

The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women

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There is no doubt that the topic of Islam and women has received a great deal of scholarly attention from different vantage points that serve competing interests and claims. Amidst this plethora of discourses, Asma Afsaruddin's edited volume *The Oxford Handbook of Islam and Women* sheds light on the multi-faceted and diverse nature of Muslim women's lives in the past and in the present. As Afsaruddin points out in the introduction, the volume is in conversation with some of the politicization and the idealization that the topic has encountered in both lay and academic circles, and attempts to provide a more nuanced and historicized approach that better reflects Muslim women's lived experiences, perspectives, and manifold contributions to the Islamic tradition. It makes for a valuable reference work that helps readers navigate the minefield of political and other ideologies that revolve around Muslim women.

The volume consists of six sections, beginning with Section A, which contains Afsaruddin's introduction, titled "Deciphering Muslim Women's Lives: Religion, Agency and Diversity." The remaining sections comprise

thirty-two chapters. The contributing authors are carefully selected, many of them leading authorities in the field as well as emerging scholars with established expertise in their respective areas. Although they do not always state their positionalities, they include Muslims and non-Muslims, conservatives and “progressives,” women and men, mimicking the multiplicity of voices that is characteristic of research in this area. Most are women, reflecting the field’s authorial demographics on the one hand, but also showcasing women’s voices, especially those of Muslim women, on the other. The chapters are carefully collated to include broad overviews, literature reviews, geographic analyses, and in-depth treatments of key themes, providing a rich resource for university teachers as well as general readers.

Section B follows the introduction and is titled “Foundational Texts and Their Interpretations.” It consists of five chapters, covering both Qur’an and Hadith. Hibba Abugideiri’s chapter introduces the methodologies of *amina wadud*, a pioneer of Islamic feminist hermeneutics, and applies them to the stories of Mary, the Queen of Sheba, and Zulaykha in the Qur’an. It is a fitting beginning for the volume, explaining wadud’s Tawhidic paradigm and thereby some of the distinctive aspects of Islamic theology that inform women’s scholarly and other activism. Hadia Mubarak does an excellent job analyzing how leading classical male Sunni and Shi’i exegetes have addressed Q. 4:1, 2:228, 4:34 and 4:128, key Qur’anic verses in Islamic feminist discourse. By digging into the distant past, Mubarak demonstrates the *tafsir* genre’s open-endedness, hermeneutical diversity, and adaptiveness to socio-cultural contexts, thereby implicitly arguing that the capacity to read the Qur’an in new, contextually sensitive ways is part and parcel of the tradition. Afsaruddin presents an overview and evaluation of Islamic feminist discourse focusing on the foundational figures, wadud and Asma Barlas, as well as its foremost critics, Kecia Ali and Aysha Hidayatullah. She evaluates pro-egalitarian and pro-hierarchical stances vis-à-vis the Qur’an and through careful cross-referential analysis of primary texts, she arrives at the conclusion that the Qur’an does not support patriarchy.

While Islamic feminist engagement with the Qur’an is a well-established trend, Muslim women’s Hadith scholarship is in its early stages. Feryal Salem’s chapter touches on some of the most important points related to women in Hadith, including the classification of hadiths and

the problem of hadiths composed of opaque “short statements” that can be read positively or negatively vis-à-vis women. While Salem presents a skillful array of primary sources from some of the most important Sunni collections (but not Shi‘i ones), Khaled Abou El Fadl’s chapter is more analytical and synthesizes the state of contemporary Muslim women’s critical engagement with Hadith. Altogether, the chapters in this section provide an excellent foundation of primary texts and their analysis for readers wishing to orient themselves on the topic of Islam and women.

Sections C and D are titled “Women and Islamic Law” and “Deciphering Women’s Lives: Women in History and Texts” respectively. Together, they cover the areas of law, biographical representation, transmission of knowledge, devotional life, literature, and economic agency. Similar to the above section, they each contribute important content to the evolving picture of Muslim women’s lives and their engagement in various disciplines, both as scholars and as subjects of study. Mariam Sheibani provides an excellent overview of marriage, divorce, and inheritance laws and examines their practical application in reference to court cases in Mamluk Egypt and Ottoman Turkey. This trend has started to gain ground in the study of Islamic law and highlights the gaps between the prescriptions of Sharia (or, to be precise, *fiqh*) and their real-life applications on the ground. Of note is also Maria Dakake’s chapter that provides important Shi‘i perspectives on Fatima, the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter, and Zaynab, his granddaughter. It serves to counterbalance the more Sunni-focussed essays.

So far, the sections have presented well-established Islamic disciplines and women’s scholarly engagement with them from a largely North American lens, catering to the interests and diversity of Muslim women in this continent, although, to be sure, they do include scholarship from outside the North American or European milieus. Section E, titled “Women’s Lived Realities and Their Religious and Social Activism in the Modern Period” is more global, providing geographical treatments of Muslim women’s activism in the Levant, North Africa, Iran, Turkey, South and South-East Asia, China, South Africa, the United States, Western Europe, and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries. Transnational networks are briefly mentioned here and there, most notably in Nelly van Doorn-Harder’s chapter on South-East Asia, home to the important Malaysian organization Sisters in Islam

that has birthed the global Musawah movement. Together, these chapters provide a well-rounded picture of Muslim women's activism in many parts of the world and some of their key interests.

The final two sections are titled "Modern Narratives of the Gendered Self: Women Writing about Women" and "Islam, Women and the Global Public Arena" respectively. They are each composed of two articles: one delving into a key topic in that general area and one presenting a broad overview. In Section 5, Ruqayya Khan focuses on modern treatments of the Prophet Muhammad's wives, while Miriam Cooke reviews contemporary Muslim feminist literature, showing how writers critique misogynistic representations and restrictions through the medium of poetry, short stories, novels and other forms of literature. In Section 6, Anna Piela probes into the topic of veiling, while Katherine Bullock examines Muslim women as a cultural trope, showing how they are politicized within global discourses. Her chapter makes for an excellent conclusion to the book and takes us squarely from the multifarious epochs that preceding chapters have addressed and into the present-day context, highlighting the crux of what all preceding chapters have demonstrated: Muslim women are not victims but are powerful agents that have helped shape the Islamic tradition in significant ways. She criticizes the trope that makes of Muslim women victims in need of saving by "the white Western male and his female accomplice," (p. 390) one that has functioned in orientalist discourses since nineteenth-century European colonialism, and which continues to justify and perpetuate Islamophobia today. Her chapter incidentally also provides context for the book, analyzing continuities and discontinuities between nineteenth-century orientalist discourses and their contemporary permutations. Of concern is her conclusion that rather than improving, Islamophobic trends are worsening, which underscores the importance of this volume.

Bullock's chapter also underlines the problems associated in the label "feminist" as applied to Muslim women's activism, because of its use in what she and others term "Imperial feminism," "gendered orientalism" and other descriptions (p. 595), forms of feminism that go hand-in-hand with colonialism to make Muslim women "victims" and thereby justify colonial oppressions. One thing that the book does well is to illustrate

the varying degrees of comfort that Muslim women have with the label “feminist”: while some Muslim women embrace it, either on its own or with the qualifier “Islamic,” others reject it outright with “everything in between,” as Julianne Hammer has pointed out in her chapter on the North American context (pp. 490-91). Whether one chooses to use “Islamic feminism” (Arabic: *niswiyya islāmiyya*) for the phenomenon or other terms, the book highlights the embeddedness of Muslim women’s pro-women activism in an Islamic theological worldview and its deep-rootedness in Muslim history. As Maria Jaschock and Man Ke’s essay on Chinese Muslim women’s activism demonstrates, even the term “activism” can be disputed, the authors more comfortable describing women’s “activities” in the religiously restrictive Chinese context. The variegated uses or lack thereof of terms such as “feminism” and “activism” illustrate the diverse forms that women’s engagement with Islam has taken in different geographical, historical and political contexts.

A volume of this size cannot possibly hope to cover all the areas of Muslim women’s activism and scholarly contributions. The most important areas deserving of further consideration are probably Islamic psychotherapy, spiritual care, and chaplaincy, which fall under the emerging discipline of Islamic practical theology in Western academia, and to which Muslim women have made foundational contributions. Notwithstanding this lacuna, together, the authors of this volume have produced an invaluable resource for educators and researchers in fields related to the intersection of Islam and women. From all the books devoted to the topic, this volume is probably the broadest, and has provided an impressive array of scholarship both in terms of quality and scope. All in all, this volume has accomplished its aims, the rich repertoire of authors, themes, and bibliography contributing to an exceptional resource that will be of interest to both lay audiences and specialists.

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