

Islam and the Epistemic Politics of Gender: A Decolonial Moment

Critical reflection on gender as a category of analysis within the study of Islam is a venture fraught with intellectual and cultural challenges. Despite tacit acceptance of the analytical significance of gender, the intersection of these two categories has made for a highly charged field of inquiry, polarizing Muslim and other audiences over its commitments, practices, and impact. The field is also gendered, with most of its scholars being women. This is characteristic of Women and Gender Studies at large and underlies its marginal epistemic and institutional status within various disciplines of the modern academy.¹ While this is also true for the study of Islam and Gender, other factors are also at play: Islam and Gender scholarship is increasingly conducted by women who are Muslim or of Muslim background. This has simultaneously mitigated and reproduced the modes of marginality associated with Women and Gender Studies.²

On the one hand, the postcolonial lens adopted in early Islam and Gender scholarship established the salience of this newly emerging field for deconstructing orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women. Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (1993), Deniz Kendiyoti's *Gendering the Middle East* (1996), and Lila Abu-Lughod's *Remaking Women* (1998) take full cognizance of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) in their critical investigation of essentializations of Islam which turn on gender. Studies recentring foundational texts as the ground for gender equality, like *Qur'an and Woman* (1992) by amina wadud, have provided postcolonial counter-readings in and of themselves. On the other hand, the growing number of Muslim women scholars engaged in the study of Islam and Gender has coincided with the global racialization of Muslim identity and rising Islamophobia since 9/11. This has led to their double penalization within their scholarly and religious communities. In the Western academy, their Muslim identity has been referenced to denigrate their scholarship as insiderist advocacy³—or, in contrast, to celebrate it as a progressive niche of Islam. The reality, however, is closer to being “sequestered into a corner space,” as Julianne Hammer puts it.⁴

Within Muslim academic institutions and networks concerned with preserving what is conceived of as ‘tradition,’ commitment to deploying gender analysis for explicit feminist purposes is frequently met with suspicion. Traditionalist intellectual responses vary, ranging from empathy over the Islamophobic and orientalist undertones of their common non-Muslim detractors to outright dismissal of these scholars as agents of cultural imperialism.⁵ This does not negate the well-evidenced recognition in Muslim contexts of the dire need for inclusive models in male-centered scholarly fora, including Muslim higher education institutions. The guiding norms and terms of inclusion remain contested, and the institutional barriers are well-documented in the literature.⁶ The crux of contestation comes from different interpretations of gender which have become central to intellectual and existential concerns in nearly every sphere of Islam.

Notwithstanding the rich ongoing debate on the implications of this category for Islamic thought and practice, especially in relation to questions of equality and gender difference, there is little critical discussion of the genealogy and theorization of gender. After all, like other modern categories such as race and religion, gender has a history imbricated in the epistemic paradigm of Western Eurocentric modernity—which has long sought to subjugate non-Western intellectual traditions through historicist objectification and conceptual reconfiguration of their texts and key events into the West's self-understanding. A critique that not only brings Islamic materials under the gender lens but also turns the interrogatory lens onto gender and its history could enable us to formulate new questions that address some of the aporias within Islam and Gender discourses.

The following is by no means intended as a comprehensive, or even representative, account of the steadily growing scholarship on Islam and Gender within multiple disciplines and from a variety of perspectives. Rather, provided here are some observations about feminist gender theory and the contours of engagement with it in Islam and Gender scholarship.

Universal En/gendering

Although we now tend to treat it as conceptually self-evident, gender, like all modern concepts, has a history. That we see gender in all phenomena related to sex is testament to its success as an analytical apparatus—but also to its timely appearance at the height of second-wave feminist politics, which picked the newly-minted concept from the field of psychology in the 1960s.⁷ Until the 1950s, the English word gender strictly denoted a linguistic phenomenon. It developed into a concept of human behaviour through clinical psychology research on hermaphroditism in the work of Robert Stoller in 1964-1968, to account for the acquisition of masculine or feminine traits by persons who are neither male nor female. Stoller introduced the theoretically transformative sex/gender distinction to explain the role of environment, delinking gender from biology and paving the way for thinking about sex, gender, and sexuality as discursive phenomena. His emphasis on environment and nurture opened up for feminists from the 1970s onward the possibility of reconsidering inequalities between the sexes as a cultural rather than a natural system that is socially produced and perpetuated (and hence alterable).⁸ This accounts for why gender became, and to a large extent remains, equated with ‘women’ in much gender scholarship.

In *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972), one of the first influential applications of gender in sociology, Ann Oakley takes the role of social norms in determining gendered identity to be paramount: “‘Sex’ is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female... ‘Gender’ however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine.’”⁹ The work of Oakley and other feminists shifted the focus of gender from individual acquisition of sexual attitudes to cultural production of sexual difference. Oakley stacks up evidence from a multitude of cross-cultural studies on male-female distinctions to substantiate this conceptual shift. Variations in cultural expressions of gender are presented as a constant of human life. Her reasoning rests on an essentialized assumption that observed biological difference results in gender differentiation universally, even when her cross-cultural evidence indicates similarity: “Both men and women in this Brazilian tribe make ‘open, ribald and aggressive onslaughts’, ... both masculine and feminine personality in this tribe [are] as ‘practical’ and ‘aggressive’.”¹⁰

Oakley’s reasoning represents the universalizing logic of difference that is persistently reworked into non-Western cultures to read differentiation even where it does not exist. Decades later, in *The Invention of Women* (1997), the path-breaking study on gender—or, more precisely, the absence of it—in West African Yorùbá culture, the Nigerian gender scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi illustrates how second-wave feminist scholarship assimilated indigenous knowledge to serve a universalist theory of gender difference.¹¹ Scholars of Yorùbá who looked for gender difference, she argues, found it in spite of ample data on Yorùbá’s non-gender specific language and its age-based rather than gender-based social organization. Oakley herself forewarns against conflating the ubiquitous presence of gender difference with its being *the* ‘organizing principle’ in all cultures. She contends that it is a condition specific to “Western society...organised around the assumption that the differences between the sexes are more important than any qualities they have in common.”¹²

Yet the thrust of feminist political and intellectual discourse since the 1970s not only universalized gender difference but made its being a central organizing principle inextricable from the analytical apparatus of gender theory. Darlene M. Juschka states unequivocally that feminists and others have taken gender to be a central and primary category in all aspects of

life from the 1980s till now, theoretically prioritizing gender difference.¹³ It is perhaps for this reason that in her foreword to the 1985 edition of her book, Oakley elaborates on the Western specificity of gender difference. She traces its centrality to the modern labor division separating home from work and restructuring social relations into a patriarchy based on European male supremacy. Core to this patriarchy has been the development of a modern nuclear family where new modes of gender differentiation have been produced and essentialized.¹⁴ It is against these developments which divested women of many legal and economic rights in the wake of capitalism and industrialization that the ‘woman question’ arises.

These remarks are a precursor to later feminist critique of how gender was being interpreted and universalized by Western feminists. In the 1990s, Linda Nicholson posited that early modern European societies espoused a “materialist metaphysics” which predicated essentializations of race, ethnicity, and sex as fundamental markers of human difference. The upshot of this, Nicholson perceptively elaborated, is that “the material or physical features of the body increasingly took on the role of providing testimony to the nature of the self it housed.”¹⁵ In opposition to systems of oppression perpetuated through modernity, late twentieth-century gender theory cultivated a constructionist approach to subvert the normative male/female binary of sexual difference, eventually abandoning the biological presuppositions of the sex/gender distinction: sex itself became conceived of as a cultural category, shaped by gender norms that precede and determine the process of sexing the body.¹⁶ Nonetheless, Nicholson asserts that constructionist feminists have continued to work on the assumption that sexual difference generates gender differentiation everywhere, that is, the “distinctive givens of the body generate commonalities in the classification of human beings across cultures and in the reactions by others to those so classified.”¹⁷ This stratagem, which she terms “biological foundationalism,” has allowed gender theory in its various inflections and permutations to hold the political claim about gender inequality and women’s condition of marginality as universal givens.

The paradigmatic shift in modern conceptions of gender, therefore, is not one from biological essentialism to constructionism (as a binary opposition); these two rather form a continuum that feminists strategically straddle because of their political investment in the category ‘woman.’ Even when the sex/gender distinction collapses as gender theory shifts to perceiving both as socially produced categories existing only through our representational systems, the corollary has been that the discursive construction of sex/gender is governed by ideas of the body. However variable these ideas might be, they always engender patterns of difference in the triad of sex, gender, and sexuality. For Judith Butler, Juschka and other feminists, this reconceptualization opens up the political possibility of subversive and non-normative re/signification of the body beyond Western formulations of the male/female binary.¹⁸ These new possibilities do not, however, invalidate women’s shared history of oppression. Alison Stone, for example, reconciles the tension between constructionist gender views and feminist politics by proposing to view women as having a shared historical experience of acquiring and reworking their culture’s interpretation of the female body without having an innate common experience of it. This is what makes exploring the continuum a productive endeavour for Western feminism.¹⁹

Thus at their fundamental level, Western gender theory continues to accentuate the body as source of knowledge and site of political action. The paradigmatic shift is hence not ontological, having to do with the essential or contingent nature of sex/gender, but rather epistemic, in that authority over the ontology of sex is relocated from the foundational texts which governed sexual norms in premodernity (e.g., the Bible) to the social experience of the body. It is fair to claim that the materialist metaphysics of modernity has been bolstered, not challenged, by the different iterations of gender theory, thus foreclosing the possibility of thinking about the identity of the human self beyond its constitution as a materially embodied

and humanly interpreted difference. This is an important locus of epistemic (and ethical) dissonance between gender theory and Islamic thought. And it is one that cuts across traditionalist and activist/feminist academic discourses on Islam and Gender, yet remains insufficiently examined. A further historical and cultural dissonance frequently arises from applying Western explanatory paradigms to non-Western materials and contexts, a problem not infrequently noted in Islam and Gender scholarship.

Gendering Islam

Within the historical-textual study of Islam and Gender, one of the pioneering applications of the sex/gender theoretical distinction to Islamic sources is Paula Sanders's 1991 study "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law"—a case study reminiscent of the 1960s pre-feminist beginnings of gender research on intersex persons. Sanders applies the sex/gender distinction to juristic strategies devised to evaluate anatomical and psychological evidence of the true biological (male/female) sex of a person presenting with gender ambiguity.²⁰ Thus, conceptually, classical *fiqh* material is enfolded neatly into gender theory. Nearly two decades later, Sanders apologetically revisited her conclusions. She admitted her "casual perusal of literary sources," the material which made Everett Rowson see a different sex/gender distinction, not between male/female but between male/not male (a distinction which aligns with penetrator/penetrated).²¹ By asking questions from the text about where the weight of the distinction lies (namely, the act of penetration), Rowson's discussion made Sanders realize that—in contrast to dominant views in gender theory at the time—more than one set of sex-based distinctions could be held concurrently within Islamic sources. This helped her understand the "nearly complete absence of anxiety over homosexuality" she had observed in her earlier work.²²

Sanders's revisitation is, undoubtedly, a feat of admirable scholarly reflexivity. However, the interpretation of Islamic sources, literary and juristic, as lending support to multiple models of sex/gender distinctions tolerant of homosexuality still betrays an assumption that a distinction between maleness/not maleness indicates a Muslim concept of 'homosexuality' as a gender identity. Khaled El-Rouayheb's *Before Homosexuality* has compellingly problematized this slippage, describing the application of the category 'homosexuality' to premodern Islamic sources as anachronistic and unhelpful.²³ His rigorous examination of the Arabic conceptual grammar shows that Islamic concerns surrounding homoreroticism do not neatly map onto modern conceptions of homosexuality. This is why historical surveys of 'homosexuality' make little sense of the prevalence of Muslim homoerotic poetry despite the Islamic condemnation of sodomy. El-Rouayheb further explains that writing a love poem to a male youth was not subsumed under the juridical concept of sodomy, whereas in contrast the category homosexuality has assimilated and sexualized a broad range of behaviours not directly related to sexual acts.²⁴ This interrogation of the epistemic universality of the category homosexuality is mirrored in Joseph Massad's deconstruction of its global politics.²⁵

Scholarly engagements with Islamic commitments can be located on the essentialist-constructionist continuum of gender theory. Well-versed in the modern theoretical lexicon, some Muslim scholars defend the authority of Islamic texts from a biologically essentialist position that accepts the sex/gender distinction insofar as it allows for a reworking of an Islamic gender normativity from body (*qua* biology *qua* *fiṭra*) back to text, as it were.²⁶ This emergent position employs the conceptual apparatus of feminist gender theory but turns its political goals on its head. The sex/gender distinction provides evidence that sexed bodies become socially gendered selves, universally differentiated into two determinate social groups of men and women. The manifestation of this difference as gender asymmetry, across time and place, is marshalled as empirical proof not of constructed reality but of a biologically deterministic

nature indicating divine ontology of gender difference as essence. Drawing on an eclectic array of behavioural and physiological research, and a select number of Qur'anic and Hadith attestations, the purportedly fundamental gender difference between male and female is grounded in an alignment of modern science and religion.²⁷ This return to biology circumscribes an Islamic ethics of gender within a materialist metaphysics of the body as constituent of human self-identity. Islamic and Qur'anic notions of the 'self' and its relation to the body play little role in shaping this Islamic take on gender and identity, ultimately thus holding in abeyance the epistemic authority of the text.

The Islamic feminist perspective, on the other hand, starts from the textual structure of the Qur'an, whose creation story provides a productive locus for interrogating the theoretical sex/gender distinction. Feminist Qur'an scholars Riffat Hassan, Amina Wadud, Nimat Hafez Barazangi and Asma Barlas—as well as Rawand Osman²⁸ and Celene Ibrahim²⁹ of the next generation—all concur that the Qur'an reinforces the 'unitary' origin of human life from a single 'unsexed soul' (*nafs*). This is most clearly articulated in Q. 4:1: "O humankind! Reverence your Lord, who created you from a single soul and from her/it created her/its mate, and from the two has spread abroad a multitude of men and women." Ibrahim restates that the 'soul' is a grammatical feminine in Arabic but never assigned gender identity in nearly three hundred Qur'anic occurrences where it refers to individual human beings irrespective of sex.³⁰ It occurs in the Qur'an interchangeably to mean both the bodily and non-bodily self, where 'non-bodiliness' is used as a referent for mortality and death and 'bodiliness' for various psychological and ethical states of being.³¹ In contrast, only on six occasions does the Qur'an use the words *jasad* and *jism* for body, and only to signify physical figure or image, highlighting the non-agentic aspect of mere physicality.³²

The 'unsexed soul' has considerable theoretical potential for thinking about human self-identity as grounded in a non-gender-specific ontology of human commonality rather than either essentially fixed or completely malleable and re-signifiable difference. Barlas remarks incisively, if briefly: "the Qur'ān itself does not endorse mind-body or body-soul dualisms. Nor does it espouse sex/gender dualisms (that is, the idea of sexual differentiation)... The theme that women and men commenced from a single Self and constitute a pair is integral to Qur'ānic epistemology."³³ However, the theoretical potential of the 'unsexed soul' and the nature of its non/corporeality remain under-interrogated,³⁴ perhaps because the "double commitment"³⁵ of Islamic feminism generates a double boundedness. On the one hand, the explanatory power of an 'unsexed soul' is entirely directed to defending gender equality in Islam, eliding its critical valence for feminist gender theory. On the other hand, Islamic feminist intellectual engagement (albeit located within postcolonial and intersectional traditions) is framed by the second-wave investment in the category 'woman' as representing a determinate social group, struggling against a history of oppression. Yet the 'unsexed soul' of the Qur'anic creation narrative calls into question the essentialized nature of women as a group in opposition to men and thus too the value of privileging the historical experience of one over the other. It throws open the materialist metaphysics of the body and the linkage between self-identity and gender in Islamic thought and society, begging the question to be asked—if human identity is not gendered through and through (that is, if bodiliness is not fundamental to identity), what does this imply for the intellectual and advocacy pursuits of Islam and Gender scholarship in the present and in relation to the past?

In *Gendered Morality*, Zahra Ayubi tells us that the classical Muslim male "ethicists did not have concepts of gender as an identity marker"³⁶ and that they maintained gender-neutral language when talking about humanity and the *nafs*. She argues, however, that an elite male normativity nonetheless pervades their language. Her examples do not fit a singular pattern of gender difference—sometimes the ethicists are caught contravening or even inverting their cosmology and producing an imperfect hierarchy³⁷—but she explains these

deviations as contradictions. However significant the exceptions appear in rendering the ethicists' own "ethics of exclusion imperfect," they do not disrupt the overall model of elite male normativity.³⁸ The ethicists' "gender-egalitarian tone" (further amplified through the gender-neutral grammar of the Persian language) is made to have no bearing whatsoever on their conceptual formulations. Instead, Ayubi puts the explanatory weight on the ethicists' articulation of gender difference, thereby exceptionalizing ambiguities, tensions, and neutrality in their work.

Ayubi presents us with a detailed textual study of a gendered Islamic ethics which does not ignore the presence of internal contradictions. The gender/ing framework informing the analysis casts the ethicists as subverting the egalitarian metaphysics underpinning the gender-neutral Qur'anic concepts of self and humanity at the center of their texts. But might the classical Muslim ethicists have been simultaneously and dialectically operating within multiple models, gender-neutral and gendered, egalitarian and hierarchical? Even if only a hierarchical model is at play, a patriarchal one, there is a substantive difference between a patriarchy which does not turn on gender as an identity marker of difference (as observed by Ayubi about classical Islamic ethics) and a model of it which does (as theorized by feminists in the context of Western modernity). Does it not follow that this changes the modality of gender differentiation and hence the meaning, significance, and operation of male/female distinctions in classical Islamic ethics or other Islamic sources?

Critiquing Gender: A Decolonial Moment?

The kindred concepts and terms of gender theory are fully integrated into analysis of Islam and Gender. The theoretical generalizability of patterns of en/gendering arising out of Western Eurocentric modernity are frequently assumed *a priori*. But the field has also presented gender theory with some exceptionally powerful rejoinders. Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (2004) and Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013) are renowned for politically questioning (Abu-Lughod) and retheorizing (Mahmood) reductionist feminist formulations, opening up space for elucidating Muslim female subjectivity. In feminist theory, Mahmood is particularly credited for her compelling dissection of the tension in Judith Butler's theoretical emphasis on the "ineluctable relationship between the consolidation and destabilization of norms,"³⁹ and her political privileging of only those modes of agency which subvert and destabilize norms. Mahmood's oeuvre is an indelible contribution to thinking about subjectivity and agency, but it is striking that amidst her disavowal of "hegemonic feminist narratives," she affirms in passing, in a footnote, that "all cultures and societies are predicated upon relations of gender inequality."⁴⁰

Without rehearsing the discussion from earlier, suffice it to observe that Mahmood's statement exemplifies one of the tacit universalizations of Western gender theory, which is interrogated by Argentinian feminist philosopher Maria Lugones and African gender scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi. This transhistorical, transcultural conception of the 'givenness' of the underprivileging of women—an enduring biological foundationalism held in tension even in constructionist and postcolonial iterations of feminist gender theory—inadvertently reinforces the 'naturalness' of this underprivileging and the inconspicuousness of the theory that accounts for it: "The presence of gender constructs cannot be separated from the ideology of biological determinism. Western conceptual schemes and theories have become so widespread that almost all scholarship, even by Africans, utilizes them unquestioningly."⁴¹

The formidable critiques by Leila Ahmed, Saba Mahmood, Lila Abu-Lughod, and others makes explicit how gender and religion have been employed in cultural othering, but ultimately their work stands on the phenomenological ground of the Western episteme that entails a return to the "things themselves"⁴² in order to consider their meaning as represented within the phenomenon. This enables Islam—as a phenomenon—to speak to the categories

informing the inquiry, making it possible to interrupt Western theoretical formations through interpreting and translating sensitively the meaning of ‘things’ related to Islam, women, and gender.

These interruptions have cultivated a horizon for further critical dissent from “gender theory.” They are part of the imminent decolonial turn—yet to come to fruition—which promises a profounder challenge to the ‘sleight of hand universalism’⁴³ that re/generates the epistemic and political normativity of the West in contemporary scholarship on non-Western materials and contexts. Through counter-historicization of the relation between coloniality and intersecting categories such as religion, race, and gender, the conceptual and political ramifications of these categories can be evaluated, independently and intersectionally. The decolonial moment in Gender Studies is in the making as re/considerations of the “coloniality of gender” are being proposed.⁴⁴ In contrast to the category of “religion,”⁴⁵ however, this moment is caught in the complex history of gender being employed by feminists to expose male-centered power in the West. The analytical category is hence predominantly perceived as an emancipatory tool.

For example, critically meaningful work on gender and religion in the 1980s and 1990s has been characterized as “subversive disturbance” and “historical disruption” of gendered asymmetries and inequalities.⁴⁶ Gender’s programmatic questions, as articulated by Joan Wallach Scott in *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988), continue to frame ‘disruptive/subversive’ inquiry across disciplines and domains of knowledge. Such questions include,

How and under what conditions [have] different roles and functions been defined for each sex; how [have] the very meanings of the categories “man” and “woman” varied according to time and place; how [were] regulatory norms of sexual deportment created and enforced; how [have] issues of power and rights played into questions of masculinity and femininity; how [do] symbolic structures affect the lives and practices of ordinary people; how[were] sexual identities forged within and against social prescriptions.⁴⁷

The givenness of these questions has been naturalized by feminist politics and sustained by the pervasiveness of the gendered realities of modernity. The core questions of gender have not changed substantively, notwithstanding critiques of the historical specificity of their assumptions. Rather, turning the critical lens onto ‘gender’ and its cognate concepts has given birth to overlapping offshoots, such as Masculinity Studies and Queer Theory, which developed other sets of questions. Scott herself expresses frustration with the uncritical, decontextualized translation of these questions. For it to be useful, the analytical category ‘gender’ must remain an open question irreducible to quantifiable gendering patterns.⁴⁸

Keeping the gender question open is exemplified in Oyewumi’s *What Gender is Motherhood?* (2016), which is a reversal of the thesis propounded by Nancy Chodorow in her widely influential work *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). Chodorow located the problem of human male dominance in the psyche of the mother, whereas Oyewumi questions the very givenness of male dominance as a universal historical reality.⁴⁹ Her example of the translation of the Yorùbá word for ‘ruler’ into the gendered English word ‘king’ is illuminating on the modes of culturally en/gendering received oral history and language.⁵⁰ These insights have been echoed in close readings of how notions of sexuality in the Muslim world, through colonization and modernity, were reconfigured and negotiated in keeping with nineteenth- and twentieth-century European sexual normativities.⁵¹ Through painstaking collation of evidence of colonizers’ (mis)translations of African languages and cultures into English, Oyewumi illustrates how liberating (even exhuming) indigenous epistemes from being lost in translation (grammatical and conceptual) depends on both a careful reconstruction of the conceptual world

encoded in an indigenous language and a critical grasp of the genealogy (and politics) of the analytical category of gender.

The programmatic gender questions prevalent since the 1980s have been central to Islam and Gender scholarship, but their 'disruptive' applications are particular to the cultural, institutional, and epistemic structures constituting the preoccupations of this field. Three main and frequently intersecting scholarly preoccupations of such literature can be summarized here: i) historical-textual enquiry into gender, often revealing the difficulties in mapping gender theory onto Islamic phenomena and providing grounds for counter-historicizations; ii) postcolonial critiques of Orientalism, questioning Orientalist 'truths' about gender, past and present, from within the epistemic paradigms of modernity; and iii) the intellectual and reformist preoccupation with gender in/justice in Muslim contexts, broadly focussing on pragmatic and political interventions into Islamic law, ethics, and gender normativity, demonstrating greater reliance on the analytical devices of gender and its liberal feminist politics.

Work on Islam and Gender grapples with its dependence on concepts emerging from the Western Eurocentric episteme. Paradoxically, this can inscribe a deeper epistemic asymmetry between Islam and gender theory and its feminist politics, even while seeking to disrupt unjust social and political asymmetries. The case is being made here for keeping the gender question open by going beyond the predetermined questions which have en/closed Islam and Gender inquiry. This requires, first, fully interrogating the historicity of the analytical category 'gender' and the conditions of modernity which rendered it ontologically constitutive of our worldview (we now see gender in everything and in particular ways). Second, it needs us to seriously consider the conceptual implications for the study of gender if sex-based distinctions are not always salient or central, or interpreted through a logic of gender difference, or operating as markers of gender identity (all of which observations are noted in the aforementioned studies in relation to Islam). These are substantive challenges to the assumptions and practices of a Western Eurocentric gender theory where gender difference is a central organizing principle. Third, keeping the gender question open for theoretical reconfiguration means not only historicizing the existing questions (what, why, and whose questions,⁵² and why they have become ubiquitous), but also provincializing these questions by asking new ones from within the Islamic episteme and its sources to develop conceptual knowledge about 'gender.' By way of example: what does the commonality of the unsexed, ungendered *nafs* mean for thinking about gender, and how does it relate to the performance of gender-neutral and gender-differentiated obligations of *shari'a*—not just politically and ethically within Islam, but also analytically and culturally for the category 'gender' itself? In other words, could the analytical category gender be liberated from and reconfigured beyond its Western materialist metaphysics?

For the many Muslim scholars in the field, this is one way to resist the folding-back of Islam and Gender knowledge into universalist Western consciousness as "ornamental dissent" (a term Ashis Nandy coined in the *Intimate Enemy*)—for "the meek inherit the earth not by meekness alone, they have to have categories, concepts and even defences of mind."⁵³ And, more broadly, it is about keeping gender 'useful' by critically re-evaluating it on multiple epistemic terms.

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- ¹ Maria do Mar Pereira, *Power, Knowledge and Feminist Scholarship: An Ethnography of Academia* (London: Routledge, 2017).
- ² Juliane Hammer, "To Work for Change: Normativity, Feminism, and Islam," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 1 (2016): 98–112.
- ³ Aaron Hughes, *Islam and the Tyranny of Authenticity: An Inquiry into Disciplinary Apologetics and Self-Deception* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2015), 77.
- ⁴ Hammer, "To Work for Change," 656.
- ⁵ Alison Scott-Baumann, Mathew Guest, Shuruq Naguib, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, and Aisha Phoenix, *Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 187.
- ⁶ See, for example, various articles on gender in relation to leadership, authority and representation in British Muslim communities in this special issue of *The Journal of Religions* 10 (2019).
- ⁷ Jennifer Germon, *Gender: A Genealogy of an Idea* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ⁹ Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society* (Towards a New Society) (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1985 [1972]), 2.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.
- ¹¹ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
- ¹² Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society*, 189.
- ¹³ Darlene M. Juschka, "Feminism and Gender Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1. See, for example, Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 10, where she states that as a historian she is interested in historicizing gender "by pointing to the variable and contradictory meanings attributed to sexual difference."
- ¹⁴ Oyeronke Oyewumi, "Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and The Challenge of African Epistemologies," *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 1-5, 2; <https://www.codesria.org/IMG/pdf/OYEWUMI.pdf>. See, particularly, her discussion on the nuclear "family division of labour in which the woman mother gives socially and historically specific meaning to gender itself."
- ¹⁵ Linda Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 20 (1994): 79–105, 84.
- ¹⁶ Juschka, "Feminism and Gender Theory," 2, 4.
- ¹⁷ Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender," 95.
- ¹⁸ Judith Butler, "The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell," *diacritics* 28, no. 1 (1998): 19-42.
- ¹⁹ The following are key contributions to the debate on gender, feminist politics, and the category 'woman': Iris Young, "Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (1985): 173-183; Nicholson, "Interpreting Gender" (1994); and Alison Stone, "Essentialism and Anti-essentialism in Feminist Philosophy," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (2004): 135-153.
- ²⁰ Paula Sanders, "Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law," in *Shifting Boundaries: Women and Gender in Middle Eastern History*, ed. Nikki Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991): 74-95, 77.
- ²¹ Everett Rowson, "The Effeminate of Early Medina," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111, no. 4 (1991): 671-693.
- ²² Paula Sanders, "Hermaphrodites Revisited: A Reconsideration," (2008): 1-4, 4. (https://www.academia.edu/35003377/Hermaphrodites_revisited_a_reconsideration_1).
- ²³ Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ²⁵ Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003).
- ²⁶ See, for example, Abdul Hakim Murad, "Boys Shall Be Boys," n.d., <http://masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/boys.htm>.

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- ²⁷ See the popular work of North American Muslim writer Mobeen Vaid, “In Defence of Male Headship in Islam,” published on Medium’s section Occasional Reflections, March 8, 2021, <https://medium.com/occasionalreflections/in-defense-of-male-headship-in-islam-55f055a8877c>.
- ²⁸ Rawand Osman, *Female Personalities in the Qur’an and Sunna: Examining the Major Sources of Imami Shi’i Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2015).
- ²⁹ Celene Ibrahim, *Women and Gender in the Qur’an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ³¹ The fullest treatment of self and body in the Qur’an can be found in ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Rahmān (Bint al-Shati’, d. 1998), the first woman to author a Qur’an commentary. See her 1969 *Maqāl fī’l-insān*, reprinted in *al-Qur’ān wa qaḍāyā al-insān* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1999), 182-184.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 184-186.
- ³³ Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 133.
- ³⁴ Ibrahim, *Women and Gender in the Qur’an*, 149. See section on ‘Future Directions’ where Ibrahim underlines the need for exploring Qur’anic notions of embodiment and embodied experience.
- ³⁵ miriam cooke, “Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 1 (2000): 91-110, 93.
- ³⁶ Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 124.
- ³⁷ See, for example, Ayubi’s discussion of al-Ṭūsī’s representation of the palm tree as a superior female, 106-107.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.
- ³⁹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 21.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 154n1.
- ⁴¹ Oyewumi, *Invention of Women*, x; cf. Nicholson, *Interpreting Gender*, esp. 88-98; and Germon, *Gender: A Genealogy of An Idea*, 85ff.
- ⁴² Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, ed. Dermot Moran (London: Routledge, 2001 [1900/1901]), 168.
- ⁴³ Krishnan Ram-Prasad, “Reclaiming the Ancient World: Towards a Decolonized Classics,” July 3, 2019, <https://eidolon.pub/reclaiming-the-ancient-world-c481fc19c0e3>.
- ⁴⁴ Maria Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*, ed. W. Harcourt (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 13-33.
- ⁴⁵ Talal Asad’s work on deconstructing the category ‘religion’ has been seminal; for a discussion of various thinkers and scholars who examine its coloniality in relation to race, gender, and Christianity, see for example a series of articles starting from February 2020 at the website Contending Modernities: <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/decoloniality/>.
- ⁴⁶ Morny Joy, “Gender and Religion: A Volatile Mixture,” *Temenos* 42, no. 1 (2006): 7-30.
- ⁴⁷ Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: Still a Useful Category of Analysis?” *Diogenes* 225 (2010): 7–14, 9.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁴⁹ Oyeronke Oyewumi, *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 77ff; see, also, *Invention of Women*, 80ff.
- ⁵¹ Khaled El-Rouayheb’s *Before Homosexuality* and Joseph Massad’s *Desiring Arabs* have already been mentioned. Dror Ze’evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) is also a compelling account.
- ⁵² Oyewumi, *Invention of Women*, 176.
- ⁵³ Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), xiii.