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Book Review

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Mouna Elmir

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BOOK REVIEW: *ISLAM AND GENDER: MAJOR ISSUES AND DEBATES*

Mouna Elmir*

Duderija, Adis, Alina Isac Alak and Kristin Hissong. *Islam and Gender: Major Issues and Debates*. London and New York: Routledge, 2020, pp. 222, AUD 69.99, 978-0815-39-670-3.

Disagreements about Islamic rules and regulations have been tolerated since the time of the Caliphate and are seen by Islamic scholars as beneficial. *Islam and Gender: Major Issues and Debates* argues how disagreements on gender issues in Islam are often a result of the Muslim intellectuals' historical, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and presents how they have impacted the thoughts and behaviour of Muslims in modern society. This book provides a comprehensive historical review of classical Islamic literature, pre-modern Islamic literature and contemporary modern academic discussions on key gender issues in Islam, supported by case studies. It highlights the growing interest in studies of Islam and gender, relating them to contemporary social, political and economic changes that have influenced many mainstream Muslims to enquire about the roles of men and women. The book has 12 chapters discussing interrelated, yet significant and controversial topics on gender-related issues in Islam, such as gender, religion and feminism; pre-modern interpretations of masculinity and femineity; logic of patriarchal honour; gender in relation to the interpretation of the Qur'ān and *sunna*; gender and *ḥadīth*; marriage and divorce; inheritance and polygamy; adultery and sexual violence; gender and sexual violence, lived religiosity; and Muslim female religious agency and gender justice in Islam. The three authors live in different social and cultural contexts – Australia, Romania and the USA; however, they show common viewpoints on issues of Islam and gender.

The authors' expertise in the areas of gender and Islam is reflected in their thorough overview of Islamic literature concerning gender issues. They also argue the implications of the discourse used by classical Islamic interpretive tradition on contemporary modern discourse. The authors try to be objective; however, their modernist, feminist, progressive viewpoints are evident in their discussions on many classical Islamic literature related to gender in Islam. In other words, the authors introduce gender issues in Islam in a way that relates to the modern reader as they reflect the lived experience of mainstream Muslims in private and public spheres. The book reviews recent debates about Islam and gender from contemporary academic and scholarly works. It is inclusive and refers to gender issues from different perspectives using a multidisciplinary approach. Apart from classical Islamic

* Mouna Elmir is a PhD candidate in the Department of Arabic Languages and Cultures at the University of Sydney.

literature, the book provides an overview of Western literature as well as the Orientalist view. As a Muslim woman researching the field of Qurānic translation, specifically looking at the verses of women translated by women and women-friendly Muslim males, this book offers different perspectives on how to scrutinise and argue these verses.

Unlike other scholarly works on gender and Islam, the controversial topic of Islamic feminism is unpacked in a manner that explains the waves of Western feminism and their influences on the rise of Arab feminism. It also scrutinises Islamic feminism's purposes and unique agenda compared to Western feminism. The book argues Islamic feminism demonstrates the Qur'ān's egalitarianism and raises awareness of patriarchal influences on Islamic literature. To further decode the topic, the authors provide a detailed explanation of the main influences of Islamic feminism for gender issues. They explain that Islamic feminism revealed Muslim women scholars' hidden voices from classical periods, and they were able to put forward new versions of many Qur'ānic verses through revised interpretational methodologies, as well as validating and highlighting the lived experiences of Muslim women from within the Muslim communities and broader mainstream society.

In relation to feminism, the authors argue the binaries created between males and females are socially constructed and related to Western history, specifically Western colonialism. The authors distinguish between the creation of binaries, misconceptions of duality, and how duality cannot be applied in societies with multiple genders and gender roles. From an Islamic perspective, the Qur'ān mentions duality and that everything has been created in pairs. For example, "And all things have We created in pairs in order that you may reflect on it."¹ Furthermore, as mentioned in this book, duality or *zawgyne* was not created to form hierarchy among creations, but for a purpose. The significance of highlighting the duality concept clarifies misconceptions related to Islamic feminism that one of its agendas is to create binaries.

The authors argue that gender relations are a formation of cultural norms and religious teachings – and not derived from religion. The review of classical literature explains the influences of patriarchal ideologies in premodern Islamic tradition on the conceptualisation and construction of masculinity and femineity. They argue that political, religious and even biological and spiritual male superiority influenced the formation of gender and religion in Islamic jurisprudence. The authors state,

Discourse and mind nature of sexuality, which played a major role in the development of Islamic jurisprudence regarding family law and gender issues which has impacted the way gender and religion has been formed.²

The arguments about the construction of femineity and masculinity presented in this book are timely and significant because male dominance is normalised within some Muslim communities, causing major marital issues among families.

¹ Qur'ān 51:49.

² Adis Duderija, Alina Isac Alak and Kristin Hissong, *Islam and Gender: Major Issues and Debates* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 27.

The book presents an overview of the “logic of patriarchal honour and its manifestations in Muslim contexts.”³ It is represented through gender issues related to honour killing, seclusion, women circumcision and regulation of female behaviour through concepts of “women-as-fitna.” The authors argue that juristic modesty regulations from the classical period portrayed women’s sexual power as dangerous while maintaining men’s sexual power as essential for claiming their authority. Furthermore, pre-modern era laws were based on the norms and social situations of the time. They assert these regulations show a fear of women’s power. The major elements of patriarchal honour referred to in this book are controversial in the modern Muslim context and aspects of disagreement among Muslim scholars.

This book is reliable for students interested in Qur’ānic studies and its exegesis. It reviews various approaches applied by classical Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* commentators and discusses the “developed innovative methodologies applied by feminist or women emancipatory perspectives.”⁴ It highlights how the latter are challenged for their revised versions of the verses of women, when their main aim is to develop interpretations of the Qur’ān’s message to serve Muslims in modern times. The authors assert they do not present what is right or wrong in Islam; however, in some cases, their arguments allude to a judgement of what is not Islamic, especially when they refer to classical Islamic commentators of the Qur’ān and *sunna*. They argue many classical commentators were influenced by their patriarchal culture dynamics, which resulted in misogynistic works and is not a representation of the Islamic *Manhaj*, the Qur’ān and *sunna*. However, based on some significant Islamic literature reviewed in this book, the latter arguments are supported and validated.

The book argues three significant aspects have been misunderstood throughout the generations and are major reasons for divorce and marital problems within modern Muslim communities. Male superiority is attached to the concepts of *qawamah*, *wilayah* and *fadala*. These concepts have been understood as divine commands that give complete authority to the male figure in the family. Development of interpreting the word *qiwama* went through stages and the authors state them chronologically, explaining social, historical and contextual causes. However, they focus on the last stage, which is dominated by an interpretation of *qiwama* in accordance with “the ideology of domesticity and women’s fitrah (created nature).”⁵ For example, they argue how pre-modern Islamic literature interprets *qawamah* as giving complete superiority to men over women because of a religious value given in the Qur’ān, referring to the concept of *fadala*. Interestingly, the authors argue *fadala* should be interpreted in general terms, as favouring some men over all humans, not only women. These concepts are explained eloquently and clearly, and the authors use persuasive arguments from Islamic literature to de-contextualise these concepts. They argue how traditional interpretations of *qiwama* are given to the husband and *wilayah* to the father, then provide suggestions that allow the reader to reach true understanding of the three terms. They conclude the debate by indicating that

³ Ibid., 44.

⁴ Ibid., 89.

⁵ Ibid., 95.

Gender egalitarian interpretations of *qiwama*, *wilaya* and *faddala* emphasise a set of universal and humanistic Qur'anic principles and concepts such as love, reciprocal consultation and equal moral agency that can become meaningful only if they are divorced from their patriarchal formulations.⁶

For the topic on divorce, the authors unpack three concepts: *ta'ah*, *nushuz* and *daraba*. They mention how different methodological approaches on modern Qur'anic *tafsir* have generated separate understandings of these concepts based on egalitarian perspectives. After presenting classical interpretations, the authors argue their misinterpretation is influenced by patriarchal ideologies from the classical period. Therefore, the authors explain, "Ta'ah was thus understood as exclusive obedience to God, *nushuz* could apply to both husbands and wives equally, whose dynamics are governed by symmetrical rights, and *daraba* was devoid of any violent implications."⁷ The authors' approach to the topic on divorce clearly explains how different interpretations of many Qur'anic concepts has affected Muslim women's status and rights in socio-legal contexts. However, in their latter argument, the authors overlook how this issue has affected Muslim men in today's society by creating confusion between traditional thoughts believed to be sacred by many mainstream Muslims and authoritative bodies, and the new interpretations from egalitarian perspectives that are demanded by contemporary women.

Similarly, for the topics of inheritance and polygamy, the authors explain how classical interpretations of Qur'anic verses influenced *fiqh* scholars. They argue how women's financial rights were misrepresented through inheritance laws. They state local customs and juristic rulings often suppressed the Qur'an's explicit meanings. Nevertheless, a counter argument is presented by the authors which found, when the verses of inheritance are interpreted based on a "contextualised and egalitarian paradigm, they support a more symmetrical gendered inheritance distribution."⁸

Some topics, such as female sexuality, polygamy and sexual diversity, are sensitive gender issues, resulting in heated debates among Muslims today. Drawing on the different interpretations of *zina* (adultery) from the classical period to the modern time, the authors explain adultery and sexual violence under three theoretical and applied objectives. First, they outline views on *zina* and sexual violence "from the formative period that led to the development of the classical works in which the primary schools of law were established."⁹ Second, they discuss the two concepts from a modern context, referring to examples that reveal the effects of classical Islamic jurisprudence. Third, they review the lived experiences of Muslim women through studies and reports by Muslim women scholars, international NGOs, and discussions in contemporary academic works which show how the diverse interpretations of *zina* have impacted women in the modern world. In relation to adultery and sexual violence, the authors discuss the boundaries within juridical rulings and their

⁶ Ibid., 107.

⁷ Ibid., 125.

⁸ Ibid., 144.

⁹ Ibid., 151.

relevance to serve modern Muslims, saying Muslim women affected by sexual violence have been impacted by *zina* laws, which has been highlighted in social and international media. They explain how aspects of *zina* and sexual violence have been linked with notions of marriage and sexual relations as a result of their understanding in contemporary Muslim societies, which is directly influenced by its representation in pre-Islamic Arabia and continues to inform modern authoritative discourse.

Similarly, the topic on gender and sexual diversity begins by explaining the linguistic limitations on the terms *liwat* (anal) sexual intercourse between males and *mukhannath* (an effeminate man), which are both used interchangeably in classical Arabic. The authors assert these terms hold different yet similar connotations to the modern terms gay and homosexual, especially in the modern and Western world. However, the authors employ a clear strategy, explaining how the meaning of each concept has changed and referring to traditional historical sources and modern understanding separately. The book also explains how these concepts are understood differently by communities and individuals in Western and Eastern societies. Their writing style clarifies how both terms are used in evolving discourse. However, they argue

Up to now, the mainstream understanding among Muslim thinkers remains unchanged from classical Islamic thought in its condemnation of same-sex sexual activity and relationships. What has changed is a sort of “will not to know” or “don’t ask don’t tell.”¹⁰

The lived religiosities chapter clearly demonstrates the significant effect of social change on individuals in modern Muslim societies. The authors demonstrate the harm inflicted by classical scholarship influenced with patriarchal social dynamics, which impacted individual understanding of Islam and gender relations in a modern context. They relate the lived religiosities of Muslim men and women influenced by the ideology of patriarchal construction of many concepts of gender and Islam.

The authors put forward some points that helped give a platform for Muslim women’s voices. They say the internet, which allowed easy access to social and global media, has played a major role in allowing international organisations to address women’s status. However, they claim, for some Muslims, this globalisation is a double-edged sword. The authors confirm for some it empowers women and others see it as a threat. The authors suggest examples like the exchange of ideas between men and women through social media is a major social change, which is a motivation to identify key social issues. The book presents the reality of communicating ideas through media platforms, arguing that mixing Western ideas, which mainstream Muslims associate with secularism, with Islamic thoughts, which are associated with traditional norms, challenges Muslims trying to resolve their new realities in a global world.

This book is significant at this time as it raises awareness of the different views and disagreements on gender issues, not only in modern and post-modern eras but also in classical Islamic literature. Unlike many other academic works on gender and Islam, which

¹⁰ Ibid., 182.

relate gender issues to political agendas inflicted by the “other” such as colonialism, this book highlights how Islam and gender issues are discussed and rooted in early classical Islamic literature, explaining how the living reality of Muslim women today is a result of many misjudgements of interpretations of religious texts or the Islamic *Manhaj*. The approach employed in this book can be used as a guide for students working on classical and modern interpretations of the Qur’ān, gender studies and Islamic jurisprudence of gender. For instance, the authors use an approach that provides detailed discussion of the historical development on understanding the status and role of men and women in classical and modern Islamic literature.

The strategies, methodologies and approaches used in the classical and contemporary periods are outlined and reviewed in a manner that attracts the interest of Muslim and non-Muslim readers. Their review of literature is injected with modern case studies from fields such as Qur’ānic exegesis, *hadīth* literature and gender studies, which shows the varied yet common perspectives on gender issues in Islam. Although the authors do not judge what is right or wrong from an Islamic perspective, they refute most classical tradition thoughts and a discursive discourse is used when introducing new conceptualisations for various Islamic concepts to the modern reader. Yet, through the rich Islamic literature presented in the book, the reader can develop a critical evaluation of the classical tradition without neglecting its contribution to the field of Islamic knowledge.

Some solutions for the major issues and debates about gender and Islam are proposed in the book. These issues mainly concern Muslim women’s scholarly works, which are often challenged by Muslim scholars who restrict the interpretation of the Qur’ān and *sunna* to male intellects alone. Thus, the authors endorse and highlight Muslim women’s concerns and demands.

...in order for interpretations of the primary sources and the creation of law to fully reflect the entire society, Muslim women are calling for women to have an active role in the interpretation and meaning making itself. It is not enough to view women just from the perspective of the patriarchal authoritative discourse.¹¹

The authors’ writing approach connects the reader with the book’s themes. They strategically engage the reader with contemporary major debates by explaining issues of gender relations in various topics and discussing the most controversial concepts in modern societies. Emerging scholars in the field of Qur’ānic translation and Qur’ānic exegesis will benefit from this book because it discusses the interpretation of the Qur’ān across socio-historical periods, presenting various perspectives and highlighting egalitarian scholarly works. Unlike many studies on gender and Islam, the book clarifies many gender aspects puzzled through some literature, which contradicts the reality of Muslim women in private and public spheres and through what is a norm about male dominance and too sacred to be argued otherwise, an issue referred to in this book as “normative androcentric society.”

¹¹ Ibid., 195.

Furthermore, this book paves the way to better and clearer understanding of the debates and lived realities of Muslim males and females today.