

## Book Review

### Islamic Feminism: Hermeneutics and Activism

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Terminologically speaking, Islamic feminism is a subset of feminism that emerged in the 1990s and makes the case that women's inequality is socially rather than religiously based and that Islamic scriptures should be reinterpreted in their favour (Ali, 2019). Anyone interested in topics like Islamic feminism, religion, and gender should read this extremely thorough book *Islamic Feminism: Hermeneutics and Activism* (2024) by Mulki Al-Sharmani which compares and contrasts existing research on the topic. Mulki Al-Sharmani is a professor at the University of Helsinki's Faculty of Theology and a research fellow of the Academy of Finland whose research interests include Muslim family law and gender activism in Egypt, Islamic feminism, and transnational Muslim marriages in Europe.

In her book, as a methodology, she conducts a comprehensive analysis of Islamic feminism hermeneutics, concentrating on the writings of particular academics. These academics offer both domestic and international variations of Islamic feminism. They reside and work in both the Global North and South, in Canada, Egypt, Morocco, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. As a result, the viewpoints of scholars from various linguistic, cultural, and academic backgrounds are investigated and when combined, their writings offer hermeneutical interactions with the *Qur'an* and other schools of Islamic interpretation, including *Hadith*, Islamic legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Sufism, and Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*). In the book, two key ideas are highlighted: reconstruction and deconstruction. Tracing and dissecting the establishment and operation of religious patriarchy as expressed in the literary tradition through interpretations, decisions, and discourses is the primary objective of deconstruction. On the other hand, reconstruction's objective is multifaceted. On one level, reconstruction entails applying gender as an analytical lens to offer fresh perspectives on more significant and fundamental theological and ethical issues in Islamic scriptures. It also refers to offering different interpretations of texts that seek to support a gender equality idea with Islamic roots.

Two interconnected literary groups can be distinguished from the expanding body of work on Islamic feminism since the 1990s: the first concerns the creation of Islamic feminist hermeneutical knowledge, and the second is the analysis and assessment of this knowledge as well as the methods employed in its creation. This book belongs to

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the second category. Its two main goals are to critically examine how Islamic feminism as a body of knowledge influences gender activism and to support a strong definition of Islamic feminism as an interdisciplinary area that integrates Islam, gender, and religious studies. In order to achieve these goals, the author first examines the contributions and hermeneutical strategies of a few Islamic feminism experts, evaluating their importance as well as the methodological and epistemological difficulties they present. Second, she looks at Islamic feminism's social relevance as an approach that combines action and scholarship in both local and international settings (Sharmani, 1).

The book is divided into nine chapters. In chapter one, entitled 'Islamic Feminism Revisited', after conducting a literature review on the topic, Sharmani examines the writings of authors and philosophers who have written on Islamic feminism and contrasts their opinions. Islamic feminism emerged in different countries for different reasons. For the Islamic feminist authors Sa'diyya Shaikh and Fatima Seedat in North Africa, for instance, Islamic feminism represented a position against both gender-based and racial discrimination (Shaikh, 2004). Likewise, Islamic feminism in South Africa and Indonesia has its own context-specific motivators and influences. In Indonesia, grassroots efforts to advance reformist religious knowledge, include women as authoritative voices in the religious sphere, reform family law, they also impact the lives of local families and communities giving rise to the scholarship and activism of Nur Rofiah and Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir (Abdul Kodir, 2022; Rofiah, 2022).

In chapter two, 'Trajectories and Perspectives', the intellectual development of the scholars under investigation is presented. The author expounds how they got involved in Islamic feminism as a way to learn and become activists. She looks at how they define 'Islamic feminism' who supports or opposes it, and how and why their viewpoints may have changed over time. She starts with Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud, who wrote the first works in this area of study. Next, she explores the work of Omayma Abou-Bakr and Amany Saleh, both from Egypt who were interested in gender and Islam in the early 2000s. They were first exposed to Wadud's work when it initially came out. A Canadian Egyptian Nevin Reda and South African Sa'diyya Shaikh admit that Wadud is as an obligation. Reda writes on the Qur'an and Shaikh mostly about Sufism, but both authors also publish eclectic works that encompass *Hadith*, *tafsir*, and *fiqh*. Then, she introduces Kecia Ali and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, two prominent Islamic feminist scholars who study Islamic legal tradition. She concludes with the work of a Moroccan doctor named Asma Lamrabet who is an important voice of Islamic feminism.

An insightful analytical lens into the discursive formation of gender hierarchies and religious patriarchy in Islamic interpretive tradition is offered by the hermeneutics of deconstruction of Islamic feminism researchers covered in chapter three, 'Hermeneutics of Deconstruction'. To achieve this, the researchers covered in this chapter use various approaches. Ali and Mir-Hosseini trace the discursive creation of the marriage contract and its underlying premises, while Abou-Bakr and Shaikh concentrate on outlining and challenging the *tafsir*'s history in relation to ideas pertaining to gender roles. While Reda and Ali dissect the approaches taken by jurists and legal theorists, Saleh explains a specific *fiqh* topic.

In chapter four, entitled 'Hermeneutics of Reconstruction', the scholars' interpretations of the Qur'an offer new and complex interpretations of key theological concepts like *tamhīd* (*wadud*); the idea that the Divine is unique and incomparable, hence genderless (Barlas, 2016); the *Qur'an* as *dhikr*, which emphasizes a humanist message, i.e., theology of *insān* (Lamrabet, 2007); the connection between ethics and aesthetics in *Qur'anic* theology (Abou-Bakr, 2001); *al-ḥaqq* as a pillar of *Qur'anic* ethics and theology (Saleh); and the Qur'an as a method of spiritual integration (Reda). Shaikh addresses comparable theological and ethical issues in Sufism, another textual source.

In chapter 5, entitled 'Hermeneutics of Reconstruction: Rereading Gender in Texts', the second level of reconstruction hermeneutics adopted by the researchers under study is the main topic. This entails reinterpreting particular verses that have served as the foundation for exegetes' and jurists' deduction of unequal rights in marriage and divorce, spousal violence as a form of wife-disciplining, polygyny, marital sex as the husband's right, spousal maintenance versus wifely obedience, and men's right to unilateral divorce. In general, academics reinterpret these verses using comprehensive intra-textual hermeneutical methodologies, returning them to a set of fundamental ethical and theological precepts. However, the scholars use various hermeneutical approaches and generate readings that illuminate some of the conflicts in their hermeneutics while also offering fresh perspectives and insights.

In chapter 6 named 'Islamic Feminism and Its Discontents', academics of Islamic feminism also read the *Qur'an* selectively, emphasising some passages to support the idea of gender equality in the *Qur'an* while disregarding those that argue against it. Another version of this criticism holds that Islamic feminism experts actually minimise the text and its authority in their efforts to argue for gender equality based on the *Qur'an*. In this critique, the author distinguishes and examines two threads. One contends that scholars of Islamic feminism interpret the *Qur'an* as a feminist scripture that liberates women and force their own contemporary gender equality ideals upon it. Another contends that these academics minimise the text's normative authority through their hermeneutical approaches and underlying assumptions. The approaches taken by the scholars and their interpretations of the *Qur'anic* text are the main topics of both branches of this critique.

In chapter seven called 'Transnational Islamic Feminism Activism: *Musawah*', the author describes *Musawah*, an organisation founded by Islamic feminists that brings together academics and civil society members from all over the world. *Musawah* keeps establishing favourable environments for the generation of study on Islamic feminism. It aims to support reform measures toward gender equality and justice through its entwined action and knowledge production.

Chapter eight entitled 'Local Islamic Feminism Activism: The Politics of Reform in Egypt' explores a conference organised by Mada Foundation in Egypt, which was mainly based on Egypt Islamic feminism. It can be inferred from this chapter that compared to a few decades ago, Egyptian Islamic feminism – a discourse of gender action based on facts and arguments with an Islamic foundation – has gained more recognition and shows promise. More and more common Egyptian women are drawn to its egalitarian philosophy based on the *Qur'an* because they don't want to compromise their freedom and agency for their faith.

The last chapter entitled 'Where we are and Where we go' is a summary of the book. The author argues that Islamic feminism today consists of two interrelated elements: the creation of scientific knowledge that links gender, theology, and ethics issues, as well as local and international activism aimed at religious and legal reform related to gender rights in both the public and private domains. Numerous significant scholarly works about the interpretations of textual sources by Islamic feminist academics have been created. The approaches taken by researchers to interpret religious texts in an instructive manner are categorised in this literature. This book aims to add to and expand upon this body of literature. The author wants to offer a comprehensive examination of Islamic feminism hermeneutics and how it generally relates to the two primary objectives of this research.

The author offers three recommendations for potential future lines of inquiry into Islamic feminism in her conclusion. The first is a methodical and comprehensive examination of the activism and work of the younger generation of Islamic feminism scholars who are studying the *Qur'an* and other textual sources through hermeneutical analysis, as well as an examination of how they advance the work of the first and second generations. Further investigation of the ideas and practices of Islamic feminism's contributions to other connected disciplines like Qur'anic ethics and comparative feminist theology would be a second avenue for future study. The third and last study avenue is one that she just started in Egypt and Finland, but it may be carried out more methodically and in different contexts by other academics. It entails researching how Muslim women who are lay and come from various backgrounds understand and apply the *Qur'an* and other pertinent religious texts to their everyday lives as they negotiate gender roles, make decisions, and live their lives.

This book is a very comprehensive resource that will guide researchers, academics and writers working in the field of Islamic feminism. As a very important source where prominent studies in this field are compared together, this book clearly explains what Islamic feminism is and what it is not, whilst giving readers the opportunity to compare different views. Sharmani not only provides extensive information about the existing literature in the field of Islamic feminism, but also provides important ideas about the studies that can be implemented on this subject in the future. As a result, it is a significant contribution to the field. On the other hand, despite mentioning significant advancements in Islamic feminism, the discussion is restricted to scholarly research carried out in a particular area. For instance, scholarly research on Islamic feminism has been carried out in Turkey, and a background on the topic has been established. In this context, Turkey could also be mentioned.

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