj*, and from these two He spread (through the earth) countless men and women' (Wadud, 1991). To refute the inferiority of women that started as early as the story of Creation[4], Wadud focuses on the word *min*, which is in this verse a controversial word. *Min* in Arabic has two meanings: the first one is the English preposition 'from' which means the extraction of a thing from other things; the second meaning implies something which is 'of the same nature as something else' (Wadud, 1991). Therefore, the word *min* changes radically the meaning of the verse.

Min as extraction, Wadud argues, 'gives rise to the idea that the first created being (taken to be a male person) was complete, perfect and superior [whereas] the second created being (a woman) was not his equal,

because she was taken out of the whole and therefore, derivative and less than it' (Wadud, 1991). Obviously enough, Wadud opts for the second meaning: 'your mates are of the same type or kind as you are' (Wadud, 1991). While the conventional interpretation opts for the meaning of the extraction to consolidate women's inferiority, looking at the verse from a female perspective refutes this inferiority by choosing the second meaning of equality.

Wadud stresses the importance of contextualization. She argues that Qur'anic rules have to be understood and discussed within the framework of the seventh century Arabia. Not only this, but they also have to be viewed within the greater Qu'ranic principles. Wadud states that: 'Qur'anic guidelines should lead the various communities towards progressive change within the context of universal Qur'anic guidance. To restrict future communities to the social shortcomings of any single community –even the original community of Islam– would be a severe limitation to that guidance' (Wadud, 1991).

Why should Qur'anic rules be doomed to carry the stamp of the Arabian Peninsula? What about the believers who do not belong to it and share no commonalities with it? This is why some twentieth century Muslim thinkers call for the abolishment of literal interpretations and application of some Qur'anic laws because they were a response to a specific historical phase and to rather highlight the rationales behind the statements. Aysha Hidayatullah in her book, 'Feminist Edges of the Qur'an', argues that 'by ignoring the […] historical context in constructing the [the verse's] meaning, exegetes have erroneously attributed general or universal meanings to verses that address only particular, limited, or conditional circumstances' (Hidayatullah, 2014). The failure to distinguish between '*amm* (general) and *khass* (specific) leads to the production of distorted knowledge of the verses (Hidayatullah, 2014).

> Wadud (1991) uses the hermeneutical model of contextualization to reread the Qur'anic verse of polygamy which states the following If you fear that you will not deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, three, or four. But if you fear that you will not be able to do justly (with them), then only one, … to prevent you from doing injustice. (Wadud, 1991)

Wadud (1991) underlines that it is basically in the context of managing the orphans' wealth that polygamy was mentioned in the Qur'an. It is worthy of mention that warfare at that time has ended with a lot of orphan children in the Muslim community (Hidayatullah, 2014). For fear that the male guardians mismanage the female orphans' wealth, the Qur'an suggested that they marry them and limited the number to four[5]. Here, rights are protected within the 'legal structure of marriage'. However, this context is almost always occulted when polygamy is discussed. Like polygamy, Wadud rereads

verses on the inheritance law and testimony which, according to her, carry female inferiority.

The third hermeneutical methodology Wadud uses to make up for the biased tone of interpretations is considering the text as a world view. In other words, the Qur'an has to be read in relation to itself and as an entity. Fragmenting the text along with its teachings, principles, and laws leads to huge contradictions within the Qur'an. In addition to grammar and contextualization, Wadud uses some Qur'anic verses to reinforce the validity of her third method: the text as a world view.

Wadud takes up, for instance, the Qur'anic verse on the beating of wives which says:

> So good women are *qanitat*, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear [*nushuz*], admonish them, banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them.

While contextualizing the verse does in no case seem to be efficient in this situation, understanding the Qur'an in relation to itself is far more efficient. In this line, Wadud (1991) asserts that:

> Even such cases, the norm at the time of the revelation, no correlation is made that the husband should beat his wife into obedience. Such an interpretation has no universal potential, and contradicts the essence of the Qur'an and the established practices of the Prophet.

The reader of the Holy Scripture will certainly come across huge difficulties in trying to absorb the contradictions s/he is exposed to. If the Qur'an is preaching justice and egalitarianism, it would be impossible for any reader to fathom the location of this verse within the overall message of the text. Actually, this verse as Wadud argues does no go hand in hand with the essence of the Qur'an as it contradicts to a great extent its message and teachings. One text cannot possibly encourage peace and violence regardless of how we interpret the word at hand. Based on her female perspective and feminist hermeneutics, Wadud invites herself to reread more and more Qur'anic verses. She implements the methodology of the composition of the text, contextualization and the world view of the text.

Hadith, or prophetic tradition, has also been a male-dominated space and its circulation and interpretation has long affected the Muslim woman's status and relegated her to the margin of the Muslim society. In her book, 'The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam', the renowned Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi contends that:

> Since all power, from seventh century on, was only legitimated by religion, political forces and economic interests pushed for the fabrication of false tradition. […] But

first let us lift the veils with which our contemporaries disguise the past to dim our present (Mernissi, 1999).

Through her feminist hermeneutics of the hadith verification, Mernissi negotiates the Muslim woman's agency to regain power and visibility in the religious field and by extension in the public space. Mernissi develops the following methodology: historicity, the process of verification, and the study of hadith transmitters' biography. This methodology helps her assess the authenticity and veracity of hadith, especially misogynistic ones. Ironically, the scrutinization of hadith is called *'ilm ar-rijal'* –literally 'the science of male authorities'– which is a sub-branch of hadith sciences and which studies the chain of references (*isnad*) as well as the biographies and reputation of transmitters. As the title reveals, it had been determined that this science is definitely not women's. 'Trespassing' the world of *ar-rijal* distinguishes Mernissi as a voice of dissonance and an intruder of *hudud* (limits).

Mernissi questions, for instance, a hadith that says: 'Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity'[6]. Thanks to the hermeneutics of contextualization, she finds out that the hadith said by the prophet in reference to a specific historical event: the assassination of Kisra the Persian king and his daughter's succession (Mernissi, 1991). Therefore, it is not to be taken as a general rule that restricts women from accessing public space.

Also, delving into the biography of the transmitters of hadith helps Mernissi deconstruct its circulating misogynistic load. Abu-Hurayra, one of the prophet's companions, transmitted the following hadith: 'The dog, the ass and woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer, interposing themselves between him and the *qibla*'. *Qibla* is the direction toward which Muslims pray. Mernissi asks: 'why would the prophet have said a hadith like that, which does me harm? Especially since this kind of saying doesn't correspond at all with what they tell us elsewhere about the life of Muhammad' (Mernissi, 1991).

This hadith was contested by 'Aisha, the prophet's beloved and the closest person to him. She reacted to Abu-Hurayra by saying: '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 bed between him and the *qibla* and in order not to disturb him I didn't move'. However, despite this, the hadith is so much influential to the extent that it successfully made its way into al-Bukhari's *Sahih*. More than this, 'Aisha's objection is not included (Mernissi, 1991). Aisha refuted another hadith which says that 'Three things bring bad luck: house, woman and horse'. This refutation or correction was not considered by al-Bukhari. Rather, he cited the hadith with three transmission chains to give it more strength and credibility.

Besides this hadith on superstition, Mernissi states that: 'he [Abu-Hurayra] has been the source of an

enormous amount of commentary in the religious literature. But he was and still is the object of controversy and there is no unanimity on him as a reliable source' (Mernissi, 1999). On the one hand, 'Aisha contested him concerning some hadith that he claimed he had heard –and in this vein she says 'He is not a good listener, and when he is asked a question, he gives wrong answers'– and on the other hand, he is contested by Umar Ibn al-Khattab who is quoted in the biography of al-Asqalani saying: 'we have many things to say but we are afraid to say them, and that man there has no restraint' (Mernissi, 1999).

All in all, these women grant themselves the right to Islam's religious texts which have been for centuries the source of the Muslim woman's ills. From the perspective of the believing woman, Islamic feminists reshuffle the rules of Islamic knowledge production which has preserved Muslim men's privileges at the expense of women's emancipation.

However, the Islamic feminist scholarship is not exempt from limitations and one of them is the apologetic discourse. For example, while it is important to contextualize polygamy in Islam, Wadud did not address the shortcomings of this solution although she speaks from a feminist believing woman's point of view. The following question can be investigated without any apologies: does marrying a female orphan prevent the mismanagement of her wealth? Couldn't female orphans be dealt with like male orphans without having to protect their wealth through marriage/polygamy? The apologetic discourse can indeed weaken the Islamic feminist scholarship which avoids, at times, a straightforward criticism of the culture of the seventh century with which the revelation was dialoguing.

Another limitation is subjectivity. As Wadud questions the subjectivity of male religious readings, one questions equally the subjectivity of her own readings and through her the readings of Islamic feminists. Are Islamic feminist readings of the religious text female-inclusive or female-centered? Building on the previous limitation, subjectivity can thrive in the quest of deconstructing the patriarchal modes of knowledge production and liberating the Muslim woman from its shackles.

To stress another limitation, I refer to Raja Rhouni who argues against what she calls 'the disabling moments' of Mernissi's methodology. Mernissi's book, 'The Veil and the Male Elite' revolves around raising skepticism around the (un-)authenticity of some hadiths with misogynistic language. Rhouni asks: 'what if the hadiths are found to be authentic?'. Following the authentication method (*isnad*) cannot always prove misogynistic hadith wrong especially in case the transmitters are reliable. Rhouni believes that Mernissi methodology could have been more powerful, if it had criticized authentication as a methodology that characterizes al-Bukhari's and others' works in general, not solely in relation to androcentric hadith*s* (Rhouni, 2010).

Though criticized for over insisting on the authentication methodology, *isnad*, Mernissi's arguments are powerful as they decenter power relations. It is her now who asks the question: did certain transmitters meet the Islamic requirements of transmitting hadith? A question that is, often, used to attack Islamic feminists who venture into the texts 'are you eligible to read the Qur'an and hadith?' Mernissi empowers her arguments by re-reading, questioning, destabilizing and desacralizing the history of the early transmitters. That was one of Mernissi's routes to the religious text.

The hermeneutics of Islamic feminists succeeded in accessing the religious field and highlighting the female perspective of the religious foundational texts. Not only this, they succeeded in optimizing their feminist consciousness through the logic of postmodernism in two major ways. First, it gives credit to the production of multiple and heterogeneous readings. As this paper tries to highlight, Islamic feminist did not only contribute to the pluralization of feminism as a theory; Islamic feminism is itself stamped with plurality considering the diversified contributions, hermeneutics, approaches and perspectives of Islamic feminists. Second, postmodernism allows for the emergence and inclusion of small voices into the world of grand-narratives. In the context of Islamic feminism, women's voices are considered small voices that try to gain access to the field of exegesis and religious interpretations that were assigned only to *ar-rijal* (men).

4   CONCLUSION

Both Muslims and Westerners try to discredit the quest for gender equality on religious grounds. Muslims claim that feminism is a western import which is incompatible with the Islamic teachings. Westerners depart from the belief that gender inequality is inherent in Islam and thus, it is oxymoronic to speak of Islamic feminism. Islamic feminists try to answer back both Muslim and Western beliefs by developing female-inclusive hermeneutics that facilitates revisiting the Islamic foundational texts and the male-centered religious interpretations to retrieve the egalitarian line of Islam.

As this paper highlights, Islamic feminists addresses a number of tasks to refute both Muslims' and Westerners' claims on Islamic feminism. Their aim is to: first, defend women's rights by subverting the religious patriarchal discourses on the Muslim woman; second, highlight the ability of devising a theory that produces the religious and cultural particularity of Muslim women; third, defend the Islamic religion from the accusation of misogyny; and fourth, decenter Western feminism which focuses only on while women. Addressing these tasks aims to define Islamic feminism. Another aim of this paper was to scrutinize the different approaches to Islamic feminism through the eyes of different contributors like Miriam Cooke, Asma Barlas, Margot Badran, Raja Rhouni, Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi and other women who marked this scholarship.

It was fundamental to discuss the hermeneutical models of Islamic feminism. Wadud ventures into the

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Qur'an by devising three main hermeneutics: the grammatical composition of the text, contextualization, and the World View of the text. This methodology has granted her the possibility to reinterpret the religious text from a female perspective and to deconstruct the misinterpretations that were the chief reason behind women's subordination in the Muslim world. In the same vein, this paper tackles Mernissi's hermeneutics of the hadith which revolve around historicity, hadith verification, and the transmitters' biography. Mernissi ironically re-appropriate '*ilm ar-rijal*, which has been for century exclusively a male endeavor to include the female approach and perspective of the prophetic tradition which addresses the status of the Muslim woman in Islam.

While a number of critics and observers still doubt the credibility and the potential of Islamic feminism, it has managed so far to trigger the interest of a number of Muslim women who have started since the last two decades to be explicit on the urgent need to reconcile their Muslim identity and the status of their rights in the Muslim world. Islamic feminists sought to relieve their scholarship from the accusation of cultural alignment to the West by stressing women's rights from within the Islamic legacy.

As it situates the scholarship of Islamic feminism within the logic of postmodernism, this paper concludes that it is endowed with a plurality of voices enriched by the contributions of different Islamic feminists. Amina Wadud capitalizes more on theology and on the deconstruction of the text linguistically while Fatima Mernissi's approach is more sociological and tends to study the impact of the religious discourse on the social performance of the Muslim woman. One should not forget also that the first phase of Fatima Mernissi's scholarship was radical which gained her so much criticism in the Muslim world after she had turned to a more moderate sociological approach to the Islamic texts and discourses.

Equally, Islamic feminism manifests clearly in the political activism of women belonging to Islamic groups who strived to gain access to the public space by capitalizing on the religious discourse merged with an approach to women's rights. A notorious example to invoke is the Moroccan Nadia Yassine who belongs to the Moroccan banned but tolerated Islamic group, Justice and Charity. Yassine has been for years an unparalleled feminist voice within her group reconciling the feminist consciousness, which is rooted in her discourse, with the Islamic basic theoretical foundations. Nadia Yassine and all the aforementioned Islamic feminists attest to the reality that discussing the viability of Islamic feminism has been surpassed by the discussion of diversity and difference among Islamic feminist theorizations of woman in Islam.

Besides the plurality of its discourses, this paper finds out that Islamic feminist endeavors fall short of its own methodologies as it adopts an apologetic approach when addressing and justifying the patriarchal language of the Islamic foundational texts. Islamic feminists at times try to justify this language by undermining it while they can admit it by referring to the cultural and historical context of 7th Century Arabian Peninsula and the impact of the pre-Islamic period on the first recipients of the Islamic revelation.

This is in a great part due to two major realities at least: the first is that feminism was born in the West which is everywhere reminiscent of the history of imperialism. The second reality is that the history of feminism is related to the Age of the Enlightenment and its rupture with the church and religion. In Muslim countries, religion has been an integral part in the legislation of women's rights.

NOTES

1. This is in a great part due to two major realities at least; the first is that feminism was born in the West which is everywhere reminiscent of the history of imperialism. The second reality is that the history of feminism is related to the Age of the Enlightenment and its rupture with the church and religion. In Muslim countries, religion has been an integral part in the legislation of women's rights.

2. I am aware that a number of Muslim women refuse to be categorized as Islamic feminists. On the reason why some Muslim women refuse the label 'Islamic feminist', see Asma Barlas (2008) and Margot Badran (2002).

3. Naia Yassine is a female affiliate to a banned Islamic group in Morocco called al-Adl wa al-Ihsan (Justice and Charity) known for its call to the return to the pure Islamic state and way of life.

4. In al-Tabari's commentary, he stresses that Eve was created from the rib of Adam. Exegetes like Ibn-Kathir goes for the idea that Adam was born first and Eve was created later to be his wife without mentioning the story of the rib. See more on https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/tabary/sura7-aya189.html#tabary. In the exegesis of al-Qurtubi, Eve was created from the left rib of Adam. He further adds that women are 'crooked' ('*awjaa'*) because she was born from a crooked rib. See more on https://quran.ksu.edu.sa/tafseer/qortobi/sura2-aya35.html.

5. This is not however the interpretation that exegetes give. Al-Tabari, for instance, goes for the idea that polygamy was not allowed only in relation to the orphans. Also, he argues that the idea of justice that most feminists and women resort to was said in relation to the fortune of the orphans. At that time, in the Arab peninsula men used to marry over ten female orphans and mismanage their wealth. Therefore, according to al-Tabari, it is in this context that the verse on justice was revealed and the number of wives was limited to four. He adds also that this is a matter of disagreement among exegetes as others believe that justice was meant to include the act of polygamy altogether.

6. The website *islamqa.info,* which is consulted by millions of Muslims for religious inquiry, reckons that the hadith does not belittle the leadership of women, but rather guides their capacities in a way that rhymes with their 'psychological, physical, and personal nature'. The famous website adds that even when women are more erudite than men they cannot take leadership positions because of Abu-Bakra's hadith itself and because women are in nature 'deficient in reason, weak, and emotional'. The website confirms that this hadith is unanimously agreed upon by the prophet's companions

and the Imams that followed them. See the article 'al-kalam 'ala hadith: lan yufliha qawmun walaw amrahom imraa', retrieved on 15-06-2018, from https://islamqa.info/ar/answers/135052/.

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