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Book Review

Gendered Morality

Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society

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BOOK REVIEW: *GENDERED MORALITY: CLASSICAL ISLAMIC ETHICS OF THE SELF, FAMILY, AND SOCIETY*

Talha Rehman*

Ayubi, Zahra. *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, pp. 368, USD 35.00, 978-0-231-19133-3.

Zahra Ayubi's new book, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society*, is an engaging study of the masculine nature of ethical normativity in classical Islamic tradition, which Ayubi explores through a close reading of ethical treatises: *Kimiya-i-Sa'adat* by Abu Hamid Mohammad al Ghazali (d. 1111), *Akhlaq-i-Nasiri* by Nasir al Din Tusi (d. 1274) and *Akhlaq-i-Jalali* by Jalal al Din Divani (d. 1502).

Ayubi identifies the construction of ethical masculinity as a subject par excellence of the philosophical treatises she discusses. Often these philosophical underpinnings of the notions of sex and gender in Islamic law, exegesis and even ethical literature are seen by feminists, modernists and reformers alike as inspired by an Aristotelian hierarchical view as opposed to the egalitarian Qur'anic ontology. So far, feminist scholars have argued the privileging of Aristotelian over Islamic/Qur'anic ontology led Muslim philosophers and ethicists in the past to masculinise ethical normativity and silence women's ethical concerns. Ayubi however, holds that Aristotelian philosophy did not stand as a scholarly endeavour in isolation with the Qur'anic studies but informed jurists' and exegetes' understanding of the Qur'an in classical era. Her work, therefore, highlights the interrelationship of *akhlaq* texts with other genres in Islamic tradition. The significance of Ayubi's work lies in laying bare the philosophical universe that shaped the construction of gender in classical ethical literature, but can be taken as fundamental in the formation of most classical traditions as well.

The introduction opens with a discussion of gender roles in a 2004 documentary, *Ghazali: The Alchemist of Happiness*. In the documentary, in the classic scene when al-Ghazali leaves Baghdad forever to embark on his legendary spiritual journey, the wife and her concerns are relegated to the background, completely silencing her. This lack of interest in any worldly or spiritual goals a woman might have in the backdrop of al-Ghazali leaving Baghdad on his famous spiritual quest looms large in Ayubi's work, leading her to ask, "In the Islamic Tradition, are opportunities for lofty pursuits and self-reflection equally open to women? And to what extent, and in what ways, is the path to ultimate happiness—enacting God's will through ethical refinement of the Self—an undertaking that is gendered male?"¹ While this

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¹ Kindle version of the book was used where no page numbers were included.

story dramatically illustrates her argument, it lacks consideration of socio-political conditions in the pre-modern era, which would not make it safe for a woman to travel in the way al-Ghazali did, nor is it clear that a woman would want to embark on a journey without fearing for their safety.

In the first chapter, “Epistemology and Gendered Analytics of Islamic Ethics,” the author highlights the continued relevance of the three treatises of philosophical ethics along with their shared cosmology of *nafs* (soul) as well as a shared assumptions about the gendered nature of ethical normativity across time and sectarian boundaries in classical ethics literature. As Ayubi demonstrates, all three authors, despite belonging to different eras and having diverse sectarian commitments, write in the cosmology of the Greek and Mediterranean world. They use this shared discourse within Islamic metaphysics around the concepts of *akhlaq* (morality), *khilafah* (viceregency) and *nafs* (soul). Ayubi situates all three works within the genre of philosophy in a branch called *hikmat-i-amali* (practical wisdom).

Chapter two opens with a nuanced discussion on the gendered grammar and intended subject of the term *nafs* in the three ethical treatises. Ayubi discusses the tripartite division of the human soul in Greco-Islamic philosophical ethics into three faculties: rational (*quwwat-i-il/aql*), irascible (*quwwat-i-ghazb*) and concupiscent (*quwwat-i-shahwat*). The embodied soul features in the treatises as a microcosm (*ālam-i-sagheer*), with the soul acting as a monarch, with ‘*aql* (rational faculty) as its vizier, *ghazb* (irascible faculty) as state police and *shahwat* (concupiscent faculty) as the tax collector. Ayubi notes the divisions of ethical *nafs* are equated metaphorically with state functions, which generally lie in the male domain of power and knowledge. The seemingly gender-neutral aspects of the three divisions of the soul appear on closer examination to be gendered male. For example, ethicists hold rationality to be present in women but only inferior to males. Thus, “Ghazali contrasts rationality with the baseness of animals as well as the ‘weakness and vulnerability of women’”. Ayubi also discusses the tension between the egalitarian core of the ethicists’ work with the hierarchy evident in their prescriptions for improvement of the *nafs*. *Nafs*, as a universally shared human trait, allows for the perfection of all human beings; however, only the elite men are able to perfect their *nafs* and are privileged to rule over women and non-elite men, just as the rational faculty rules over the other two. Similarly, *ghazb* and *shahw* reach their full perfection in qualities such as *ghairat* (male pride or jealousy), *sakha* (generosity), *najaddat* (valour), *muruwah* (manhood) and so on, focusing on men, particularly elite men. Therefore, Ayubi argues, *nafs* along with its three faculties, while remaining gender and class neutral linguistically, as used by ethicists in their philosophical sense, is synonymous with the *nafs* of elite males. While this may be the case, it is also possible the authors’ primary audience were men who wielded far more influence on the affairs of society in pre-modern era. In the ethicists’ mind, if elite men purified their *nafs*, most issues in society would be addressed for the benefit of all, men and women.

In chapter three, “Ethics of Marriage and the Domestic Economy,” Ayubi foregrounds the contradictions within the ethicists’ conception of the *nafs*, which, by acknowledging women’s *nafs* allows for their humanity, but also dehumanises women by emphasising their deficiency in rationality and self-restraint: “a woman has a *nafs* to give up and she should be willing to do

so without reflection on her own *nafs*'s refinement since his is the *nafs* that matters." The wife at best holds an inferior status in terms of rationality and morality, and it is precisely this inferiority that makes her an ideal wife. The home serves as a microcosm to the world where elite men are the leaders. The home, therefore, acts as a site for refinement of the male *nafs* and relegates women to an instrumental role within this male goal. Ayubi observes, in ethicists' cosmology, love between the marital couple far from being the basis of marriage, actually undermines their proper gender roles, particularly interference with male authority, domination and discipline over the household.

Siyasat (governance) appears as one of the key features in the household economy as well as male homosocial relations in the public sphere, which forms the subject matter of the fourth and last chapter of Ayubi's book, "Homosocial Masculinity and Societal Ethics." In the nested worlds of individual, household and society, Ayubi spots the ethicists' creation of ethical masculinity as perfection at all three levels. She highlights the gendered and classed as well as urban nature of the ethics treatises. She notes ethics in the homosocial sphere is denoted through love, friendship and companionship between equals, elite males, all the relations conspicuously absent in the ethicists' discussion of marital relationship and for good reason, because, in their view, love for a woman is base and lowly because of the bodily associations.

Ayubi draws attention to the contradictions between potentially egalitarian ideas of *nafs*, *khilafah* (vicegerency of God) and shared humanity of all, even the equality of all matter, including plants and animals on one hand implicit in ethicists' cosmology and the hierarchical social ideals of the Greco-Mediterranean world they built upon. Despite the potentially egalitarian aspects of some key ideas the ethicists used in their discourse on ethics, they created a hierarchical conception of the world based on the supposed rational superiority of elite men over women and non-elite or younger men. Yet another tension in the works that Ayub identifies is, despite superior rationality being the justification for hierarchy in society, upward social mobility on the basis of one's intellectual qualities is deemed unjust even for men. The real problem, which Ayubi grapples with throughout the book, is what she sees as inherent injustice, "that the discipline of *akhlaq* itself—the path to happiness and fulfilment of God's intent for humanity—is, at its core, designed only for elite men and is reliant on the subordination of all others."

For a modern reader of *akhlaq* texts, the construction of normativity around elite male poses a formidable ethical problem, which might be the only way to think about ethics in pre-modern era, because the existence of human society would require more and more people involved in physical labour, with very little time for philosophical contemplation or ethical refinement. As the ethicists saw it, it fell upon the most elite members of the society to engage in ethical enquiry and refinement. They also might be the only literate members of a community. Since they held the power to order the society more or less in a manner that allowed everyone in the hierarchy the utmost degree of refinement that could be availed from their respective stations, they became the primary or even exclusive audience for the ethicists' texts. Therefore, in addition to asking whether the ethicists' worldview was in sync with modern ethical sensibilities, a more pertinent question would be to ask whether the central concepts such as

nafs and *khilafah* used by the ethicists in their milieu remain open to newer semantic constructions that also render them useful for ethical thought in the modern period, such as in the writings of modern feminist exegetes.

Discussing the strategies for a feminist philosophy of Islam, Ayubi counterposes the use of the terms *nafs* and *khilafah* to delimit women's and non-elite men's humanity in the ethicists' writings to the use of these terms in the works of modern feminist exegetes, including Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas to emphasise women's agency and viceregency. This approach raises questions in the field of history of ideas, where terms such as *khilafah* and *nafs* are understood in radically diverse ways by authors with different cosmological and moral assumptions. Ayubi's work displays sensitivity to historical construction and evolution of ethical terms and the role of human contingency in how these terms are read by authors with varying concerns. However, she does not elaborate enough on how certain meanings, particularly the more egalitarian ones, remain unavailable to the ethicists due to their positionality within a pre-modern material and intellectual universe.

One of the merits of Ayubi's work is that it does not fall into the false binary between Muslim praxis and construction of the normative on one hand and what counts as Islamic on the other, while also not equating the two, but highlighting historical contingency in the formation of normative in Islamic tradition, leaving room for critical engagement with tradition and the possibility for change. Her arguments on the hierarchy and elite bias in the ethical texts do not dwell upon these texts being 'Islamic' or 'un-Islamic', but on the fact that terms used within an Islamic cosmology gain their semantic content from the lived realities and modes of thought available to the interpreters. In a new context, the terms might continue to be the same; however, their significance undergoes changes that are discernible only through close readings of the texts with a view to the entire semantic field associated with the concept under consideration.

By uncovering multiple dimensions of hierarchy, including gender, class, age, slavery and race within the ethics tradition, Ayubi calls for feminist politics that address intersectional concerns and rewrites an ethical tradition in sync with what it means to be an ethical human today.

Rich in historical and philosophical content on classical Islamic thought along with a commitment to developing an ethical philosophy with unwavering egalitarian ideals, Ayubi's book is a much-needed intervention at a time when feminist scholarship in Qur'an, *hadith* (traditions), *tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) has revolutionised the field of Islamic studies by taking the discussion on gender in Islamic tradition beyond mere apologetics to a sound theoretical footing. What is particularly significant about Ayubi's book is that she engages with the hitherto neglected and much decried field of philosophy, philosophical ethics in particular, to enquire into the underlying philosophical notions of sex and gender that informed most premodern Islamic religious literature but remains elusive because it is not explicitly referred to in works of exegesis, law and theology.