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Islam and Gender

In Islam, religious texts define the parameters of the relationship between Islam and gender; modern scholarship then interprets and gives meaning to this relationship. This essay on Islam and gender comprises two parts; part one discusses the pertinent Islamic religious texts, and part two reviews their interpretation in modern scholarship.

The gender experience in Islam is defined mainly through the *Koran*, the Book of God according to the Muslims, which is regarded as perfect, eternal, and unchangeable. Containing 114 chapters (*suras*) and 6000 verses (*ayats*), the *Koran* often addresses all believers, and, in specific instances, women alone. These latter instances are located specifically in chapters (*suras*) 4 (*Al-Nisa'*), 5 (*Al-Ma'ida*), 24 (*Al-Nur*), and 60 (*Al-Mumtahana*). Chapter 4 contains the most number of verses on women and Chapter 5 spells

out the conditions of marriage, dowry giving, divorce, and inheritance. Among these, three instances that affirm the male dominance over the female have been challenged, particularly by feminist scholars. One instance on polygam states that 'you may marry other women who seem good to you: two or three or four of them. But if you fear that you cannot maintain equality among them, marry only one'...(4:3). Another instance on inheritance claims 'a male shall inherit twice as much as a female' (4:11). The last instance is on punishing women that 'men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other, and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them. As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. Then if they obey you, take no further action against them (4:34).' There is also a reference to homosexuality in this chapter stating 'if two men among you commit indecency punish them both. If they repent and mend their ways, let them be (4:16).'

Chapter 24 refers to conditions of adultery and modesty, whereby those who defame honorable women and cannot produce four witnesses will be punished (24:4). The portions on modesty have also become contentious in that they provide the only possible reference to justify veiling and seclusion. Specifically, 'enjoin believing women to turn their eyes away from temptation and to preserve their chastity; to cover their adornments; to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery except to their husbands, fathers ... (24:31).' However, it should be noted that restrictions are also brought upon men in the preceding part which states 'Enjoin believing men to turn their eyes away from temptation and to restrain their carnal desires (24:30).' Chapter 60 in turn asks believers to test believing women who seek refuge from them to attest if they are true believers and to protect them if they are. It is interesting to note that even though men and women are treated unequally in society, they are equal in the eye of God as believers. It is important to note that male dominance also existed in the early Jewish and Christian scriptures as well (Genesis 3:16, 1 Timothy 2:11), reflecting the status of women in the times in which they were written (Cook 2000, p. 38).

The religious texts also help portray the ideals of gender behavior in a Muslim society. According to the pre-Islamic tribes of Arabia, the 'ideals and norms of their ways were of life had been contained and preserved in their social practices (*sunna*, trodden path), the customs or oral laws handed down from the previous generations by word and example (Esposito 1988, p. 14).' The lives of the prophet Muhammad, his wives, companions, and other pious Muslims therefore provided models for all believers to emulate. Since the recorded practices of the prophet (termed *hadith*) in particular revealed God's will, they became the norm

for community life alongside the Koran. Yet these *hadith*, unlike the *Koran*, could contradict one another since they were narrated by humans rather than given by God; most of the political and social debates in the Muslim world do indeed revolve around different *hadith* versions. Nevertheless, the *Koran* and the *hadith* together form the main sources of Islamic law, followed by legal reasoning (*ijtihad*), consensus of the community (*ijma*), as well as other influences such as custom, public interest, and jurist preference or equity.

Since Islam literally means submission to the will of God, Muslims particularly emphasize correct practice; gender practice is therefore based on the lives of exemplary males and females (Ahmed 1986, 1992, Esposito 1988, Zuhur 1992). According to these authors, marriage emerges as mandatory on every Muslim man and woman unless they are financially or physically unable to marry. In marriage, husband and wife then have complementary roles, as the men mainly participate in the public sphere to secure the livelihood, and the women principally manage the family and household. Marriage recognizes the needs and wants of both partners, paralleling the story of the 'fall' in the *Koran* that identifies Adam, not Eve, as the one personally tempted by the devil. Hence neither is the woman portrayed as the cause of the 'fall' nor is there a notion of an inherited original sin for which all humanity suffers. The wives of the prophet provided, through their lives, different qualities of the ideal Muslim woman. Khadija, the first, and at the time only wife of the prophet, was a wealthy widow who employed the prophet to oversee her caravan; her prominent economic and social position as a wealthy merchant provided a strong female model. 'Aisha, whom the prophet married at age ten after Khadija's death, and who became his favorite wife, was also a forceful woman who participated in the political affairs of the community and who also narrated many of the *hadith*. Fatma, the Prophet's only recorded surviving child, provides the primal mother figure for all virtuous women to follow; one who is chaste, immaculate, and sinless. The generational transformation from Khadija to 'Aisha to Fatma captures the changing position of women. During and after the prophet's lifetime, women were gradually removed from leadership positions within the community and the prophet's wives were secluded from the public sphere to preserve the wives' honor. The public prominence of women became limited to exceptional individuals who could stand out in spite of the exclusion and seclusion. In the contemporary period, Islamist reformists such as Muhammad Abduh and Ahmad Khan did indeed identify the plight of women as the cause of the decay of the Islamic family and society, and attempted to reason that the *Koran* contained social practices of its time that needed to be reformulated in the modern period to overcome the biases against women. Western colonial practice used the same plight of women to justify their political

intervention in the Middle East. The reformulation of women's position in response to both has been contested by the secular Westerners as inadequate and by the fundamentalists as inappropriate. Feminist scholars instead proposed another rereading of the sources, suggesting that in the modern period Khadija and 'Aisha rather than the obedient Fatma, need to be identified as the ideal for Muslim women (Ahmed 1986, 1992, Smith 1985).

The modern scholarship on Islam and gender centers around issues concerning the status of women in Middle Eastern societies in general, and the public participation of veiled women in particular. This selective focus, scholars argue, has largely resulted from the historical experience of the region with European colonialism when differences between the East and West were highlighted at the expense of similarities, and the image of the veiled women was specifically employed to justify the 'civilizing mission.' Historically, the publication of Edward Said's book (1978) entitled *Orientalism* alerted scholars to the European portrayal of Islam as a different, traditional, immutable, monolithic force resisting change, and the veiled oppressed image of Muslim women as its visual proof, one that also justified Western intervention. Criticism of gender analysis in other non-Western contexts (Mohanty 1984, Ong 1988, Spivak 1990) also proved helpful in further deconstructing the Western gaze in Islam and gender. These criticisms specifically engaged the growing literature of Western feminist analyses of non-Western women, pointing out how the Western gaze was uncritically replicated in these.

The literature criticizing the Western gaze over the field of Islam and gender thus identified overcoming the untexturedness of the non-Western subject and conveying her complexities as the first step in reversing the Western domination over the field of Islam and gender. The two most influential works that set the stage for the studies on gender in the Middle East (Fernea and Bezirgan 1977, Beck and Keddie 1978) were published as edited, collaborative volumes, letting the Middle Eastern women speak for themselves. More in-depth, specialized studies on particular dimensions of women's existence followed in problematizing Middle Eastern woman's alleged immutability or silence, as they studied archival court records (Tucker 1986) or women's poetry and songs (Abu-Lughod 1986). Following the queries generated by feminist theory, scholars also reflected on their own subjectivities in doing research in the field and commented on the dual structuring of knowledge by gender (Altorki and El-Solh 1988). Attempts to situate Middle East feminism in the larger context of feminist theory followed (Badran and Cooke 1990). After defining their own social space, Middle Eastern women were now located in the larger society, especially in relation to the state (Kandiyoti 1991). Redrawing the temporal and spatial boundaries of gender analysis followed as scholars reanalyzed his-

tory (Keddie and Baron 1991). More recently, the relation of religion and gender (Ahmed 1992, pp. 1–2) was studied, where it was argued that in the Middle East, women's realities are no longer captives of religion but equal partners, and that women now hold their own in the religious processes that had epistemologically obliterated their existence in the mid-twentieth century.

The most recent work in the field of Islam and gender juxtaposes theoretical abstractions with empirical realities, employing a multiplicity of academic, literary, and personal narratives to highlight the spectrum of gender experience in the Middle East both spatially and temporally (Göçek and Balaghi 1995). These range from the emergence of Islamic Eve and the reconstruction of motherhood (Spellberg 1996) to the construction of the relation between Islamic law and gender in Ottoman Syria and Palestine (Tucker 1998) to the origins of modernity and feminism in the Middle East (Abu-Lughod 1998). New efforts compare experiences within the field as they analyze the relationship between gender and support for Islamist movements in Egypt, Kuwait, and Palestine (Tessler and Jolene 1996), gender and identity construction across Turkey, Central Asia, and the Caucasus (Acar and Güneş-Ayata 2000), gender and politics in the Middle East (Berkovitch and Moghadam 1999), or women's human rights in the Muslim world (Afkhani and Friedl 1997). Other contemporary issues that engage scholars' interests range from the impact on gender relations of migration (Erman 1997), the Gulf War (Mojab 1997) or citizenship and parliamentary elections (Göçek 1999).

Works on Iran need to be mentioned as a separate category since the relation of gender and Islam has been particularly problematic after the Iranian revolution. Even though women had to re-veil in Iran, the changed nature of their participation in the public sphere became hotly debated. In spite of the religious rhetoric of returning women to their homes, the number of women in the public sphere has actually increased since the revolution whereby women have evolved a new gender politics that is empowering within the limits set by religion. The various dimensions of this new politics is currently being analyzed in relation to national memory (Najmabadi 1998), to secular versus religious gender politics (Sedghi 1996), and to the religion debate in contemporary Iran (Mir-Hosseini 1999).

A significant new effort differentiates, for the first time, the social history of women and gender (Meriwether and Tucker 1999) while another (Joseph 1999) focuses on the interaction among gender, identity, and the self. While these works provide new insights, there are still two important shortcomings in the field of Islam and gender. In defining Islam, scholars rarely take into account the vast variation in theory and praxis throughout the world. Islam is often spatially limited to the place where Islam emerged,

namely the Middle East, often shortchanging its presence in the West, the emerging Muslim communities in North America and Europe, in North Africa and Africa proper, the East, Central Asian republics, the Muslim communities in China and India, and, of course, in Asia proper. Social issues such as the Islamic veil in France (Troper 1999) or women's participation in Islamist parties in Bangladesh (Shehabuddin 1999) need to be brought more to the center stage. In defining gender, even though the category theoretically includes the social interpretation of the biological divide into female and male, in practice scholars focus overwhelmingly on women often to the exclusion of men. This emphasis is again a reaction to the skewed narration in human history, which naturalized men's actions as the norm and silenced the women's contributions. More work needs to be undertaken in the field of Islam and gender emphasizing men's experiences and sexuality.

See also: Accidents, Normal; Buddhism and Gender; Catholicism and Gender; Christianity Origins: Primitive and 'Western' History; Feminist Theology; Fertility Transition: Middle East and North Africa; Islam: Asia; Islam: Middle East; Islam: Sub-Saharan Africa; Islamic Fundamentalism; Judaism; Judaism and Gender; Near Middle East/North African Studies: Gender; Near Middle East/North African Studies: Religion; Protestantism and Gender; Religion and Gender; Religion: Family and Kinship; Women's Religiosity

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Islam: Asia

Islam is often understood as a Middle Eastern and, even more narrowly, an Arab religion. While the origins and core scriptures of Islam are indeed Arabic, the majority of the world's Muslim population is located in South, Southeast, and East Asia. This article concerns the Islamicate civilizations and societies of these regions. It examines theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of Islam in the region, the historical processes through which Islam came to be an Asian religion, relationships between ethnicity and religion in Asian societies, popular religion and vernacular literatures in Islamic Asia, the diverse roles played by Islam and Muslims in public life in contemporary Asian States, and the significance of Islamist or fundamentalist movements.

1. 'Islam' and 'Muslim' Definitional and Theoretical Concerns

In both western and Muslim writing the terms 'Islam' and 'Muslim' are used in various and often contradictory ways. Conflicts concerning their use and definition are apparent in, and have done much to shape, scholarly discourse about religion and culture in Muslim Asia. In a theological sense the term Islam means 'submission to god.' A Muslim is a person or *jinn* (spirit) who practices submission. Debates concerning the meaning of submission are a central feature of Islamic discourse. Muslim jurists define Islam as an all encompassing behavioral code and do not distinguish between religious and other modes of social behavior. Mystics (*Sufis*) define Islam as an emotional or spiritual state and are less concerned with personal